



Southern Campaigns of the American Revolution

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The Journal of the Southern Campaigns of the American Revolution

Vol. 11, No. 5

November 2016

Gen. Andrew Williamson's Self Defense

This amazing letter was first located by Will Graves, annotated and published in *SCAR* in May of 2005.¹ Since we have learned so much about the geography of the Southern Campaigns and the particulars of the people in the last ten years, I thought it worthy of revisiting, updating the annotations, and slightly expanding. This letter was written to Gen. Nathanael Greene by Gen. Andrew Williamson who surrendered himself with many of the western South Carolina backcountry militia leaders to the British after the fall of Charlestown in May 1780. Thereafter, Williamson was courted by the British, no doubt offered money, property, and position to take an active leadership role for the British in South Carolina, and was considered by many contemporaries as colluding with the Enemy. Some later writers have dramatically labeled him as the “Benedict Arnold of the South” though that tag is in no way deserved.² In the latter stages of the Revolution, the State of South Carolina reconvened its representative government and began to wrestle with the problem of how to treat her Loyalists, those who accepted British protection, and those who actively supported the Crown.³ Williamson was initially named on the lists of “Obnoxious Persons” whose lands were to be confiscated by the SC General Assembly. This letter is one in which he struggled to prove that the rumors of his collaboration with the British, starting in 1779, were not true.⁴ In a very unusual move, Gen. Nathaniel Greene actually provided information to the General Assembly supporting Williamson’s claims of secretly helping the Americans after taking British protection at great personal risk.⁵ As with many other important South Carolinians, Williamson’s penalty for surrendering and taking British protection was thereafter reduced to Amercement.⁶

The attached report in the letter is also interesting as it provides a glimpse into the deployments and strengths of the Americans along the Savannah River corridor and around the Augusta area during the latter days of the Siege of Charlestown. The British threat against American held Augusta was real, at least intended to make the Americans believe that. British North America Commander-in-Chief, Sir Henry Clinton and Royal Navy Admiral Mariot Arbuthnot disembarked almost 1,800 men under Gen. James Paterson at Savannah where they joined with several hundred more British soldiers, Georgia and Carolina Loyalists and Creek Indian warriors. This strong detachment left Savannah on

¹ *Southern Campaigns of the American Revolution (SCAR)*, Vol. 2, No. 5 (May 2005) on-line; summary in the *Papers of Gen. Nathanael Greene (PNG)*, XII:395

² Connor Runyan, “The Monument that Never Was”, *Journal of the American Revolution* (Sept. 2, 2015) on-line

³ The SC General Assembly convened at Jacksonborough, SC, about 30 miles from Charlestown in Jan. 1782, protected by Gen. Greene’s Continentals and militia.

⁴ Llewellyn Toulmin, “Brigadier Andrew Williamson and White Hall”, *Journal of Backcountry Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Fall 2012); *Royal Gazette* (Charleston), March 20, 1782. Letter from Lt. Col. Nesbit Balfour to Lord Cornwallis, June 24, 1780, confirms the British and Williamson’s comfortable relationship. Ian Saberton, *The Cornwallis Papers*, Vol. 1, p. 239.

⁵ Greene to SC Gov. John Mathews, Dec. 22, 1782 only 8 days after the British withdrawal from Charlestown. Conrad, *PNG*, XII:331-332

⁶ South Carolina’s Amercement was a one-time penalty tax of between 12% and 30% of the value of all property, both personal and real. Rebecca Brannon, *From Revolution to Reunion* (Columbia, SC: USC Press, 2016)

March 5, 1780 and marched northwest along the River Road towards Abercorn, Ebenezer, and Augusta.⁷ The Americans did not know this was a feint, planned to draw the backcountry militia away from the defense of Charlestown. Even so, it clearly threatened the Georgia and South Carolina backcountry and put a British army behind American lines. In addition to trying to loosely hold a line from Dorchester, SC west to south of Augusta, SC Gov. John Rutledge was unsuccessfully trying to rally the SC backcountry militia at Orangeburg and then at Scott's Lake to march to the defense of Charlestown.

January 28, 1783⁸

Sir

From the conversation I had with you this morning I take the liberty of troubling you with a few particulars which are wrongfully alledged against me.

When Col. Campbell⁹ was at Augusta¹⁰ I opposed him in crossing the Savannah River for thirteen Days and when reinforced by General Ash¹¹ made him retreat on the night of the fourteenth and there are some members in the House of Assembly know that I took every measure in my power to harrass him on his March yet there are some people disposed to say that I took protection of him, also of him or some other British Officer a Bribe of Ten Thousand Guineas.

Col. Lytle¹² who now commands the North Carolina Brigade was a witness to my actions during the whole of that time.

On my second Command on February 1780 to releave Col. Parker¹³ at Augusta. I took every step in my power to frustrate the designes of the Enemy as well as to gain every Intelligence which I communicated to General Lincoln¹⁴ while the Communication was open.

I am accused with not opposing General Patterson¹⁵ in his March from Georgia to Charlestown, but General Pickens¹⁶ may well remember I came to Beach Island as soon as I had Intelligence of his penetrating into Carolina with a wish to oppose him and the General

⁷ Charles B. Baxley, "*Petit Guerre* and British Gen. James Paterson's March from Savannah to Charlestown – March 1780" *SCAR* (to be published).

⁸ The original of this letter is located in the Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.

⁹ Lt. Col. Archibald Campbell (1739-1791), commander of the British expedition charged with capturing Savannah in December of 1778 and Augusta in 1779.

¹⁰ Campbell took Augusta on January 29, 1779.

¹¹ Brig. Gen. John Ashe (1720-1781), North Carolina militia general who commanded the forces that were soundly beaten at the Battle of Briar Creek, Georgia, on March 3, 1779. In a subsequent court-martial proceeding chaired by Gen. William Moultrie, Ashe was censured for "want of sufficient vigilance."

¹² Archibald Lytle (1730-1790), North Carolina Continental officer serving under the command of John Ashe at Briar Creek. He and his North Carolina Continentals maintained discipline during the route of the Americans and covered the retreat of the militia commanded by Ashe.

¹³ Col. Richard Parker, commander of the 1st Virginia Regiment of the Continental Line. This unit was stationed on Spirit Creek south of Augusta, Georgia, prior to the British invasion of South Carolina. He and his unit were ordered to Charlestown to participate in defense of that city. He was killed by rifle fire on April 24, 1780 while making observations of the trenches dug by the British during their siege of Charlestown.

¹⁴ Gen. Benjamin Lincoln of Massachusetts (1733-1810), commander of the Continental forces in the Southern Department, unsuccessfully defended Charlestown from the British siege in the spring of 1780.

¹⁵ Brig. Gen. James Paterson, commander of a British force sent by Sir Henry Clinton from Savannah to make a diversionary march toward Augusta as part of Clinton's 1780 campaign to take Charlestown. Paterson's force of about 2,000 was recalled by Clinton, marched from Georgia, and participated in the successful siege of Charlestown.

¹⁶ Andrew Pickens (1739-1817), a South Carolina militia officer who served under Andrew Williamson up until they, along with other backcountry patriot officers, took parole from the British in June 1780 following the fall of Charlestown. Unlike Williamson, Pickens renounced his parole following the burning of his home by Tory or British troops in late 1780 and returned to command a regiment of militia that took a very active role in the war until its conclusion. He was promoted to brigadier general in the South Carolina militia after the Battle of Cowpens in January 1781.

will also remember that in a Conversation between us, he gave it as his opinion that Col. Twiggs¹⁷ and his people would not go in consequence of a report of a Body of Indians and some of the disaffected coming on the back parts of Georgia.

The inclosed Return will show you what my Force was at that time and the General may also recolect how many of the Georgia Militia I ever could get to join me except when he went to Midway¹⁸ with Col. Twiggs.

Governor Rutledge's¹⁹ Orders of the 3rd of May in answer to mine by express making an offer to join him with all the Force under my Command were that he would not wish the post at Augusta to be abandoned and his orders of the 5th of May 1780 were to leave three hundred men at Augusta and come with or send the remainder to him which by the Return inclosed you will see was not in my power. On my showing Governor Rutledge's Letters to the Governor of Georgia,²⁰ I expressed my uneasiness at not being able to comply with the orders I had received but could not get from him any hopes of assistance.²¹ He and one of his Council called on me next day expressing their desire to enable me to comply with the above order at the same time requesting that if I would remain with the Ninety two Independents, the whole of the Militia might go to the assistance of the Governor. Immediately, I sent Capt. Anderson²² with the whole Militia to join Col. Pickens at the Ridge,²³ who previous to this, had orders to repair there as speedily as possible with all the men he could raise from his Regt.²⁴ General Pickens well knows the necessity there was for the capitulation²⁵ for the Militia in the month of June 1780.

I have the Honour to be
Your most Obt. Hble. Servt.
S/ A. Williamson

[Enclosure]

¹⁷ Col. (later, General) John Twiggs (1750-1816) of Burke County, Georgia, commanded Georgia militia troops in numerous engagements in Georgia.

¹⁸ Coastal Georgia settlement burned by British in 1778 in their first attempt to invade Georgia from their stronghold in St. Augustine, East Florida.

¹⁹ John Rutledge (1739-1800), Governor of South Carolina at the time of the siege and surrender of Charleston in 1780.

²⁰ The Governor of Georgia in the spring of 1780 was Stephen Heard (1740-1815). He held the office of Governor from February 18, 1780-August 18, 1781.

²¹ The implication is that if Georgia could take over the defense of the Augusta area, then Williamson would be free to move his militia to Charlestown as directed by Gov. Rutledge.

²² Robert Anderson (1741-1813), a member of Andrew Pickens' regiment and, along with Pickens and others under Andrew Williamson's command, a parolee who subsequently reentered the war on the American side following British violations of their paroles.

²³ "The Ridge" is where modern communities of Ridge Springs and Monetta, SC are located, a colonial road intersection of the road from Granby (modern Cayce, SC) to Augusta, Ga. and the road from Orangeburgh to Ninety Six.

²⁴ Though Charlestown was under an intense formal siege, the last pathway into the City was not closed until April 14, 1780 when Lt. Cols. Banastre Tarleton, Patrick Ferguson, and James Webster defeated Gen. Isaac Huger at Moncks Corner and Biggin Bridge and dispersed the American cavalry gathered there. The British then poured troops south down the east side of the Cooper River to control inland access down and across the Cooper River into the besieged City.

²⁵ Williamson is referring to the British paroles accepted by himself and a number of his officers in June 1780 following the fall of Charlestown. Along with Williamson, Andrew Pickens, LeRoy Hammond, Robert Anderson, Daniel Huger, and Charles Pinckney, among others, accepted such paroles.

A General Report of the Troops now doing duty at Augusta & under the Command of Brig. General Andrew Williamson

	Lt. Cols.	Capt s.	Lts.	Serg ts.	Cor ps.	D Major s	Dru ms	Fi fe s	Priv ates
Independents at Augusta		2	3	9	4	1	4	6	84
do at Fort William [Williams] ²⁶				1					8
Col. Pickens' Regt. Militia at New Savannah		2	4	7					44
do Escorting Mr. Galphin ²⁷ to meet the Indians at Old Town			1	1					11
Col. Hammonds ²⁸ Regt Militia at Augusta		3	2	4					36
Col. Williams ²⁹ Regt do at the Cupboard ³⁰	1	3	10	12					85
at Spirit Creek ³¹			1	1					14
	1	10	21	35	4	1	4	6	282

S/ Benj Tutt³²

Capt. Indt. Compy [Captain, Independent Company]

Letter annotated by William T. Graves; re-edited Charles B. Baxley (11-07-2016)
Originally published in SCAR, May 2005

²⁶ Williams Fort was located on the plantation owned by Col. James Williams. The fortification is believed to have been near Mudlick Creek in modern day Laurens County at the Newberry County line.

²⁷ George Galphin, an Indian trader of Silver Bluff, SC, was appointed by the South Carolina government as agent to the Creek Indian tribes. He is credited with suppressing the Creeks from joining with the Cherokee as active British allies, though some did join and fight with the Loyalists. Michael P. Morris, *George Galphin and the Transformation of the Georgia-South Carolina Backcountry* (London, UK: Lexington Books, 2015)

²⁸ Col. LeRoy Hammond of what is now North Augusta, SC was commander of one of the militia regiments under Gen. Williamson's command and Williamson's brother-in-law.

²⁹ Col. James Williams (1740-1780), commander of the Little River Regiment of South Carolina militia. Williams was the highest ranking patriot officer to die as a result of wounds suffered at the Battle of Kings Mountain on October 7, 1780. William T. Graves, *Backcountry Revolutionary* (Lugoff, SC: Southern Campaigns Press, 2012)

³⁰ The Cupboard Swamp located south of Augusta is the wetlands between the Gordon Highway (US Hwy 78) and the Bobby Jones Expressway (I-520).

³¹ Spirit Creek, a tributary of the Savannah River, located about 10 miles south of Augusta.

³² Capt. Benjamin Tutt was a commander of a company in the 5th SC Continental Regt.; later he commanded an independent company of rangers.