



**American Forces Commanded by  
Gen. Francis Marion**

<b>Strength</b>	<b>Killed</b>	<b>Wounded</b>	<b>Missing/Captured</b>
450	2	?	?

**British Forces Commanded by  
Lt Col. Donald McPherson**

<b>Strength</b>	<b>Killed</b>	<b>Wounded</b>	<b>Missing/Captured</b>
175	?	?	175

**Conclusion: American Victory**

## THE SIEGE OF FT. MOTTE

MAY 8<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup>, 1781 AT FT. MOTTE, CALHOUN  
COUNTY, SOUTH CAROLINA

In March 1781, Ft. Motte was established as a post after the British abandoned Thompson Plantation, at Belleville, about a mile from Motte's. Like Thompson's, Motte's served as a sanctuary for convoys of supplies coming from Charleston on their way to Camden and Ninety-Six. Defending the post was Lieut. Donald McPherson, of the 71st Regt., with 140 men, 120 of which were Provincials (Greene states British) and Hessians, plus 7 or 8 officers. In his letter to Huntington of 14 May, Greene reported that a carronade was taken at the fort. However, a footnote by the editor of the Greene papers states that the fort was defended with an enlarged firelock mounted as a swivel, but no had artillery. Possibly then the carronade was not actually in use.

Fort Motte was the principal depot on the British line of communications between Charleston and the interior of South Carolina. It was located at the point where the Wateree River and the Congaree River merged to form the Santee River. The actual "fort" was the large mansion of Mrs. Rebecca B. Motte. It had been fortified by a stockade, a ditch, and abatis. The fort was garrisoned by 150 British infantry. A small detachment of dragoons had been on a mission of carrying British dispatches to Camden when the Americans attacked. They joined with the garrison for the soon to come battle. The fort commander was Lt. Col. Donald McPherson.

Marion and Lee arrived before the fort on the 6th. Initially, there was some uncertainty whether Lee would continue with Marion, but by the 8th it had been decided that he would do so.

**On May 8**, Marion had 150 men, while Lee had 300 regulars including the Legion infantry, Oldham's Maryland Company, and 140 North Carolina Continentals under Maj. Pinkertham Eaton. The Legion cavalry was elsewhere keeping an eye on Watson. With them also was a six-pounder (or possibly a four-pounder) under Capt. Ebenezer Finley. They had their force to start regular approaches to the fort. The American headquarters was set up at a nearby farmhouse where Mrs. Motte had been using since the British took over her mansion.

**On May 10**, the call for surrender was sent to the fort and McPherson refused the request. That evening, the Marion and Lee learned that Lt. Col. Francis Rawdon was heading towards Fort Motte from Camden.

**On May 11**, with beacon fires used during the morning and evening hours, the British were encouraged and they told the Americans that they had better take the fort quickly or abandon their plans. After attempts of regular approaches and with Rawdon approaching, Lee decided to fire flaming arrows onto the fort's shingle roof and burn the British out. When Mrs. Motte was informed of the plan, she not only did not protest, but even offered up an East Indian bow and a set of arrows. According to William Dobein James account the roof was set alight by one of Marion's men using a ball of rosin and brimstone thrown by a sling. Bass suggests it was both.

**On May 12**, during the morning hours, McPherson was given another chance to surrender, which he again refused to do. By noon, the American trenches were close enough for 2 flaming arrows to be fired onto the roof. When McPherson sent a few of his men to the roof to put out the fires, American cannon fire drove them off.

**At 1:00 P.M.**, a white flag had appeared from the fort. Marion accepted the British surrender and let the them go to the roof to put out the fires. After the mansion was emptied of soldiers, Mrs. Motte invited both the American and British officers to a good dinner at her own table. Maj. Gen. Nathanael Greene arrived at the fort, having been worried about finishing the operation before Rawdon could arrive and give aid to McPherson. McPherson and his garrison were made prisoners, and 140 stand of arms, a quantity of salt, provisions and other stores were taken. The editor to the Greene papers notes that the regulars surrendered to Lee, and the loyalist militia to Marion suggesting there may have been some friction between the two officers. On the other hand the measure may have been devised to avoid McPherson have to report that he surrendered to militia, even though Marion had overall command of the Americans. In terms of casualties, Marion lost 2 killed at Fort Motte, the British none. While Marion was away with Lee against Ft. Motte, Ganey, who had been called out again by Balfour, rose up with his men at Drowning Creek. The British prisoners were paroled and the British officers joined Rawdon at Nelson's Ferry on the Santee River.



**Lossing:** *"The prisoners were treated with great humanity, notwithstanding some of them were Tories of a most obnoxious stamp. As soon as paroled, they were sent off to Lord Rawdon, then crossing the Santee at Nelson's Ferry, near Eutaw Springs. The fall of Fort Motte greatly alarmed that officer, and two days afterward [May 14.], he blew up the fortifications at Nelson's Ferry, and hastened toward Charleston. During the day of the capitulation, Greene arrived with a small troop of cavalry, being anxious to know the result of the siege, for he was aware Rawdon was hastening to the relief of the garrison. Finding every thing secure, he returned to his camp, then on the north side of the Congaree, after ordering Marion to proceed against Georgetown, toward the head of Winyaw Bay, near the coast, and directing Lee with his legion, and Captain Finley with his six pounder, to attack Fort Granby, thirty-two miles above Fort Motte, near the present city of Columbia."*

**William Dobein James:** *"On the night of the 10th, the fires of Lord Rawdon's camp were seen on the Santee hills, in his retreat from Camden, and encouraged the garrison for a while; but on the 12th the house was set on fire, and the commander Lieut. M`Pherson, and one hundred and sixty-five men, surrendered. This deed of Mrs. Motte has been deservedly celebrated. Her intention to sacrifice her valuable property was patriotic; but the house was not burnt, as is stated by historians, nor was it fired by an arrow from an African bow, as sung by the poet. -- Nathan Savage, a private in Marion's brigade, made up a ball of rosin and brimstone, to which he set fire, slung it on the roof of the house. The British surrendered before much mischief was done to it, and Marion had the fire put out."*

**Rawdon, on 24 May, wrote Cornwallis:** *"My first news, upon landing at Nelson's, was, that the post at Motte's house had fallen. It was a simple redoubt, and had been attacked formally by sap. Lieut. M'Pherson had maintained it gallantly till the house in the centre of it was set in flames by fire arrows, which obliged his men to throw themselves into the ditch, and surrender at discretion."*