

Revolutionary War battle

■ Generals targeted British in Chester County.

March 22 1992

In 1876, the centennial year of the Declaration of Independence, a number of historians published accounts of the early battles of the revolution. One of those historians, the Rev. Robert Lathan, focused on South Carolina's



Nearby history

LOUISE
PETTUS

Col. William Hill, a Revolutionary War hero and owner of Hill's Iron Works in York County.

The time was the last two days of July 1780. Gen. William Richardson Davie was camped at Waxhaw Church in Lancaster County. Sumter was camped at Clems Branch in Indian Land in northern Lancaster County. The two generals agreed that they would simultaneously attack the British. Davie would go down the east side of the Catawba River to Hanging Rock and

Sumter would cross the river and attack Rocky Mount on the west side.

On the morning of July 31 a Tory spied Sumter's forces and informed the British, who had already constructed fortifications. By the time Sumter got there, the British were ready. Sumter "poured volley after volley" at the entrenched British. The Tories abandoned the trenches and took refuge in several log houses.

There was no way to get them out. The houses were at the bottom of a slope and apparently the British had plenty of ammunition stored in the houses. Then Sumter had an idea how it might be done. He decided to burn the

houses. An old wagon was loaded with dry brush and straw, set afire and rolled down the hill. The effort failed.

Then, according to Daniel Hill, Sumter "in his impetuosity" called for two volunteers to go down and set the houses afire. The two men who stepped forward were Col. William Hill and James Johnson. They gathered rich pine knots to take with them.

The only protection for the two men was a large rock near the houses. As well as they could manage, they crouched so that they were protected from the line of fire of the British. But there came a time when they would be exposed. When they got close, there was a terrific volley directed at them.

The men did not hesitate. Johnson had the strength to throw the burning pine knots the two men carried onto the roofs of the houses. As the flames shot up, Hill and Johnson rushed back to their own lines. Hill's grandson wrote, "Their clothes were literally riddled with bullets and the locks of their hair shot away."

The British put up a white flag and Sumter ordered his men to cease firing. Just at that moment a hard rain began falling and doused the fire. "Sumter, now seeing that nothing could be done, led the men away, and having crossed the Catawba at Landsford, went back to Clems Branch."

An examination of a number of modern day histories on the action at Rocky Mount shows no mention of Hill and Johnson's attempts to burn the log houses with pine knots or of the hard rain.

They all report that Sumter had about 600 men and the British around 300, including 150 battle-hardened New York Volunteers. They say Sumter made three assaults against the fort and was finally forced to withdraw. Each side lost about 15 men killed or wounded.

□□□

Louise Pettus is a retired history professor from Winthrop College. Her column appears Sundays.