

The Buford Massacre

About 9 miles east of Lancaster on S.C. 522, a quarter of a mile south of S.C. 9, there is a 2-acre plot of land with two historical markers, a stone wall and two mass graves. What happened there



Nearby history

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On May 29, 1780, is known variously as the Buford Massacre, Buford's Defeat or the Battle of the Waxhaws.

Following a naval siege, Charleston had surrendered May 12. Col. Abraham Buford and his Virginia soldiers were the only organized troop left in South Carolina. Buford and his men retreated at a slow pace, partly because they waited on remnants of several South Carolina cavalry troops to join them, and partly because the Virginians were escorting S.C. Gov. John Rutledge and his party to Hillsborough, N.C., for safety.

Afraid that Gov. Rutledge would escape, the British general, Lord Cornwallis, assigned his best commander of mobile forces, Col.

■ Historical markers, mass graves a reminder of 'atrocious acts of barbarity.'

Banastre Tarleton, to pursue. By the time Tarleton caught up (at one point covering 105 miles in 54 hours), Rutledge had separated from Buford's 350 Virginia Continentals. Tarleton, who had 130 cavalry, 100 infantry, and 40 British Dragoons, found Buford's forces resting after a long march.

Accounts of what happened next vary considerably. One view states that Buford, realizing that it was futile to resist, ordered his men to raise the flag of truce.

Tarleton came forward on horseback to accept the flag. Just as he did so, his horse was shot from under him. Tarleton fell and the horse fell on him. Tarleton's men, mistakenly believing their leader was killed, attacked furiously.

Another version, and the one most popular with Patriot writers, is that Tarleton tricked Buford by offering the Colonials quarter and when they laid down their arms, Tarleton ordered the British troops to attack without mercy. Alexander Garden of Charleston wrote that it was "one of Tarleton's most atrocious acts of barbarity, yet it exalted him in the favor of Lord

Cornwallis, and raised his military reputation, in the opinions of the British nation, to the most exalted degree of perfection."

American casualties were 113 killed, 150 wounded and 53 prisoners. Many of the wounded died within a day. An American officer who was there said that the average number of saber and bayonet wounds per soldier was 16. After this the Americans spoke of "Bloody Tarleton." Buford escaped and most of those who did were mounted. The British lost only 5 killed and 14 wounded.

People in the neighborhood came to care for the wounded and that afternoon buried 84 of the dead in a mass grave. The next day they buried 25 others in a second mass grave about 300 yards from the first.

The remaining wounded patriots were taken by wagon to Waxhaw Presbyterian Church to be tended. Among the nurses there were Elizabeth Jackson and her son, 13-year-old Andrew Jackson.

A major result of Buford's Massacre was to stimulate a vast amount of hatred toward the British in the Scotch-Irish communi-

ties of Lancaster, Chester and York. It was easy for Thomas Sumter to recruit soldiers in the area. Recruiters only had to shout, "Tarleton's Quarter."

The oldest memorial on the site is a marble obelisk, 15 feet tall from base to top, which was erected in 1860. It was designed and cut by William T. White, a prominent Charleston stone-cutter. The monument is inside a 2-foot wall of white rocks that outlines the larger of the two mass graves. The second mass grave is unmarked. There is also a single grave, dated 1894, near the rock enclosure. It is the only thing left of a church called Buford Monument Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, which adjoined the site from 1893 until 1902.

Because the writing on the 1860 monument could not be read and the stone was badly chipped by souvenir hunters, in 1955 the Lancaster County Historical Commission and the Daughters of the American Revolution, Waxhaws Chapter, erected a second monument repeating the wording of the first.

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