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**“THE VIRTUE OF HUMANITY
WAS TOTALLY FORGOT”:
BUFORD’S MASSACRE, MAY 29, 1780**

J. TRACY POWER*

WHEN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION IN SOUTH CAROLINA became a civil war, from 1780 to 1782, the bitterness of the opposing forces was echoed by the lasting bitterness of spoken and written accounts of the fighting. One particularly vicious action which characterized the campaigns in the backcountry South was known popularly as “Buford’s Massacre.” The massacre took place on May 29, 1780, some nine miles east of present-day Lancaster, in north-central South Carolina near the North Carolina border. It quickly became a symbol of British atrocities against Americans, and the British commander at the scene, Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton, became widely known as “Bloody Tarleton.”

This action was part of the British effort to quell the “rebellion” in South Carolina after the fall of Charleston. On May 12, 1780, after a two-month siege, General Benjamin Lincoln surrendered the city and its garrison of nearly 6,000 troops to the British, under General Sir Henry Clinton. Lincoln’s army had been the major American force in the South, and the fall of Charleston was the most significant American defeat of the war. The surrender of both the city and the army lost not only South Carolina but most of the South to the British.¹

Early that year, a detachment of 350-to-400 soldiers had been organized in Virginia to reinforce the First, Second, and Third Virginia Regiments and the First and Second Virginia Detachments at Charleston. This reinforcement, consisting of both Continental veterans returning after furloughs and new recruits, was commanded by Colonel Abraham Buford. Though most of Buford’s command was infantry, it included part of Colonel William

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¹Russell F. Weigley, *The Partisan War: The South Carolina Campaign of 1780-1782*, Tricentennial Booklet number 2 (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press for the South Carolina Tricentennial Commission, 1970), pp. 6-7; H. Henry Lumpkin, *From Savannah to Yorktown: The American Revolution in the South* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1981), pp. 41-49; John S. Pancake, *This Destructive War: The British Campaign in the Carolinas 1780-1782* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1985), pp. 63-67.

Washington's Third Continental Dragoons and five pieces of artillery.²

The reinforcement, however, was still about thirty miles north of Charleston when Buford learned of Lincoln's surrender. His small detachment was now the largest body of Continentals in the South. Buford's orders were to move to the outpost at Camden and collect all the provisions and munitions he could carry, destroying the rest. He was then to march into North Carolina and help rebuild the shattered American army. Brigadier General William Caswell, commanding about 700 North Carolina militia, had also been sent south to reinforce the Charleston garrison and joined the Virginians on their retreat north. When the combined force reached Camden on May 25, Caswell left Buford, marching on to the Pee Dee River. Buford, with several wagons of stores, left Camden on the morning of May 27, retreating toward Salisbury, North Carolina.³

Meanwhile, the British were aware of Buford's force, and planned to destroy it before it left South Carolina. Lieutenant General Charles Lord Cornwallis, with about 2,500 British regulars and loyalists, detached a force of about 270 soldiers in pursuit of Buford on May 27. They were commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton of the British Legion, a loyalist unit created in New York and easily recognized by its distinctive green jackets. The 130 cavalry and 100 mounted infantry of the Legion were joined by forty regulars of the Seventh Regiment of Light Dragoons and one piece of artillery, a three-pounder.⁴

Tarleton, after a forced march which covered 150 miles in fifty-four

²Alexander Garden, *Anecdotes of the American Revolution, Illustrative of the Talents and Virtues of the Heroes and Patriots, Who Acted the Most Conspicuous Parts Therein*, Second Series (Charleston, S.C.: A.E. Miller, 1828; Repr., Vol. III, Brooklyn, 1865), p. 126; C. A. Flagg and W. O. Waters, "Virginia's Soldiers in the Revolution," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* XX (July 1912), pp. 275-276; Francis C. Heitman, *Historical Register of Officers of the Continental Army During the War of the Revolution April, 1775, to December, 1783*, New Revised and Enlarged Edition (Washington, D.C.: The Rare Book Shop Publishing Company, 1914), pp. 59, 131, 574; Robert K. Wright, Jr., *The Continental Army*, Army Lineage Series (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 1983), pp. 154-55, 283-292, 346.

³Garden, p. 126; Walter Clark, ed., *The State Records of North Carolina. Published Under the Supervision of the Trustees of the Public Libraries, by Order of the General Assembly* (Winston, N.C.: M.I. and J.C. Stewart, Printers to the State, 1896), Vol. XIV, p. 832; William Dobein James, *A Sketch of the Life of Brig. Gen. Francis Marion and a History of his Brigade From Its Rise in June 1780 Until Disbanded in December, 1782 With Descriptions of Characters and Scenes not Heretofore Published...* (Charleston, S.C.: Gould and Miles, 1821; Repr., Marietta, Ga.: Continental Book Company, 1948), p. 38, App., pp. 1-2.

⁴Banastre Tarleton, *A History of the Campaigns of 1780 and 1781 in the Southern Provinces of North America* (London: T. Cadell, 1781), pp. 26-27; Philip R.N. Katcher, *Encyclopedia of British, Provincial, and German Army Units 1775-1783* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Stackpole Books, 1973), pp. 24, 83.



“... Tarleton offered Buford terms similar to those accepted by Lincoln at Charleston. ‘... If you are rash enough to reject them, the blood be upon your head,’ the summons concluded.” Painting of Sir Banastre Tarleton by Sir Joshua Reynolds, courtesy of The National Gallery, London.

hours, caught Buford just south of the South Carolina-North Carolina boundary on the afternoon of May 29, 1780. He sent Buford a flag of truce, demanding the Virginians' surrender. Exaggerating his strength as 700 cavalry and mounted infantry, with reinforcements under Cornwallis close behind, Tarleton offered Buford terms similar to those accepted by Lincoln at Charleston. "If they are accepted, you will order every person under your command to pile his arms in one hour after you receive the flag: if you are rash enough to reject them, the blood be upon your head," the summons concluded. Buford answered, "I reject your proposals, and shall defend myself to the last extremity." He sent his advance guard, wagons, and artillery ahead on the road to Salisbury and prepared to defend a position astride the road.⁵

The Legion cavalry quickly routed Buford's rear guard, and the British commander formed his slightly-outnumbered force with the mounted infantry in the center and the cavalry on each flank. Though his Virginians formed in line to receive the expected charge, Buford ordered them to hold their fire until Tarleton's horsemen were within ten yards. As the loyalists and regulars charged, hacking with sabers and thrusting with bayonets, the Americans were unable to load and fire their muskets with any effectiveness.⁶

After the point of initial contact both the American and British accounts of the action are so dependent on the writers' prejudices that the sequence of events, and their details, are virtually impossible to reconstruct. Most agree that all or part of Buford's force surrendered, or attempted to, soon after the fight began and that the British did not properly accept the Americans' surrender. An American officer present called the fight "a dreadful massacre," while Tarleton called it a "complete success."⁷ The prevailing American view was that the severity of the battle was no accident, but a deliberate decision by Tarleton. It was seen as part of the British plan to conquer America by any means, whether civilized or not. Most narratives claimed that Tarleton tricked Buford, offering his men quarter and then brutally cutting them down without mercy. "This sanguinary massacre was one of Tarleton's most atrocious acts of barbarity," wrote one historian in 1828, "yet it exalted him in the favour of Lord Cornwallis, and raised his military reputation, in the opinions of the British nation, to the most exalted degree of perfection."⁸ British narratives, on the other hand, viewed the British reaction as an unfortunate result of the battle. It was, they observed, caused by the Virginians' continued resistance after they had raised the white flag; or by angry members of the Legion who

⁵Tarleton, pp. 28, 77-78; Garden, p. 127; Clark, p. 833; James, App., p. 2.

⁶Tarleton, pp. 29-30; Garden, p. 128; Clark, p. 833; James, App., pp. 2-3.

⁷Garden, p. 128; Tarleton, p. 31.

⁸Garden, pp. 129-130.

mistakenly believed that Tarleton had been killed.⁹ "The king's troops were entitled to great commendation for their activity and ardour on this occasion," Charles Stedman wrote in 1794, "but the virtue of humanity was totally forgot."¹⁰ A notice in the *Royal South-Carolina Gazette* of June 8, 1780, published in Charleston, quoted Clinton's proclamation of June 1, which complimented the British for "the Advantage obtained." It also contained a brief description of the engagement by an officer of the Seventy-first Cavalry, who was not present. According to this source, "the Colonel [Tarleton] summoned them to surrender, but they rejected his Terms, on which the Party charged, and Victory soon declared in Favour of the brave and fatigued Troops." The *Gazette* also noted — significantly, in light of later British justification for the bloodshed — "We are informed, that during the Engagement, Colonel Tarleton's Horse was shot under him."¹¹

What is certain is that the fighting was confused and quite bloody. Though originally formed in line, both Buford's defenders and Tarleton's attackers quickly lost any semblance of organization, and the action degenerated into a savage hand-to-hand fight between individuals or small groups. Captain John Stokes of the Second Virginia Regiment, for example, was wounded twenty-three times by dragoons with sabers and infantrymen with bayonets, losing a hand and a finger; remarkably, he survived.¹² One American account claimed that the British "killed at least 200 men in a most Cruel & Inhumane Manner, after piling their Arms."¹³ According to another narrative, "they went over the ground plunging their bayonets in every one that exhibited signs of life, and in some instances, where several had fallen one over the other, these monsters were seen to throw off on the point of the bayonet the uppermost, to come at those beneath."¹⁴ Several British accounts gave only slightly less graphic descriptions of the fight. "I have Cut 170 Off'rs and Men to pieces," Tarleton wrote Cornwallis immediately after the battle.¹⁵ One of his officers later boasted that "in three minutes after the attack was begun, there was not a rebel on the field that was not levelled with the ground."¹⁶

The mounted British had a decisive advantage over the Virginians, and their casualties were quite light; only five were killed and fourteen wounded.

⁹Tarleton, p. 31.

¹⁰Charles Stedman, *The History of the Origin, Progress, and Termination of the American War* (London: Printed for the Author, 1794), Vol. II, p. 193.

¹¹*The Royal South-Carolina Gazette* (Charleston), June 8, 1780.

¹²James, App., pp. 2-6; *Camden Journal*, June 18, 1845.

¹³Clark, p. 858.

¹⁴James, Appendix, p. 4.

¹⁵Quoted in Robert D. Bass, *The Green Dragoon: The Lives of Banastre Tarleton and Mary Robinson* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1957), pp. 81-82.

¹⁶"Account of Lieutenant Colonel Tarleton," *Gentleman's Magazine* (London), March 1781.

Buford's losses, however, were so appalling as to give credence to the term "massacre": 113 killed, 150 wounded, many of whom died soon afterwards, and fifty-three prisoners, for a total of 316 out of some 350 to 400 engaged. Most of the Americans who escaped, including Buford, were mounted.¹⁷

Local citizens buried eighty-four of the dead in a mass grave in the field that afternoon, and twenty-five others in another mass grave, about 300 yards from the first, the next day. The wounded were taken in wagons to Waxhaw Presbyterian Church, where many of them died and were buried in the churchyard.¹⁸ Many Virginians suffered multiple saber and bayonet wounds which testified to the severity of the action; an American officer who saw the wounded "found many of them absolutely naked, having been stripped of their clothes, and that the average of wounds inflicted, amounted to sixteen to each man."¹⁹

THE TRUE SIGNIFICANCE OF BUFORD'S MASSACRE was not in its military results, which were temporary, but in the intense hatred it created, which was lasting, and which encouraged American efforts to force the British out of the South. "This barbarous massacre gave a more sanguinary turn to the war," observed David Ramsay in 1785, in his *History of the Revolution of South-Carolina*. "Tarleton's quarters became proverbial, and in the subsequent battles a spirit of revenge gave a keener edge to military resentments."²⁰ This "keener edge" was aptly illustrated by later incidents. At Kings Mountain, in October 1780, and Haw's River, in February 1781, victorious Americans shouted, "Give them Buford's play!", "Remember Buford!", and "Tarleton's Quarter!" before brutally shooting and cutting down loyalists who pleaded for mercy. When Tarleton was decisively defeated at Cowpens in January 1781, American officers had difficulty restraining their men, who taunted British prisoners with cries of "Tarleton's Quarter!"²¹

¹⁷Tarleton, pp. 30-31, 84.

¹⁸Tarleton, pp. 31-32; Camden *Journal*, June 18, 1845; Henry Lee, *Memoirs of the War in the Southern Department of the United States* (Philadelphia and New York: Bradford and Inskeep, 1812; Second Ed: New York: University Publishing Co., 1869), p. 165; George Howe, *History of the Presbyterian Church in South Carolina* (Columbia, S.C.: Duffie and Chapman, 1870), Vol. 1, pp. 536-537.

¹⁹Garden, p. 129.

²⁰David Ramsay, *The History of the Revolution of South-Carolina, From a British Province to an Independent State* (Trenton, N.J.: Isaac Collins, 1785), Vol. II, p. 110.

²¹Lyman C. Draper, *King's Mountain and Its Heroes: History of the Battle of King's Mountain, October, 7th, 1780, and the Events Which Led to It*, Reprint Edition (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1967), p. 282; Lumpkin, p. 102; John C. Dann, ed., *The Revolution Remembered: Eyewitness Accounts of the War for Independence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 202; Tarleton, pp. 217-218; Edwin C. Bearss, "The Battle of Cowpens: A Documented Narrative and Troop Movement

As early as the mid-1780s veterans published memoirs or histories of campaigns and battles, and historians chronicled the Revolution's figures and events. Early accounts of Buford's Massacre in such works were defined by vivid details of the action and by emotional accusations or justifications of the responsibility for it. Most of them were written by Americans — often South Carolinians — whose righteous indignation gave their versions such force. Another distinguishing characteristic of these narratives was that their authors, though many of them interviewed survivors of the massacre, had not actually been present.²²

Of the massacre's descriptions published from the war's end to the mid-nineteenth century, only one of any note was written by a participant. It was Banastre Tarleton's self-serving *History of the Campaigns of 1780 and 1781, in the Southern Province of North America*, published in 1787. The former British commander called the action "an affair," arguing that Buford was to blame for the faulty disposition of his force and for losing control over it after the fight began.²³

American authors who mentioned Buford's Massacre throughout this period — as might be expected of those creating their national history during a period of patriotic fervor — tended to stress the gory details of a brutal slaughter. The British "advanced to the charge with the horrid yells of infuriated demons," claimed one particularly impassioned historian in 1821. "Tarleton with his cruel myrmidons was in the midst of them [Buford's men], when commenced a scene of indiscriminate carnage never surpassed by the ruthless atrocities of the most barbarous savages."²⁴ Alexander Garden, who compiled three volumes of anecdotes on the American Revolution, wrote that "wheresoever the influences of Tarleton extended, with scarcely an exception, his progress might be traced by merciless severity.... Witness the slaughter of the unresisting force of Colonel Buford, crying out for quarter."²⁵

Though such views were typical, there were some which were less blatantly partisan than most. Charles Stedman's assessment of 1794, quoted above, complimented Tarleton's men for their "activity and ardour" while

Map," unpublished report (Washington, D.C.: Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation, National Park Service, 1967), p. 40; Bass, p. 158; Don Higginbotham, *Daniel Morgan: Revolutionary Rifleman* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), p. 140.

²²See, for example, the accounts of Ramsay, Lee, Garden, and James, quoted above, as well as Garden's earlier work, *Anecdotes of the Revolutionary War in America, with Sketches of Character of Persons the Most Distinguished, in the Southern States, for Civil and Military Service* (Charleston, S.C.: A.E. Miller, 1822; Repr., Spartanburg, S.C.: The Reprint Co., 1972), pp. 284-286.

²³Tarleton, pp. 27-32.

²⁴James, App., pp. 3-4.

²⁵Garden, *Anecdotes of the Revolutionary War in America*, p. 285.

at the same time deploring their methods.²⁶ William Moultrie, an American general, did not dwell on the terrible aspects of the action in his *Memoirs of the American Revolution*, published in 1802. His perspective was that of a soldier, criticizing Buford's tactical mistakes and calling "this victory of Tarleton's" an illustration of "the superiority which cavalry have over infantry."²⁷

THE MASSACRE'S HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE was not neglected by later South Carolinians. As interest in the Revolution increased in the first half of the nineteenth century, local interest in a monument to Buford's command also increased. Attempts were made to memorialize both the site and the mass grave as early as 1845, but the plans were not realized until 1860. Contributions were collected from Lancaster District and neighboring areas, and William T. White, a prominent Charleston sculptor and stone-cutter, was commissioned to design and create the monument. A marble obelisk, approximately fifteen feet high from base to tip, it was described in the *Charleston Courier* as "beautiful for its unpretending simplicity ... designed to commemorate an event that will never fail to kindle a feeling of indignation in the bosom of the patriot. The bloody massacre at the Waxhaws will never be forgotten."²⁸ The monument's dedication, in June 1860, was marked by several speeches from local civic and religious leaders, who noted that they "had assembled together to erect a monument in honor of the brave dead, who had for so many years tenanted their silent homes without a stone to mark the spot where they lay."²⁹ The inscription read:

Erected to the memory and in honor of the brave and patriotic American soldiers who fell in the battle which occurred at this place on the 29th May 1780 between Col. Abraham Buford who commanded a regiment of 350 Virginians and Col. Tarleton of the British Army with 250 Cavalry and a like number of Infantry.

Nearly the entire command of Col. Buford was either killed or wounded, 84 gallant soldiers are buried in this grave. They left their homes for the relief of Charleston, but hearing at Camden of the surrender of that city, were returning. Here their lives were ended in the service of their country.

²⁶Stedman, p. 193.

²⁷William Moultrie, *Memoirs of the American Revolution, So Far as It Related to the States of North and South Carolina, and Georgia* (New York: David Longworth, 1802), Vol. I, pp. 205-6, 208.

²⁸Quoted in the *Lancaster Ledger*, May 16, 1860.

²⁹*Ibid.*, June 6, 1860.

The cruelty and barbarous massacre committed on this occasion by Tarleton and his command after the surrender of Col. Buford and his regiment, originated the American war cry, "Remember Tarleton's Quarter." A British historian confesses at this battle "The virtue of humanity was totally forgot."

A stone wall encloses the monument and mass grave; the second, smaller mass grave is unmarked.

Later historians of the American Revolution, most of them relying on the earlier postwar narratives, have used Buford's Massacre and its aftermath as an example of the intense severity of the war in the backcountry South. "The tragedy sank deep into the hearts, not only of the American soldiers, but of the people of this section who had hitherto had but little to do with the war," wrote Edward McCrady in 1901. "It was an event which contributed much to arousing them from an indifference to the contest to the most determined resistance to the British."³⁰ More recent historians have described the massacre and its aftermath in similar terms.³¹ "Tarleton's harsh effectiveness came at a high price," wrote Don Higginbotham in 1971, "spurring the trimmers and the faint-hearted to join bolder patriots in the field."³²

Local and state efforts to recognize the massacre's historic significance and to mark the site have continued since the erection of the 1860 monument. In 1893 the Buford's Monument Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church was founded, and a frame church built, near the monument; its congregation merged with another church and the building was moved in 1902. Lancaster County erected a South Carolina Historical Marker, titled

³⁰Edward McCrady, *The History of South Carolina in the Revolution 1775-1780* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1901), p. 524.

³¹The modern accounts are usually quite similar, though they vary widely both in their length and their quality. See, for example, Willard M. Wallace, *Appeal to Arms: A Military History of the American Revolution* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951; Repr., Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1964), p. 211; Christopher Ward, *The War of the Revolution*, John Richard Alden, ed. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952), Vol. II, pp. 705-6; Bass, pp. 78-83; Bruce Lancaster, *The American Heritage Book of the Revolution* (New York: American Heritage Publishing Company, 1958), p. 311; M. F. Treacy, *Prelude to Yorktown: The Southern Campaign of Nathanael Greene 1780-1781* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1963), pp. 16-17; Nat and Sam Hilborn, *Battleground of Freedom: South Carolina in the Revolution* (Columbia: Sandlapper Press, 1970), pp. 117-120; Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence: Military Attitudes, Policies, and Practice, 1763-1789* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971), p. 361; Lumpkin, pp. 50, 119, 249-250; and Robert Stansbury Lambert, *South Carolina Loyalists in the American Revolution* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1897), p. 99.

³²Higginbotham, p. 361.

"Buford's Bloody Battleground," on South Carolina Highway 9 near the site, in 1940. Since 1946, when the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church deeded the two-acre plot to Lancaster County, the county has maintained it as a county historic park. A modern granite monument, duplicating the inscription of the 1860 monument, was erected by the Lancaster County Historical Commission and the Daughters of the American Revolution in 1955. The massacre site was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1990.³³

Buford's Massacre was, from a purely military standpoint, a minor action. Its impact on American morale, however, was enormous, coming as it did immediately after the fall of Charleston. Though the British hoped Buford's defeat would mean the end of effective resistance in the South, the massacre's effect on the population was precisely the opposite. It helped create a climate of revenge and resolve which transformed the war in the Carolinas into a crusade. Elizabeth Ellet, writing in *The Women of the American Revolution* in 1850, recounted the response of the Gaston family, which lived nearby. When the news of the massacre reached them, according to Ellet, several of the young men "rose with one accord, and undaunted by reverse, grasped each other by the hand, and voluntarily pledged themselves to suffer death rather than submit to the invader. This spontaneous vow was confirmed by a solemn oath, and thence forward they continued in arms" to fight the British. Two of the young women, along with a child, "lost no time in repairing to Waxhaw church," where the temporary hospital had been established. Ellet wrote, "It was the part of the woman, like the angel of mercy, to bring relief to the helpless and perishing. Day and night they were busied in aiding the surgeon to dress their wounds, and in preparing food for those who needed it."³⁴

The massacre's impact on the early historiography of the war in the South, and on the impulse to commemorate the Revolution's battles and figures, was only slightly less significant. Though Charles Stedman's admission that "the virtue of humanity was totally forgot" is a familiar one, quoted in most accounts and on the monuments at the site, it is still perhaps the most appropriate assessment of a tragic episode in the history of the American Revolution.

³³Lancaster County Deed Book H, pp. 269, 610, Lancaster County Records, S. C. Dept. of Archives and History, Columbia, S.C. (hereafter SCDAH); *The Centennial History of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church 1803-1903. Prepared and Published by Order of the Synod* (Charleston, S.C.: Presses of Walker, Evans and Cogswell Co., 1905), pp. 434, 548; South Carolina Historic Marker Files, SCDAH.; Louise Pettus and Martha Bishop, *Lancaster County: A Pictorial History* (Norfolk: The Donning Company, 1984), p. 29; National Register of Historic Places Files, South Carolina State Historic Preservation Office, SCDAH.

³⁴Elizabeth Ellet, *The Women of the American Revolution* (New York: Baker and Scribner, 1850), Vol. III, pp. 157-158.