

# How Sumter missed the

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## Battle of Kings Mountain

In the summer of 1780, British troops were swarming all over this state. Gov. John Rutledge and the skeletal remains of the S.C. Assembly were in Hillsborough,

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**NEARBY HISTORY**

N.C., gloomily assessing their chances of returning to Charleston.

For the American Patriot cause, the low point came in mid-August. Gen. Horatio Gates lost Camden to the British on Aug. 16.

Gen. Thomas "the Gamecock" Sumter was defeated in the Fishing Creek "Surprise" two days later.

Camden was the courthouse town of seven future counties, including York, Lancaster and

Chester. Sumter was "licking his wounds" at his Clems branch camp in the Indian Land of Lancaster County (Clems branch runs out of North Carolina below Pineville into Sugar Creek).

It would be up to a few Whigs from the Ninety Six area of western South Carolina and the "mountain boys" of North Carolina and Tennessee to face the British at Kings Mountain.

Looking back, it is easy to recognize that the Battle of Kings Mountain was the turning point of the American Revolution. But at that time, the importance of the Kings Mountain victory was not recognized. Still, the question might be asked, "Why wasn't Sumter at Kings Mountain?"

Obviously, communication in wartime in 1780 was terribly slow, but Sumter had been fortunate in

having the Catawba Indian warrior force of around 42 men, acknowledged as superior gatherers of intelligence on the enemy's whereabouts.

The truth is that Sumter had very few men on hand. British forces sent out by Gen. Charles Cornwallis after he captured Camden had found Sumter's forces splashing in Fishing Creek and Sumter asleep under a wagon. While Sumter managed to escape (in his night clothes and without a saddle), one in every five of his men was killed, and 40 percent were captured.

The remaining 40 percent of Sumter's men at Fishing Creek mostly carried off the wounded and went home to harvest the sparse crops against the winter. That left Sumter and Col. Edward Lacy with a very small force.

There was a second surprise for Sumter. Brig. Gen. James Williams, who claimed victory over the British at Musgrove's Mill the same day Sumter lost at Fishing Creek, came to Clems branch bearing a commission from Gov. Rutledge to take command of all S.C. troops in the area. In other words, Williams had authority to replace Sumter.

Not only did Sumter refuse to hand over his army to Williams, but Sumter's men, to a man, refused to accept Williams as their commander. It seems that earlier Williams, then a colonel, had been Sumter's commissary head. In some way not understood today, Sumter's men developed a great hatred of Williams. But Williams had North Carolina troops with him, enough to prevail.

At that point there came word

that the British officers Rawdon and Tarleton were preparing to attack and would cross the Catawba at Bigger's ferry. The two warring officers had to come to a truce to face their mutual enemy. Sumter retired from the army to await Gov. Rutledge's final decision. The S.C. troops would be under Cols. William Hill and Edward Lacy while Williams commanded his N.C. troops.

Four of Sumter's colonels were sent as a commission to Gov. Rutledge in Hillsborough. Lacy and Hill took their army up to Tuckaseegee ford on the Mecklenburg County side of the Catawba, hoping to join Gen. William Davidson.

Williams' scouts brought him

word of the approaching battle at Kings Mountain. Williams sent word to the others, including Lacy who was at his Chester home, requesting that they all spread the word of the British troops' position. The N.C. and Tennessee men had heard that the British under Major Patrick Ferguson were returning to Ninety Six and would have abandoned the search if Lacy's heroic efforts had not informed them differently.

So it was that Lacy, not Sumter, became a key player in the British defeat at Kings Mountain.

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