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AN UNFORTUNATE AFFAIR: THE BATTLE OF BRIER CREEK AND THE AFTERMATH IN GEORGIA

by

WILLIAM HENRY

(Under the Direction of Solomon K. Smith)

ABSTRACT

The Battle of Brier Creek on March 3, 1779 has been overlooked for many years by historians of the American War of Independence in Georgia. Because it was so brief and did not include massive field armies, the importance of the battle has been ignored. This is unfortunate as the Battle of Brier Creek had many severe consequences and changed the direction of the war in Georgia. The loss of men, arms, and equipment derailed Patriot offensive plans and gave the British valuable time to secure their position in the small frontier colony. It allowed them to establish civil government in Georgia while the Patriots were reeling from their losses and the unwillingness of the militia to reenlist. Most importantly, the battle reversed the fortunes of the opposing armies in Georgia. Prior to the battle, the British had lost their momentum and were in danger of being driven out of the state. The Patriots, after their calamity at Savannah, were on the move and preparing for a major assault against the British. They had regained the initiative and their morale was high. The Battle of Brier Creek changed all of this within a few short minutes.

Few studies on this battle look beyond the engagement and its aftermath. The affects on the Patriot and British forces is apparent and yet historical works dealing with the Revolution in Georgia often neglect this important engagement. The Battle of Brier Creek deserves closer examination. The British Southern Campaign began in Georgia and had it not been for the Battle of Brier Creek it could have just as easily ended there.

INDEX WORDS: Brier Creek, American Revolution, Georgia, John Ashe, Archibald Campbell,
Mark Prevost, Samuel Elbert

AN UNFORTUNATE AFFAIR: THE BATTLE OF BRIER CREEK AND THE AFTERMATH IN GEORGIA

by

WILLIAM HENRY

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AN UNFORTUNATE AFFAIR: THE BATTLE OF BRIER CREEK AND THE AFTERMATH IN GEORGIA

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this Thesis to my brother, Chris, who was, and will always be, a very influential part of my life. He supported me in all of my endeavors and was always there for me with support, sound advice, and encouragement. I looked up to him as a child and as an adult and will continue to look to him as an example of the type of person I want to be. I owe more to him than I can express in words. Chris made a big impact on my life and though he is no longer with us, he will forever remain in my heart. He was an inspiration to me and my entire family. So this is for Chris; my friend, my role model, my Brother.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are several people that I would like to thank for their assistance, advice, and support.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my parents. They have always encouraged me to pursue my educational ambitions and never doubted my ability to achieve those goals. I would not be where I am today if it was not for their unwavering love and support. I would also like to thank my fiancé, Morgan, for her love, support, and patience as I worked towards my Masters Degree. She has made many sacrifices and basically put her life on hold in order for me to focus on school and she has supported me every step of the way. Last, but certainly not least, I owe a great deal of gratitude to my graduate advisor Dr. Solomon Smith. He has worked with me on this Thesis, offered advice and words of encouragement, and pushed me to do the best work possible. I would have been lost for much of this Thesis if it had not been for his guidance and counsel. There are many family members and friends that I would like to thank, but for the sake of space I will simply say Thank You to all those who have offered your assistance, support and words of encouragement. Thanks!

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INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the consequences of the Patriot defeat at the Battle of Brier Creek. Through the use of primary source material, this study seeks to identify the affects, both short and long term that this engagement had on British and Patriot forces in the southern colonies. It will investigate how the loss of men, arms, and equipment affected the capabilities of the Patriot army in the south. It will also look at how the battle affected reenlistments and desertions in the immediate aftermath.

Several historians studied the Battle of Brier Creek, but none have provided an analysis of the possible consequences of the battle. Instead, these focused on examining the battle with little thought of how its outcome altered the course of the war in Georgia and the southern colonies as a whole. This study will fill that gap in the historiography and shed light on an important battle that has been overlooked for far too long. The Battle of Brier Creek swung momentum in favor of the British, crushed Patriot morale, and derailed Rebel offensive plans in Georgia. It also provided the British with the opportunity to secure their foothold in the frontier colony, which changed the course of the war.

CHAPTER 1

The Southern Campaign and the Tides of War

To understand the importance of the Battle of Brier Creek, it is necessary to examine the events leading up to that engagement. The British Southern Campaign hinged on success in Georgia. Failure to secure the small colony would almost certainly spell disaster for the British military. Momentum would be an important factor for both armies, particularly in recruiting for loyalist or Patriot militias. The British needed quick and decisive victories in hopes of bringing out the many loyalists who were said to inhabit Georgia and South Carolina. Lord George Germain wrote to Lieutenant Colonel Archibald Campbell that “The recovery of that province alone is in the present situation of American affairs an object of importance in several points of view, but in none of such magnitude as its opening an intercourse with the loyal inhabitants of the Carolinas and affording the means of reducing those provinces.”¹ Clearly, there was little room for error for the British. They had to be successful from start to finish or they risked those loyal inhabitants thinking better of coming to their aid or even worse, they might join the Patriots. The British were able to seize the advantage early with the capture of Savannah; however, this would quickly begin to change. Thomas Brown’s defeat in Burke County was the first incident to chip away at British initiative. At Augusta, the British were concerned with the swelling ranks of Patriot forces across the River and the continuation of raids by the Rebels. Colonel Campbell’s withdrawal from Augusta and the rout of a loyalist force at Kettle Creek had all but eliminated British momentum. By the time British forces surprised the Rebels at Brier Creek, momentum had swung in favor of the Patriots. The Battle of Brier Creek would quickly

¹ Lord George Germain to Lieutenant Colonel Archibald Campbell, 16 January 1779, in K.G. Davies, ed., *Documents of the American Revolution 1770-1783*, 20 vols. (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1976), 17:32.

change that and alter the course of the war in the south. It is therefore very important to examine these events and the shifts in momentum leading up to the Battle of Brier Creek and after.

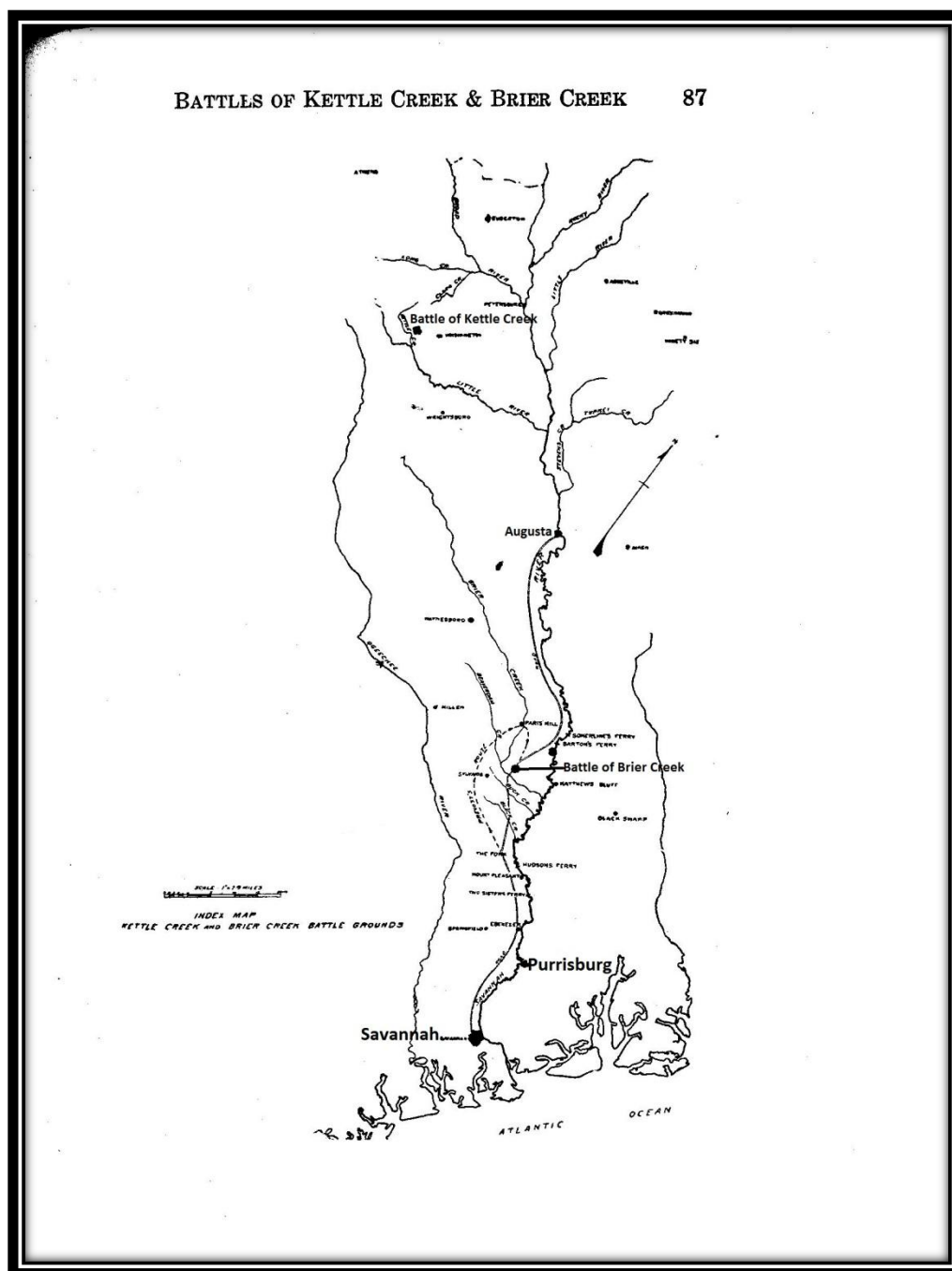


Figure 1.1. In: Otis Ashmore and Charles Olmstead. Index Map: Kettle Creek and Brier Creek Battle Grounds [map].

"The Battles of Kettle Creek and Brier Creek." *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, vol. X, no. 2, (June 1926), 85-125.

By 1778, the war in the northern colonies was not going well for the British. As much as Sir Henry Clinton wanted to destroy George Washington's Continental Army, he could not lure Washington into a decisive battle in which this could be accomplished. Washington always managed to slip away, and as long as his army remained intact, the war would continue. Add to this situation the French entry into the war and British success was becoming less and less certain. Because of this crisis, Lord George Germain, the Secretary of State for the American Colonies, decided it was necessary to shift the war to the south. The idea was that by securing the southern colonies, the British would be able to further isolate the northern colonies and cut them off from much needed supplies coming from Virginia and the Carolinas.² The plan laid out by Lord Germain first involved the capture of Georgia, and then the army would move up into South Carolina, North Carolina and then Virginia. British forces would capture ports and cities, then leave them in the protection of loyalist militias as they moved on to their next target. Here in lies the problem with the British southern strategy. British intelligence, much of which was from exiled loyalists, portrayed the southern colonies as a hotbed of loyalist support. According to these sources, all that was needed was a strong show of force by the British Army and Tories in the southern population would rally to the King's Colors and overthrow their patriot oppressors. The belief of and reliance on a counterrevolution by loyalist militias proved to be a terrible mistake by the British. Their first target was Georgia, which was supposed to be one of the most loyal of all of the colonies. It was here in this vital frontier colony that the British Southern Campaign began.³

² Davies, *Documents*, 17:12-14.

³ David K. Wilson, *The Southern Strategy: Britain's Conquest of South Carolina and Georgia 1775-1780*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), p.XIII-5.

There were several reasons for choosing Georgia as the initial target in the new southern campaign. It would secure the northern border of British Florida. That would allow British troops in Florida to move northward to help secure the colony. Georgia also had a smaller population and fewer defenders than other colonies. By securing the port of Savannah, the British could bring in supplies and reinforcements with ease. Another reason for choosing Georgia was that British forces had already attempted to capture Charleston and secure the Carolinas in 1776 and failed. This attempt was hampered by poor planning and incompetent leadership. After the campaign failed, the southern colonies were largely ignored until 1778. By this time, the stakes had been raised as the French entered the war and British success in North America depended upon the subjugation of the south.⁴

The plan to capture Georgia involved a landing of British forces near Savannah, as well as a force of British regulars and loyalist militia marching from St. Augustine, Florida. The King's forces in Florida were under the command of Major General Augustine Prevost, who became the overall commander of British forces in the southern colonies once Savannah was taken. General Prevost was ordered to move his men up to the St. Mary's River and take post there. To command the landing party in Georgia, General Clinton chose Lieutenant Colonel Archibald Campbell. The force that Campbell would command numbered around 3,000 men, making his rank insufficient. To remedy this, Clinton tried to promote Campbell to brigadier general. Unfortunately, protests from other officers prevented the promotion from taking place. Instead, Campbell received a brigadier general's salary during the expedition to Georgia while maintaining the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. Campbell set sail for Savannah on November 9,

⁴ Wilson, *The Southern Strategy*, 59-64.

1778, on board the man-of-war *Phoenix* with his army in tow onboard the many ships that made up the British fleet.⁵

On the opposite side, the man in charge of the Southern Department of the Patriot's Continental Army was General Robert Howe. By the fall of 1778, the Continental Congress had already decided to relieve Howe of command and replace him with Major General Benjamin Lincoln. While waiting for relief from General Lincoln, Howe was forced to move his small army into Georgia in an attempt to prevent further raids from Florida. He originally took post at Sunbury, but eventually moved north to Savannah. The city was surrounded by a series of rundown forts that were built to defend against the Spanish during the French and Indian War. After considering the abandonment of Savannah, Howe was compelled by his senior staff to stay and defend the city. After some deliberation, the decision was made to construct defenses outside of the fortifications to prevent his men from being trapped by the British.⁶

On December 29, 1778, Lieutenant Colonel Campbell began putting his men ashore at Girardeau's Landing about two miles south of Savannah. Colonel Samuel Elbert, who commanded the Georgia Continentals at Savannah, recommended that defense of the city be made at Brewton's Hill. This position was about 600 yards from the river and would have provided the Americans with an excellent position for shelling the enemy as they came ashore. Howe, though, overruled Elbert and decided on a position about one-half mile from the city. He sent one company of South Carolina Continentals to delay the British advance, but it was of little use. Once onshore, Campbell's men moved quickly against the Patriot position. It would

⁵ Colin Campbell, ed., *Journal of an Expedition against the Rebels of Georgia in North America under the Orders of Archibald Campbell Esquire Lieut. Colol. of His Majesty's 71st Regimt. 1778*, (Darien, GA: The Ashantilly Press, 1981), 4-13.

⁶ Wilson, *The Southern Strategy*, 71-72.

have been difficult to disembark the remaining British troops and supplies without first controlling Brewton's Hill. The Patriots fired one volley and retreated under the bayonet charge of the redcoats.⁷

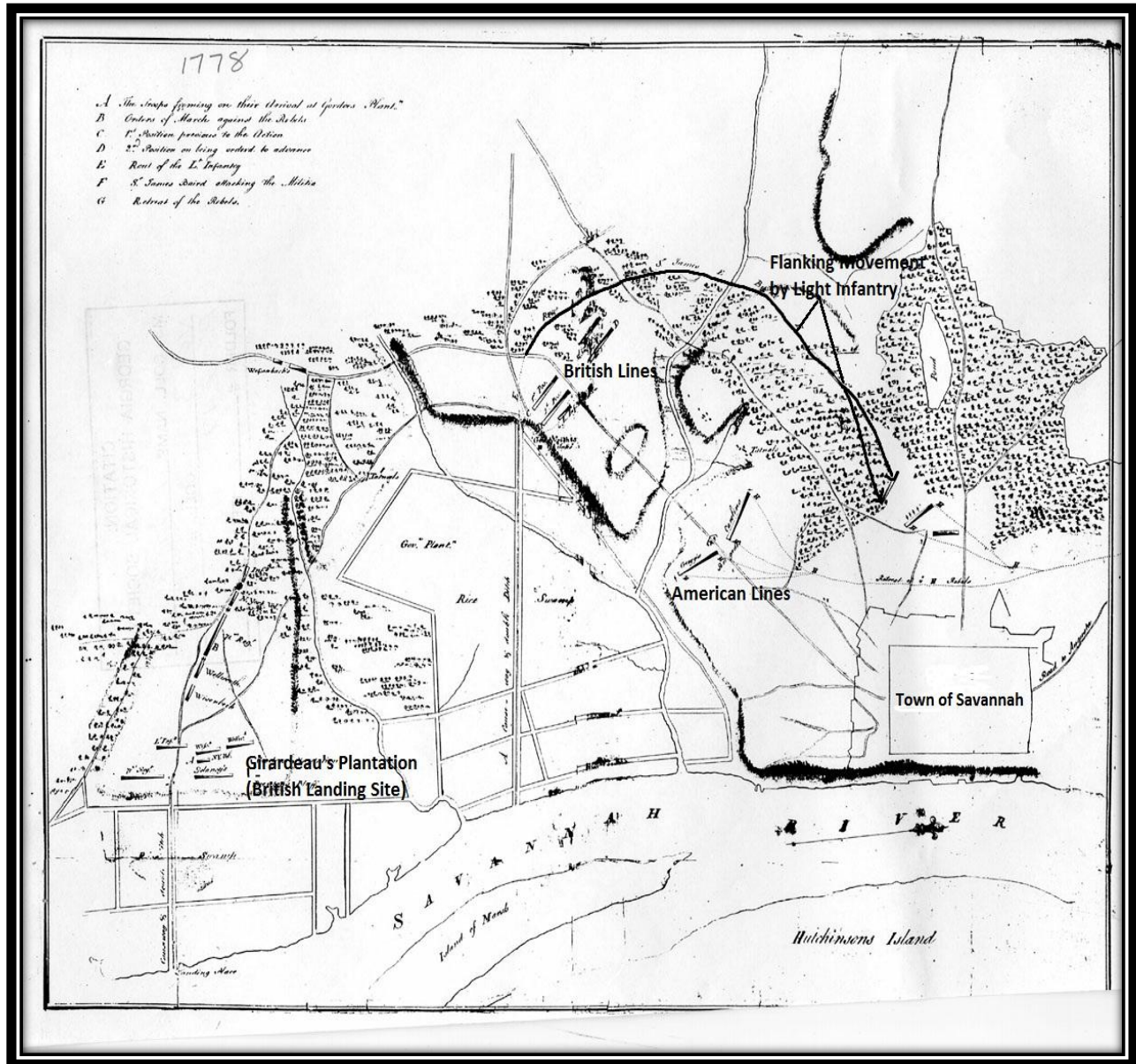


Figure 1.2. Capture of Savannah [map]. In: Jim Byous. *The Fortresses of Savannah*. <http://www.sip.armstrong.edu/Forts/Essay.html>

⁷ Wilson, *The Southern Strategy*, 72-73.

Campbell was surprised that more effort was not made to maintain control of the bluff. In his report of the engagement, Campbell stated, “had the rebels stationed four pieces of cannon on this bluff with 500 men for its defense, it is more than probable, they would have destroyed the greatest part of this division of our little army in their progress to the Bluff.”⁸ This failure was a terrible mistake on Howe’s part. Once on land, Campbell clearly had the momentum and rapidly prepared his men to move towards Savannah. Before marching to Savannah, Campbell sent out scouts to clear the woods around the bluff as well as detachments to guard the left and right flanks of the army. Once these precautions were taken, his army moved out. As the British approached the city, they discovered that the Rebel line was forming about a half mile south of Savannah. Campbell wanted to attack as soon as possible, but difficulties in bringing men and material from their landing place meant it was around midday before everyone was in position.⁹

By two o’clock, the British formed a line along a railed fence on Sir James Wright’s plantation, just 800 yards from the American line. The Americans greeted the British with artillery barrages, though Campbell was able to keep his men out of the way. The British worked quickly to ascertain the disposition of the Americans, and Campbell himself climbed a tall tree to get a better view of the battlefield. The American line was formed on a plain just across the Savannah Road. The main line was facing west and their right was stretched to a thickly wooded area. The American line was in a well defended position, with a marshy area to their front and thick woods on their right. Howe ordered the burning of bridges across the waterways leading to Savannah as well. Unfortunately for the Americans, the British captured a

⁸ Campbell, *Journal*, 23-24.

⁹ Campbell, *Journal*, 24-25.

slave who gave them a great deal of useful information about the American position. More importantly, however, he could guide the British troops through the wooded area on the American right. Campbell quickly ordered the Light Infantry to move on the American right, while he attacked the center. He also shifted a considerable number of men towards the American left, in the hopes of drawing attention away from their right flank. Campbell's plan worked well.¹⁰

Upon receiving the signal that the Light Infantry had made contact on the American right, Campbell ordered the Royal Artillery to open up on the American line and his forces advanced rapidly towards the Americans "with great Alacrity and Firmness."¹¹ Howe realized that he had been outflanked when he heard musket shots from the barracks on his right. By this time, it was too late. The American line was already shifting from the British bombardment. Howe, seeing clearly that his army was in danger of being destroyed, ordered a general retreat. At first the withdrawal was orderly, but British and German troops charging with fixed bayonets turned the retreat into a rout. The American line crumbled. Colonel Huger and Colonel Owen Roberts performed a rear guard action that allowed many Americans to escape the city.¹² Among the retreating forces were General Robert Howe and Colonel Samuel Elbert. They had to abandon their horses to swim across Yamacraw Creek to safety. The British captured 453 men of various ranks, and no small quantity of arms and ammunition. This was a severe blow to American forces in the south and was a most unfortunate start to the Southern Campaign in

¹⁰ Campbell, *Journal*, 25-27.

¹¹ Campbell, *Journal*, 27.

¹² Wilson, *The Southern Strategy*, 76-77.

Georgia. Campbell landed his men at daybreak on December 29, and was in control of Georgia's capital before nightfall.¹³

Howe's army was in full retreat at this point, which gave Lieutenant Colonel Campbell ample opportunity to secure various posts in Georgia. He quickly secured Cherokee Hill and the town of Ebenezer. With General Prevost set to arrive in Savannah, Campbell held off on any further movements into the interior of Georgia, though he was already making plans to take Augusta.¹⁴ Campbell intended to make a rapid march to Augusta with only a couple of field pieces and enough provisions for a month. He hoped that the rapid movement of his troops to Augusta would increase his odds of success.¹⁵ They also hoped that there would be more support from loyalist further into the interior of Georgia. William Moultrie wrote to Colonel Charles Pinckney that a deserter informed them of the enemy's numbers and that most of the inhabitants of Georgia had not taken up arms against them. Instead, most of them "delivered up their arms and submitted quietly to the British."¹⁶ He went on to say that "I believe they will remain neuter, unless we go in with a considerable body, so as to insure success,"¹⁷ which further highlights the importance of the mood and feelings of the inhabitants. Thus with the winning of hearts and minds a priority in Georgia, Colonel Campbell and General Prevost made plans to take Augusta.

On January 24, Colonel Campbell set out from Ebenezer with a force of just over 1,000 men, consisting of the 1st Battalion 71st Regiment of Foot, the New York Volunteers, Light

¹³ Campbell, *Journal*, 28-29.

¹⁴ Lieutenant Colonel Archibald Campbell to Lord George Germain, 16 January, 1779 in Davies, *Documents*, 17:36-38.

¹⁵ Lieutenant Colonel Archibald Campbell to Lord George Germain, 16 January, 1779 in Davies, *Documents*, 17:40.

¹⁶ William Moultrie, *Memoirs of the American Revolution*, (New York: Arno Press, 1968), 265.

¹⁷ Moultrie, *Memoirs*, 265.

Infantry, one troop of Light Dragoons, Carolina Loyalists, the Florida Rangers, and a few units of the Royal Artillery. On February 26, the Florida Rangers under command of Colonel Thomas Brown were ordered by General Prevost to march westward towards a party of Rebels said to be in Burke County. Campbell did not agree with these orders, stating “it was very contrary to my Ideas.”¹⁸ Campbell had a rather low opinion of Colonel Brown and his Florida Rangers and expected them to fail. However, since the order came from General Prevost, he was obliged to obey it. Brown and his Rangers set out for Burke County and caught up with the Americans at the county court house. After a skirmish with the Americans, Brown was forced to withdraw. He suffered casualties and was himself wounded in the action. Campbell notes that they returned “seemingly much jaded, and not a little disconcerted with their Repulse.”¹⁹

Thomas Brown’s raid into Burke County was the first of a series of events that would shift the momentum in the American’s favor, only to be undone by the events at Brier Creek. According to Campbell, “This unfortunate Skirmish made the Rebels retire towards the Upper Country, and unite with 600 Men,” bringing their total to about 900.²⁰ Despite this setback, Campbell continued his march towards Augusta, encountering only minimal resistance as the British army moved northward. On the outskirts of Augusta, he learned from prisoners and scouts that the Americans, under General Williamson, had cannon set up to bombard the main road into the town. Knowing this, Campbell ordered his men to take a circuitous route and enter the town without risk. By February 1, Augusta was under British control.²¹

¹⁸ Campbell, *Journal*, 47-48.

¹⁹ Campbell, *Journal*, 49.

²⁰ Campbell, *Journal*, 19.

²¹ Campbell, *Journal*, 50-54.

Securing Augusta would be difficult task. Colonel Campbell set about creating defensive works around the small town and reconnoitering the area. He was limited by the fact that the Americans had taken all of the boats across the Savannah River when they abandoned Augusta. Since he had no boats, he could not attack the Rebels across the river. This left the town vulnerable to those raiding parties and meant that Campbell could not pursue them across the river. One of his volunteers was a ship carpenter, so he was ordered to construct several flat boats that could be used to ferry a small detachment of men across the river to attack individual elements of the American army under General Williamson. While the boats were being constructed, the Patriots launched several raiding parties across the river. One such party killed a Light Infantryman named MacAlister, who was posted as a safeguard at the home of an American officer to protect his family. This killing severely angered the British and would come back to haunt the Patriots at Brier Creek. The safeguard in European warfare was supposed to be left alone while he was protecting non-combatants, hence much of the anger after MacAlister's death.²²

Campbell sent detachments into the backcountry as well. In one instance, a group was sent to secure a series of small forts meant to protect against Indian attacks. Others were sent to recruit loyalists for the militia. The British were expecting a large number of Tories to come out and support the King's Army. However, that expectation was much too high. Instead of the roughly 6,000 Tories that were supposed to be hiding in the Georgia backcountry, the British found barely 1,100. This had much to do with the uncertain position of the little British army in Augusta. It is very likely that most loyalists, or even neutrals, were concerned that the British

²² Campbell, *Journal*, 55-57.

could not adequately protect them or their families. There was also the very real possibility of Campbell being forced to withdraw from Augusta, leaving Tories at the mercy of their Patriot neighbors. The possibility of withdrawal was highlighted by the growing force of Patriots across the river. Campbell's hope rested with Colonel Boyd and his loyalist militia. Boyd was marching towards Augusta with approximately 600 loyalists ready to assist Campbell. This would do little to assuage the fears of local Tories. The news of a force of 1,600 Patriots under Generals Ashe and O'Brien which were moving to rendezvous with General Williamson's army, made the situation even bleaker. Campbell's little army of just over 1,000 men would be outnumbered by a Patriot force of almost 3,800.²³

By February 14, Colonel Campbell decided it was in his army's best interest to withdraw from Augusta to a more defensible position that would allow for more and better communication and supply. This was a necessary precaution considering the fact that overwhelming Loyalist support he was counting on never materialized. In explaining this withdrawal to Lord George Germain, General Prevost noted that, "The object of this expedition was to open the back country, to bring to the test the often made professions of loyalty of its inhabitants by this appearance of support in their neighborhood to countenance their rising in arms."²⁴ This clearly illustrates the need for loyalist support in Georgia. It was of such importance that both Colonel Campbell and General Prevost were willing to risk a part of their army to take Augusta and recruit a loyalist militia. Prevost went on to say, "without such rising both hearty and powerful it would be very difficult if not impossible to supply or sustain so

²³ Campbell, *Journal*, 58-61.

²⁴ Davies, *Documents*, 17:76-77.

distant a post.”²⁵ It is obvious that Campbell’s position in Augusta was precarious, with no boats and a much larger force of Americans opposite him across the river. Campbell was also concerned that his retreat might be cut off. Campbell wrote in his journal “there were six deep Ravines between us and General Prevost’s Army; At any of which, 1000 determined Men might keep us for many Days at Bay, in Opposition to our best Efforts to dislodge them.”²⁶ With these concerns at the forefront of his mind, Campbell withdrew from Augusta on February 14, disappointed in the outcome of the expedition. The very same day Colonel Boyd’s loyalist militia came under attack from Patriot forces.

Colonel Boyd was marching south from South Carolina to link up with Colonel Campbell. On February 14, he set up camp on a farm on the north side of Kettle Creek. Despite early skirmishes with Patriot forces, he did not consider himself or his army in any real danger. He ordered the horses set loose to graze, and his men began preparing food. It was a much needed rest, since they had been marching for the past few days. The Patriots, under command of Colonel Pickens, were following Boyd closely. When Boyd stopped at Kettle Creek, Pickens sent scouts to reconnoiter the area. From those scouts, Pickens learned that Boyd’s army was unprepared for an attack. He immediately set his army in motion, despite being outnumbered. Pickens hoped that surprise would level the playing field. Boyd was indeed surprised, first learning of the attack from gunshots fired by his pickets. Colonel Boyd quickly reorganized his men, but Pickens had already obtained the most favorable ground and was able to flank the column of men being led by Boyd. It was during this period of fighting that Colonel Boyd was mortally wounded. The battle lasted for almost two hours before the Tories fled the field. It was

²⁵ Davies, *Documents*, 17:77.

²⁶ Campbell, *Journal*, 64.

a bloody battle that resulted in 70 Tory dead, and 75 wounded. The Americans lost 9 dead, and 20 wounded. The Patriots defeated a Tory force of between 600 to 800 men, and did so with a much smaller force.²⁷

This was a tremendous setback for the British in Georgia as it no doubt further discouraged Loyalist support in the backcountry and elsewhere. The British were met with success early in the campaign as they easily captured Savannah and proceeded to take control of the surrounding areas. Their march northward to Augusta was likewise easily accomplished. The expedition of Colonel Campbell to Augusta, while contested, was still a success, though it was to be the last major success until the Battle of Brier Creek. The British reached Augusta expecting an outpouring of support from the locals, but that would not be the case. The hope of a loyalist counterrevolution against the patriots in Georgia was put to rest at Augusta. All the while the Americans were building up their forces across the Savannah River. By this point it is obvious that momentum was shifting. Campbell was compelled to withdraw from Augusta rather than risk the destruction of his army, while on the same day, Patriot forces crushed Colonel Boyd's Tories at Kettle Creek. With Campbell in retreat, the Americans could now link their armies for an attack on Savannah.

²⁷ Otis Ashmore and Charles H. Olmstead, "The Battles of Kettle Creek and Brier Creek," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, vol. X, no. 2, (June, 1926), 95-99.

CHAPTER 2

General Ashe's Unlucky Affair at Brier Creek

The British withdrawal from Augusta coincided with a terrible defeat of Loyalist forces at Kettle Creek. Up to this point, the British had enjoyed a series of successful expeditions in Georgia. First taking Savannah and then moving north to outposts like Ebenezer. When Lieutenant Colonel Archibald Campbell set out to take Augusta, he met but minimal resistance along the way. The first major defeat of the expedition came during Thomas Brown's raid into Burke County, when his Florida Rangers were repulsed by a group of Patriots. Brown was even wounded during the affair. This began a shift in fortunes in favor of the Rebels. Upon reaching Augusta, Campbell found only a fraction of the loyalists he had hoped for and had to watch as the Patriot army across the river swelled to more than twice the size of his own. Furthermore, Campbell could not even cross the river to attack his opposition due to the lack of boats. As his position became more and more precarious, he was finally compelled to withdraw back down the Savannah River towards General Prevost's army. The same day that he abandoned Augusta, Colonel Boyd's Loyalist militia was annihilated at Kettle Creek. It is obvious that the British had failed to inspire confidence in the local Tories and even more so among the neutral inhabitants. The situation was beginning to look bleak for the British Southern Campaign, but the Battle of Brier Creek would reverse their fortunes.

Upon leaving Augusta, Colonel Campbell marched his men to Boggy Gut Creek where they set up camp. Campbell continued marching southward over the next few days, as General Prevost thought it was a good idea to further shorten their communication and supply lines. In a letter to Campbell, General Prevost stated that he believes General Benjamin Lincoln intends

to cross the Savannah River and cut off his retreat. Such a movement would have left Colonel Campbell with a Rebel force to his front and another to his rear; a dangerous prospect to say the least. Prevost could not move to assist Campbell without leaving Savannah vulnerable. With this information, Colonel Campbell prepared his men to meet General Lincoln's army. However, the attack never materialized. Still, Campbell thought it prudent to continue southward and arrived at Hudson's Ferry on February 20. While at this post Campbell met up with Lieutenant Colonel James Prevost who took command of the army once Campbell left for Savannah. Campbell was to help with the implementation of civil government in Georgia, but before this, he gave Colonel Prevost a great deal of valuable information and a plan to attack the Rebels following him southward.²⁸

Campbell already had a plan in mind to ambush the Patriots. He believed that they would stop at Brier Creek, giving Colonel Prevost an opportunity to feint towards their front, while sending the remainder of the army back upstream and around the creek at Paris's Mills. This would leave the Rebels with little room to maneuver and no easy line of retreat. Campbell's advice was sound and made an impression upon Colonel Prevost. More intelligence of an impending attack by Lincoln compelled Campbell to move further south with General John Ashe not far behind, shadowing his path back down.²⁹

The Patriots were trailing the British, not pursuing a general action, but attempting to keep pushing them back towards Savannah until a suitable time developed for them to link up with General Lincoln and his forces. Ashe had around 1,100 troops under his command, but they were mostly militia. General Ashe met with General Lincoln during a council of war on

²⁸ Campbell, *Journal*, 65-68.

²⁹ Campbell, *Journal*, 68.

March 1 to devise a plan to move against Savannah. While at this meeting, General Ashe left his army at Brier Creek and had set some of them to repairing the bridge, which Colonel Campbell destroyed after crossing. Ashe assured Generals Lincoln and Moultrie that his position was secure. After all, he had Brier Creek to his left and a deep swamp on his right, meaning the enemy could not outflank him. He also believed the enemy to be afraid of him, since they thought he had a much larger force than them. This was obviously not the case.³⁰

Once it was realized by Colonel Prevost that the Rebels encamped at Brier Creek were only there to prevent communication with the upper part of the colony and to threaten his army, he set Colonel Campbell's plan in motion. Colonel Prevost's desire was to remove this threat to his army, open the upper part of the colony to communication, and prevent General Ashe from linking up with General Lincoln's army at Purrisburg. Colonel Prevost sent Major McPherson and the 1st Battalion of the 71st Regiment, along with some irregulars and a couple of field pieces, to move towards the burned out bridge at Brier Creek to mask the movement of the rest of the army. Prevost took the 2nd Battalion of the 71st Regiment, Sir James Baird's Light Infantry, and three companies of Florida Grenadiers on a circular route around Brier Creek in an attempt to get to the American rear. The plan required surprise and Colonel Prevost hoped that the feint towards the bridge would be sufficient to hold the attention of the Rebels across the creek, while he swung his army around from upstream.³¹

Several things happened leading up to the battle that influenced the outcome. First and foremost, a detachment of horse under command of Colonel Marberry made contact with the British well before their attack on the American camp at Brier Creek. Strangely, this information

³⁰ Moultrie, *Memoirs*, 321-322.

³¹ Davies, *Documents*, 78.

was inexplicably kept within that party. Secondly, a detachment of horse under Major Ross was sent out on the morning of March 3rd to reconnoiter the enemy. This left General Ashe without a substantial mounted unit to quickly employ against the British. Finally, the American army at Brier Creek was poorly equipped and had no entrenching tools to build a defensive work around their camp. Combine with this the experience and superior equipment of the British and things begin to look grim indeed.³²

General Ashe's first warning of an impending attack came from an express rider. This was confirmed moments later by a message from Colonel Smith. General Ashe immediately ordered the drums to beat to arms and began to order his men into position. The order was given to distribute cartridges; however, many were of the wrong caliber.³³ Furthermore, the lack of Cartouche Boxes for most of the troops meant that many men were running to their positions "carrying their Cartridges under their arms, others in the bosoms of their shirts, and some tied up in the corners of their hunting shirts."³⁴ The army was drawn up into two lines with General Elbert's Georgia Continentals forming the center of the front line, the New Bern Regiment on the left, and the Edenton Regiment on the right. The Halifax and Wilmington Regiments made up a second line with about 70 or 80 yards in between.³⁵

³² Moultrie, *Memoirs*, 338-339.

³³ Moultrie, *Memoirs*, 339.

³⁴ John Ashe to Richard Caswell, *Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, vol. 14, pp. 39-43, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr14-0041>.

³⁵ Wilson, *The Southern Strategy*, 85.

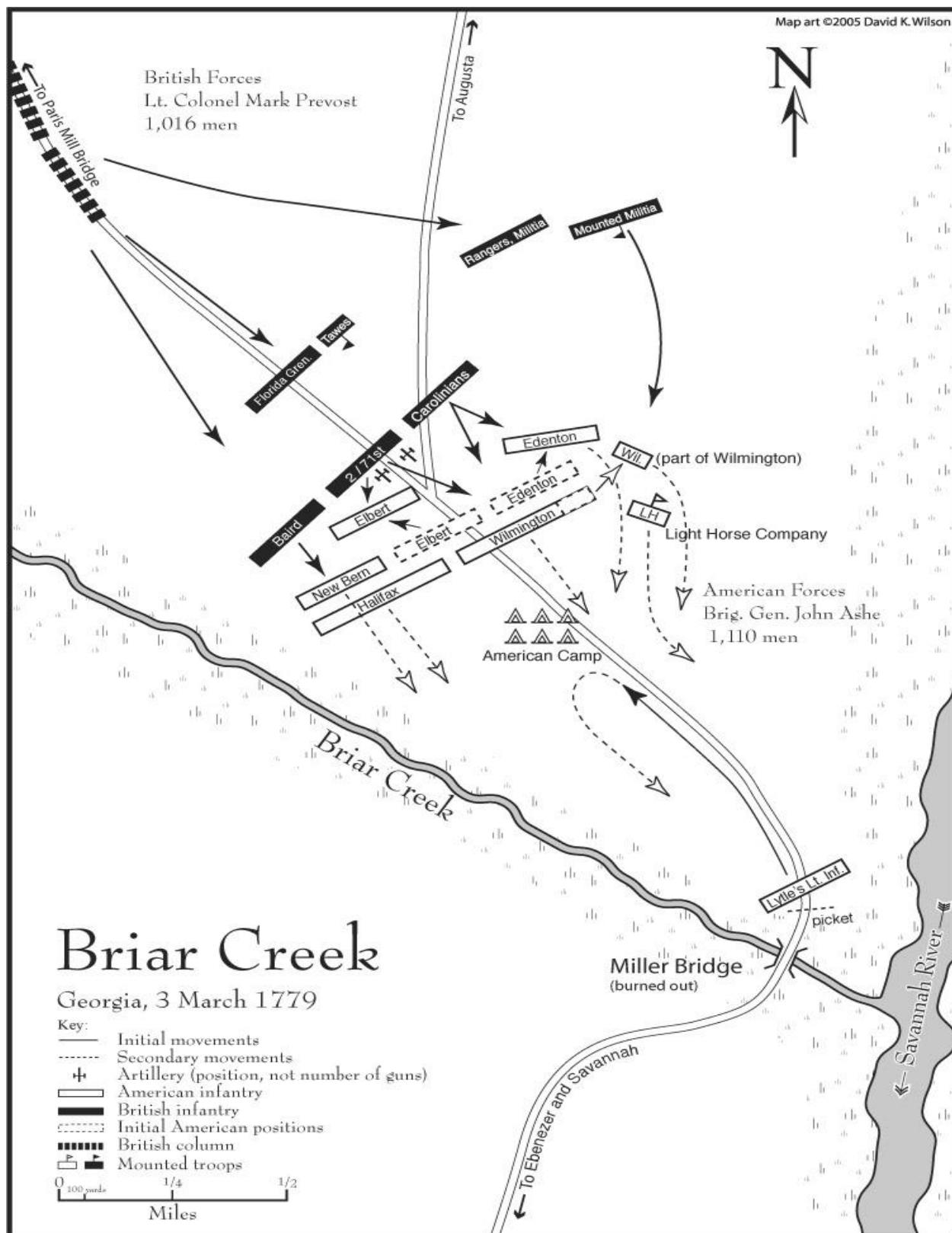


Figure 2.1. In: David K. Wilson. Briar Creek [map].

The Southern Strategy: Britain's Conquest of South Carolina and Georgia, 1775-1780. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2005.

It was about 3 o'clock in the afternoon when the British appeared, just 15 minutes after General Ashe received warning from an express rider. The British were marching in three columns in close formation, six abreast. As they reached 150 yards, the British deployed their columns to the left and right to form a line with the Florida Rangers and another mounted unit in reserve. At this point, the Georgia Continentals and the Edenton Regiment under Colonel Perkins opened fire. After two or three rounds, General Elbert's Georgians moved forward a few paces. As they did so, they drifted slightly to the left in front of the New Bern Regiment. According to General Ashe, "By this movement, and that of the Edenton Regiment, which had been obliged to move a little to the Right, there was a vacancy in the line."³⁶ Colonel Prevost was no fool. He sought to exploit the opening immediately and gave the order to charge with bayonets. General Ashe's army was comprised mostly of militia and therefore had no bayonets to defend themselves. As such, the line crumbled as the British surged forward.³⁷

The Halifax Regiment was the first to break and did so without firing a single shot. Next, most of the Wilmington and New Bern Regiments broke and fled the field. Only the Edenton Regiment of Colonel Perkins and General Elbert's Georgia Continentals remained in action. General Ashe had already moved to the rear in hopes of rallying his men. It was of no use, since just a few moments later the Edenton Regiment gave way.³⁸ During the charge, one of the Highlanders of the Light Infantry yelled out, "Now my Boys, remember poor Macalister!" As a result, this unit "spared very few that came within their Reach."³⁹ The British were exacting

³⁶ John Ashe to Richard Caswell, *Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, vol. 14, pp. 39-43, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr14-0041>.

³⁷ Wilson, *The Southern Strategy*, 95.

³⁸ John Ashe to Richard Caswell, *Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, vol. 14, pp. 39-43, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr14-0041>.

³⁹ Campbell, *Journal*, 77.

their revenge for the killing of the safeguard named MacAlister by Patriots at Augusta. This act was considered barbaric and went against an established tradition in European warfare. At Brier Creek, the British got the opportunity to avenge the killing of one of their comrades, which they did several times over.⁴⁰

With the lines breaking away all around them, General Elbert's Georgians held their ground and continued firing. It was not until they were completely surrounded that Elbert finally surrendered. This was a testament to the differences between Continental troops and militia. It also highlights why Continentals were so valuable to American commanders. In the face of a British bayonet charge, Continental regulars could be expected to hold their ground and continue fighting. In the case of the militia, it rarely took something as dire as a bayonet to encourage their departure from the field. By the time Elbert and his Georgia Continentals surrendered, General Ashe had given up trying to rally the men, who by this point, were running in every direction. Ashe turned to the swamp and proceeded to make his escape. He was fortunate that he was able to avoid capture, as were many others. Mainly this resulted from the British soldiers stopping to plunder the American camp which was almost entirely intact. This gave Ashe and many men the chance to escape and avoid capture or death. The British so completely surprised the Rebels at Brier Creek that they had to leave their camp with cook fires burning to rush out to form a line of battle. During the retreat, most of the men threw down their arms and belongings in order to get away with their lives.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Campbell, Journal, 57-58.

⁴¹ John Ashe to Richard Caswell, *Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, vol. 14, pp. 39-43, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr14-0041>.

The Battle of Brier Creek was a crushing defeat for the Rebels in Georgia and South Carolina. General William Moultrie stated that, “Gen. Ashe’s affair at Brier-Creek, was nothing less than a total rout.” He went on to say, “never was an army more completely surprised [sic], and never were men more panic struck.”⁴² The British were in agreement as to the outcome of the battle. General Augustine Prevost wrote to Lord George Germain, “The rebels being in some measure surprised on the 3rd instant were totally defeated and dispersed.”⁴³ Not only was General Ashe’s army routed, it lost almost all of its supplies and provisions. Arms, ammunition, and seven cannon were among the list of items seized by the British. This was particularly important for an army that could barely arm and supply its troops. The sheer number of casualties was also a devastating blow to the Americans. One hundred and fifty were killed, many drowned while attempting to swim across the creek or Savannah River. Nearly 200 were taken prisoner, including over 20 officers. Most of those captured were from General Elbert’s Georgia Continentals, including Elbert himself. By contrast, the British lost just five privates killed, and eleven others wounded, including one officer.⁴⁴

The Battle of Brier Creek ended all hopes the Patriots had of retaking Georgia. All offensive plans were put on hold as the American southern army withdrew to South Carolina and attempted to regroup and rebuild. The loss of men and supplies was a severe blow to General Lincoln and his army. This is particularly true in the case of the entire Georgia regiment of Continental troops being captured, along with General Elbert, who was an able officer and an asset to Lincoln. Officers and Continental troops were especially hard to come by in the

⁴² Moultrie, *Memoirs*, 324.

⁴³ Davies, *Documents*, 78.

⁴⁴ Davies, *Documents*, 78-79.

southern colonies. The loss at Brier Creek also affected the ability of the Patriots to retain troops whose enlistments were up, and give the British time to further their efforts to build defenses in and around Savannah. Morale in the American camp suffered greatly, while British morale received an obvious boost. More importantly, the Battle of Brier Creek put the British back in control of their own destiny in Georgia.

CHAPTER 3

Losing the Momentum and the War in Georgia

The Battle of Brier Creek was a disaster for the Patriots. General William Moultrie stated, "Gen. Ash's affair at Brier-Creek, was nothing less than a total rout; never was an army more completely surprised [sic], and never were men more panic struck."⁴⁵ It was true. General Ashe and his army were caught completely off their guard, and they paid dearly for it. More importantly, the American army in the south paid dearly. The loss of arms and ammunition was devastating. As was the loss of so many Continental troops, whose value in battle cannot be doubted. General Ashe continued to lose men even after the action, as none of them were willing to extend their service. There are several reasons why this battle was so unfortunate for the Americans in the southern colonies, many of which have been overlooked. The consequences of this battle were diverse and far reaching. Most importantly, however, the battle of Brier Creek changed the course of the war in Georgia; it gave the British the opportunity to build defenses in and around Savannah and it allowed the British to plan their next major offensive: Charleston.

At first glance, one might overlook the importance of the Battle of Brier Creek. It was a short battle, and engaged only a small fraction of the troops in the south, both British and American. It did not occur near any major cities, but happened in a back woods section of Georgia surrounded by swamps and creeks. Still, the outcome of this battle had lasting consequences and changed the nature of the war in Georgia in many ways. Furthermore it ensured the continuation of the British campaign in the southern colonies.

⁴⁵ Moultrie, *Memoirs*, 324.

The British strategy in Georgia relied heavily on acquiring large numbers of loyalists to form militias. These could maintain control over areas under Royal control. The British believed that a strong loyalist militia would be capable of providing security and defense for captured towns. After all, much of the American army was militia and no better trained or equipped than the loyalist militias created by the British. This would allow the British regulars to move on to new targets, without being concerned that a Patriot force would take back what the British had acquired. The importance of British dependence on loyalist support in the southern colonies cannot be overstated. The British were counting on the loyalists in Georgia to rise up against the patriots as soon as the Royal Colors were in sight. Without the counterrevolution by Tories, the British southern strategy was doomed to failure. General Augustine Prevost was keenly aware of this situation when he wrote to Lord George Germain, "The object of this expedition was to open the back country, to bring to the test the often made professions of loyalty of its inhabitants, and by this appearance of support in their neighborhood to countenance their rising in arms and give an opportunity if they were so inclined of manifesting an active zeal for His Majesty's and their country's service."⁴⁶ Prevost, however, was skeptical from the beginning. The southern colonies had been under patriot control for quite some time. He was not surprised that loyalist support had only partially materialized, but he knew that without loyalist support, there was little chance of British success. About the loyalist uprising that they had hoped for, Prevost wrote, "in this view we were disappointed, or no rising of consequence made that we know of, and without such rising both hearty and powerful it would be very

⁴⁶ Davies, *Documents*, 76-77.

difficult if not impossible to supply or sustain so distant a post."⁴⁷ This clearly shows the importance of a loyalist uprising in the southern colonies. Prevost knew that to maintain control in the south, he needed loyalists to step up and fight back against their Patriot adversaries. Only then would the British be able to move on to their next objective.

Gaining the support of loyalists required a show of force by the British. This meant not simply showing up with an army, but rather the British had to exhibit the ability to drive out the Patriots and protect any loyalists who came to the King's aid. In this sense, the momentum of the opposing armies became very important. After the quick seizure of Savannah, the British seemed unstoppable. Colonel Campbell then proceeded to march, almost unimpeded, northward up the Savannah River. By this point, it is clear that the momentum rested solely with the British in Georgia. The rapid advance put the Rebel forces on their heels, and they could do little to stop the onslaught of the King's army. As Campbell marched toward Augusta, things began to turn around for the Patriots. Thomas Brown's raid into Burke County was violently repulsed by a group of Patriots they were sent to disperse or capture and the number of Patriots forming up across the river from Augusta continued to swell. Even after taking Augusta, Campbell found few loyalists willing to join the militia. More than likely, this was due to the threat of Patriot reprisals, since there was no guarantee that the British would be able to maintain control of the upper part of Georgia. When it became apparent that his army was in danger, Campbell had no choice but to withdraw. No longer were Patriot forces retreating in the face of superior British soldiers; instead the British army was withdrawing from Augusta due to the growing force of Rebels across the river.

⁴⁷ Davies, *Documents*, 77.

To make matters worse, the same day that Campbell withdrew from Augusta, a Tory force under Colonel Boyd was crushed at Kettle Creek. Campbell had no option other than to move further and further south, with a Patriot army shadowing his every move. General Prevost was concerned that Colonel Campbell's army might be cut off and wanted him to move closer to Savannah and reinforcements. Prevost obviously felt that Savannah was still in danger. In a letter to Campbell, Prevost stated that he "cannot move without uncovering Savannah." He went on to warn Campbell, "Judge then if it is not dangerous to be so far divided. I have neither Carts nor Harness, I cannot pretend to supply you; not now."⁴⁸ In another letter, which Campbell received a day later, General Prevost reiterated his concern, stating, "also recommending to your Consideration the Propriety or otherways, of your falling still farther back."⁴⁹ It is clear that by this point the momentum had completely shifted to the Patriots. They were able to threaten the British, all the while their forces continued to grow and new militia units made their way south. Colonel Campbell was well aware of the tenuous situation in Georgia and that momentum was no longer an advantage that they enjoyed. After receiving orders to return to England, Campbell sent a letter to General Prevost offering his opinion on securing the province. In it he states, "When I consider the Strength of His Majesty's Forces in Georgia, and that of the Rebels on the opposite Banks of the Savannah, I am inclined to think it would be imprudent at this Juncture, to follow other Views than those of securing the Conquest already made," and that the most attention should be paid to "The security of Savannah, Ebenezer, and Sundbury."⁵⁰ Despite the sizable British force in Georgia, it was quickly being

⁴⁸ Campbell, *Journal*, 66.

⁴⁹ Campbell, *Journal*, 67.

⁵⁰ Campbell, *Journal*, 70-71.

outnumbered by its Patriot counterpart. This added a great deal of risk for any detachments being sent out beyond the already captured posts. Campbell knew that their best bet was to entrench themselves at their current position. This meant that most of Georgia would remain under Patriot control, but it was too dangerous to risk what they already had. The British needed a victory large enough to slow the Patriots, and perhaps put them on the defensive once again. As it turned out, they got what they were looking for at Brier Creek.⁵¹

After the defeat of General John Ashe's forces at Brier Creek, the British felt their position was much more secure. According to General Prevost, "The rebels will not again, at least for some time, much disturb us in this province."⁵² General Prevost was aware of the particularly high casualties, as well as the large number of Rebels taken prisoner. He expected such a loss to be severely detrimental to the Patriots and most advantageous to himself and his troops. Along with the relative peace that he expected "for some time,"⁵³ Prevost also expected communication to be much more secure to the back country. He even dispatched emissaries to attempt to communicate, not only with loyalists in the back country, but also the Native Americans.⁵⁴

Prevost was equally confident in a letter to General Sir Henry Clinton. Prevost stated, "if an additional Force could possibly be spared to attack Charles Town, where there are few of the Continental Troops left, I am convinced the Conquest of South Carolina would be easily accomplished."⁵⁵ Such a bold suggestion shows the shift in fortunes to the British. Prevost knew

⁵¹ Campbell, *Journal*, 76-77.

⁵² Davies, *Documents*, 17:78.

⁵³ Davies, *Documents*, 17:78-79.

⁵⁴ Davies, *Documents*, 17:78-79.

⁵⁵ General Augustine Prevost to Sir Henry Clinton, March 6, 1779, Savannah, GA. British Public Record Office, Colonial Office, Class 5 Files: Part 5: The American Revolution, 1772-1784.

that his position was now considerably more secure, and with reinforcements he might even be able to take Charleston while they had the Rebels on their heels. In addition to this, he felt confident enough to send the Light Infantry, South Carolina Light Horse, and the Rangers to take up a post within 40 miles from Augusta as a show of strength and support for the inhabitants of the upper part of Georgia.⁵⁶ This statement is in stark contrast to his earlier insistence that Colonel Campbell continue marching southward closer to Savannah and reinforcements. Prevost was very concerned at having a small army so far from reinforcements and in an area where it might be surrounded by a larger force of Rebels. The Battle of Brier Creek changed all of this. It is clear that Prevost no longer considered the Patriots a real threat to his troops. Otherwise, he would not have detached such a small force to secure an area so close to Augusta, an environment that turned out to be less than friendly to the British. The rout of General Ashe's army at Brier Creek, however, gave the British a significant boost in confidence and morale as well as shifted momentum to His Majesty's forces in Georgia.⁵⁷

If the British were keenly aware of their good fortunes after the Battle of Brier Creek, there can be no doubt that the Americans were equally aware of their misfortune. The Patriots had the advantage, and were increasing their ranks prior to the battle. Their growing army was enough of a concern to compel Colonel Campbell to withdraw from Augusta. General Prevost was likewise concerned, recommending that Campbell continue to move south towards Savannah, closer to support. After the Battle of Kettle Creek, things seemed to be going well for the Patriots. But the Battle of Brier Creek quickly changed all of that. A sizable piece of the

⁵⁶ General Augustine Prevost to Sir Henry Clinton, March 6, 1779, Savannah, GA. British Public Record Office, Colonial Office, Class 5 Files: Part 5: The American Revolution, 1772-1784.

⁵⁷ Campbell, *Journal*, 66-67.

Rebel army was obliterated, which limited any future offensive plans in Georgia by the Patriots. According to General William Moultrie, “This unlucky affair at Brier-Creek, disconcerted all our plans,” and “the war was protracted at least one year longer.” He went on to say that, “it is not to be doubted that had we have crossed the river with our army, and joined Gen. Ash, which we were preparing to do, we should have had a body of 7,000 men.”⁵⁸ This force would have been roughly double the size of that of the British forces in Georgia, constituting a serious threat to the British’s ability to hold onto Savannah. At the very least, General Lincoln could have kept the British bottled up in Savannah. With proper artillery, he could even prevent the influx of supplies into the city. Moultrie believed that it would have been possible to not only drive the British out of Georgia, but stop the invasion of the Carolinas.⁵⁹

General Benjamin Lincoln, the commander of the Patriot army in the southern colonies, thought of the Battle of Brier Creek in terms that were similar to the views of Moultrie. With such a staggering defeat, he knew that his plans to move against the British and maintain control of the upper half of the state were no longer an option. In a letter to Governor Rutledge on March 4, 1779, Lincoln expressed his concern after he received “the very disagreeable information of Gen. Ashe’s defeat.” He went on to say, “By this stroke we shall be driven to the necessity of collecting our force to one point, and leave the upper part of the country uncovered; the consequence of which may be the loss of it.”⁶⁰ As a result of Brier Creek, Lincoln decided it was necessary to keep his army intact and in one location. This would give him a large enough army to deter the British from attacking. The problem, as he mentioned to

⁵⁸ Moultrie, *Memoirs*, 326

⁵⁹ Moultrie, *Memoirs*, 325-326.

⁶⁰ General Benjamin Lincoln to Governor Rutledge, March 4, 1779.

Rutledge, is that this action would require him to leave the upper part of Georgia unprotected. The loss of so many men and supplies at Brier Creek was obviously much more than just a nuisance. It forced General Lincoln to take actions to protect the whole of his army and abandon Georgia for the time being. In the aftermath of Brier Creek, he could not risk losing another large piece of his army to the British.

It is not surprising that General Lincoln wanted to consolidate his forces. But it also clearly exhibits the rapid change in the nature of the war in Georgia. Instead of being able to harass the British and push them back towards Savannah, Lincoln was compelled to withdraw his forces back to South Carolina and lose Georgia completely. The need to regroup also showed how detrimental the loss of men, arms, and supplies were to any future offensive operations. Colonel Campbell knew that the Rebels were in trouble. According to Campbell, "The Defeat at Briar's Creek was productive of good Consequences, as the whole of the Rebels after this Discomfiture withdrew themselves to South Carolina."⁶¹ He went on to say that the Rebels, "united their Chief Force under General Lincoln at Purisburg."⁶² In this case, actions speak louder than words. For quite some time, General Lincoln had to refrain from any large scale operations. The Battle of Brier Creek cost the Patriots a great deal. Momentum was not the only loss the Patriots suffered. Soldiers, Officers, supplies, and arms were all substantial losses to the Patriot army, and all were difficult to replace, especially the officers and Continental troops.⁶³

⁶¹ Campbell, *Journal*, 78.

⁶² Campbell, *Journal*, 78.

⁶³ Moultrie, *Memoirs*, 325-327.

Another important consequence of the Battle of Brier Creek, and an often overlooked one at that, is the fact that it gave the British a great deal of time to secure their position in Georgia. Even after their success at Brier Creek, their immediate concern was still to fortify and secure the gains that they had already made. General Prevost was adamant that they not lose what had already been gained and nothing would change that. The victory at Brier Creek changed the amount of time that was available to the British to secure the posts at Savannah, Sunbury, and Ebenezer. It allowed the British to work without the threat of attack. It also gave them a chance to focus on one of their primary objectives: establishing a civil government in Savannah.

As of March 1, 1779, the British were still rushing to complete a series of redoubts around Savannah. With General Lincoln camped at Purrisburg with at least 2,000 men, there was always the threat of an attack on Savannah. Campbell was “At Savannah employed in hurrying on the Redoubts and Public Works.”⁶⁴ He was also forming a plan for ensuring the security of Savannah and the surrounding posts, which he would submit to General Prevost.⁶⁵ On March 2, Campbell sent his proposal for the defense of Savannah. He believed it should be protected, no matter what the Patriots did. His principal concern was the vulnerability of an attack on Savannah from Purrisburg. He wrote, “At present Savannah appears to me to be too much exposed to the Attempts of a flying Corps from Purrisburg and I know not any Attack by which they can injure us so much.”⁶⁶ This was not merely the result of a large force under the command of General Lincoln. Colonel Campbell’s concern was a rapid attack in which the

⁶⁴ Campbell, *Journal*, 70.

⁶⁵ Campbell, *Journal*, 70.

⁶⁶ Campbell, *Journal*, 72.

Rebels would engage in “burning the Metropolis, spiking up the Guns, and destroying our Provisions.”⁶⁷

He was not as concerned with the city being overrun as he was with it being burned to the ground by a hit and run attack. This type of threat would remain well after the events at Brier Creek, as it would require only a limited number of horsemen to make such a daring raid possible. However, the likelihood of this happening decreased as British fortifications increased. Campbell outlined a solution to this problem. A large part of it was increasing the size of the garrison in Savannah. The other part of the plan included the immediate completion of redoubts at all posts, including “proper Guard-houses and Sentry Boxes.”⁶⁸ This type of work took time, however. Time was something that seemed to be running out for the British prior to their victory at Brier Creek. General Lincoln was briefing his officers on plans for an offensive into Georgia. The first part of Lincoln’s plan was the unification of the various armies under his command. But after the events at Brier Creek, unification was no longer an option. General Prevost completed the redoubts without the constant threat of an attack by Lincoln. In a letter to Lord George Germain he stated, “The rebels will not again, at least for some time, much disturb us in this province.”⁶⁹ He went on to say that, “In the meantime, whilst we guard what we have already got, we hold ourselves in readiness to catch at further favourable incidents as they may occur.”⁷⁰ The British could now complete work on their defenses unmolested, while looking for opportunities to attack Patriot forces. This was a substantial shift from focusing solely on securing Savannah, which both Campbell and Prevost had previously vouched for.

⁶⁷ Campbell, *Journal*, 72.

⁶⁸ Campbell, *Journal*, 72-73.

⁶⁹ Davies, *Documents*, 17:78-79.

⁷⁰ Davies, *Documents*, 79.

Before the Battle of Brier Creek, both General Prevost and Colonel Campbell believed that they should focus on securing their current positions, as it was too risky to attempt further offensive operations. This added pressure on General Lincoln and restricted the movement of his forces. The added security after their victory at Brier Creek also allowed them to focus more on establishing a civil government.

Upon reviewing the evidence, it is obvious that the Battle of Brier Creek radically shifted the momentum of the war in Georgia in favor of the British. The British had the initial advantage, with an easy victory at Savannah and rapidly securing the surrounding areas. Colonel Campbell was then able to march north and take Augusta, meeting only minimal resistance along the way. It was here, however, that things began to change. First and foremost, the loyalist counterrevolution that the British hoped for never materialized. This left Campbell and his men at a distant post with a Rebel army just across the river, whose ranks were growing daily. Campbell was compelled to withdraw on the same day that Patriot forces crushed a Tory force under Colonel Boyd at the Battle of Kettle Creek. Campbell was forced to keep falling further and further back down the river to safety. By March 3, the Patriots were doing the acting and the British were forced to react. Had it not been for the unlucky event at Brier Creek, it is probable that General Lincoln could have, at the very least, bottled the British up in Savannah, which would have been very detrimental to British aims in the southern colonies. Securing the Georgia back country and establishing contact with loyalists and Native Americans there would no longer have been an option; nor would advancing into South Carolina and taking Charleston and the surrounding areas.

Instead, the victory at Brier Creek gave the British the breathing room they needed to prepare for future operations against the Americans, both offensive and defensive in nature. General Lincoln, on the other hand, was forced to put his offensive plans on hold and try to regroup his army. Almost all of the American forces in Georgia withdrew into South Carolina, giving the British ample opportunity to construct defensive works around Savannah and establish a civil government in Georgia. General Prevost even sent a detachment to take post near Augusta to defend against raids from South Carolina. After the defeat of General Ashe's army at Brier Creek, Prevost was more confident in the security of the British position in Georgia and his actions bear this out. For the British, they could not have asked for a better outcome than what transpired at Brier Creek. It was a most advantageous affair for the King's forces in Georgia, while it was a disaster for the American southern army.

CHAPTER 4

Men, Ammo, and Equipment

The Battle of Brier Creek was costly for the Patriots in many respects. It resulted in a significant shift in momentum in favor of the British, and it effectively put the Rebels back on the defensive. General Benjamin Lincoln's plans to attack the British in Georgia were no longer an option. For well over a month, General Lincoln had been working to increase the size of his army. He was also expecting reinforcements from other states. When Lieutenant Colonel Archibald Campbell withdrew from Augusta, General Lincoln summoned his officers for a meeting to discuss offensive plans. The goal was to force Colonel Campbell back to Savannah, then unite all of the American forces in the area. According to General William Moultrie, bringing together General Ashe's army, General Lincoln's army, and that of General Williamson, along with other smaller forces scattered across Georgia and South Carolina, Lincoln would have had an army of nearly 7,000 men. This was roughly twice the size of the British forces in Georgia, giving Lincoln a fair chance to, at the very least, bottle up the British at Savannah or at best, drive them out completely. Since most of this force was comprised of militia and as such, General Lincoln could not afford to lose men. To be successful, Lincoln needed as large a force as possible because the militia was often unreliable in battle. This is one of the reasons that the Battle of Brier Creek was so devastating to American war efforts in Georgia. The losses to men, arms, and supplies were severe.⁷¹

For an army to be completely functional and in turn successful in any engagements, it must first be well supplied and equipped. This includes, but is not limited to, provisions,

⁷¹ Moultrie, *Memoirs*, 324-328.

clothing, blankets and rum, ammunition and weaponry as well as artillery pieces. For the American army in the southern colonies, these were rather difficult to come by without disturbing the local populace. Since the Continental Congress did not have the power to tax, it was left to the individual states to supply and equip state militias and Continental regiments. This resulted in the American forces being poorly equipped for war upon arrival compared to their British adversaries, who were well armed and equipped. It also made it exceedingly difficult to obtain more weapons and ammunition, as well as supplies like clothing and blankets. Any losses of said arms and supplies became a serious consideration amongst the American officers in Georgia and South Carolina.

The Battle of Brier Creek lasted for just a few turbulent minutes. During the battle and in the confusion of a British bayonet charge, the vast majority of the Americans threw their weapons down and ran as fast as they could. The Georgia Continentals under General Elbert stood their ground and fought but were eventually forced to surrender, losing all of their weapons in the process. The retreating Americans left everything behind. They were not concerned with taking their baggage, weapons, food, or any other belongings they might have had. The only thing they wanted to escape with was their lives. This turned out to be a stroke of good luck for the Americans in some ways, since the British troops stopped to plunder the American camp rather than chase after them and kill them. This delay kept the British from catching up to General Ashe's fleeing army. While this may have saved some men from capture

or worse, the loss of so much equipment was a severe blow to the American Cause, and added to the equipment already at the disposal of the British.⁷²

General Augustine Prevost, in a letter to Lord George Germain, made a point to note that the American loss of arms and ammunition was near total. According to General Prevost, the American force at Brier Creek suffered the loss of “seven pieces of cannon, several stand of colours, almost all their arms, all their ammunition and baggage which were left to the victorious troops.”⁷³ There was also a significant loss of baggage and supplies. This was a significant loss of material for an army that could do little to replace it. Worse, it is obvious that the British were well aware of this flaw. Colonel Campbell, in a letter to General Sir Henry Clinton, alluded to the difficulty in maintaining enough provisions for an army in a place like Georgia. He noted that the Americans from South Carolina were “creeping with cautious steps down our frontiers.”⁷⁴ He went on to say that it should be encouraged due to the lack of forage and provisions on the frontiers. Campbell stated, “we have already taken care to eat up the forage and provisions in that quarter,” and that, “they will be under every inconvenience in the supply of those articles.”⁷⁵ This demonstrates the difficulties of moving large armies across areas with little forage. If the British were aware of the difficulties the Americans faced in supplying and equipping their army, the American officers were even more aware of the problem, as they had to deal with this problem on an all too regular basis.

Provisions were a real problem for General Ashe’s army. By the time he reached Brier Creek and set up camp, he was running very low on the most basic necessities. In fact, most of

⁷² John Ashe to Richard Caswell, *Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, vol. 14, pp. 39-43, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr14-0041>.

⁷³ Davies, *Documents*, 78.

⁷⁴ Davies, *Documents*, 76.

⁷⁵ Davies, *Documents*, 76.

the troops in camp were living off of “a half Dozen small potato slips” per day.⁷⁶ This was hardly a meal, even by soldier’s standards from this period, but supplies were scarce. Parties were sent out to find forage, but had little or no success in their endeavors. One such party, a unit of South Carolina Horse, threatened to return to their homes if they could not find some sort of forage for themselves and their horses. They had already been two days without provisions. General Ashe was doing everything he could to get supplies and provisions; however, these were scarce, particularly in Georgia. General Williamson attempted to help General Ashe by sending 40 barrels of flour, but this, like all of the other supplies and equipment, would end up falling into enemy hands the day after it arrived in camp.⁷⁷

Worse than the limited amount of food, many of the American soldiers in camp at Brier Creek lacked the basic equipment needed for combat. The most obvious example of this is the lack of cartouche boxes, which resulted in a significant amount of cartridges being lost or destroyed during the fight, something that the American army could not afford to let happen. When General Ashe gave the order to beat to arms, many of his men were running to the line “carrying their Cartridges under their arms, others in the bosoms of their shirts, and some tied up in the corners of their hunting shirts.”⁷⁸ During his court of enquiry, General Ashe pointed this out as one of the reasons he was in such a difficult situation. He also noted that he lacked entrenching tools. As a result, he could not build any sort of defensive works around the encampment. With basic supplies and equipment scarce in the American army, the loss of any

⁷⁶ John Ashe to Richard Caswell, *Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, vol. 14, pp. 39-43, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr14-0041>.

⁷⁷ John Ashe to Richard Caswell, *Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, vol. 14, pp. 39-43, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr14-0041>.

⁷⁸ John Ashe to Richard Caswell, *Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, vol. 14, pp. 39-43, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr14-0041>.

of them was extremely detrimental to its ability to conduct operations against the British.

General Ashe's army highlights the supply problem very well. It is for this reason that the Battle of Brier Creek was so devastating to Patriot plans in Georgia.⁷⁹

The loss of equipment and supplies at Brier Creek was near total. The rapid approach of the enemy meant that the American camp and everything in it had to be abandoned. In the heat of battle, most of the men simply threw down their weapons and ran to escape the bayonet. William Moultrie summed up the situation after Brier Creek stating, "The loss of arms was almost total, and it was a very serious consideration with us, at that time, as we could not replace them."⁸⁰ Losing so many weapons and ammunition would be a serious blow to any army, but in the case of the Americans, it was more so since it was extremely difficult to replace any that were lost. Charles Pinckney wrote to William Moultrie, expressing his concern at the loss at Brier Creek. Pinckney wrote, "The late great loss of arms, and the daily call for them, makes us somewhat uneasy."⁸¹ He went on to say that they had begun requisitioning arms from the public stock. This was an extreme measure, but it was obviously a necessary course of action to ensure that the militia was fairly well armed.⁸²

General Ashe himself was also concerned with the state of his army after the Battle of Brier Creek. In a letter to Governor Caswell, Ashe discussed the state of General Bryan's brigade, which was deplorable by this point. Having abandoned all of their equipment during their retreat from Brier Creek, General Ashe's forces lacked basic necessities. Food was scarce prior to the battle and after abandoning their camp, the situation would not improve. There

⁷⁹ Moultrie, *Memoirs*, 340.

⁸⁰ Moultrie, *Memoirs*, 326.

⁸¹ Moultrie, *Memoirs*, 329.

⁸² Moultrie, *Memoirs*, 329-330.

was also a lack of proper clothing for the troops under Ashe's command. Ashe stated that "the whole suffer greatly for the want of cloathes."⁸³

This was a serious problem for General Ashe's men. A lack of proper clothing would often lead to sickness. Whether it was disease or malnutrition, 18th century military encampments were often filled with unhealthy men. The Patriot camps during the Revolution were no exception. According to Ashe, a large percentage of his men were sick, and others pretended to be in order to obtain a discharge from service. Ashe stated that he did not have time to oversee the examinations himself and that regimental commanders were given the task. Ashe went on to note that about three hundred and forty men were sent home, "two-thirds of which were not really sick."⁸⁴ This shows another deleterious effect of the events at Brier Creek; a loss of men. After the Battle of Brier Creek, the loss of men, either to the battle or to sickness or desertion, was a serious concern for American commanders in the southern colonies.⁸⁵

The Patriot army in the southern colonies could not afford to lose any soldiers. Though their numbers had continually increased during the months leading up to the Battle of Brier Creek, many of these men were part of militia units coming from North Carolina. Georgia and South Carolina did not have a comparable population, which meant there were fewer men to draw on for militia or Continental regiments. Furthermore, the militia was often unreliable leading to the need to have large numbers of militia to outnumber their opponents.

⁸³ John Ashe to Richard Caswell, *Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, vol. 14, pp. 51-55, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr14-0054>.

⁸⁴ John Ashe to Richard Caswell, *Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, vol. 14, pp. 51-52, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr14-0054>.

⁸⁵ John Ashe to Richard Caswell, *Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, vol. 14, pp. 51-55, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr14-0054>.

Unfortunately, increased numbers did not make the militia any more reliable, but it did give the Rebels a better chance at success. Without training and proper accoutrements, Patriot commanders hoped that they could at the very least outnumber the British. As General Moultrie pointed out, before the unfortunate events at Brier Creek, the Patriots were hoping for a force of more than 7,000 men. Even though most of this was militia, it was still a sizable army capable of threatening the British in Savannah and the surrounding areas. But the loss of so many of General Ashe's men at Brier Creek meant this was no longer the case.⁸⁶

Getting accurate casualty numbers for any engagement is always a difficult task. In the case of the Battle of Brier Creek, the confusion of the battle and subsequent retreat makes it even more difficult, or even impossible, to determine exact numbers. It is, however, possible to determine an approximate figure for casualties of this battle by looking at a variety of sources, both American and British. Given the panicked nature of the American retreat and the desertions that accompanied such a defeat, it is likely that the American commanders were unaware of exact figures for battlefield losses. The British on the other hand, captured a large number of troops and had access to the dead and wounded, with the exception of those that drowned in the Savannah River. By any estimate, the casualty numbers for the Americans at the Battle of Brier Creek were high.

General Ashe took note of the losses in a letter to Governor Richard Caswell. Ashe stated that there were only about 150 men missing after the battle. Fifty of these were believed to have crossed the river north of the Brier Creek and continued on to North Carolina. This letter was written on March 17 and the whereabouts of those men was still unknown. It is

⁸⁶ Moultrie, *Memoirs*, 325-328.

probable that those were not the only individuals to continue running until they reached their homes. The numbers provided by General Ashe are likely optimistic estimates in order to downplay the severity of the loss of men. It was also difficult for any commander to keep precise counts of the troops under their command during this period. There were regular desertions in the army and the number of men sick and the number fit for duty was constantly changing. This is especially true of American officers in the southern colonies. It was relatively easy for men to desert their unit and return home. The rout at Brier Creek encouraged many to leave before their enlistments were up and risk the punishment rather than staying and running the risk of being caught in another massacre.⁸⁷ General William Moultrie noted in his memoirs that “We never could ascertain the number of men that were lost in this unfortunate affair, as many of them made no stay any where until they got to their own homes in North-Carolina.”⁸⁸

A more accurate account of the casualties can be had from the British sources, as they were more thorough in their reporting of engagements. Sadly, even they cannot provide much information on American desertions. General Augustine Prevost wrote to Lord George Germain detailing the battle and the losses inflicted upon the Americans. General Prevost stated that “about 150 were killed on the field of battle and adjoining woods and swamps, but their chief loss consists in the number of officers and men drowned in attempting to save themselves from the slaughter and plunging into a deep and rapid river.”⁸⁹ By this account, General Ashe lost at least 150 men in the battle, and an unknown number more were lost trying to swim the Savannah River. This figure also did not include those captured during the battle. In this early

⁸⁷ John Ashe to Richard Caswell, *Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, vol. 14, pp. 51-55, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr14-0054>.

⁸⁸ Moultrie, *Memoirs*, 325-326.

⁸⁹ Davies, *Documents*, 78.

report, Prevost noted that the patriots captured were “The second-in-command, Brig.-General Elbert, one of their best officers, several more of note, in the whole 27 officers were taken with near two hundred men.”⁹⁰ This number is relatively close to a later count of prisoners by Prevost after having been asked by General Benjamin Lincoln for a tally of prisoners taken at Brier Creek. According to this, there were 162 men captured at Brier Creek, along with 24 officers, including General Elbert. Going by these numbers, General Ashe lost approximately 336 men killed, wounded, or captured. There is always the possibility that the British exaggerated the number of killed and wounded, but the number of prisoners was given to General Lincoln by General Prevost for a prisoner exchange. The casualty numbers could have been lower, but they could also have been higher. Many men drowned trying to swim across the Savannah River and they are not included in those numbers. Either way, it was a significant number, considering the small populations of the southern colonies from which to recruit new soldiers. This figure also does not include desertions, which were a problem at all times during the American Revolution. Perhaps most important in all of this is the loss of an entire regiment of well trained and well armed Continental troops, along with an intelligent and able commander in General Samuel Elbert.⁹¹

The importance of Continental troops throughout the Revolutionary War cannot be overstated. Militia units made up the majority of the Patriot armies and their track record was less than stellar. In many engagements, the militia would break rank and run as was the case at Brier Creek. Continental troops, however, were fairly well trained and disciplined and often held their ground. They were better equipped and had bayonets to defend themselves against

⁹⁰ Davies, *Documents*, 78.

⁹¹ Moultrie, *Memoirs*, 332.

charging British regulars. Militiamen were not trained to stand up to bayonets charges, nor were they properly equipped for it. This made the militia a weak point in the Patriot army and the British were well aware of that situation. Continentals posed a real threat to the British when they were gathered in force. General Prevost notes the lack of Continentals at Charleston as a weakness that could be exploited. In a letter to General Sir Henry Clinton after the Battle of Brier Creek, Prevost states, "if an additional force could possibly be spared to attack Charles Town, where there are few of the Continental Troops left, I am convinced the Conquest of South Carolina would be easily accomplished."⁹² The fact that Prevost points out the lack of Continental troops at Charleston is noteworthy. It is obvious that the British were aware that their chances for success were always better when there were fewer Continentals in the field.⁹³

Patriot officers were also keenly aware of the value of Continental units in their army. Continentals were more likely to hold their ground and their training. The discipline that came from training put Continentals on a more even footing with British regulars. Continental troops were also better equipped for combat than the militia, though that is not surprising. General Lincoln, in a letter to Governor Rutledge, expressed his belief that the situation in the southern colonies was far from ideal for the Americans and that the British were aware of it. Lincoln notes that the British would likely expect little resistance in Georgia, "considering the apparent aversion of the militia, in general, to take the field."⁹⁴ Lincoln goes on to mention "the few Continental troops in the department," as another weakness of American forces in Georgia and

⁹² General Augustine Prevost to Sir Henry Clinton, March 6, 1779, Savannah, GA. British Public Record Office, Colonial Office, Class 5 Files: Part 5: The American Revolution, 1772-1784.

⁹³ General Augustine Prevost to Sir Henry Clinton, March 6, 1779, Savannah, GA. British Public Record Office, Colonial Office, Class 5 Files: Part 5: The American Revolution, 1772-1784.

⁹⁴ Benjamin Lincoln to Governor Rutledge, Benjamin Lincoln Letter Book, Massachusetts Historical Society, 189-191.

the Carolinas.⁹⁵ Having disciplined Continentals within the ranks was an advantage for any American commander. At the Battle of Brier Creek, General Elbert's Georgia Continentals held their ground and continued fighting while lines of militia all around them broke and ran at the sight of bayonets. In a letter to General Moultrie, Colonel Charles Pinckney expressed concern that the situation for the southern army might have been worse than he was told, with particular regard to the loss of the Georgia Continentals in their entirety. Pinckney states, "by some letters now in town, we are told things are much in a much worse situation than you speak of: such as the loss of Col. Elbert and all his regulars."⁹⁶ American officers were obviously concerned by the loss of an entire Continental regiment at the Battle of Brier Creek. Training and supplying the Continentals took a great deal of time and money. Thus any losses to Continental numbers were a severe blow to the American war effort. In an engagement, the chances of success for the Americans were much higher if they possessed a larger number of Continental troops. Add to this the increasing problem of desertions within the militia after the Battle of Brier Creek, and it is easy to see how that unfortunate battle crippled the American army in the southern colonies.⁹⁷

The loss of men, both Continental troops and militia, was a staggering blow to General Benjamin Lincoln's war plans in Georgia and South Carolina. The capture of an entire Continental regiment was devastating, as was the high casualties among the militia units. While battlefield losses were high, the loss of men did not stop there. Desertions were always a problem for American armies in the Revolutionary War. In the aftermath of the Battle of Brier

⁹⁵ Benjamin Lincoln to Governor Rutledge, Benjamin Lincoln Letter Book, Massachusetts Historical Society, 189-191.

⁹⁶ Moultrie, *Memoirs*, 327.

⁹⁷ Moultrie, *Memoirs*, 325-327.

Creek, the desertion problem became even more evident. Some men ran from the field and never returned. Many others left camp days or weeks later. General Lincoln needed every man that he could get if he hoped to at least contain the British in Georgia. With rampant desertions, any operations against the British were becoming a forlorn hope.

A lack of discipline and the tendency to desert were two of the most notable problems of the militia. General Moultrie knew this fact all too well and described the problem in a letter to Colonel Pinckney. Moultrie refers to the American troops as undisciplined and goes on to say that “they soon grow tired and desert; too much of which we have sensibly felt.”⁹⁸ He went on to point out that many of those deserters were going over to the British. Of course, Moultrie believed that skirmishes would keep the militia occupied, while Colonel Pinckney questioned the wisdom of such actions. After all, the Americans could not afford another disaster such as the Battle of Brier Creek. In another letter, written some ten days later, General Moultrie offered Governor Rutledge the current plan of action in Georgia and South Carolina. Moultrie stated, with clear disappointment, “I am sorry to inform you that our desertions still continue.”⁹⁹

Desertions plague armies at all times but at no time is it worse than during a retreat, or in the case of the engagement at Brier Creek, a rout. General Ashe originally claimed that only 150 men were missing from his army. This was obviously not an accurate number, since at least 50 of those missing were deserters. Ashe stated that they “crossed the River above and

⁹⁸ Moultrie, *Memoirs*, 365.

⁹⁹ Moultrie, *Memoirs*, 369.

returned to our State”¹⁰⁰ of North Carolina. He also made another separate statement regarding the desertion problem, stating that it, among other things, had “rendered my command very disagreeable.”¹⁰¹ The number of deserters was likely much higher than that mentioned. Ashe managed to prevent the desertion of between two or three hundred men who were fleeing during the battle. General Ashe ordered them to be stopped and, upon learning that they were under his command, brought them back to camp. With so many men fleeing through swamps and trying to cross the Savannah River, it is easy to imagine how so many men could simply march home without anyone knowing. With limited knowledge of those captured or killed, General Ashe had no way of truly knowing who deserted, who was captured or who was killed. This was obviously too much temptation for undisciplined militiamen, and thus continued to be a thorn in the side of American commanders.¹⁰²

Battlefield losses and desertions were not the only ways in which Patriot officers lost men. Sickness and disease ravaged Eighteenth century army camps, and American camps were no different. Many men became ill and were unfit for duty, while some pretended to be sick in order to be sent away from the front lines or even discharged entirely. General Ashe was upset at the loss of men who were not really sick. Ashe had received orders to discharge any men that were sick or unfit for duty. According to Ashe, the short notice of the order prevented him from being present at the examinations. Instead, he was forced to rely on the commanding officer of each regiment. Obviously, Ashe did not trust the judgment of those officers because he stated

¹⁰⁰ John Ashe to Richard Caswell, *Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, vol. 14, pp. 39-43, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr14-0041>.

¹⁰¹ John Ashe to Richard Caswell, *Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, vol. 14, pp. 39-43, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr14-0041>.

¹⁰² Moultrie, *Memoirs*, 325.

that they “permitted about three hundred and forty to return home.”¹⁰³ He went on to question the health of those discharged, saying that “two-thirds of which were not really sick.”¹⁰⁴ Ashe also added that with the addition of 50 or 60 desertions that they had lost approximately 400 men. Of those still in camp, many were sick yet remained in service. This further highlights the problems of losing men in the Patriot camp and how detrimental the loss of so many at Brier Creek was to the war effort. Even though desertion was always a problem for the Patriots, there can be little doubt the traumatic events at the Battle of Brier Creek led many good men to desert. For those who finished out their enlistments, there was little that could entice them to remain in service and risk being part of another rout at the hands of the British.¹⁰⁵

The Battle of Brier Creek came at a very inopportune time for the Patriots. Many of the enlistments for the militia would run out approximately one month later. After taking part in such a terrible defeat and scrambling for their lives, many men did not reenlist, despite incentives provided by their respective states or commanding officers. Incentives such as increased compensation or bonuses for reenlisting had often been used to maintain the ranks of the Patriot armies. After the engagement at Brier Creek, however, the Rebel southern army would fail to reenlist many of those men who witnessed that unfortunate event. Charles Pinckney wrote to William Moultrie that efforts should be made to encourage the reenlistment of as much of the militia as possible for another one or two months. Good housing and better

¹⁰³ John Ashe to Richard Caswell, *Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, vol. 14, pp. 51-55, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr14-0054>

¹⁰⁴ John Ashe to Richard Caswell, *Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, vol. 14, pp. 51-55, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr14-0054>.

¹⁰⁵ John Ashe to Richard Caswell, *Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, vol. 14, pp. 51-55, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr14-0054>.

pay were offered for their continued services. Still, few would be willing to stay for even a short time beyond their enlistment.¹⁰⁶

General Lincoln also saw the need to reenlist as much of the militia as they could, despite their dismal record in combat. Lincoln needed as many men under arms as he could get, militia or otherwise. Much of General Ashe's army was made up of militia and their enlistments ended about a month after the Battle of Brier Creek. General Lincoln requested that General Ashe try to persuade as many as possible to reenlist for a short time. Ashe's plea to his men fell on deaf ears. General Lincoln received the following response from Ashe: "Sir, Agreeable to your desire of yesterday, and my instructions from his Excellency, Gov. Caswell, I have endeavored to persuade this Brigade to continue in Service two months longer, or at least till the reinforcement from our State arrives. I am sorry to inform you that there was but one man consented to continue."¹⁰⁷

Governor Caswell received much the same response as General Lincoln when he tried to encourage reenlistment. Despite his best efforts and the offer of increased pay for a short extension of their service, the men of General Bryan's Brigade were unwilling to stay any longer. General Rutherford's Brigade also refused to continue in service. According to Ashe, "few or none of General Rutherford's Brigade will continue in this service longer than the 10th of April."¹⁰⁸ Then, as if to punctuate the dismal state of affairs of the American forces in the

¹⁰⁶ Moultrie, *Memoirs*, 358.

¹⁰⁷ John Ashe to Benjamin Lincoln, *Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, vol. 14, p. 55, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr14-0056>.

¹⁰⁸ John Ashe to Richard Caswell, *Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, vol. 14, pp. 51-55, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr14-0054>.

south, Ashe noted that “Things here wear a melancholy appearance.”¹⁰⁹ This statement shows not only the unfortunate circumstances of the Patriots but also the steep decline in moral in the month after the Battle of Brier Creek. As for the many men who refused to reenlist, it is easy to understand why. Many had been a part of a terrible defeat. They witnessed firsthand many of their fellow soldiers perishing or being captured. Those that were not present at Brier Creek on March 3 likely heard countless tales of horror from those that were there. Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that none of these men were willing to risk being a part of another massacre in exchange for a small pay increase. For most, more money simply was not worth it.¹¹⁰

Enlisted men were not the only individuals who were unwilling to continue in the service after the Battle of Brier Creek. There is at least one example of a high ranking officer resigning in the weeks after the battle. General William Bryan resigned his commission on April 27, 1779, citing his lack of experience as a military officer and listing his expedition to Georgia as an example. General Bryan placed much of the blame for the debacle on himself for moving the American camp at Brier Creek. After witnessing the massacre at Brier Creek and its deleterious effects on the American war effort, General Bryan believed the cause would be better served by his resignation. He wrote to Governor Caswell that there was, “so little prospect of being serviceable to my Country and acquitting myself with repute.”¹¹¹ The reason for this was that he lacked experience and training to be an officer which he concluded after taking part in a

¹⁰⁹ John Ashe to Richard Caswell, *Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, vol. 14, pp. 51-55, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr14-0054>.

¹¹⁰ John Ashe to Richard Caswell, *Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, vol. 14, pp. 51-55, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr14-0054>.

¹¹¹ William Bryan to Richard Caswell, *Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, vol. 14, pp. 75, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr14-0079>.

terrible defeat for the Rebel army. Thus, General Lincoln lost General Bryan to resignation, General Elbert to capture, and General Ashe was so demoralized as to be of little use, all of which resulted from the Battle of Brier Creek.¹¹²

The Patriots faced many problems that resulted from the losses at the Battle of Brier Creek. The loss of supplies and arms was near total, and created a serious problem for the Rebels as they had significant difficulties in replacing them. It would be quite some time before the nearly 1,000 arms lost at Brier Creek could be replaced. Needless to say, those losses effectively prevented any serious offensive operations against the British. The Rebel army was already short on supplies and food stuffs. The fiasco at Brier Creek simply added to those shortages. General Ashe and General Lincoln could not afford to lose anything, but unfortunately, almost all of the supplies of Ashe's army fell into enemy hands. There was also a significant amount of flour that ended up being captured along with the weaponry and supplies left behind by fleeing militiamen.¹¹³

Perhaps even more damaging to American efforts in Georgia was the loss of an entire Continental Regiment and its very able commander Samuel Elbert. Continental troops were an extremely valuable commodity to American commanding officers and the loss of any was a severe blow. Even the British General Prevost had a grudging respect for the Continentals, further highlighting their value in the field. They were better trained and better equipped than their militia brethren and thus were not as likely to break rank and run at the sight of British bayonets. The loss of Elbert and his Georgia Continentals was a damaging blow to General

¹¹² William Bryan to Richard Caswell, Colonial and State Records of North Carolina, vol. 14, pp. 74-75, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr14-0079>.

¹¹³ Moultrie, *Memoirs*, 375.

Lincoln's plans for Georgia. When an American general lost or lacked Continental regiments, he was usually forced to compensate with additional militia units. After the Battle of Brier Creek, even that would be an issue.

In the panic of battle and the rout that ensued at Brier Creek, many men simply ran for their lives and continued to do so for some time. A number of these men simply kept walking and did not stop until they reached their homes, many of which were in North Carolina. These desertions were difficult to prevent since General Ashe did not know how many were killed, wounded, or captured in the battle. This in itself was bad, but it did not stop there. Desertions would continue to plague the American camps for quite some time. It was a serious concern for basically every American officer. The events at Brier Creek exacerbated this problem as so many men were willing to desert and risk punishment rather than face another British bayonet charge. For those that stayed until their enlistments ran up, there was little their commanding officers could offer that would entice them to stay. After the traumatizing events at Brier Creek, few were willing to stay even for a short time.

The loss of men and supplies was a terrible blow to the American army in the south. The desertions and the unwillingness of militia to reenlist meant that any offensive plans against the British had to be put on hold. This gave the British a great deal of time to finish their defensive works around Savannah and to plan ahead for their next operation. Despite the continued efforts of General Lincoln, the Battle of Brier Creek crushed any hopes of a quick

offensive against the British and demoralized the American army. General Ashe was correct when he said, "Things here wear a melancholy appearance."¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ John Ashe to Richard Caswell, *Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, vol. 14, pp. 51-55, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr14-0054>.

CHAPTER 5

Georgia Lost

The Battle of Brier Creek could easily be called a disaster for the Americans in the southern colonies. The defeat effectively ended any hopes of an immediate American offensive against the British in Georgia and crushed the morale of American troops in Georgia and South Carolina. It changed the course of the conflict in Georgia and gave the British ample time to complete their work on fortifications in and around Savannah. The British success at Brier Creek allowed them to continue their Southern Strategy and eventually move into South Carolina and then North Carolina. The Americans had an opportunity to unite their forces and possibly drive the British out of Georgia. The Battle of Brier Creek effectively slammed the door on that opportunity for the Americans and gave the British one of their own.

Despite the importance of the Battle of Brier Creek, it has sadly been understudied. The historiography is rather short and there are only a handful of articles that focus solely on the events at Brier Creek. More often than not, information about the Battle of Brier Creek will be found in books dealing with either the Southern Campaign or the Revolution in Georgia. There are several books that have information about this little known battle, but in most it is just a cursory examination and none of them delve into the consequences of it on the larger course of the war. In many works, the Battle of Brier Creek is overlooked completely. This is unfortunate as the battle had much more of an impact than might be expected.

Some historians, such as Kenneth Coleman and Leslie Hall, mentioned the importance of the battle in their respective works. They stated that the battle prolonged the war in the south, but they failed to provide any supporting evidence. Instead, they left it as a simple statement at

the end of their discussion of the battle. There is ample evidence to support this idea, but no one has put it all together in a coherent argument. David K. Wilson, in his book *The Southern Strategy*, discussed the battle at length, but he chose not to discuss the consequences of the battle. Joshua B. Howard and Otis Ashmore and Charles Olmstead all put together excellent articles about the Battle of Brier Creek, but again they did not look into how the battle affected the British or the Americans and their respective war plans. Howard's work has a promising introduction focusing on the importance of the battle, but in the end it falls short examining the consequences. Like most other works dealing the Battle of Brier Creek, Howard's is basically an account of the battle and not the affects of it on the larger course of the war.¹¹⁵

Other authors have ignored the Battle of Brier Creek completely, even when discussing events in Georgia. Some only make a brief mention of it and then move on to something else. There are several reasons why this has been the case. First and foremost, the number of documents relevant to the Battle of Brier Creek and its consequences are few and far between. Many of these documents are scattered across the eastern United States, making it difficult to bring them all together. Fortunately, many of these documents have been digitized and/or put onto microfilm, making it easier to obtain them. As far as the scarcity of documents relevant to the battle, there are more than enough to determine that this battle was more important than has generally been thought. There are other reasons that the battle has been overlooked. Patriotic American historians may have steered clear of it because it was such an embarrassment for the Patriots and their cause, while others did so because it was also a very

¹¹⁵ Howard, "*Things Here Wear a Melancholy Appearance*," 477-498.

brief engagement involving small armies. Whatever the reason, it is unfortunate that the consequences of the Battle of Brier Creek have been ignored for so long.

The Battle of Brier Creek had many consequences. It resulted in a substantial loss of men and equipment for the Patriots, along with a loss in momentum and a severe drop in morale. For the British this battle allowed them to secure their position in Georgia and maintain their southern strategy. The southern strategy of the British relied heavily on loyalists flocking to the King's Colors when the army arrived. From these loyalists a militia would be created that could defend the conquests already made by British regulars. To obtain loyalist support, however, the British had to show that they could ensure the safety of loyalists in Georgia. Momentum would play a large role in this. The British needed swift decisive victories to show their superiority. The hope was that the sight of the British marching through Georgia would rally the spirits of loyalists who had been living under patriot authority for quite some time. In the beginning, the British succeeded.¹¹⁶

By the March 3, 1779, the British had lost most, if not all, of the momentum that they had built up in the months preceding the Battle of Brier Creek. Colonel Campbell's force was under the very real threat of being cut off from reinforcements in Savannah. If that had happened, a larger Rebel force could have overrun his army, should they have chosen to bring together their forces for such an attack. The Rebels were preparing to unite their forces for an all out assault on Savannah instead with a force of around 7,000 men, a sizable force to say the least. It is very possible that this force could have driven the British out of Savannah, or at the

¹¹⁶ Wilson, *The Southern Strategy*, 81-98.

very least, bottled them up inside the town. The British needed a decisive and swift victory to reverse their fortunes in Georgia. The Battle of Brier Creek provided exactly that.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ Moultrie, *Memoirs*, 326.

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