

Carolina Day

Since 1777, South Carolinians celebrate Carolina Day on June 28.



Image: NPS Website - Fort Sumter Carolina Day Celebration 2007

Those unfamiliar with the history behind this commemoration often wonder why we mark this anniversary in our state.

This short booklet explains the importance of our Carolina Day tradition.

Carolina Day was established and celebrated in 1777 to commemorate the American victory over the British Naval and Armed forces at Sullivan’s Island on June 28th 1776.ⁱ

- ❗ In 1775, one year before the renowned battle, Sullivan’s Island was desolate public land containing one structure—the old Colonial Quarantine Station. In December 1775 the British used Sullivan’s as a watering station and a refuge for runaway slaves. At night the slaves joined armed sailors to raid area plantations for provisions. In response, the Council of Safety commissioned a night raid that shut down British operations. The Council also forbade British ships from provisioning in the Charleston harbor.ⁱⁱ
- ❗ From this experience Carolinians learned that British possession of Sullivan’s Island meant grave danger for the Lowcountry. By February 1776 Patriots were aware of an impending British strike. Continental leadership tried to persuade locals to build a fort at Haddrell’s Point (Mt. Pleasant). Yet, Patriots decided to stand their ground on Sullivan’s Island—the key to Charleston’s harbor.ⁱⁱⁱ
- ❗ The British planned to surprise the Carolina coast with a “quick thrust” attack by sea and land. Intelligence on May 26th indicated that a fort was being built on Sullivan’s Island but it was far from completion. The English expected an easy victory over the most strategic port in the South.^{iv}
- ❗ Britain’s naval officer Sir Peter Parker commanded a squadron of eleven warships. Of these, two were 50- gun ships and six were light frigates. Army officer Sir Henry Clinton commanded three full regiments and seven companies. They arrived in early June but conditions proved unfavorable for war. Rather than a surprise strike, for three weeks the idle fleet sat in plain view.^v
- ❗ Since January Carolina had been preparing for war. The British soon learned that the Sullivan’s Island Fort was farther along than believed. It was reclassified as a *significant* threat. The final structure was four-sided and made of palmetto logs rather than traditional tabby masonry. It had four bastions—one at each corner. The walls were a double thickness of logs secured by sand. Patriots packed sixteen feet of sand and marsh clay between the fort’s interior and exterior walls. Thirty guns ranging from 9 to 20 “pounders” were at the ready—12 “pounders” were aimed toward Haddrell’s Point.^{vi}
- ❗ There were 6500 American troops—a combination of Continental and Provincial forces. Colonel Moultrie and the 2nd Regiment placed 344 officers and men inside the fort. Colonel Thompson’s 3rd Regiment served as the advance guard on the Breach between Long Island (Isle of Palms) and Sullivan’s. Batteries and garrisons protected the coastline including Haddrell’s Point—a total of 600 guns.^{vii}
- ❗ The highly regarded Continental Commander Major General Charles Lee judged Sullivan’s Island Fort a “slaughterhouse.” He tried to push the battle line to Haddrell’s Point. Moultrie considered General Lee’s awe-inspiring presence to be equivalent to 1000 men. Yet, he refused Lee’s logic on this point. President Rutledge supported Moultrie.^{viii}
- ❗ General Lee believed the British would target Charleston. Both President Rutledge and the locals knew better. Rutledge vowed never to abandon the Sullivan’s Island Fort while one man was alive to defend it. He wrote to Moultrie: “General Lee wishes you to evacuate the fort. You will not without an order from me. I will sooner cut off my hand than write one.” Thus, Lee removed half the fort’s powder to Haddrell’s Point in hopes of forcing an early retreat for the protection of the men and Charleston.^{ix}
- ❗ **Everything went wrong for the British during this “one-day battle” on 28th June 1776**
 - Clinton and Parker failed to coordinate army and navy movements.
 - Parker did not have an expert navigator on board making harbor maneuverability a challenge.
 - Clinton thought the Breach was **18 inches** at low tide creating an easy footpath to Sullivan’s. On June 9th he landed 2500 soldiers on Long Island (Isle of Palms). The Breach proved **7 feet** at low tide with Patriot guns aimed at the route. Attempts to ferry the men across failed miserably.

- Thus, the helpless British Army watched the naval battle from Long Island.
- *The Thunder Bomb*'s guns failed due to "overloading" by sailors.
- The division of light frigates was stuck for hours on sandbars:
 - One, *The Acteon*, was abandoned altogether.
- The two critical 50-gun ships suffered massive damage and debilitating losses of life:
 - One, *The Bristol*, had a cable cut and swung "stern-to" uncontrollably making an easy target until a repair was made.
- British firepower focused on the fort's spongy palmetto walls that proved miraculously resilient.
- American firepower was so intense at one point that the *Bristol*'s deck was cleared of men (all killed or wounded) except Parker whose "breeches" were blown off and his knee and leg injured.
 - After the battle Parker's story was told in England and relayed to America. The commander became the riotous "butt" of numerous American jokes.
- British losses: 61 dead and 161 wounded (many of whom died later). The British Governor of Carolina, Lord William Campbell, died later of wounds sustained on a British ship during battle.
- This list of mishaps represents the highlights of the battle for the British.^x

! Patriot Highlights

- Parker opened fire and the Patriots returned shots conservatively yet mercilessly. Moultrie controlled how often soldiers fired guns. The garrison focused solely on the two 50-gun ships.
- The British predicted it would be over in an hour. General Lee of the Continentals thought the Americans would retreat after two hours.
 - Four hours passed and the British reported wonder and astonishment. By late afternoon General Lee commended Moultrie for having it "under control."
- Most of the British shot landed in the sandy/swampy area inside the fort inflicting zero damage.
 - The battle "ship shot to fort shot" ratio was 20:1.
 - The fort ran out of powder at 3:00 pm and ceased fire. Two hours passed before ammunition stores arrived. Americans rested and ate. Officers smoked pipes. The British were confused and grossly misinterpreted the comings and goings at the fort.
- Sergeant William Jasper rescued the garrison flag in the midst of the firefight (see appendix).
- The battle raged from 10:30 am to late at night when the British cut their cables and fled.
- Patriot losses: 11.^{x1}

! The Continental Congress declared Independence on 4th July—six days after Carolina routed the mighty British Navy. As stated in Lipscomb's book: "Any hope of immediately regaining the South for the Crown by the combined efforts of the British Armed Services and the Southern Loyalists was utterly smashed." The British did not make another attempt on Charleston for three years.^{xii}

! Sullivan's Island Fort was officially named Fort Moultrie retroactive to the battle on 28th June as announced in the paper on August 2nd 1776.^{xiii}

! George Washington visited the site ten years later on May 5th 1791 and wrote in his journal "scarcely a trace [was] left" of Fort Moultrie.^{xiv}

Appendix

Summary of British Battle Plan of Sullivan's Island (Fort Moultrie)

"The plan of action was well-conceived, though circumstances of nature and the resistance of the Americans made its execution difficult. The *Solebay*, 28 guns was to lead the heavy division under topsails off Moultrie; following her were the *Experiment*, 50 the *Bristol*, 50, which was Sir Peter Parker's flagship, and the *Active*, 28. Another division, consisting of the *Sphynx*, 20, the *Actaeon*, 28, and the *Syren*, 28, was to move south of the first division and take a station west of the fort where the ships could enfilade the unfinished face of Moultrie with their starboard broadsides and hammer the batteries at Haddrell's Point from the other side. The mortarship *Thunder Bomb* and the frigate *Friendship*, 22, were to shell Moultrie from the southeast. Meanwhile an armed schooner and a sloop were to aid the boats in ferrying Clinton's troops across the Breach to assault Moultrie from the landward side."^{xv}

List of American Patriots Killed at Battle of Sullivan's Island

Sergeant MacDaniel
Corporal Samuel
Yarbury Privates:
John Fleming
James Hunter
John Boxall
John Hickie
Luke Flood
Richard
Rogers Isaac
Edwards John
Ryan
Rowley Purdy^{xvi}

A Twentieth Century Reflection on British Operations by historian Eric Robson:

“The high hopes of October 1775 had not been realized. An expedition then determined on had sailed almost four months later: it was not complete at its rendezvous until mid-May: it delivered its attack on 28 June, eight months after its first inception, when surprise and speed, the essentials of any expedition, had long since passed. It was a performance which was to be repeated too often by the British during the War of Independence.”^{xvii}

A Reflection on Impact of American Operations by influential patriot Dr. Benjamin Rush of

Philadelphia written to American General Lee, on July 23rd, 1776: “Dear General, It would take a Volume to tell you how many clever things were said of you and the brave Troops under your command after hearing of your late victory. It has given a wonderful turn to our affairs. –The loss of Canada had sunk the spirits of many people who now begin to think our cause is not desperate and that we shall yet triumph over the enemies.”^{xviii}

A Reflection by British on American Operations:

An eyewitness in Parker's fleet predicted the reaction from the British people: “This will not be believed when it is first reported in England. I can scarcely believe what I saw myself saw on that day—a day to me one of the most distressing in my life.” Praise of the deadly accurate and conservative patriot fire of ammunition made numerous British records/accounts—“artillery well-respected and well-served.”^{xix}

Comments by historian Terry Lipscomb on the Garrison Flag and Grenadier Sergeant William

Jasper: A large blue flag with a white crescent was shot down from the southeastern bastion wall. Worry spread that friendly and enemy troops would misread a ‘missing flag’ as surrender. Jasper yelled out to Colonel Moultrie, “Colonel don't let us fight without our flag!” Moultrie responded, “How can you help it? The staff is gone.” Jasper said he would “fasten the color to a makeshift staff” and raise it on the “salient angle of the bastion.” He walked the length of the fort in enemy fire, cut down the flag from the mast, mounted the outside wall, and called to Captain Horry for aid. Jasper tied the flag to a “sponge staff” from Horry's gun crew. He planted it firmly in the sand on the rampart, gave three cheers and returned to his post. Later he was awarded President Rutledge's dress sword—an “elegant weapon with a silver hilt.” Rutledge commanded him to wear the sword in remembrance of the courageous act and of Rutledge.^{xx}

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*These particular sources are the best for detailing local history and rely upon primary source documents in the text specific to the Battle of Sullivan's Island.

Endnotes

ⁱ South Carolina Historical Society, "Carolina Day Celebration 2007," <http://www.southcarolinahistoricalsociety.org> [accessed 05.11.09].

ⁱⁱ Terry Lipscomb, *The Carolina Lowcountry April 1775-June 1777* (Columbia: S.C. Department of Archives and History, 1991), 19, 20.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lipscomb, *The Carolina*, 24.

^{iv} Willard M. Wallace, *Appeal to Arms* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), 93; Lipscomb, *The Carolina*, 22.

^v Wallace, *Appeal*, 91; Lipscomb, *The Carolina*, 27.

^{vi} Sol Stember, *The Bicentennial Guide to the American Revolution* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co. Inc., 1974), 43-

7; Lipscomb, *The Carolina*, 23; Wallace, *Appeal*, 92.

^{vii} Wallace, *Appeal*, 92-4; Lipscomb, *The Carolina*, 38.

^{viii} Wallace, *Appeal*, 92-4.

^{ix} Lipscomb, *The Carolina*, 24. Rutledge is quoted within Lipscomb's text.

^x Lipscomb, *The Carolina*, 26, 40; Wallace, *Appeal*, 94-5; Stember, *The Bicentennial*, 46.

^{xi} Stember, *The Bicentennial*, 44-46; Lipscomb, *The Appeal*, 29, 31-3.

^{xii} Lipscomb, *The Carolina*, 39, 96.

^{xiii} Lipscomb, *The Carolina*, 40. Newspaper account quoted in Lipscomb's text.

^{xiv} Lipscomb, *The Carolina*, 41. George Washington is quoted in Lipscomb's text.

^{xv} Wallace, *Appeal*, 91.

^{xvi} Lipscomb, *The Carolina*, 32.

^{xvii} Eric Robson, "The Expedition to the Southern Colonies 1775-1777," *The English Historical Journal* 66, no. 261 (October 1951), 560.

^{xviii} David Lee Russell, *Victory on Sullivan's Island: The British Cape Fear/ Charles Town Expedition of 1776*

(Haverford, PA: Infinity Publishing, 2002), 240-1.

^{xix} Lipscomb, *The Carolina*, 31, 39.

^{xx} Lipscomb, *The Carolina*, 32.

Information compiled by historian Victoria Musheff, in May 2009, at the request of Town Councilmember Paul S. Gawyrch.