

CAMDEN, BATTLE OF (Southern Campaign)

Date: August 16, 1780

Region: Southern Colonies, South Carolina

Commanders: (British) Lt. General Charles Earl Cornwallis;
(American) Major General Horatio Gates

Time of Day / Length of Action: Morning / One hour

Weather Conditions: Unremarkable, warm, clear

Opposing Forces: (British): 2,239 Regulars and veteran volunteers;
Americans: Approximately 3,700 (900 Continentals, 2,800 militia)

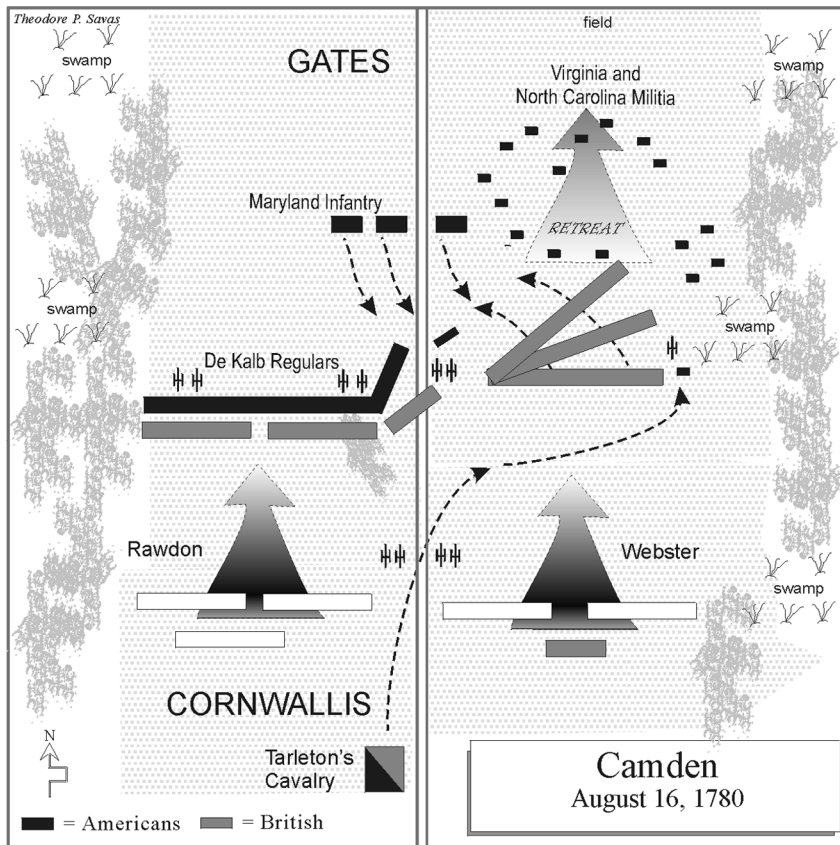
British Perspective: On May 12, 1780, Major General Benjamin Lincoln surrendered Charleston, South Carolina, to a powerful combined British invasion force led by Sir Henry Clinton. Some 5,000 soldiers walked into captivity and tons of precious supplies were lost. Clinton sailed back to New York City leaving Lt. General Charles Earl Cornwallis in command. His orders to Cornwallis were to reduce and subjugate the rest of the Carolinas while maintaining a firm grasp on the port cities of Charleston and Savannah, Georgia. Cornwallis's most important interior garrison and logistical supply depot was established at Camden. This small but strategically located crossroads town by the Wateree River and Catawba Indian Trail was about 115 miles northwest of Charleston. When Cornwallis learned that Horatio Gates had been appointed to lead an American army that was threatening Camden, he left Charleston to confront and defeat him in the field. Cornwallis made a night march from Camden on August 15-16 in an attempt to position his army for an attack the next morning, but halted when his cavalry struck the head of Gates's army.

American Perspective: A few days before the fall of Charleston the victor of Saratoga, Major General Horatio Gates, was appointed to take command of the small Continental field army in South and stabilize the deteriorating situation there. Gates arrived in late July 1780 at the Deep River camp and took command of a small, demoralized, and ill-equipped

army composed largely of militia. Despite its deplorable condition, he marched on Camden on July 27 believing that only 700 men held it. Gates knew almost nothing about the region and marched his hungry men through unfriendly and difficult terrain. Though large numbers of militia reached him, he also weakened his army by detaching several hundred men on less important duties. At about 2:00 a.m. on August 16, advance cavalry elements of the opposing forces stumbled into one another on the old Waxhaws Road several miles north of Camden above Saunder's Creek. Both sides pulled back and prepared for battle as soon as it was light enough to fight. When Gates discovered that he faced Cornwallis and a veteran field army, he decided it was too late to retreat.

Terrain: Gently undulating lightly wooded field of battle approximately three-quarters of a mile wide with both flanks covered with woods and swamp land. The Waxhaws Road bisected the length of this field.

The Fighting: Cornwallis formed his men before dawn on either side of the Waxhaws Road. His finest troops under Lieutenant Colonel James Webster held the position of honor on the right wing. These men included the 23rd and 33rd Foot, with a pair of battalions from the 71st Highlanders behind them in reserve (perhaps astride the road). The left wing under Lord Rawdon was composed of his own Irish Volunteers, infantry from the British Legion, the Royal North Carolina Regiment, and Morgan Bryan's North Carolina militia. Banastre Tarleton's veteran legion of horse and foot formed in reserve. Four pieces of artillery bolstered the center of his line. Cornwallis was so certain of tactical victory he deployed his army with Saunder's Creek behind him. Gates deployed his army in much the same manner. His right wing comprised some 900 veteran Maryland and Delaware infantry under the command of General Jean, Baron de Kalb, one of the Continental Army's finest subordinate commanders. Three small Maryland regiments straddled the road in reserve 200 yards behind the front line. Gates joined them there with his staff—a critical mistake that kept him too far in the rear to affect the course of the fighting. His left front was entirely formed of untried militia from North Carolina and Virginia, about 2,500 strong, with a handful of cavalry and other light infantry behind them. Seven pieces of artillery dotted the line. Gates's foolhardy deployment positioned his least reliable troops in front of



Cornwallis's finest Regulars. (Long established European tradition calls for the best troops to hold the right side of the line.)

Cornwallis opened the battle by advancing Webster's elite warriors against Gates's left. They advanced "with great vigour [and] in good order and with the cool intrepidity of experienced British soldiers," wrote Cornwallis after the battle. Except for one company the American militia fled almost without firing a shot. In a matter of minutes the left half of the American army had evaporated. On the other flank, General de Kalb's Regulars held their own against a spirited advance by Lord Rawdon. Baron De Kalb, who was wounded early and often at Camden, launched a serious attack that forced Cornwallis himself to ride into the action and steady his men. Webster, meanwhile, pivoted his regiments to the left and pinned de Kalb and the advancing Maryland reserves into place. With Rawdon in front and Webster on one flank and swampy woodland on the other, Cornwallis recognized his opportunity and threw Tarleton's cavalry

around the Continentals, sealing their doom. A few escaped into the swamp, but most were killed, wounded, or captured. Gates, who spent the entire battle deep in the rear, fled the field even before the mortally wounded deKalb was surrounded. Tarleton's vigorous pursuit inflicted additional American casualties.

Numbers and Losses: British losses were 68 killed and 256 wounded, or about 14% of Cornwallis's effective force. American losses were apparently never officially reported, but were approximately 250 killed and 800 wounded and captured. Many of the militia never returned to the ranks, and the American army lost the valuable services of General de Kalb, who died three days after the battle.

Outcome/Impact: The defeat at Camden was the worst loss suffered by an American army during the entire war. Morale dropped like a stone and the Southern army was reduced to a paltry few hundred men. South Carolina and Georgia were firmly, if temporarily, under the Crown's control. The most important consequence of the battle was the exposure of the hapless Gates as an incompetent field commander, and the appointment of Nathanael Greene to replace him.

Today: Historic Camden Revolutionary War Site can be visited in Camden, South Carolina. Several hundred acres of the battlefield have been preserved, and there is a museum on the site, walking trails, and regular historic reenactments.

Further Reading: Buchanan, John, *The Road to Guilford Courthouse: The American Revolution in the Carolinas* (John Wiley and Sons, 1999); Landers, H. L. *The Battle of Camden, S.C., August 16, 1780* (Kershaw County Historical Society, 1997); Pancake, John S. *This Destructive War: The British Campaigns in the Carolinas, 1780-1782* (University of Alabama Press, 1985).