



Carlyle House

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George William Carlyle and the Battle of Eutaw Springs

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This article provides a general description of the Battle of Eutaw Springs and expounds upon what is known about George William Carlyle's involvement in the Revolutionary War and his untimely death in September 1781 at the very young age of 15 (see *George William: What Do We Really Know?*, Carlyle House Docent Dispatch, April 2000).

Battle of Eutaw Springs (September 8, 1781)

Throughout the first eight months of 1781, American forces clashed with British and Loyalist military units on several occasions in the Carolinas and Georgia. The Patriot forces were comprised of Continental army units, as well as state militia and "partisan"-type forces led by famous commanders such as Francis Marion, the "Swamp Fox", of South Carolina and "Light Horse Harry" Lee of Virginia. While the Americans did not win many of these engagements, they did inflict substantial losses on the British and their Loyalist sympathizers, ultimately causing the British forces to pull out of the inland areas of the Carolinas and Georgia. In August 1781, General George Washington sent word to General Nathanael Greene, commander of the Americans' Southern Campaign, to strike another blow against the British Army in South Carolina in order to prevent Lord Cornwallis from pulling additional men from the Carolinas to augment his troop base already stationed at Yorktown.

Days before the Battle of Eutaw Springs, Lt. Col. Alexander Stuart, commander of the British Forces, set up camp at Eutaw Springs--about 50 miles northwest of Charleston, SC. At the same time, Greene and the American forces were able to approach to within 4 miles of Stuart's camp due, in large part, to the low level of Loyalist support for King George III's army in the Carolinas at this time (i.e., the local populace

provided no warning to the British of the movement of American forces). Several American regiments were involved in the Battle, including Continental Infantry units from Maryland, North Carolina, Virginia and Delaware, Cavalry units (Lee's Legion and Lt. Col. William Washington's 3rd Regiment of Continental Cavalry), South Carolina state troops and militia, North Carolina militia, and Francis Marion's Brigade. Total muster of men for the Battle was approximately 4,000 (2,000 for each side).

As the American forces advanced toward the British camp early on the morning of September 8th, some skirmishing took place. The British troops quickly fell back to Eutaw Springs. At about 9:00 AM, the British forces set up for battle a few hundred yards in front of their encampment. General Greene's men were about to face an intensely hot day at Eutaw Springs--on short rations and little rest. The Battle would last nearly 4 hours--replete with some of the fiercest fighting during the Revolutionary War as most soldiers from both sides experienced close-in, hand-to-hand combat.

The Battle commenced with some artillery salvos, soon followed by a clash of American militia and British regulars. While initially holding their position, the militia was eventually broken up by a bayonet charge. The North Carolina Continentals stepped into the fray, but were also beaten back by another British bayonet attack. General Greene then set forward his Maryland and Virginia Continentals who drove most of the British back to, and eventually beyond, their camp. However, a British unit, led by a Major John

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Marjoribanks, was able to maintain its defensive position at the right flank. To increase pressure on this stubborn British regiment, General Greene ordered the cavalry unit he had been keeping in reserve, led by William Washington (second cousin to George Washington and a hero at the crucial Battle of Cowpens of January 1781 in South Carolina), to advance against Marjoribanks' unit. After receiving Greene's order, Lt. Col. Washington immediately led his horse-backed unit, without infantry support, against Marjoribank's position. Within an area full of brambles and thickly growing dwarf black oak trees, Marjoribank's men held their strong defensive position. Soon after the cavalry unit went into this thicket, Lt. Col. Washington tried to wheel the horses about to find an open field right off of the thick, brushy area. However, as the cavalry started to head to the open field, the British, firing with deadly efficiency, turned this unit into a disordered mass of men and horses. The result was a decimation of Washington's 60 man regiment. The British killed, wounded, or captured over half of the cavalymen. William Washington's horse was shot out from under him, and Washington himself was wounded and taken prisoner. **It was during this charge that young George William Carlyle was most likely killed.**



Battle of Eutaw Springs

George William Carlyle

According to the list of "Casualties of Commissioned Officers at Eutaw Springs", contained within General Greene's September 11 Eutaw Springs report to the Continental Congress, a "Mr. Carlisle", noted as a "Volunteer" in the "Cavalry" was listed as "killed". He was the only officer/cadet listed as Cavalry to have been killed at this Battle; also on this list, six commissioned officers in the Cavalry were wounded, including William Washington. In Greene's report, it is clear that "Cavalry" refers to William Washington's unit and is distinguished from Lee's "Legion Cavalry". No officers/cadets from Lee's Legion Cavalry were listed as killed.

Some sources have referred to George William as having served in Lee's Legion [W&M Quarterly, July 1909; annotations to Papers of George Washington, April 12, 1772]. However, it is not clear whether George William actually served under Lee. When George William was killed, he was not with Lee's Legion. According to "Light Horse Harry" Lee's "Memoirs of the War in the Southern Department of the United States" (1812, first edition), during the Battle of Eutaw Springs "[t]he gallant young Carlisle of Alexandria, a cadet in the Regiment, was killed and half the corps destroyed." Lee references "Young Carlisle" in the course of discussing the events leading up to and during Lt. Col.

Washington's ill-fated charge against Marjoribanks.

A big mystery is how and when George William joined William Washington's Cavalry unit and if he ever served in Lee's Legion. William Washington fought continuously in the Carolinas from February 1780. Lee and his Legion joined the Southern fighting in January 1781. After a long trek from Philadelphia, it is most probable that Lee rode through Alexandria during his expedition to the Southern Campaign. However, it is improbable that "Young Carlisle" signed up with Lee when his Legion came through town in January 1781. A handwritten officers' mess list—prepared by one of the leaders of the Fairfax Militia, Major Dennis Ramsay (son of an Alexandria founder, William Ramsay), provides the names of a few officers, including George William Carlyle and Charles Little (one of the executors of John Carlyle's will and a George Washington pallbearer). The date on this list is February 24, 1781. On that date, the Fairfax Militia was most likely preparing to march south to combine with other Virginia Militia units to fight against British forces led by General Benedict Arnold in the Virginia Tidewater area. (On February 17, 1781, Baron von Steuben, noted military leader in southern Virginia, requested about 1,000 militiamen from the counties of Fairfax, Loudoun, Prince William, and Fauquier to march to Williamsburg.)



The orderly book of John Piper, one of Major Ramsay's fellow officers in the Fairfax Militia and whose name is included in the officers' mess list described above, provides date and location information regarding the Fairfax Militia from March 4 through April 11, 1781. Included in this orderly book are references to camp locations such as Fredericksburg and Williamsburg. No mention is made of George William Carlyle; however, mention is made of a "Captain Little" during this timeframe. Thus, it is unclear to what extent, if at all, did George William travel with the Fairfax Militia during this time before making his way to the Carolinas to join the Cavalry fighting under General Greene.

Significance of the Battle of Eutaw Springs

George William did not see the end of the Battle of Eutaw Springs. After their push into the British Camp, the American rank & file (i.e., the enlisted men), probably thinking they had the Battle won and having gone days with only minimal provisions, proceeded to loot the British tents for food and drink (drink including not only cold water but also spirits). The British forces counterattacked on both flanks of their once-held encampment and successfully drove out the American forces. Technically, Lt. Col. Stuart's men won the Battle as they controlled the field upon cessation of this engagement. However, the casualty cost was so high for the British-led forces that within a day after the Battle, Stuart led the remainder of his men back to Charleston.

Eutaw Springs was one of the bloodiest battles of the Revolutionary War in terms of soldiers killed/wounded from both sides (about 25% from each side, or 1,000 total). Furthermore, the Battle of Eutaw Springs was the last major engagement between American and British-led forces prior to the American and French bombardment of and eventual victory at Yorktown. The Battle of Eutaw Springs proved to be the "knockout" blow to the British forces' presence throughout the inland portions of the Southern Region; after Eutaw Springs, the British "holed" themselves up in port cities such as Charleston and Savannah and never again ventured out from these strongholds (i.e., such British Forces neither marched to Yorktown nor any other Southern Campaign site) until their evacuations of these cities in 1782. Had "Young Carlisle" survived Eutaw Springs, he would have very likely survived the War (i.e., his cavalry unit was not present at Yorktown).

Poem by Philip Freneau, a renowned Revolutionary War Poet, addressing the Eutaw Springs engagement:

**"At Eutaw Springs the valiant died;
Their limbs with dust are covered o'er. -
Weep on, ye Springs, your tearful tide;
How many heroes are no more!**

**If, in this wreck of ruin, they
Can yet be thought to claim the tear,
Oh, smite your gentle breast, and say,
The friends of freedom slumber here!**

**Now rest in peace, our patriot band;
Though far from Nature's limits thrown,
We trust they find a happier land,
A brighter sunshine of their own."**

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