

THE ADMINISTRATIVE HISTORY OF
NINETY SIX NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

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Foreword

" . . . We have been prosecuting the Seige [sic] at this place with all possible diligence with our little force . . . , and our poor Fellows are worne out with fatigue. . . . The [British] Works are strong and extensive. The position [is] difficult to approach and the Ground extremely hard." So wrote Maj. Gen. Nathanael Greene on June 9, 1781, in his report to the president of the Continental Congress with regards to the siege of the British fortifications at Ninety Six, South Carolina. Almost two hundred years later the United States Congress would establish a national historic site not only to commemorate this ill-fated siege but the colonial and early settlement history of a backcountry village known as Ninety Six.

Prior to the English settlement of South Carolina, the area known as Ninety Six was used by Native American tribes particularly the Saludas, the Waterees, and Cherokees for hunting and fishing. The name Ninety Six originated from its distance to Keowee, a Cherokee town farther along the Cherokee Path. Increased trading with Native Americans in the early to mid-1700s opened the backcountry to settlers. One such settler was Robert Gouedy, who purchased property at Ninety Six in 1751 and opened a trading post servicing settlers and Indian traders.

Hostilities between the British and French in the 1750s filtered down to the backcountry of South Carolina in the form of attacks by Cherokees on the English settlers. Gouedy's barn was enveloped by a small fort in 1759 in response to the threatening situation. It became known as Fort Ninety Six.

In 1760, Fort Ninety Six was attacked twice by the Cherokees but did not fall. With the capture of Fort Loudoun on August 7, 1760, Fort Ninety Six's importance as a supply station to the backcountry increased considerably. In 1762, a treaty with the Cherokees brought peace to Ninety Six, and with peace the lands reopened to new settlers.

The citizens of Ninety Six built a village about 500 yards north of Fort Ninety Six. After its designation as one of seven new judicial districts in 1769, a courthouse and jail were added to the prospering village in 1772. The populous of the backcountry differed from their coastal counterparts economically and politically. With the outbreak of war in 1775, many residents in and around Ninety Six remained loyal to the crown in opposition to their coastal neighbors, while others were indecisive and wavered from one side to the other. The American Revolutionary War was truly a civil war in South Carolina pitting neighbor against neighbor and brother against brother. Over the next six years the British would attempt to take advantage of this partisan atmosphere in their quest for control over the southern colonies. The burgeoning village would be pulled into the conflict repeatedly over the next six years.

The first act of partisan warfare in South Carolina involved Ninety Six in July of 1775. Fearing the backcountry Loyalists might use the arms and ammunitions stored at Fort Charlotte against their Patriot neighbors, Whigs ordered Maj. James Mayson to remove the military supplies from Fort Charlotte to Ninety Six. Betrayed by his assistant, the ammunition was recaptured and Mayson was arrested by the local militia. Mayson was held in the Ninety Six

jail but was soon released on bail. Four months later, the first land battle of the American Revolution in South Carolina would be fought at Ninety Six.

In November, the Cunningham brothers (Loyalists) captured gunpowder on its way to Cherokees inciting more hostility between Patriots and Loyalists. A stockaded fort under the command of Andrew Williamson (Patriot) was built a short distance from Ninety Six. On November 19, three hours after being completed, the fort was surrounded by Loyalists under Patrick Cunningham. The battle lasted until November 21, when a truce was declared with both sides parting company. James Birmingham was killed in this battle becoming the first South Carolina Patriot to die for America's independence. Loyalist opposition subsided over the next four years but was revived with the British Southern Campaign in 1780. Ninety Six's strategic location in the backcountry made it a focal point for British operations. Patriots found themselves prisoners of war on parole with Loyalists in control.

In 1780, the Continental forces in the South were put under the command of General Nathanael Greene. Victories at Kings Mountain and Cowpens diminished the British position in South Carolina. By the spring of 1781, Lord Charles Cornwallis was in North Carolina on his way to Virginia leaving South Carolina with a greatly reduced British force. Greene took advantage of the situation by attacking the British outposts, finally reaching Ninety Six on May 22, 1781, with 981 men. The British forces fortified the village with a palisade enclosure and a star redoubt northeast of the village. The Continental army's siegeworks were engineered by Thaddeus Kosciuszko over the next four weeks drawing ever closer to the British position, ironically held by Loyalists under Col. Harris Cruger, an American. News of approaching British Troops

forced the Continentals to attack the star redoubt on June 18. Unable to capture the redoubt, Greene's army suffered heavy losses and was forced to retreat.

The British forces evacuated Ninety Six one month later, burning the village as they departed. A new village was built a quarter of a mile from the ruins of its predecessor. In 1787, the new village of Ninety Six became known as Cambridge after the school erected in the town in 1785. By 1860 Cambridge had lost its position as a judicial district. Even its stagecoach and railroad services were moved to a new town two miles to the north known as Ninety Six. Although the once prosperous village of "Old" Ninety Six ceased to exist, its history was still remembered by local inhabitants. In Benson Lossing's The Pictorial Field-Book of the Revolution, James M. McCracken was noted as observing that "The trees and shrubbery on the battleground are considered by the inhabitants too sacred to be molested." (Vol. 2, p. 485). Reverence for the battleground would be held by coming generations resulting in the establishment of a national historic site at this backcountry settlement.

