

The Americans, under cover of fire from the tower, pushed their trenches forward until they were able to begin undermining the surrender of Fort Watson.

Lt. McKay complained that "...we were reduced to the disagreeable necessity of capitulating, by the cowardly and mutinous behavior of a majority of the men...having grounded their arms and refused to defend the post any longer, not withstanding every exertion made by the officers to encourage and force them to their duty."

The terms of surrender provided that the soldiers in regular units of the British Army be allowed to march to Charleston under parole, meaning that they would not serve in the military until they were exchanged for American prisoners of war. The officers could keep their sidearms and personal effects. The irregulars, however, were made prisoners. All military stores and equipment went to the victors. Francis Marion did not wish to occupy the post and soon began demolishing the works to give the British no opportunity to regarrison it.

The action at Fort Watson lasted only eight days and casualties were light on both sides. It was however, an important American victory. The loss of this post made the already tenuous British supply lines to the upcountry less defensible. The fall of Fort Watson was an important link in the chain of events that made the British authorities abandon the back country of South Carolina.

This information is provided by the Santee National Wildlife Refuge staff in cooperation with the Santee Indians and the Clarendon County Archives

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PLEASE DO NOT CLIMB THE INDIAN MOUND. USE THE STEPS TO REACH THE TOP.



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The Blue Goose is the symbol of the
National Wildlife Refuge System

Santee Indian Mound and Fort Watson

The large hill located on Lake Marion adjacent to the Santee National Wildlife Refuge is known as the Santee Indian Mound. The Santee Indians were part of the Mississippian culture that lived in this area for thousands of years. The mound itself is approximately 1,000 years old. The mound served as a prehistoric ceremonial center of a native culture that flourished on the coastal plain in the centuries before the founding of Charleston.

The site here at Scotts Lake is the largest such ceremonial center discovered on the coastal plain to this date. It appears that the mound, besides being the site of various religious rites, was also used for burials. Archaeologists have excavated at least sixteen graves each containing artifacts. The Santee Indian's average height was 5'2" for women and 5'7" for men.

Around 1650 the Santee numbered approximately 3,000 tribal members. In 1715, their tribe had been reduced to approximately 500 members due to illness and death resulting from diseases brought by the Spanish as well as the English settlers.

The Santee Indians hunted an area from north of present day St. Matthews eastward to within 30 miles of the coast. Their hunting area stretched from the Manning, Sumter area south to Orangeburg. They were very successful farmers and cultivated

large fields of corn, squash, greens, beans, etc. that stretched for miles on both sides of the Santee River (the word Santee means “river people”).

Although the British excavations during the later fortification of the mound destroyed much archaeological evidence, it appears that there may have been native American structures on the summit. Subsurface remains indicate walls that were built using posts set in the ground and woven with saplings. This woven network of small sticks was then plastered with a mud mixture known as “daub”. These structures consisted of four main poles used to form a circular hut.

In the spring and summer the hut would be covered with tree bark or river reeds and in the fall and winter the bark or reeds would be covered with mud. Every year the mud would be torn down and the bark or reeds were replaced. The Santee Indians traveled up and down the Santee River in canoes or “dugouts”. A “dugout” canoe was made from a tree that had been burned out in the center to make it hollow with the outer ends curved flat. By the beginning of the American Revolution, the site had been abandoned by the Indians. The site, however, took on a new and more violent role during this period.

Perhaps, the Santee Indian Mound’s greatest notoriety comes from its use as a British fort during the American Revolution. This outpost, named Fort Watson, was part of a chain of British strong points that stretched across South Carolina and included Fort Mott, Granby, Ninety Six, Camden and Charleston.

This abandoned ceremonial site was the ideal location for a fort since it provided an elevated vantage point that overlooked the Santee River and the road to Charleston. The mound was incorporated into a stockade built under the direction of Colonel John Watson of the British Army. Contemporary descriptions and archaeological evidence point to a stockade of vertical logs around the summit of the mound. To make it more difficult to move up the face of the mound, ditches were cut and three rows of abatis were constructed.

An abatis is a line of pointed stakes placed into a slope so that they face outward in the direction of a potential attack. It is probable that there were buildings inside the palisade and there was a garrison hospital located below the mound in an exposed position.

On February 28, 1781, General Thomas Sumter’s partisans attempted to take the post by storm. Without artillery to breach the works, the assault cost many patriot lives. The British defenders used their two cannons to great advantage and the Americans were forced to abandon the attack.

Another direct assault was therefore viewed with caution and the second attempt in April began as a siege. Much of the advantage that the defenders possessed in February was relinquished, as the two cannons had been moved to another area of operation. This new campaign was under the direction of Francis Marion and Lt. Colonel Henry “Light Horse Harry” Lee with his newly arrived Continental troops. The fort was under the command of Lt. James McKay of the British Army.

The first few days of the siege were rather uneventful consisting of scattered small arms duels. The attackers hoped to force surrender

by depriving the garrison of access to their water supply at the lake. The British, however, had hastily dug a well within a covered ditch to insure protected access to their water supply. The Americans also began digging trenches to approach the mound under cover and to intercept the defender’s protected access to their well.

The stalemate might have gone on for some time had it not been for the initiative and ingenuity of a Major Maham of Francis Marion’s legion. He proposed to build a tower that could be used to fire into the stockade and thus neutralize the advantage of elevation that the defenders possessed.

It is uncertain exactly how the famous tower was constructed, but it was apparently built out of rifle range of the fort, and then moved into place possibly on wheels or a wagon frame. Lt. McKay, who was in charge of Fort Watson’s garrison, described the day,

“They likewise in the afternoon brought down a wooden machine that they had built, and were busy in raising a scaffold made of rails and mold, nearly level with the top of our works for their marksmen to pick off our sentinels”.

The tower made it possible to cover much of the fort with rifle fire. The removal of the British artillery several months before now proved to be critical, as one cannon could easily have destroyed the tower.