Restored Camden Gives Historical Insight

BY MARSHALL SWANSON

In 1780-193 years ago—General Lord Cornwallis and a contingent of British troops marched into and occupied Camden, South Carolina in an attempt to maintain control over the Southern portion of the then Revolutionary American colonies.

Attempts by American troops to regain the town were unsuccessful until a newly-appointed general by the Continental Congress, Nathaniel Greene, fought the British two miles north of the town in what is now known as the Battles of Congress. Nathaniel Greene, fought the British two miles north of the town in what is now known as the Battle of Hobik Hill.

There, both the British and the Americans suffered heavy losses, forcing the British to evacuate the area and relinquish control of South Carolina to the colonists.

Now, almost two centuries later, South Carolinians and others visit Camden and get a glimpse of what things were like when the city was under British control from 1780.

It’s been made possible by the creation of Historic Camden, an outdoor museum that provides an example of what a revolutionary era settlement was like.

The museum, located on US 521 in southern Camden, boasts an impressive collection of historical exhibits and displays which do a credible job of chronicling the history of the town during its years of British occupation.

Located on the site from which the British occupied the town, the museum features three restored structures that are used to house most of the site’s exhibits and furnishings.

Crawford House, for example, is furnished with antique pieces of furniture dating back to revolutionary days. Also on hand are photographic exhibits showing the restorative process of the house and articles which relate to the house’s original construction.

Bradley House, donated to the museum by a South Carolina timber company, has on display artifacts and relics also furnished by private individuals. A series of exhibits in the house chronicle the development of Camden from its founding days, featuring prominent individuals who had an influence in the early development of the town.

In addition to Indian arrowheads and other stone implements, there are old firearms and other military paraphernalia which date from revolutionary times. Particular emphasis is given by means of maps and diagrams to the British’s “Southern Strategy” or plan to gain effective control of the Southern portion of the colonies during the Revolutionary War.

According to the museum, much of the information in the display was ferreted out of old records and papers dating from the revolutionary period.

In the Drakeford House, which was constructed in 1822 and contributed to the museum by descendants of Joseph Kershaw, Camden town founder. During the occupation of the town by the British, the Kershaw home was used as a military headquarters by Lord Cornwallis and other British commanders.

Other displays in the Drakeford House include information on the two opposing commands in the Battle of Camden, which occurred on August 16, 1780. An original “two bits” piece or quarter of a Spanish dollar, is also shown in the Drakeford House.

The display explains that the term “two bits” originated with the practice of cutting a Spanish dollar into quarters and using the pieces as surrogates during the Revolution. According to the exhibit, American continental currency at the time was worthless.

Some of the relics on exhibit were found in the Camden area by individuals. Others are the result of archeological diggings conducted on the grounds of the museum by the USC Institute of Archeology and Anthropology.

According to museum authorities, the Camden Historical Commission and the Camden District Heritage Foundation have reason to believe that historical records of the area are in some cases incomplete. These two organizations are hoping to cooperate with the USC Institute of Archeology and Anthropology in a continuing effort to reveal any additional information which may be available through diggings and continued exploration.

In addition to the three restored houses at Historic Camden, there are several “partial restorations” or other structures which figured prominently in the British’s occupation of the town. These may be viewed by taking a tour on either bicycles or electric golf cars provided free by the museum.

Included in the partially restored sites is a small fort of redoubt built by the British to protect their supply base during their occupation of the town. Also, there is the restored foundation of the Kershaw house, in the exact location of the original foundation built in 1777.

In addition, the bicycle path provides a view of a reconstructed fort which was one of six built in Camden. The shape of the fort is said to be copied from the 1781 map of the fortified town.

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