

= Battle of Beaufort =

The Battle of Beaufort , also known as the Battle of Port Royal Island , was fought on February 3 , 1779 , near Beaufort , South Carolina , during the American Revolutionary War . The inconsequential battle took place not long after British forces consolidated control around Savannah , Georgia , which they had captured in December 1778 .

Brigadier General Augustine Prevost sent 200 British regulars to seize Port Royal Island at the mouth of the Broad River in South Carolina in late January 1779 . Major General Benjamin Lincoln , the American commander in the south , sent South Carolina Brigadier General William Moultrie from Purrysburg , South Carolina with a mixed force composed mainly of militia , but with a few Continental Army men , to meet the British advance . The battle was inconclusive , but the British withdrew first and suffered heavier casualties than the Americans .

= = Background = =

The British began their " southern strategy " by sending expeditions from New York City and Saint Augustine , East Florida to capture Savannah , Georgia late in 1778 . The New York expedition , under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Archibald Campbell , arrived first , and successfully captured the town on December 29 , 1778 . Remnants of Savannah 's defenders combined with South Carolina militia under Major General Benjamin Lincoln at an encampment at Purrysburg , South Carolina to oppose the British .

When Brigadier General Augustine Prevost arrived from Saint Augustine in mid @-@ January 1779 , he assumed command of the garrison there , and on the 22nd sent a force under Campbell to take control of Augusta and raise Loyalist militia companies . Prevost decided thereafter to send a force to occupy Port Royal Island just up the coast in South Carolina , where he had been led to believe that Loyalist sentiment was strong . On January 29 the HMS Vigilant , an unseaworthy ship of the line that had been converted to a floating battery , was towed by Royal Navy crews in longboats through the channel separating Hilton Head Island from the mainland . She was accompanied by a flotilla of smaller ships that carried 200 infantry from the 16th and 60th Regiments under Major William Gardner , who had orders to take control of Beaufort , the island 's main settlement .

The only major defense establishment on Port Royal Island was Fort Lyttelton , which was garrisoned by a company of Continental Army troops under Captain John DeTreville . When he learned that a comparatively large British force was moving in his direction , he spiked the fort 's cannons and blew up its main bastion in order to deny their use to the superior force . When General Lincoln learned that communications with Port Royal Island had been cut off by the British advance , he sent South Carolina Brigadier General William Moultrie , who had distinguished himself in the 1776 Battle of Sullivan 's Island , and 300 men to counter the move . Moultrie 's force was composed mostly of South Carolina militia from the Beaufort area , but it was accompanied by a few Continental Army regulars , and two companies of artillery from Charleston , which were headed by former Congressmen Edward Rutledge and Thomas Heyward , Jr . This force arrived at the main Port Royal ferry on the 31st , not long after DeTreville had finished destroying the fort . They crossed over to the island on February 1 and occupied Beaufort .

= = Battle = =

Gardner 's men landed on Port Royal Island at the plantation of Andrew Deveaux (present @-@ day Laurel Bay) , a Loyalist who may have guided them , on February 2 . Gardner sent a detachment to secure the island side of the ferry . These men retreated when they encountered Patriot troops , and Gardner began to move his main force toward Beaufort to face the Americans . Early on February 3 General Moultrie was alerted to the British presence , and moved his forces out of town . The two forces met near the highest ground on Port Royal Island , a rise called Gray 's Hill that was about 3 miles (4 @.@ 8 km) south of the ferry and in the middle of the island .

Gardner lined his men up at the edge of some woods near the top of the hill and advanced with

bayonets fixed . The Americans approached and lined up in an open field outside musket range . General Moultrie positioned two six @-@ pound field cannons in the center of his line , with a smaller two @-@ pounder on the right . The Americans then advanced on the British , Moultrie observing that the action was " reversed from the usual way of fighting between British and Americans ; they taking the bushes and we taking the open ground . " The Americans opened fire first with the artillery , and then with musket volleys . The battle continued for about 45 minutes , at which point the Americans were running low on ammunition . Moultrie had begun a withdrawal when the British were also observed to retreat , leaving the field to the Americans . A company of light horse militia chased after the British , very nearly cutting them off from their boats . They successfully captured 26 men , but were unable to hold all of them due to their small numbers .

= = Aftermath = =

In addition to the prisoners taken (sources cite either seven or twelve were retained) , the British reportedly suffered 40 killed or wounded , although deserters reported that nearly half of Gardner 's men had been hit by American fire . The Americans , in contrast , suffered only 8 killed and 22 wounded .

Gardner was criticized by Prevost for the mauling his detachment received because he strayed too far from his boats . It was not Gardner 's fault , however , that he had no Loyalist support . The victory of a largely militia force over British regulars was a boost to the Americans ' morale . However , severe losses incurred in early March at Brier Creek delayed American plans to move against Prevost 's forces in Georgia . When Lincoln began moving troops toward Augusta in April , Prevost moved in force toward Charleston , but was able to do little more than briefly blockade the city before retreating back to Savannah . Port Royal Island was again occupied by the British during this campaign .

The battle is commemorated by a highway marker on U. S. Route 21 near the battle site . Fort Lyttelton 's remains are listed on the National Register of Historic Places .