

= Battle of Sullivan 's Island =

The Battle of Sullivan 's Island or the Battle of Fort Sullivan was fought on June 28 , 1776 , during the American Revolutionary War . It took place near Charleston , South Carolina , during the first British attempt to capture the city from American rebels . It is also sometimes referred to as the First Siege of Charleston , owing to a more successful British siege in 1780 .

The British organized an expedition in early 1776 for operations in the rebellious southern colonies of North America . Delayed by logistical concerns and bad weather , the expedition reached the coast of North Carolina in May 1776 . Finding conditions unsuitable for their operations , General Henry Clinton and Admiral Sir Peter Parker decided instead to act against Charleston . Arriving there in early June , troops were landed on Long Island , near Sullivan 's Island where Colonel William Moultrie commanded a partially constructed fort , in preparation for a naval bombardment and land assault . General Charles Lee , commanding the southern Continental theater of the war , would provide supervision .

The land assault was frustrated when the channel between the two islands was found to be too deep to wade , and the American defenses prevented an amphibious landing . The naval bombardment had little effect due to the sandy soil and the spongy nature of the fort 's palmetto log construction . Careful fire by the defenders wrought significant damage on the British fleet , which withdrew after an entire day 's bombardment . The British withdrew their expedition force to New York , and did not return to South Carolina until 1780 .

= = Background = =

When the American Revolutionary War broke out in 1775 , the city of Charleston in the colony of South Carolina was a center of commerce in southern North America . The city 's citizens joined other colonists in opposing the British parliament 's attempts to tax them , and militia recruitment increased when word arrived of the April 1775 Battles of Lexington and Concord . Throughout 1775 and into 1776 , militia recruits arrived in the city from the colony 's backcountry , the city 's manufacturers and tradesmen began producing war materiel , and defensive fortifications began to take shape around the city .

= = = British operations = = =

British army forces in North America were primarily tied up with the Siege of Boston in 1775 . Seeking bases of operations where they had more control , the British planned an expedition to the southern colonies . Major General Henry Clinton , then in Boston , was to travel to Cape Fear , North Carolina , where he would join with largely Scottish Loyalists raised in the North Carolina backcountry , and a force of 2 @, @ 000 men from Ireland under the command of Major General Charles Cornwallis .

The plan was beset by difficulties from the start . The Irish expedition , originally supposed to depart at the beginning of December 1775 , was delayed by logistical difficulties , and its 2 @, @ 500 troops did not depart until February 13 , 1776 , escorted by 11 warships under the command of Admiral Sir Peter Parker . Clinton left Boston on January 20 with two companies of light infantry , and first stopped at New York City to confer with William Tryon , New York 's royal governor . Major General Charles Lee , sent by Major General George Washington to see to the defense of New York , coincidentally arrived there the same day as Clinton . New York was at that time extremely tense ; Patriot forces were beginning to disarm and evict Loyalists , and the British fleet anchored there was having difficulty acquiring provisions . Despite this , Clinton made no secret that his final target was in the south . Lee observed that this was " certainly a droll way of proceeding ; to communicate his full plan to the enemy is too novel to be credited . " This was not even the first notice of the expedition to the colonists ; a letter intercepted in December had already provided intelligence that the British were planning to go to the South .

Clinton arrived at Cape Fear on March 12 , expecting to find the European convoy already there .

He met with the royal governors of North and South Carolina , Josiah Martin and William Campbell , and learned that the recruited Scottish Loyalists had been defeated at Moore 's Creek Bridge two weeks earlier . Clinton also received pleas for assistance from the royal governor of Georgia , James Wright , who had been arrested , and then escaped to a navy ship .

Parker 's fleet had an extremely difficult crossing . Battered by storms and high seas , the first ships of the fleet did not arrive at Cape Fear until April 18 , and Cornwallis did not arrive until May 3 . After several weeks there , in which the British troops raided Patriot properties , Clinton , Cornwallis and Parker concluded that Cape Fear was not a suitable base for further operations . Parker had sent out some ships on scouting expeditions up and down the coast , and reports on the partially finished condition of the Charleston defenses were sufficiently promising that the decision was made to go there .

= = = American defenses = = =

John Rutledge , recently elected president of the General Assembly that remained as the backbone of South Carolina 's revolutionary government , organized a defense force under the command of 46 @-@ year @-@ old Colonel William Moultrie , a former militiaman and Indian fighter . These forces comprised three infantry regiments , two rifle regiments , and a small artillery regiment ; they were augmented by three independent artillery companies , and the total force numbered about 2 @,@ 000 . These forces were further augmented by the arrival of Continental regiments from North Carolina and Virginia (1 @,@ 900 troops) , as well as militia numbering 2 @,@ 700 from Charleston and the surrounding backcountry .

Moultrie saw Sullivan 's Island , a sandy spit of land at the entrance to Charleston Harbor extending north about 4 miles (6 @.@ 4 km) long and a few hundred yards wide , as a place well suited to build a fort that could protect the entrance from intruding enemy warships . A large vessel sailing into Charleston first had to cross Charleston Bar , a series of submerged shoals lying about 8 miles (13 km) southeast of the city , and then pass by the southern end of Sullivan 's Island as it entered the channel to the inner harbor . Later it would also have to pass the northern end of James Island , where Fort Johnson commanded the southeastern approach to the city . Moultrie and his 2nd South Carolina Regiment arrived on Sullivan 's Island in March 1776 , and began construction of a fortress to defend the island and the channel into Charleston Harbor . The construction moved slowly ; Captain Peter Horry of the Patriot naval detachment described the site as " an immense pen 500 feet long , and 16 feet wide , filled with sand to stop the shot " . The gun platforms were made of planks two inches thick and fastened with wooden spikes .

Congress had appointed General Lee to command the Continental Army troops in the southern colonies , and his movements by land shadowed those of Clinton 's fleet as it sailed south . Lee wrote from Wilmington on June 1 that the fleet had sailed , but that he did not know whether it was sailing for Virginia or South Carolina . He headed for Charleston , saying " [I] confess I know not whether I shall go to or from the enemy . " He arrived in Charleston shortly after the fleet anchored outside the harbor , and took command of the city 's defenses . He immediately ran into a problem : the South Carolina troops (militia or the colonial regiments) were not on the Continental line , and thus not formally under his authority . Some South Carolina troops resisted his instructions , and Rutledge had to intervene by proclaiming Lee in command of all South Carolina forces .

Square @-@ shaped Fort Sullivan consisted only of the completed seaward wall , with walls made from palmetto logs 20 feet (6 @.@ 1 m) high and 16 feet (4 @.@ 9 m) wide . The walls were filled with sand , and rose 10 feet (3 @.@ 0 m) above the wooden platforms on which the artillery were mounted . A hastily erected palisade of thick planks helped guard the powder magazine and unfinished northern walls . An assortment of 31 cannon , ranging from 9- and 12 @-@ pounders to a few British 18 @-@ pounders and French 26 @-@ pounders , dotted the front and rear walls . General Lee , when he had seen its unfinished state , had recommended abandoning the fort , calling it a " slaughter pen " . President Rutledge refused , and specifically ordered Colonel Moultrie to " obey [Lee] in everything , except in leaving Fort Sullivan " . Moultrie 's delaying tactics so angered Lee that he decided on June 27 that he would replace Moultrie ; the battle began the next

day before he could do so . Lee did make plans for an orderly retreat to Haddrell 's Point .

= = = British arrival = = =

The British fleet weighed anchor at Cape Fear on May 31 , and arrived outside Charleston Harbor the next day . Moultrie noticed a British scout boat apparently looking for possible landing points on nearby Long Island (now known as the Isle of Palms) , just a few hundred yards from Sullivan 's Island ; troops were consequently sent to occupy the northern end of Sullivan 's . By June 8 , most of the British fleet had crossed the bar and anchored in Five Fathom Hole , an anchorage between the bar and the harbor entrance . With the fort on Sullivan 's Island only half complete , Admiral Parker expressed confidence that his warships would easily breach its walls . Optimistically believing he would not even need Clinton 's land forces , he wrote to Clinton that after the fort 's guns were knocked out , he would " land seamen and marines (which I have practiced for the purpose) under the guns " and that they could " keep possession till you send as many troops as you think proper " .

The British fleet was composed of nine man @-@ of @-@ war ships : the flagship 50 @-@ gun Bristol , as well as the 50 @-@ gun Experiment and frigates Actaeon , Active , Solebay , Siren , Sphinx , Friendship and the bomb vessel Thunder , in total mounting nearly 300 cannon . The army forces in the expedition consisted of the 15th , 28th , 33rd , 37th , 54th , and 57th Regiments of Foot , and part of the 46th . On June 7 , Clinton issued a proclamation calling on the rebel colonists to lay down their arms . However , the inexperienced defenders fired on the boat sent to deliver it (which was flying a truce flag) , and it was not delivered until the next day . That same day , Clinton began landing 2 @, @ 200 troops on Long Island . The intent was that these troops would wade across the channel (now known as Breach Inlet) between Long and Sullivan 's , which the British believed to be sufficiently shallow to do so , while the fleet bombarded Fort Sullivan .

General Lee responded to the British landing with several actions . He began reinforcing positions on the mainland in case the British were intending to launch an attack directly on Charleston . He also attempted to build a bridge of boats to provide an avenue of retreat for the fort 's garrison , but this failed because there were not enough boats to bridge the roughly one mile (1 @.@ 6 km) channel separating the island from Charleston ; the unwillingness of Moultrie and Rutledge to support the effort may also have played a role . The Americans also constructed an entrenchment at the northern end of Sullivan 's Island , which was manned by more than 750 men and three small cannons , and began to fortify a guard post at Haddrell 's Point on the mainland opposite Fort Sullivan .

General Clinton encountered the first major problem of the attack plan on June 17 . An attempt to wade the channel between the two islands established that part of the channel was at least shoulder @-@ deep , too deep for troops to cross even without the prospect of enemy opposition . He considered using boats to ferry the troops across , but the Americans , with timely advice from General Lee , adopted a strong defensive position that was virtually impossible to bombard from ships or the Long Island position . As a result , the British and American forces faced each other across the channel , engaging in occasional and largely inconsequential cannon fire at long range . Clinton reported that this meant that Admiral Parker would have " the glory of being defeated alone . " The attack was originally planned for June 24 , but bad weather and contrary wind conditions prompted Parker to call it off for several days .

= = Battle = =

On the morning of June 28 , Fort Sullivan was defended by Colonel Moultrie , commanding the 2nd South Carolina Regiment and a company of the 4th South Carolina Artillery , numbering 435 men . At around 9 : 00 am that morning , a British ship fired a signal gun indicating all was ready for the attack . Less than an hour later , nine warships had sailed into positions facing the fort . Thunder and Friendship anchored about 1 @.@ 5 miles (2 @.@ 4 km) from the fort while Parker took Active , Bristol , Experiment and Solebay to a closer position about 400 yards (370 m) from

Sullivan 's Island , where they anchored facing broadside to the fort . Each of these ships began to fire upon the fort when it reached its position , and the defenders returned the fire . Although many of Thunder 's shots landed in or near the fort , they had little effect ; according to Moultrie , " We had a morass in the middle , that swallowed them up instantly , and those that fell in the sand in and about the fort , were immediately buried " . Thunder 's role in the action was also relatively short @-@ lived ; she had anchored too far away from the fort , and the overloading of her mortars with extra powder to increase their range eventually led to them breaking out of their mounts . Owing to shortage of gunpowder , Moultrie 's men were deliberate in the pace of their gunfire , and only a few officers actually aimed the cannons . They also fired in small volleys , four cannon at a time . One British observer wrote , " Their fire was surprisingly well served " and it was " slow , but decisive indeed ; they were very cool and took care not to fire except their guns were exceedingly well directed . "

General Clinton began movements to cross over to the northern end of Sullivan 's Island . Assisted by two sloops of war , the flotilla of longboats carrying his troops came under fire from Colonel William Thomson 's defenses . Facing a withering barrage of grape shot and rifle fire , Clinton abandoned the attempt .

Around noon the frigates Sphinx , Syren , and Actaeon were sent on a roundabout route , avoiding some shoals , to take a position from which they could enfilade the fort 's main firing platform and also cover one of the main escape routes from the fort . However , all three ships grounded on an uncharted sandbar , and the riggings of Actaeon and Sphinx became entangled in the process . The British managed to refloat Sphinx and Syren , but Acteon remained grounded , having moved too far onto the submerged sandbar . Consequently , none of these ships reached its intended position , a piece of good fortune not lost on Colonel Moultrie : " Had these three ships effected their purpose , they would have enfiladed us in such a manner , as to have driven us from our guns . "

At the fort , Moultrie ordered his men to concentrate their fire on the two large man @-@ of @-@ war ships , Bristol and Experiment , which took hit after hit from the fort 's guns . Chain shot fired at Bristol eventually destroyed much of her rigging and severely damaged both the main- and mizzenmasts . One round hit her quarterdeck , slightly wounding Parker in the knee and thigh . The shot also tore off part of his britches , leaving his backside exposed . By mid @-@ afternoon , the defenders were running out of gunpowder , and their fire was briefly suspended . However , Lee sent more ammunition and gunpowder over from the mainland , and the defenders resumed firing at the British ships ; Lee even briefly visited the fort late in the day , telling Colonel Moultrie , " I see you are doing very well here , you have no occasion for me , I will go up to the town again . " Admiral Parker eventually sought to destroy the fort 's walls with persistent broadside cannonades . This strategy failed due to the spongy nature of the palmetto wood used in its constructions ; the structure would quiver , and it absorbed the cannonballs rather than splintering . The exchange continued until around 9 : 00 pm , when darkness forced a cessation of hostilities , and the fleet finally withdrew out of range .

At one point during the battle , the flag Moultrie had designed and raised over the fort was shot down . Sergeant William Jasper reportedly ran to the battlement and raised the flag again , holding it up and rallying the troops until a flag stand could be provided . He was credited by Moultrie with reviving the troops ' spirits , and later given commendations for bravery . A painting of this event (pictured above) depicts Jasper 's actions .

Counting casualties , Parker reported 40 sailors killed and 71 wounded aboard Bristol , which was hit more than 70 times with much damage to the hull , yards , and rigging . Experiment was also badly damaged with 23 sailors killed and 56 wounded . Active and Solebay reported 15 casualties each . The Americans reported their casualties at only 12 killed and 25 wounded . The following morning , the British , unable to drag the grounded Acteon off the sandbar , set fire to the ship to prevent her from falling into enemy hands . Patriots in small boats sailed out to the burning ship , fired some of its cannons at the British ships , took what stores and loot they could , and retreated shortly before the ship 's powder magazine exploded .

= = Aftermath = =

The British did not attempt to take the fort again . Within days of the battle , Charlestonians learned of the signing of the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia . The British troops were reembarked on their transports , and on July 21 the British fleet withdrew northward to help the main British army in its campaign against New York City . To add insult to injury , one of the British transports grounded off Long Island and was captured by Patriot forces .

The British did not return to Charleston until 1780 , when General Clinton successfully besieged the city and captured an entire army . Until the South again became a focus of the war in late 1778 , its states provided military supplies to the northern war effort and produced trade goods that brought in valuable hard currency to fund the war effort .

Admiral Parker and General Clinton engaged in a war of words after the battle , each seeking to cast the blame on the other for the expedition 's failures . Although Clinton was not blamed by the government , popular opinion held him responsible , and Parker was lauded for his personal bravery .

= = Legacy = =

Fort Sullivan was renamed Fort Moultrie shortly after the battle to honor Colonel William Moultrie for his successful defense of the fort and the city of Charleston . Extensively modified in the years after the battle , it was supplanted by Fort Sumter as the principal defense of Charleston prior to the outbreak of the American Civil War . In 1876 , to celebrate the centennial , companies from Savannah , Augusta , Macon , Columbia , New York and Boston were invited to Charleston . The site was turned over to the National Park Service in 1960 , and is now part of Fort Sumter National Monument .

A small monument to the Battle of Sullivan 's Island has been placed at the northeastern tip of the island , overlooking the inlet where General Clinton 's soldiers had hoped to cross . The monument includes historical markers describing the events surrounding the engagement .

One iconic emblem of the battle was the flag designed by Colonel Moultrie . Commissioned by the colonial government , he designed a blue flag with a white crescent in the top left corner , which was flown at the fort during the battle . Despite being shot down during the siege , it was seen as a symbol of this successful defense (and famously raised during victory) . It came to be known as the Moultrie flag or Liberty Flag . When Charleston (lost to the British in the 1780 siege) was reclaimed by American forces at the end of the war , the flag was returned to the city by General Nathanael Greene .