



The Lessons of Fishdam Ford

On November 9, 1780, the British were poised to deliver a crushing surprise attack against the patriot militia at Fishdam Ford, nestled in what is now the rural South Carolina landscape. This raid was one strike in Britain's broader "southern strategy" — a calculated push to slice through the rebellious colonies piece by piece, starting in the South, to finally snuff out the spirit of independence spreading through America.

As Major James Wemyss, a British officer notorious for his ruthless tactics, crept toward the patriot encampment with his 140 dragoons, he had one target in mind: [General Thomas Sumter](#), the defiant "Gamecock" leading 300 South Carolina militiamen. Wemyss' plan? A predawn assault that would snatch Sumter right out of his camp. But plans on paper often meet a different fate in the field. Instead of capturing Sumter, Wemyss found himself wounded, captured, and face to face with fierce resistance from patriots ready to defend their homeland.



Public Domain
Thomas Sumter

This clash at Fishdam Ford was more than just a skirmish. It was part of the brutal "brother-against-brother" conflict tearing through the Santee River valley. And Sumter and Wemyss weren't strangers to this kind of combat. Both were seasoned in the brutal guerrilla warfare that unfolded across South Carolina's swamps and farms. As Wemyss chased patriots through the backcountry, his fellow British officer, the infamous Banastre Tarleton, hunted the elusive Francis Marion — the "Swamp Fox" — whose guerrilla tactics had made him a terror to British loyalists across the state.

Sumter's Preparations

While Wemyss and Tarleton tore through the countryside, laying waste to farms, Sumter gathered his militia. His force was so committed they soon began calling him the "Gamecock." These men, hardened by the destruction of their homes and communities, vowed to return every bit of devastation inflicted by the British.

In his bid to capture Sumter, Wemyss relied on loyalist spies and intelligence to guide his way. But Sumter was prepared. He ordered his men to "sleep on their weapons," kept fires burning, and stationed guards around the camp's perimeter. As Wemyss' troops closed in, the pre-dawn light revealed them to the waiting patriots, who picked them off with deadly accuracy. Soon Wemyss himself was down and wounded. The British dragoons, disoriented and outgunned, stumbled through the darkness into Sumter's well-prepared defenses. In half an hour, it was over, with Wemyss lying



wounded on the field.

Less than two weeks later, Tarleton caught up with Sumter, severely wounding him and forcing him to step down temporarily. But the spirit Sumter inspired didn't falter as Francis Marion took command. These resilient Carolinians eventually pushed the British northward, all the way to their final stand at Yorktown.

Past Is Prologue

Now, as then, Americans who cherish liberty are beset by those who would willingly hand over their freedoms, trusting that a central authority has their best interests at heart. The loyalists of yesteryear have their counterparts today — citizens who scoff at patriots and label any resistance to federal overreach as extremist.

Sumter's preparations at Fishdam Ford teach us that the defense of liberty requires vigilance, readiness, and an unyielding spirit. We too must "sleep on our weapons," preserving our God-given right to keep and bear arms. Yet, the Constitution itself is another weapon in our arsenal. We must engrain its principles in our minds, for it represents the timeless ideals of self-government and individual sovereignty.

And just as Sumter kept his campfires burning to reveal the advancing enemy, we must keep the fires of freedom burning in our communities. These fires — fueled by faith, morality, and a respect for republican virtue — are essential to a free people. To sustain them, we must teach the rising generation a deep respect for the liberties bequeathed to us by Providence and defended by our patriot forefathers. Only by doing so can we honor their sacrifices and ensure that our liberty will never be extinguished.



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