

Historians pinpoint location of battle

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Michael D. Abernethy, Reporter - March 30, 2008



Photograph by Sam Roberts

Jeff Bright discusses a diorama of the Battle of Clapp's Mill on Saturday inside the clubhouse at Lake Mackintosh Park and Marina. Historians provided tours of the Battle of Clapp's Mill, Pyle's Defeat and the skirmish at Weitzel's Mill

The first breaths of a Revolutionary War turning point were breathed in Alamance County, claim local historians who say they've pinpointed the exact location of the Battle of Clapp's Mill.

At a tour of local battle sites Saturday, Jeff Bright and Stewart Dunaway unveiled their estimation of events at Clapp's Mill which led to the Battle of Guilford Courthouse. Using GPS technology and topographical map overlays, Bright and Dunaway located the spot, just off the banks of Beaver Creek, now submerged in Lake Mackintosh, where the battle's namesake mill operated.

"I'm not a historian. I'm a sociologist by trade but I'm proud of my history and Alamance County and I want this land to be preserved," Bright said, leading a tour just beyond Lake Mackintosh Park and Marina and a stone's throw from the Guilford County Line. "I had friends growing up who played here. We found all kinds of things around this site: horseshoes, musket balls and a button with 'London 1765' on it."

About 50 people trekked out into the rain Saturday morning to recount the battles of Pyle's Defeat, Clapp's Mill and a skirmish at Weitzel's Mill. Bright and Dunaway's interpretation of events was followed by an animated description of Pyle's Defeat, by author Patrick O'Kelley, and a lesson in how the Piedmont landscape affected the revolution's outcome, by Tom Magnuson with the Trading Path Association.

On March 2, 1781, the skirmish that happened beyond Clapp's Mill off Beaver Creek - where a recently discovered, centuries-old roadbed still sits - helped lead to the Battle of Guilford Courthouse, considered a decisive moment when rebels began to dissolve the British Army.

Along with Pyle's Defeat, on Feb. 24, 1781, the attempted ambush at Clapp's Mill helped weaken loyalist forces headed to the Guilford Courthouse battle, allowing a victory there two weeks later.

"This could have been (the Battle of) Guilford Courthouse before Guilford Courthouse. There were huge numbers of people here and it could have been huge if they'd engaged correctly.

Sam Powell and Pat Bailey, who worked to erect the memorial monument for the Battle of Clapp's Mill in the early 1990s knew they were on to something back then, when they placed the memorial where part of the battle occurred, by what is now the Lake Mackintosh Park and Marina.

With new maps, they found the hand-dug well used by the barn cited in the battle just over the hill from their monument. They also found musket balls and other artifacts with metal detectors.

Bright and Dunaway's work proved their suspicions true and completed their interpretation of the battle.

"There are those who want to say it happened in Guilford County. We say, 'Prove it,'" Bailey said with an air of satisfaction. "We've got the charts. We've got the maps."

And from the Editorial page on Saturday, April 5, 2007:

"THUMB'S UP to the new technology mixed with old-fashioned gumption and determination that may have located the spot where a Revolutionary War skirmish took place in Alamance County. Jeff Bright and Stewart Dunaway believe the Battle of Clapp's Mill, which led to the Battle of Guilford Courthouse, took place where high-end homes now rest at Lake Mackintosh. It's likely the combatants on that day never envisioned such a place would one day house a massive recreational lake, docks and million-dollar homes. Fact is, we didn't see it coming even 30 years ago."