

## Cox's Mill Encampment at Buffalo Ford on Deep River- July 1780

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This event was the assembling of American troops preparing to confront the British forces occupying South Carolina following the American defeat and siege of Charles Town (now Charleston). Lord Cornwallis had already been given British command with orders to occupy all of South Carolina.

American Continental Army commanders were desperately trying to reorganize their rag-tag units in an effort to fend off the British in early 1780 as Cornwallis and his army began their move toward North Carolina.

First Continental Army troops to arrive in North Carolina were commanded by Baron de Kalb. He brought 1400 men from Maryland and Delaware who were exhausted from marching, tick-bites, and lack of regular food.

They went first to Hillsborough, NC and then on to Buffalo Ford on Deep River in Randolph County arriving the second week of July 1780.

De Kalb and his 1400 men camped at the Buffalo Ford location for at least two weeks. The reason for this extended stay is believed to be the fact that they found not one but two Cox's Mills at this location. One of the gristmills was located west of Deep River on Mill Creek and run by Thomas Cox. A second was located less than a mile away on the east side of Deep River on Millstone Creek and run by Harmon Cox, a brother of Thomas Cox.

The reason two gristmills were being run by a single family so close together was the fact that Deep River is prone to serious flooding any time during the year. These ravaging floods often render Buffalo Ford, which connects the two mills, impassable for several weeks at a time.

De Kalb and his 1400 men camping on the Coxes' farms along Deep River were to be joined by General Caswell and his North Carolina Militia of 1200 men at this location. Also slated to join them here was General Edward Stevens and 400-800 men of the Virginia Militia. We found no record of the fact that this actually happened at this site. This would have brought the total troop count to over 3000.

The Coxes and most of their neighbors were Quakers and very good farmers. With two gristmills right there on their farms and industrious farmers busy in the peak of summer harvest for wheat and other cereal grains, how could an army of this size resist the urge to stock up on flour and other provisions they might find on the farms? This probably explains why they stayed two weeks before leaving for Camden.

While the troops were camped at the Cox's Mills near Buffalo Ford, General Horatio Gates, who had been successful at Saratoga, was pressed into duty and arrived at Hillsborough, NC. This meant that the ranking officer of the Continental Army

in the state was now General Gates. De Kalb wrote him from Buffalo Ford relinquishing his command to Gates.

General Gates then joined him at the Cox's Mills (or at the Spinks Farm about eight miles away) and took over the Southern Continental Army command.

Gates insisted on immediately marching the men to South Carolina perhaps hoping to achieve some element of surprise for Cornwallis's scattered troops. This was early August 1780.

Even with such a grain bonanza at the Cox's Mills, this large assemblage of men had to leave without being properly provisioned for what lay ahead at Camden. Thus, the Southern command of the Continental Army suffered for lack of food and supplies, thanks to Gates' great haste in moving them out to South Carolina.

This lack of food and supplies is believed by many historians to have played a major role in the disastrous outcome of the battle which took place when Gates' American troops encountered the British Army under Lord Cornwallis at Camden, South Carolina on August 11, 1780.

The Camden battle has been called one of the worst American defeats of the Revolutionary War. Gates lost several hundred men killed or wounded in a matter of a few hours. In addition nearly 1000 of his men were captured.

In that battle over 100 of the killed or wounded were North Carolinians and 300 of the captured Americans were from this state. The British had 324 killed or wounded.

General de Kalb was one of the Americans to die in the battle of Camden. General Gates evidently abandoned his command and emerged in Hillsborough a few weeks later obviously healing from a battle wound.

Thus, the assemblage of troops on the Cox's Mill sites played a less than heroic, yet significant, part in the South Carolina campaign of the Revolutionary War. Remnants of this gathering place includes the foundation remains of the Harmon Cox Mill, the eroded road-bed of Buffalo Ford, other less prominent road-beds and rolling hillsides covered with grass or trees where they camped. These features still flank Deep River as it pours millions of gallons of water each day into the Atlantic Ocean via the Cape Fear River Basin.

The encampment of men headed for Camden was not the final event of the British-American conflict for the Deep River sites. Less than a year later (July 1781), the notorious David Fanning who was loyal to the Crown, moved into the Cox's Mills and Buffalo Ford encampment area and terrorized the local people there for nearly a year.

At one time Fanning accumulated as many as 950 men in his band of soldiers. Several skirmishes took place at what Fanning called "The Fort at Cox's Mill" which is the same area used by de Kalb and the men gathered in July 1780 in preparation for their march to Camden.