

Historical Markers: Roadside History Lessons

By William Lee Anderson III

OMGS member Bill Anderson scouted out historical sites in North Carolina and South Carolina that he thought should be commemorated. He then arranged for historical markers to be placed at the sites. Here he describes the research and review process of selecting sites for historical markers.

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During the American Revolution, Colonel Thomas Sumter returned to South Carolina from the battle of Ramsour's Mill with 300 to 500 of his fellow South Carolinians, planning to resist British Army occupation of their state. In late June and early July 1780, they camped at Clems Branch on the dividing line between Mecklenburg County and Lancaster County, South Carolina.

Some modern historians have written that the site was "secret" or "hidden."¹ Actually, it was more hidden in modern times than it was in 1780, when it straddled the Camden-Charlotte wagon road.

I became interested in Sumter's camp, because my 4th great-grandmother, Jane Patton Moor, filed an 1845 pension application as widow of veteran John Moor.² She testified that John was with Sumter at the time of the battle of Ramsour's Mill on 20 June 1780. It is likely that John was still with Sumter five days later when Sumter returned to South Carolina and camped on Clems Branch. John was born in what is now York County, South Carolina, and was buried at Brittain Presbyterian Church in Rutherford County, North Carolina.

I live near Clems Branch and frequently drive the nearby roads. I tried to reason from topography where Sumter's camp could have been, but that was unsuccessful. I was resigned that the precise site would probably never be known.

Then, while we were discussing a different subject, Louise Pettus (professor emeritus at Winthrop University in Rock Hill, South Carolina) mentioned what turned out to be the vital clue.

About 1980, she said, long-time nearby resident, Walter Patterson, pointed out to her the approximate location of a site that his family had traditionally associated with Sumter's camp. Since that encounter, Professor Pettus has written several Charlotte Observer articles about Clems Branch.³ Not only did Sumter use the camp during the American Revolution, but a farmer's market also existed there for many years before and after the war. Still, its precise location was unknown. I started a search for original documentation.

¹ Robert D. Bass, *Gamecock, The Life and Campaigns of General Thomas Sumter*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961. p. 57.

² John Moor, pension application, W4035.

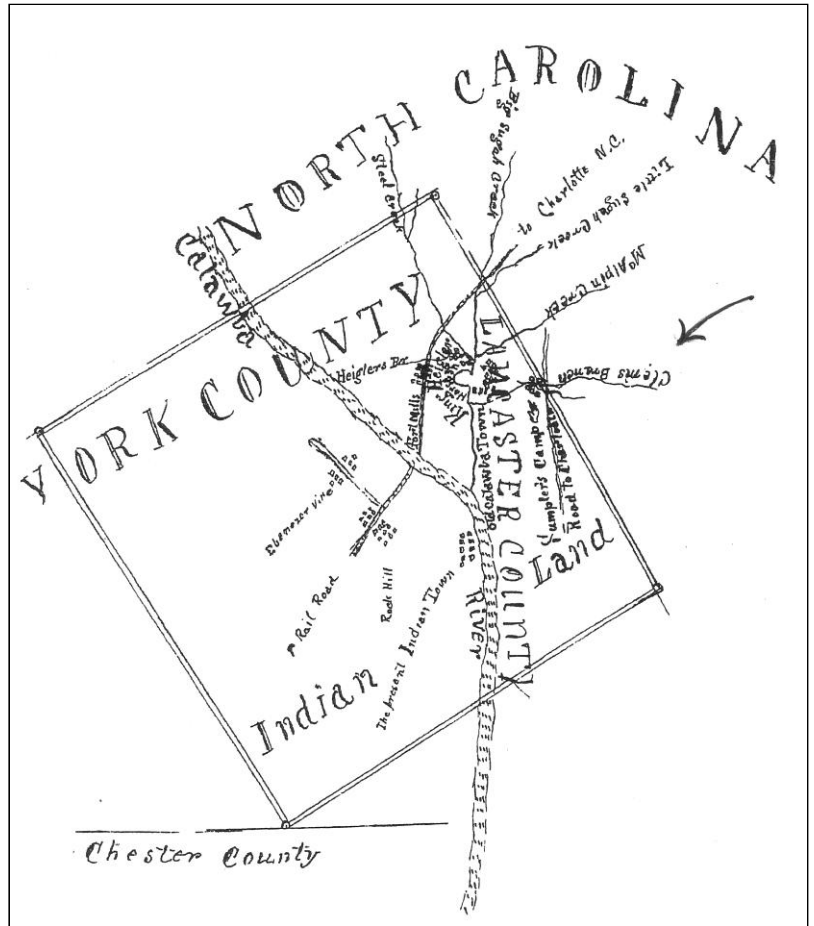
³ Louise Pettus, "Clems Branch," *Charlotte Observer*, July 22, 1990.

—. "President Washington's Southern Tour," *Charlotte Observer*, May 26, 1991.

—. "Mules & PCA," *Charlotte Observer*, 2005.

Between 1840 and 1885, Professor Lyman Draper interviewed Revolutionary War veterans and their relatives. His Draper Manuscripts⁴ are a wonderful resource about that war in the South. One series is entirely about Sumter and his men. I read about 1,500 microfilm pages looking for references to “Clems Branch” and found three hand-drawn maps showing the camp where three linear features cross at the same point: Clems Branch, an old road, and the state line.⁵ At least 11 pension applications reference the location.⁶

Memoirs of Colonel William Hill⁷ and Captain Joseph Graham⁸ mention Sumter’s camp on Clems Branch. Walter Patterson’s nephew, Dr. Thomas Culp, also pointed out the site known by family tradition. All this evidence from multiple independent sources located the camp directly on the state line separating Mecklenburg County and Lancaster County, South Carolina.



Map with pointer to Sumter’s camp on Clems Branch
(Draper Manuscripts, VV:5:46)

Requirements for Historical Markers

In late May 2005, a commemoration ceremony was held for the 225th anniversary of Buford’s Defeat in the Waxhaws. During the ceremony, Christine Williams, president of the Lancaster County Historical Commission, said that the Commission wanted to sponsor new

historical markers. Afterwards, I introduced myself and suggested that Sumter’s camp on Clems Branch could be a candidate. Ms. Williams had read about Sumter’s camp and was very interested in finding its location. Consequently, I compiled all the evidence into a marker application.

Research revealed that the site was significant in more than one way. Not only had Sumter camped there in June–July 1780, but Cornwallis’s army also marched past on 25 September 1780⁹ and President George

⁴ Lyman C. Draper, *Draper Manuscripts*, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1873

⁵ *Ibid.*, VV:5:45–46 & VV:13:6.

⁶ See page 8 for list of pension applications.

⁷ William Hill, *Col. William Hill’s Memoirs of the Revolution*, edited by A. S. Salley, Jr., The Historical Commission of South Carolina, Columbia, SC, 1921, p. 8.

⁸ William A. Graham, *General Joseph Graham and His Papers on North Carolina Revolutionary History*, Edwards & Broughton, Raleigh, NC, 1904, pp. 234–235.

⁹ Anderson, William Lee, “Where did Cornwallis’s Army invade North Carolina.” 2008. <http://home.earthlink.net/~historycarolina/CornwallisNCInvasion.pdf>.

Washington passed by on 28 May 1791.¹⁰ I suggested that marker text include each of these events. South Carolina marker specifications allow 1 or 2 title lines of 25 characters and up to 11 lines of 36 characters each.¹¹

On 1 August 2005, the application was submitted to the Lancaster County Historical Commission, which sent it unaltered to the South Carolina Department of Archives and History.¹²

The review committee responded in April 2006 that reference to President Washington's tour was redundant, because another marker, 15 miles away, was devoted to Washington's tour. The committee wanted a marker devoted to the general theme of "Revolution in the Backcountry."

The idea that Cornwallis's army passed this location was new to most experts, and they were not convinced of its validity. Since 2006, further evidence has established this fact with high probability,¹³ but in 2006, it was excluded. I argued unsuccessfully for references to Cornwallis's army and Washington's tour.

On balance, there is something to be said for compromise. There is nothing on the resulting marker that is incorrect, and its existence stimulates public interest in the site and further research.

¹⁰ George Washington, "The Diaries of George Washington," *George Washington Papers* at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC, 1791.

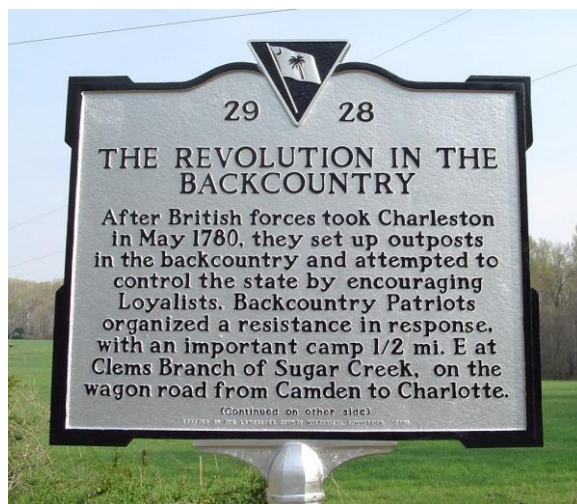
¹¹ "South Carolina Historical Marker Program," South Carolina Department of Archives and History, September 23, 2009. <http://www.state.sc.us/scdah/historic.htm>.

¹² William Lee Anderson, "Application for a South Carolina Historical Marker Commemorating Colonel Thomas Sumter's Clems Branch Camp June–July 1780." 2006. <http://home.earthlink.net/~historycarolina/SumtersClemsBranchCamp.pdf>.

¹³ John Money, "Notebook," British Public Records Office, 24 September 1780. Blackwell P. Robinson, *Revolutionary War Sketches of William R. Davie*, NC Dept. of Cultural Resources, Div. of Archives & History, Raleigh, NC, 1976, pp. 6, 24.

Marker Materials

The durable, cast-aluminum historical marker cost about \$1,600 and fund-raising was started. A two-page flyer was circulated among everyone who had expressed an interest in the site. Announcements were made in local history and genealogical societies in both Lancaster and Mecklenburg Counties. Contributors sent funds to the Lancaster County Treasurer, and the Lancaster County Historical Commission managed the funds. When a sufficient amount was raised, the order was placed with a foundry in Ohio.



Both sides are shown of the historical marker for Colonel Thomas Sumter's camp that was placed at the Clems Branch bridge on Harrisburg Road in upper Lancaster County, South Carolina.

The marker was delivered in February 2007, erected by the Lancaster County Highway Department crew on 26 March, and dedicated on 21 October.

Clems Branch is also a candidate for a North Carolina historical marker. It is where Cornwallis's army invaded North Carolina¹⁴ and where President George Washington was greeted by an escort of Mecklenburg militia horsemen. At the top of the next hill, Washington stopped at Harrison's Plantation for breakfast.¹⁵ In 2008, the Mecklenburg County Commission designated Clems Branch as a Greenway Corridor. So, in time, a trail may parallel the stream.

Camp New Providence

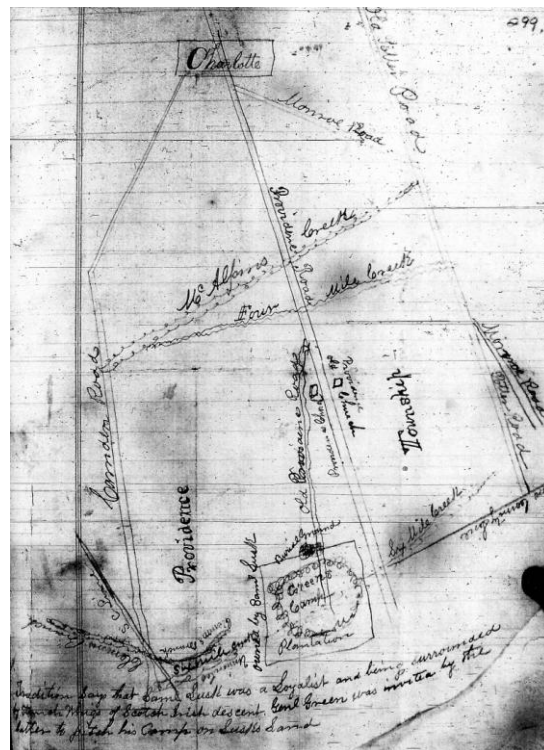
Another American Revolution site close to Clems Branch was considered by the North Carolina Department of Archives and History for historical marker status.

During October-December 1780, Camp New Providence was a large Southern Continental Army and militia camp of about 1,300 soldiers on Providence Road at Six Mile Creek. For five days, when it was the headquarters of the Continental Army's Southern Department commanded by Major General Horatio Gates, it had as many as 2,600 soldiers. This camp was referred to in multiple, independent, original sources¹⁶ and in many pension applications.¹⁷

On 17 April 1872, Samuel Ellison Belk, a Charlotte resident, wrote and drew a map for historian Lyman Draper. Belk used information from acquaintance Jas H. Morrison whose mother, as a young girl, remembered passing through the camp and seeing soldiers washing their shirts in Six Mile Creek.

This acquaintance was probably James Houston Morrison (1792-1875), whose mother was Mary Susannah Houston (1771-1823). She married William Morrison at Providence Presbyterian Church, which is 2-1/2 miles from the Camp New Providence site. James H. Morrison lived near present-day Weddington, North Carolina, one mile from the campsite and that is the reason why Belk interviewed him.

Belk sketched the map below of the camp on Providence Road. He labeled it "Green's Camp" and noted that the camp was on the plantation of loyalist Samuel Lusk. Today, that location is within the Providence Crossing and HighGate housing developments.



North American. Reprint 1968, The New York Times & Arno Press, Inc., 1787, p. 181.

¹⁷ See page 8 for list of pension applications.

¹⁴ William Lee Anderson, "Where did Cornwallis's Army invade North Carolina?" 2008. <http://home.earthlink.net/~historycarolina/CornwallisNCInvasion.pdf>.

¹⁵ George Washington, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ Blackwell P. Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 21. William A. Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 284. William Seymour, "Journal of the Southern Expedition, 1780-1783," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, 1883, p. 290. Robert Kirkwood, www.battleofcamden.org/kirkwood.htm. Dennis M. Conrad, *Papers of General Nathanael Greene*. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC, 1997, VI, p. 590. Banastre Tarleton, *A History of the Campaigns of 1780-1781 in Southern Provinces of*

Proposed New Marker


Because North Carolina allows an individual to submit an application for a historical marker, in September 2009, I submitted an application for the Camp New Providence marker to the Department of Archives and History. It was reviewed on 15 December and on 22 December, I received notice that the marker was approved, and funding would be covered in the North Carolina Department of Transportation's budget. The projected date for its installation on Providence Road is May 2010.

The North Carolina rules are simple and direct, only requiring a few answers on a 4-page form. Marker text can have 1 or 2 title lines of 16 characters each and up to 6 lines of 23 characters.¹⁸ Of course, all but the simplest application would supply supplementary evidence.

Importance of Historical Markers

Historical markers are a cost-effective way to remind the public of significant historical people, places, structures, and events. They reach an audience that history books, films, and lectures may miss.

They inspire the imagination of young students and encourage them to explore history in more depth. Considering the minimal cost of historical markers and their long life, they should be erected more generally throughout the Carolinas.

The American Revolution remains the great epic story that occurred in the Carolinas. Nothing like it occurred before or since. It defined our nation. Its noteworthy sites are all around us. We should do our best to preserve what we can. 

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¹⁸ "North Carolina Highway Historical Marker Program," *North Carolina Office of Archives and History*, 23 September 2009, & <http://www.ncmarkers.com/Home.aspx>.

History of Historical Markers

Beginning in the 1930s, it became evident that historical markers were an effective way to associate a place with a person, structure, or event in America's history. A national program of erecting roadside markers was begun. Such a marker is often the public's first indication that a place has historical significance. Markers can inspire young people to investigate history.

Since the 1930s, the application process for historical roadside markers has remained the same in both Carolinas. It requires a written application and review process. An individual or organization submits an application to the state Department of Archives and History. Professional historians review the application and decide if a state-endorsed marker is justified. The review process may include multiple revisions and is flexible and efficient.

The Process

In North Carolina an individual may apply, but in South Carolina an organization or institution must make application. In either case, the process for erecting a historical marker has several sequential steps.

1. Decide if site is historically noteworthy for a state marker. A historical organization might establish a priority list.
2. Research multiple, independent, original sources.
3. Write the historical marker application.
4. If possible, get endorsement of the local historical commission.
5. Submit application to state Department of Archives and History.
6. Respond to review.
7. Raise funds (except in North Carolina).
8. Order marker from foundry.
9. Erect marker using county highway maintenance crew.

Supporting Documentation for Historical Markers

Bill Anderson found the following Revolutionary War pension applications that contain references to the events that took place at Clems Branch campground and the patriot encampment at New Providence.

The letter before the pension number denotes S for survivor and W for widow. The R stands for a rejected file, which often meant that insufficient proof of service was provided, not that the information was incorrect.

The location and date following the pension number indicate the last residence of the applicant and the year application was made.

Sumter's Camp at Clems Branch

Adair, John, W2895 (KY, July 12, 1832).

Brown, Archibald, S39249 (Chester District, SC, March 18, 1822).

Curry, Edward, S15393 (Union County, KY, May 20, 1833).

Gaston, Hugh, S10729 (Wilcox County, AL, November 13, 1834).

Gill, George, S21229 (Chester County, SC, October 22, 1832).

Hemphill, James, S21277 (Lincoln County, TN, September 27, 1832).

Houston, Samuel, W7810 (Fayette County, GA, May 6, 1833).

Jameson, James, S21839 (York County, SC, October 16, 1832).

Kincaid, James, R5929 (Buncombe County, NC, July 1, 1833).

Watson, Samuel, S17187 (Pike County, MS, September 27, 1832).

Wylie, William, Alabama State Pension (*Draper Manuscripts*, VV:9:102-106).

Camp New Providence

Apple, Daniel, S6520 (Guilford County, NC, May 21, 1833).

Bradford, James, S6716 (Mecklenburg County, NC, April 16, 1833).

Findley, George, W7273 (Lawrence County, TN, August 30, 1832).

Gray, Shared, S31707 (Pulaski County, AR, January 13, 1834).

Helms, John, W3811 (Lincoln County, NC, July 16, 1833).

Neel, William, S15945 (Giles County, VA, October 29, 1832).

Pass, Holloway, S7289 (Caswell County, NC, January 11, 1836).

Vernon, Richard, S1883 (Davidson County, TN, October 26, 1832)



Directions to Sumter's Camp at Clems Branch

From Pineville, North Carolina, drive south on old Hwy. 521 (extension of South Boulevard) about 3.4 miles. Just past Harrison United Methodist Church, turn right on Providence Road West. Go 1.1 miles and turn left on Harrisburg Road. About .6 mile further, you will see the historical marker on the left just before the bridge on Clems Branch.

To see the campground, continue south on Harrisburg Road for .6 mile and turn left into the BridgeHampton development. Immediately turn left onto Camden Woods Drive and go to the end. Park on the side street named Villa Terrace. Walk down the paved utility road between the two houses at 26243 and 26251 Camden Woods Drive and around the gate. The old wagon road is a few feet to the left. The main campground was only 2-3 acres and was in the woods to the left.