

Relocating the Capital to Richmond

Although James City County largely escaped the ravages of war until the spring of 1781, a political decision made in 1779 had a profound effect upon the counties of the lower peninsula. On June 12th the General Assembly voted to shift the seat of Virginia's government from Williamsburg to Richmond, which was presumed less vulnerable to enemy attack. On April 7, 1780, the state's executive department ceased transacting business in Williamsburg and on April 24th resumed its duties in Richmond. A week later, the General Assembly held its first session in the new capital city.²⁶

After the capital was moved, Williamsburg no longer was at the hub of Virginia's social and commercial life. In 1783 Johann David Schoepf observed that the community was:

*. . . a poor place compared with its former splendor. With the removal of the government, merchant, advocates and other considerable residents took their departure as well. . . The merchants of the country round about were accustomed formerly to assemble here every year, to advise about commercial affairs and matters in the furtherance of trade. This also has come to an end.*²⁷

Thus, in some respects, Williamsburg's decline mirrored that of Jamestown when the capital was moved in 1699. Although the people of James City County continued to make regular visits to the county seat, the city lost much of its cosmopolitan atmosphere.

In mid-April 1781 when British General William Phillips arrived in Hampton Roads with 2,600 men, he decided to move up the James River and

capture Williamsburg. He had Lt. Colonel John Simcoe and the Queen's Rangers land below the city and he sent Lt. Colonel Abercrombie's men ashore further upstream. When Simcoe and his men reached Burwell's Ferry Landing on April 19th, they discovered that the Americans had thrown up entrenchments, which were manned. Employing a diversionary tactic, he opted to land a short distance downstream, on the west side of a small estuary now known as Wareham's Pond, but dispatched a gunboat and some other small vessels toward Burwell's Ferry. According to Baron von Steuben, the



Lt. Colonel John G. Simcoe's portrayal of "Action at Spencer's Ordinary," June 26, 1781. National Archives.

American troops fared as well as they did because of "an accidental occurrence which happened, much to the soldierly credit of old Chancellor Wythe and one or two other old Gentlemen" who "took a pop" at the British while partridge-hunting near the mouth of College Creek. Later, Phillips and the rest of his army went ashore at Burwell's Ferry. He ordered Simcoe to spend the night in Williamsburg before continuing on to Yorktown.²⁸

On April 21st, Colonel James Innes sent word to the governor that 500 British infantrymen, 50 horses, and four pieces of artillery had come ashore at Burwell's Ferry and that their unexpected arrival had forced him to withdraw to the Six Mile Ordinary around midnight. He said that 14 British ships were above of Jamestown, and that 16 flat-bottomed boats had ascended the Chickahominy and were within three miles of the shipyard. Meanwhile, General Phillips and a large body of troops marched to Barretts Ferry where they boarded vessels that transported them to the mouth of the Appomattox River. Simcoe and the Queen's Rangers lagged behind, for they "formed the rear guard and lay on shore the whole night in a position which a little labor rendered unassailable." Phillips' army reportedly inflicted extensive damage upon everything in its path.²⁹

On April 22nd at 4 P.M. a detachment of British soldiers seized and destroyed the Chickahominy Shipyard. Colonel Innes, who was encamped in the yard of Hickory Neck Church, sent word to Governor Jefferson on April 23rd that the British had set the shipyard ablaze, which flames illuminated the night-sky. The next day, Innes reported that the shipyard's buildings and an unfinished 20-gun ship were destroyed, along with some naval stores that had been stashed at the Diascund Bridge. The destruction of the state shipyard and the loss of more than a dozen vessels at Osbornes marked the demise of the Virginia State Navy.³⁰

In late May General Charles Lord Cornwallis and his army of seasoned veterans arrived in Petersburg and joined forces with General Phillips' men, temporarily under the command of Benedict Arnold. This union of forces created a British Army 7,000 strong. Cornwallis left Petersburg, crossed the James and set out in pursuit of Lafayette, who had retreated toward Fredericksburg while awaiting reinforcements. The savvy French general embarked upon a strategy of paralleling the British Army's movements while

staying just out of reach. In mid-June Cornwallis moved eastward along the old road that ran through New Kent Courthouse and Burnt Ordinary.³¹ Simcoe's men, meanwhile, followed the upper side of the Chickahominy River, then crossed and burned the Diascund Bridge. Simcoe and Cornwallis met up at Cooper's Mills on Diascund Creek.³² Cornwallis and the vanguard of his army set out for Williamsburg and arrived on June 25th. Meanwhile, Lafayette, who joined forces with Generals Anthony Wayne and von Steuben, amassing an estimated 1,900 Continentals and 3,000 militia, also headed for Williamsburg. On June 26th, part of the Allied Army was encamped at Byrd's Tavern. According to a British intelligence report, Lafayette held forth in the yard of the Chickahominy Church, near Burnt Ordinary, and some of his men were near Rhodes Ordinary and the Drinking Spring. His advance detachments were approaching Spencer's Ordinary and plantation near Centerville, where main roads to Williamsburg and Jamestown converged.³³

Some of Cornwallis's men were already there, resting while they awaited



Green Spring as depicted on Nicholas Desandrouin's 1781 map, "Plan de Terrain a la Rive Gauche de La Riviere du James." Library of Congress.

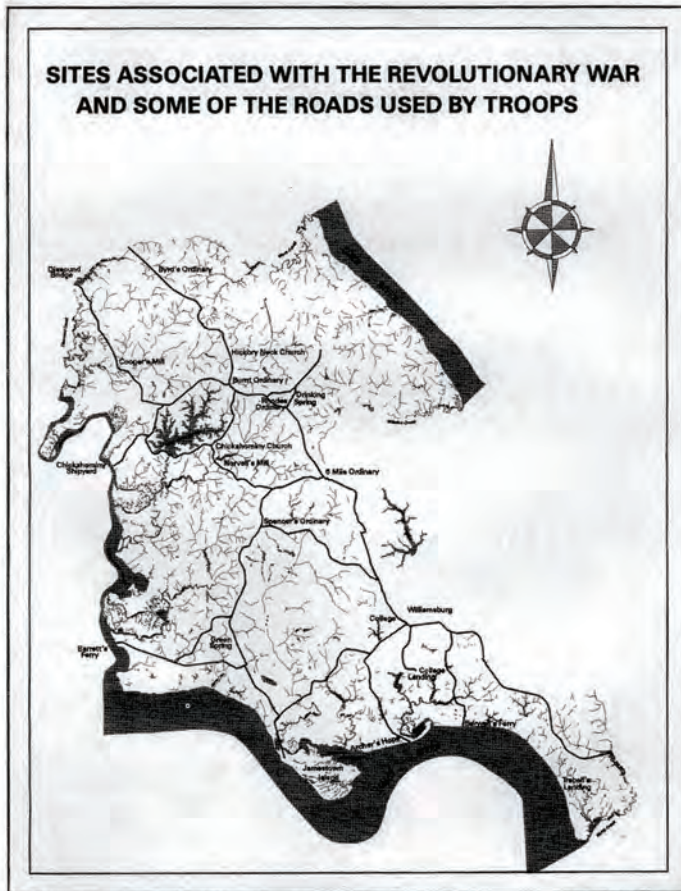
Major Armstrong's ranger battalion and the army's baggage train. Johann Ewald, a Hessian officer with the British Army, arrived at the Spencer plantation on June 26th, around six or seven in the morning. He and his men camped in platoons along the road, had breakfast, and relaxed. Although Ewald hoped to resume his march before "the awful heat" became oppressive, he was tired and decided to take a nap:

I had hardly closed my eyes when several shots were fired . . . I jumped up and asked where the shooting was, whereupon several officers shouted that the farmers had fired on the [Loyalist] refugees . . . driving the cattle. . . . I had scarcely fallen asleep for the second time when I was awakened by a number of shots. I jumped up, mounted my horse, called the men to take up arms, and rode with my orderly and a ranger dragoon into Spencer's orchard, behind which I crouched.

I had hardly ridden fifty paces into the apple orchard, when I discovered a man in a blue uniform a short distance away from me. I was aware of him before he saw me and I sprang upon him. The man was more frightened than I, and after he was in my hands I saw that he was an officer of the Armand Legion and a Frenchman. . . . I handed him over to my orderly, sprang back without saying one word more, and shouted "Up, up, forward march!" Everyone followed. But to my astonishment, when I was barely across the orchard I found a long line deployed behind a fence, two or three hundred paces away, just on the point of moving forward.

During the military engagement that followed, men from both sides were killed or captured. Ewald said that his soldiers found it difficult to move through the thick undergrowth. A map he made to illustrate his account reveals that troop movements and intense fighting encompassed both sides of Centerville Road.³⁴

Colonel Simcoe, who was present at Spencer's when combat occurred, saw the day's events from another perspective. He claimed that the British emerged victorious and the Allies fled in confusion, discarding their weapons. Lt. Colonel Banastre Tarleton, who approached Spencer's via Longhill Road, also spoke of the arms the Allies threw away. The Marquis de Chastelleux, who was with the Allied Army, said that Lafayette's vanguard made a surprise attack upon the British, who were stealing cattle from the neighborhood.



Map by Deborah L. Wilson. See enlarged map, page 206.

Thus, they were caught off-guard and forced to fight. Chastelleux claimed that only when Cornwallis came to his men's rescue were the Allies obliged to retire, by which time nearly 150 men had been killed or wounded.³⁵ This battle probably gave rise to the name War Hill, a large tract between Centerville and Longhill Roads.