The Southern Campaign of the Revolutionary War

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Description

The fighting in the American Revolution drifts from the northeastern colonies to the south. At first successful, the British army is ultimately defeated at Yorktown, Virginia, bringing an end to the long war.

Keywords


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The Southern Campaign of the Revolutionary War

Dr. ALBERT HIBBS (historian): After “Gentleman Johnny,” which is what Burgoyne’s troops called him, surrendered, the war was all but over in the north. Even though the British kept hold of New York and made occasional hit-and-run raids on the surrounding countryside, there were no more big campaigns. Things were a bit different in the south where for a while, Lord Cornwallis seemed to be having success after success. In April 1780, British Generals Clinton and Lord Cornwallis launched a naval invasion of Charleston, South Carolina. One group of British and Loyalist troops landed south of the city while another force sailed past the menacing guns of Fort Moultrie. Charleston was in a trap and on the 4th of May it surrendered to the British. Cornwallis now had a southern base and for the next three months he busied himself capturing most of the surrounding countryside. He was so successful that things looked very dark for the American cause. In August of that same year, American General Horatio Gates reached Camden, South Carolina, with some 3,000 men, most of who were weak and exhausted from their long march south. Out to meet them were Cornwallis’ men, fewer in numbers but well fed and experienced. In the Battle of Camden that followed the American forces tried hard but they were outfought and finally they were scattered into the woody, swampy countryside.

Heartened by victory Lord Cornwallis and his men marched into North Carolina hoping to win that state for the crown. However, at King’s Mountain, the wily Watoog and the West Virginia riflemen brought Cornwallis’ troops to an abrupt halt and sent them packing back to their South Carolina stronghold. For the next few months it was back and forth, Cornwallis marching north, and the Continental troops now led by Light Horse Harry Lee, Dan Morgan, and Nathaniel Greene, beating them back. Finally by fall the British troops had been driven all the way back to Charleston. Cornwallis didn’t give up though, and on April 25, 1781, he was on the move again and this time towards Virginia. After various skirmishes he
ended up in Yorktown, which, though he didn’t know it, was to be the end of the line, not only for his
troops, but for British hopes of regaining their American colonies. For a new force was now abroad, the
long-awaited help of the French navy, promised since Saratoga and finally a factor in the war.
Twenty French battleships were on their way. Slowly they converged on Yorktown fighting off the
British ships in their way. On September 28, Yorktown was surrounded and Cornwallis and his troops
bottled up in the little coastal town. And a month later it was all over, Cornwallis had surrendered and
Lafayette, commander of the French forces in America, announced, “the play is over, the fifth act has
come to an end.” It wasn’t quite the end of the play but the British had lost heart and only a few more
incidents remained. By the following April 1782, formal peace negotiations had begun. And the British
crown had to admit defeat. The American Revolution was over and the American colonies had the
responsibility of independence.