

General Thomas Sumter captures Orangeburg, May 11, 1781

On this day in history, May 11, 1781, General Thomas Sumter captures Orangeburg, South Carolina, as the American patriots sweep across South Carolina and Georgia in their efforts to recover the south. General Nathanael Greene took over the crumbling American defense of the south in December of 1780 after the British had successfully conquered most of Georgia and South Carolina and begun an invasion of North Carolina.

After Greene dragged British General Charles Cornwallis on long marches and into a costly battle at Guilford, North Carolina, Cornwallis was forced to retreat to the coast for supplies and regrouping. Greene turned his efforts south to recapture South Carolina and Georgia, whose major cities, such as Charleston, Savannah and Augusta were occupied, but whose interiors were guarded by a string of lightly guarded forts.

Greene broke his army into smaller groups under various commanders and sent them out across South Carolina to take as many of these outposts as they could. South Carolina Brigadier General Thomas Sumter had already proven a successful commander with victories at the Battle of Hanging Rock, the Battle of Fishdam Ford and the Battle of Blackstock's Farm, where he was severely wounded. Sumter had been largely responsible for the resurrection of South Carolina's partisan resistance after the fall of Charleston and the evacuation of the state's government to North Carolina.

As the patriots began reclaiming the south, General Sumter and Lt. Col. Henry Lee laid siege to Fort Granby, near present day Columbia, South Carolina. Their force was too small to overtake the fort, so after several days they parted. Lee would come back to Fort Granby several days later and offer the British garrison safe passage back to Charleston if they would surrender, which they did.

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Sumter, meanwhile, headed southeast for Orangeburg, an important supply post on the route from Charleston to the interior that would see numerous activities from both sides during the war. Sumter sent men ahead to begin a siege on the town, while he came behind, slowed down because he was carrying his single six-pounder cannon.

At this time, only a small contingent of 89 British soldiers and Loyalists were guarding Orangeburg. When the Americans arrived on the evening of May 10th, the British gathered as a group and holed up inside a brick house, refusing to surrender. Early the next morning, Sumter arrived with the cannon and began to bombard the house. After three holes were shot through the house, all 89 men surrendered without a fight. The following day, after gathering up plentiful supplies in the town, Sumter sent the prisoners to General Greene, but unfortunately local patriot militia killed some of them along the way.

The victory at Orangeburg was one of a string of victories that put nearly the entire states of South Carolina and Georgia back into American hands within only a few months, with the exception of Charleston and Savannah on the coast. General Greene's reconquest of the south was nearly complete. Savannah and Charleston would finally be abandoned by the British in 1782 when the signing of the Treaty of Paris, which ended the war, was imminent.