

Patriots win the Battle of Springfield, June 23, 1780

On this day in history, June 23, 1780, patriots win the Battle of Springfield, the last major battle of the American Revolution in the north. British Commander-in-Chief, General, Sir Henry Clinton had left New York to conquer Charleston, South Carolina in December of 1779 as part of the new British strategy to conquer the south, where, it was believed, the Loyalists would help them attain ascendancy.

Clinton left Hessian Lt. General Wilhelm von Knyphausen in charge at New York in his absence. While Clinton was away, refugee New Jersey Loyalists, who had filled up New York City, pressed von Knyphausen to launch an attack on George Washington's Continental Army encamped at Morristown, New Jersey. The American army had struggled through the winter, suffered from desertion and inadequate supplies. One strong attack, they believed, would wipe out the rebels.

Von Knyphausen was finally talked into making the attempt. On June 7, he led thousands of soldiers across New Jersey in an attempt to get through Hobart Pass in the Watchung Mountains. The Morristown encampment lay through the pass on the other side of the mountains. The New Jersey militia had arisen in force, however, and stopped them at the Battle of Connecticut Farms. Von Knyphausen retreated from this battle after hearing General Clinton would soon return with reinforcements.

After Clinton's return, George Washington became concerned not only that another attack would be made on Morristown, but also on West Point, above New York, the most important point for defending upstate New York from invasion from New York City. Washington decided to send supplies and reinforcements to West Point and took part of his army north to defend this supply line. He left Major General Nathanael Greene in charge of defending Morristown.

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On June 23rd, Clinton ordered von Knyphausen to make another attempt at destroying the Morristown encampment. 6,000 British soldiers marched out of Elizabethtown on the morning of the 23rd. When Major General Greene heard the news, he quickly dispatched his army, consisting of about 1,500 Continentals and 500 militia.

Greene split his men into two main groups, half along Galloping Hill Road through Connecticut Farms and Springfield, and the other half along Vauxhall Road slightly to the north. On each road, he placed successive lines of defense at various bridges. When each line of defense was attacked, they could fight for as long as they could and then retreat to the line behind them. This same strategy was later used to great effect by Greene in the battle to win the south.

The strategy succeeded in slowing the British down, but they eventually drove the patriots all the way to Springfield in the south and to the foot of the Short Hills on Vauxhall Road. By this time, Continental reinforcements arrived and the New Jersey militia began to assemble in mass. Von Knyphausen, though outnumbering his enemies by nearly 3 to 1, became nervous of a massacre if he tried to move forward against the patriots who held the high ground. He ordered a retreat through Springfield. Loyalists burned the entire city to the ground as they went, with the exception of 4 buildings that belonged to Loyalists. Militia continued sniping at the British the entire way back to Elizabethtown, inflicting more casualties.

The Battle of Springfield was the last major battle in the north as the focus of the British shifted south. It is sometimes called the "forgotten victory," as it was overshadowed by the victory at Yorktown 16 months later. Nonetheless, it was a decisive battle in the north, checking British ambitions and once again emphasizing to the British high command that they had severely underestimated the American militia.