

The Siege of Charleston begins, March 29, 1780

On this day in history, March 29, 1780, the Siege of Charleston begins, when the British advance to take the most important city in the south. After failing to defeat George Washington in the north and the entrance of France into the American Revolution, Great Britain decided to focus on the south where it was believed heavy Loyalist sentiment would help conquer the rebels in those colonies.

The southern strategy began with the taking of Savannah, Georgia, in December of 1779. The British Commander-in-Chief, General Sir Henry Clinton, sailed south from New York with 8,500 men and arrived south of Charleston on February 11, 1780. More troops arrived to raise the total British force to 14,000 men.

Continental Army Major General Benjamin Lincoln had around 3,000 men in Charleston. Rather than following George Washington's strategy of evacuating the army from large cities when the enemy approached, Lincoln decided to leave his army in Charleston at the request of the city's leaders to prevent it from falling into British hands. Lincoln established extensive defenses, including a "boom chain" and sunken Continental Army ships to block access from the sea. He built a defensive canal that ran the length of the peninsula on which Charleston was located. Another 1,500 Virginia soldiers arrived to bring Lincoln's force to 5,500 men, but they were still vastly outnumbered by the British.

Charleston sat at the end of the peninsula between the Ashley and Cooper Rivers. General Clinton marched overland and, on March 29, crossed the Ashley River onto the peninsula. The Siege of Charleston was to last for the next six weeks. Within days, American outposts around the city were taken and British ships entered Charleston Harbor, trapping the small American fleet under Commodore Abraham Whipple.

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When Lincoln refused to surrender, the British began a bombardment of the town that went on for weeks, killing soldiers and destroying homes and businesses every day. Letters were exchanged several times by Lincoln and Clinton demanding various terms for a surrender. On April 29, the British began to destroy the dam holding the water in the defensive canal, which was the last protection for the city. The Americans tried to defend the canal, but it was mostly drained by May 6, giving the British free access to the city. General Clinton demanded a full surrender, which was refused. He then began a massive bombardment of the city and threatened to destroy it. The civilian leaders convinced Lincoln to surrender to save the city, which he did on May 12.

5,300 soldiers were taken captive, destroying the Continental Army in the south, a high percentage of whom died in squalid British prison facilities during the next 2 1/2 years. The captives included Major General Lincoln, Commodore Abraham Whipple and Declaration of Independence signers Arthur Middleton, Edward Rutledge and Thomas Heyward, Jr.

The defeat at Charleston was a huge blow to the Continental Army. Congress would respond by sending Major General Horatio Gates with another large army that would be defeated at Camden, South Carolina. It was not until General Nathanael Greene arrived to take over the army's operations in the south late in the year that things began to turn around for the Americans. Less than one year later, British General Charles Cornwallis would surrender at Yorktown, ending the major operations of the war.