

Bruce's Cross Roads, Battle of ^[1]

Bruce's Cross Roads, Battle of

by Daniel W. Barefoot, 2006

Bruce's Cross Roads, located in northern [Guilford County](#) ^[2] in the present community of Summerfield, was the site of a [Revolutionary War](#) ^[3] skirmish on 12 Feb. 1781 between American forces commanded by Lt. Col. [Henry Lee](#) ^[4] and British troops under Lt. Col. [Banastre Tarleton](#) ^[5]. Following the American council of war at [Guilford Courthouse](#) ^[6] on 8-10 Feb. 1781, Lee's cavalry was assigned to a 750-man contingent that was detached from the main body of Gen. [Nathanael Greene](#) ^[7]'s army for the purpose of staying in front of the British army so that Greene could safely cross the Dan River. In carrying out their mission, Lee and his cavalymen were frequently within rifle range of Tarleton's troopers.

About noon on 12 February, Lee, who was suffering from a lack of sleep and food, paused for a meal at the home of Charles Bruce, a local Patriot. The dwelling was located approximately one-half mile south of the crossroads named for Bruce. As the meal was being prepared for Lee, Isaac Wright, an area resident, appeared at the Bruce home in an agitated state with news that a detail of British dragoons was two to three miles away. Lee promptly dispatched a Captain Armstrong, one of his most trusted and skilled officers, to confirm the report. Wright, who was ordered by Lee to act as a guide, received permission to exchange his slow-gaited pony for the speedy horse of Lee's teenage bugler, James Gillies. To ensure that he would not lose his horse, the bugler accompanied Armstrong, Wright, and several other soldiers on the scouting expedition.

After traveling some distance, Armstrong grew skeptical of the report, but Wright prevailed upon young Gillies and two other soldiers to proceed a bit farther. They rode only another quarter mile when they encountered the British dragoons. The small group of Americans immediately began to retreat with the enemy in hot pursuit. Because he was mounted on Wright's pony, the unarmed teenage bugler was no match for the speedy British pursuers. He was overtaken, pulled from his pony, and slashed to pieces while begging for quarter.

Captain Armstrong and a squadron of Americans arrived on the scene about the time the youth was being butchered. During the ensuing melee, Armstrong's men killed seven British soldiers. Tarleton, alerted by the sounds of the fight, closed in with his cavalry at full speed. The Americans retreated to the crossroads, where Lee had concealed his command in a most favorable position. A portion of Tarleton's corps slammed into Lee's waiting forces. The British soldiers were routed, suffering 13 dead and several captured.

Much of the British army camped on the Bruce plantation on the night of 12 February. James Gillies, the lone American casualty in the skirmish, was buried at the Bruce family cemetery. Charles Bruce was later buried near the young bugler. In 1922 a monument was erected by the [Daughters of the American Revolution](#) ^[8] at Bruce (Guilford Muster Ground) Park in Summerfield to honor the two Patriots.

References:

John Buchanan, *The Road to Guilford Courthouse: The American Revolution in the Carolinas*(1997).

Eli Washington Caruthers, *Revolutionary Incidents and Sketches of Character Chiefly in the Old North State*(1856).

Subjects:

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[Battles](#) ^[10]

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