

Guilford Courthouse: British High Tide in North Carolina

A BGES Revolutionary War Field University Program
with Robert Dunkerly

May 3, 2025; from Guilford Courthouse National Military Park

In late winter of 1781, British forces led by Gen. Charles Lord Cornwallis marched into North Carolina, fresh from recent victories in South Carolina and intent on subduing the state. However, their campaign encountered immediate challenges. For weeks, American forces under Gen. Nathanael Greene skillfully outmaneuvered the British, setting the stage for the pivotal Battle of Guilford Courthouse—the largest Revolutionary War clash in North Carolina. We will explore how Cornwallis’s smaller but highly trained army and Greene’s larger but less seasoned force, delving into the strategies and outcomes that shaped this critical conflict.

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Participants will meet at 9 a.m. at the Guilford Courthouse National Military Park Visitor Center (2332 New Garden Rd., Greensboro, NC 27410) to kick off the day with the center’s exhibits and film. From here, we will step outside to discuss the strategic and historical context leading up to the battle.

Next, we will caravan to the nearby starting point of the battle to examine the initial deployment of both forces. Gen. Nathanael Greene positioned his troops in three defensive lines to meet the advancing British. Here, we will visit recently preserved lands and a recently added monument honoring British forces. This section of the battlefield has often been overlooked on previous battlefield tours, and we will spend some time uncovering its unique significance.

We’ll return to our vehicles and break for lunch. Please bring your own meal, as we’ll enjoy a picnic in the field.

Following lunch, we’ll caravan to the site of the second line, where fierce fighting erupted. This area now includes the famous General Greene monument and a memorial to North Carolina’s signers of the Declaration of Independence. After heavy combat, British troops broke through here, and we will follow their progress onto the third line.

The park has updated its tour map and interpretation based on archaeology and new research, showing that for over a century, the third line site had been incorrectly located. We will delve into that study and walk along the third line where the two sides engaged in hand-to-hand combat. This was the battle’s climax and saw the most intense fighting.

As we conclude our exploration of the battlefield, we will reflect on its aftermath and broader significance, discussing key questions:

1. Why did the British win the battle yet retreat?
2. Why did Greene's army withdraw despite facing a smaller, weakened British force?
3. How did this battle mark the end of British control over North Carolina's interior?
4. Why is Guilford Courthouse considered a critical step toward the ultimate American victory at Yorktown?

Guilford Courthouse stands as North Carolina's premier Revolutionary War site, boasting an extraordinary collection of monuments and memorials. Its preservation history is as fascinating as the battlefield itself, resembling a Civil War battlefield site with its large number of monuments.

The total walking distance is 2 miles (flat and easy), and we will finish around 3 PM.

About the Faculty:

Robert M. (Bert) Dunkerly is a historian, award-winning author, and speaker who is actively involved in historic preservation and research. He holds a bachelor's degree in history from St. Vincent College in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, and a master's degree in historic preservation from Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. He has worked at 14 historic sites and written over a dozen books and numerous scholarly articles. His research interests encompass archaeology, colonial life, military history, and the art of historic commemoration. He is a past president of the Richmond Civil War Round Table and currently serves on the Preservation Commission for the American Revolution Round Table-Richmond. Bert has taught courses at Central Virginia Community College, the University of Richmond, and the Virginia Historical Society. He is currently a park ranger at Richmond National Battlefield Park. Outside of his professional pursuits, he enjoys exploring local bookstores, battlefields, and breweries.

Hotel Information

There is no sponsoring hotel for this 1-day, private driving-walking tour. There are numerous hotels nearby in Greensboro, NC.

Transportation

The servicing airport is Piedmont Triad International Airport (GSO), Greensboro, NC. It is also commonly referred to locally as "PTI." Airports at Charlotte (104 miles away) and Raleigh-Durham (75 miles away) are also an option.

Recommended Reading

The following books are suggested to enhance your readiness for the program:

Buchanan, John, *The Road to Guilford Courthouse: The American Revolution in the Carolinas*, Trade Paper Press, Los Angeles, CA: 1999.

Dunkerly, Robert M., *An Explorer's Guide to America's Revolutionary War*, Blue & Gray Education Society, Chatham, VA: 2022.

Maass, John R., *The Battle of Guilford Courthouse: A Most Desperate Engagement*, The History Press, Charleston, SC: 2020.

Maass, John R., *From Trenton to Yorktown: Turning Points of the Revolutionary War*, Osprey Publishing, New York, NY: 2025 (expected release Feb. 12, 2025).

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Name: _____

Address: _____

City/State/Zip: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

Registration includes maps, the academic program, and support of a historian.

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