

VIRGINIA MILITIAMAN SAMUEL CLARK (1764-1857): HERO OF THE BATTLE OF GREEN SPRING

Seventeen-year-old Samuel Clark of Virginia remains one of the unsung heroes of the Revolutionary War and the story of his courage and self-sacrifice should be an inspiration to all Americans. Between September, 1780 and April, 1782 Clark was twice drafted, and on three occasions he volunteered (twice as a substitute for members of his family who had wives and children) to serve ninety-day tours with various Virginia Militia units. On the afternoon of July 6th, 1781, he fought in “The Battle of Green Spring” that took place along portions of what became known as “Greenspring Road” in James City County, Virginia. Severely wounded by the saber of a British Cavalry trooper (he carried a silver plate in his skull for the rest of his life), Clark lived to fight again at the siege of Yorktown, raised a family, served as an officer during the War of 1812, received a Revolutionary War veteran’s pension for more than thirty years, and died in 1857 at the age of 92.

The last major open field engagement of the American Revolution fought in Virginia, The Battle of Green Spring involved some 6000 men (1500 American and 4500 British), and produced more than two hundred casualties (150 American, 75 British). On the afternoon of July 6th, 1781 Clark was one of roughly two hundred Virginia Militia riflemen deployed as skirmishers south of Green Spring Plantation, the imposing brick mansion built in 1645 by Colonial Governor Sir William Berkeley some three miles north of Jamestown Island. Because the American forces had few cavalry of their own, the Riflemen’s mission was to counter probes by Colonel Banastre Tarleton’s infamous light cavalry unit known as “The British Legion.”

Samuel Clark and his fellow riflemen had arrived at Green Spring Plantation earlier that day, part of the advance guard of an American army commanded by the Marquis de Lafayette and General Anthony Wayne. This force included several hundred Virginia militiamen and about nine hundred experienced regulars from three Pennsylvania regiments of the Continental Line. Lafayette and Wayne had been shadowing the exhausted, but still powerful British expeditionary force under General Cornwallis for two months, waiting for an opportunity to attack. Thanks to false information planted by British intelligence agents, Lafayette initially believed that most of Cornwallis’ army had already crossed the James River, leaving only a rear guard behind at Jamestown. In reality, 4000 battle-hardened British troops lay hidden in the woods at the southern end of Green Spring Road, ready to ambush the attacking Americans.

Samuel Clark and his fellow Virginians were some of the first victims of Cornwallis' trap. In an attempt to goad the Americans into attacking, Cornwallis sent Tarleton's Legion up Green Spring Road and deployed a line of skirmishers across the road to simulate a "rear guard." When Clark's unit, a company of one hundred Virginia Riflemen commanded by Major John Willis, encountered Tarleton's cavalry, a firefight took place, during which Samuel Clark received his saber wound. Taken immediately to Green Spring Plantation for treatment, Clark was probably evacuated that night to Chickahominy Church, located two miles south of modern-day Toano, Virginia. Given the seriousness of his injury, one might think that Samuel Clark was lucky to survive, let alone turn up three months later at the Siege of Yorktown. However, according to a doctor friend of mine, 18th Century military medicine was quite familiar with skull wounds such as Clark's and surgeons of the period knew that a silver plate was the best suited to cover an "open-brain" wound because silver's chemistry tended to prevent infections.

The subsequent events and final outcome of "The Battle of Green Spring" are fairly well known. After sending the three Continental Line regiments down Green Spring Road and pushing aside the British skirmishers, Lafayette and Wayne realized too late that they had blundered into a trap and were about to be surrounded and annihilated. Only a brave, but costly, charge against the center of the British line by the Pennsylvanians gave the American forces time to withdraw and prevented a victory for Cornwallis. By contrast, Samuel Clark's story has only just begun to be told, but it helps put "a human face" on an important event in our nation's history.

Note: The above information concerning Samuel Clark's life and military career was provided by one of his descendants, Mike Bailey, of Russell, Kentucky.