

Travel Tales

The Search for White Hall: Revolutionary Plantation and Battlefield

by

Llewellyn Toulmin

Last month I described the strange life of my fifth great-grandfather, Brigadier General Andrew Williamson, the “Benedict Arnold of South Carolina” and America’s first major double agent. I got so interested in him that I wrote his first-ever biography, and determined to find his now-missing plantation.

Williamson acquired Hard Labor plantation from his mentor Dr. John Murray before 1767, and renamed it White Hall. It was located on Hard Labour Creek in what is now Greenwood County, South Carolina. The plantation was located only 18 miles from Indian territory, and it was one of the only major plantations in the area, at a time when most settlers lived in tiny log cabins. The plantation was described by Thomas Griffiths, who was sent there by the famous Josiah Wedgewood of Britain to scout out samples of fine clay. Griffiths arrived in October 1767 and said:

I Marched on for Andrew Williamsons at Whitehall near a place called hard Labour, about two hundred miles from Charles Town. This is one of the finest plantations in South Carolina; abounding with fine Rich Red Loomy Land, famous for Raising Corn, Hemp, Flax, Cotton, Rice, Cattle, Hogs, Fruits of all sorts and great plenty of innumerable [illegible]. Friend Williamson said in the year Sixty Six his Peach orchard yielded near Three Thousand bushel baskets; which proved of great use to the poor young inhabitants of the province; besides feeding him a great number of hogs.

Griffiths stayed nine days and Williamson charged him almost eight pounds, a considerable sum. Perhaps this is proof of Williamson’s alleged Scots ancestry!

During the Revolution, White Hall became Williamson’s military headquarters, and also served as a POW camp for “many” British prisoners, boasting a prison guard force of at least a “Sergeant, Corporal and 12 men.” The plantation also contained a “mill,” “blockhouse” and “military store.” It was even the site of a battle between Patriot and Loyalist forces in December 1781, which the Loyalists won, and in which they “burned the rebel works, burnt seven

Waggon, and captured the Garrison, consisting of about 30 men.” The Loyalists then used the site as a regional headquarters. Incredibly, there is no trace on the ground of all this activity.

No sketch, painting, plat or detailed map of White Hall plantation has ever been located. The Mills Atlas of 1825 shows “Whitehall” on Hard Labour Creek, but this and other sources are not accurate to more than a mile.

It is not clear what happened to the plantation, but by the modern era it had faded into legend and was represented only by Whitehall Road and the Whitehall church, about a mile apart. In 1978 an archaeological survey of Greenwood County was undertaken. Using the Mills’ Atlas, the team guesstimated the site of the plantation, and examined the surface finds. They located some quartz flakes, milk glass and Indian stone tools, but did not identify any pottery or other items that were clearly from the Revolutionary period. They did no digging, shovel testing or metal detecting, and were gone within an hour.

There the matter lay until I got interested in my strange ancestor.

After doing historical research at the South Carolina Archives, I tracked down and contacted the land owners. To my amazement, they already knew a lot about General Williamson and White Hall, and were quite keen to find the plantation. They had already found a musket ball on a knoll near the site of the 1978 survey. Things were starting to move.

Excited, I contacted the State Archaeologist of South Carolina, who was also a fellow member of The Explorers Club. (This Club is headquartered in New York, and has had as members the first men to the North and South Poles, the first conqueror of Everest, the first men to the Moon, etc.) He arranged for a US Forest Service and a State Transportation archaeologist to do a “walkover” survey of the site, using the “Mark I eyeball” and a metal detector. Other participants included me, my wife Susan, and numerous members of the large family of the owners. We were excited to find old nails and hinges near the site of the musket ball, and numerous other apparent metal hits. It was time to launch a real Expedition.

In December 2011 and May 2012 an Expedition team led by me and the State Archaeologist, and including an archaeologist from the US Forest Service, members of The Explorers Club, my wife, and members of the family of the landowners, conducted preliminary archaeological fieldwork on the site. We carried Flag number 132 of The Explorers Club, which had previously been carried on an expedition to the Hindu Kush, to the 1619 *Warwick* wreck in Bermuda, and on three expeditions to the RMS *Titanic*, among other efforts. I had requested this particular Club flag (of the 202 in



existence) because of its many British connections. The expedition was also sanctioned by the prestigious Royal Geographical Society.

This effort utilized visual surveys, metal detecting, magnetic gradiometer detection, analysis of LIDAR data, and the excavation of test pits.



We stayed in nearby motels and some members drove from their homes in Columbia, and we were fed by the gracious owners. So the Expedition conditions were not onerous at all. The work was hard, though, especially digging in the hard red clay soil. We found that the best tool was a large, heavy pick.

The results were initially very exciting. The metal detectors registered hundreds of “hits.” The magnetic gradiometer, an amazing machine from Britain costing \$20,000, seemed to show foundation walls exactly where we had expected them. (A gradiometer looks like three thin PCV pipes wired together in an “H” shape. But inside are very sensitive gases and sensors that sense minute changes in the magnetic field of the Earth. Incredibly, they have been used to locate deep, compacted cart ruts as old as Roman times!)

But our Forest Service archaeologist was skeptical. He kept saying, “Where is the broken pottery?” He said that back in Revolutionary times no-one had trash collection, and there were no landfills. Everyone threw their trash outside in the yard, around the house. Over time this would create a perfect “doughnut” shape around the house of broken pottery, nails, pipe-stems, and organic matter. We weren’t finding any doughnuts!

The proof of the pudding was “good old dirt archaeology.” This meant throwing out the fancy gadgets and digging test pits. Each one was one meter by one meter, with straight sides (not as easy as it sounds), right down to the subsoil. Every shovelful from the pit was sifted through a wire screen, to find tiny items. Everything found was bagged and tagged. But there wasn’t much. The best find was a horseshoe-like object that might have been a homemade hook.



The nails we found in the initial walkover, on closer examination, turned out to be from after 1830 – too late. The hundreds of metal detector hits that we thought would be musket balls from the battle turned out to be anomalies caused by natural iron nodules in the soil. And the “foundations” from the gradiometer turned out to be another anomaly, perhaps a bulldozer scar in the earth.

As the State Archaeologist eloquently said, “Lew, it is what it is.” Depressed, I left the site, and had to write a largely negative report. The exact location of General Williamson’s famous White Hall plantation, and its outbuildings, battlefield, POW camp, arms depot and slave quarters, is yet to be determined.

But on the flight home to Maryland I started thinking about my search and rescue experience. The immediate goal in SAR is not necessarily to find the victim, plane or ship (although that is the ultimate prize), but to “clear likely areas with a high probability of detection” (POD). Keep doing that long enough and eventually you will find what you are looking for. And each effort, if done in a professional manner, contributes to the search. So in Greenwood County we had “cleared” a likely area, and had even identified the next most likely area. We had done our job, but the rest of the effort remained.

Onward!

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Lew Toulmin lives in Silver Spring, Maryland, Fairhope, Alabama and Port Vila, Vanuatu, and is an amateur archaeologist, semi-pro genealogist, and member of the Society of the Cincinnati and numerous other historical and lineage societies.

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Words in the main story and bio: 1400

Photos: (all credits to Lew Toulmin, except as noted)

1. The Expedition logo, with British and South Carolina flags of the Revolutionary period, sanctioned by the Royal Geographical Society.
2. Expedition members use a screen to sift the soil, looking for broken pottery and other signs of White Hall plantation.
3. The State Archaeologist of South Carolina uses a \$20,000 magnetic gradiometer to search for archaeological features up to six feet underground.
4. Expedition members carry the flag of The Explorers Club and the logo of the Royal Geographical Society.

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