War in the South

The paintings here place us in the middle of the action during the Revolutionary War’s last years in the American South.

Fighting in the Carolinas, Georgia, and Virginia from 1779 to 1781 wore out the British Army. Though headquartered in New York City, British General Sir Henry Clinton based his plan for victory in the Revolutionary War on conquering the South. He aimed to secure coastal cities and then watch the Revolutionary cause crumble thanks to the help of Southern Loyalists from the countryside.

But this southern strategy did not go according to plan. Even with British victories at Savannah, Georgia, in 1779, and Charleston and Camden, South Carolina, in 1780, fewer Loyalists turned out than expected. Meanwhile, Revolutionary militias in the swamps and the mountains wreaked havoc on British troops and supply lines. And the small Southern Army, a department of the Continental Army, managed to live to fight another day against superior British forces. After the bloody Battle of Guilford Courthouse in March 1781, for example, a British officer reported that it was the “sort of victory which ruins an army.”

For another example, take a closer look at the painting of the Battle of Kings Mountain. It was an intense fight between Loyalist and Revolutionary militias and a devastating surprise defeat for the British cause. The scene is different than some of the other battle paintings in the exhibition and shows how confusing a battle in woody, hilly terrain could become. Many of the battles in the South were smaller engagements but featured these same elements.