

Anyone who thinks history is a dry topic needs to listen to Taylor Osborne talk about it. When describing the three battles of the American Revolution that interest him most, the 19-year-old college student sounds like a sports broadcaster announcing a championship game, offering both play-by-play and color commentary that conveys the drama, intrigue and the stakes. Osborne, of State Road, researched the southern campaign of the American Revolution for his Elkin High School senior project, building three dioramas that represent scenes from the battles of Camden, Guilford Courthouse and Yorktown. At the time, the work was noteworthy in its scope and for his effort: he well exceeded the 15 hours of work required for the project, charting about 100 hours while actually putting in about 1,000 hours. He researched, designed and built each diorama from scratch, hand painting each tiny soldier. A year later, the project is on exhibit at the Mount Airy Museum of Regional History. The Surry Community College freshman reached out to the museum when looking for different places to display it. “We thought it would fit,” said Amy Snyder, museum curator, because the museum’s April history talk focused on events from a similar time period.

The materials now on display in the third floor of the museum reflect a year’s worth of Osborne’s continued attention to the project. He repainted some soldiers for accuracy, and added collectibles, pictures and items that flesh out the dioramas for a full exhibition. Flags from various contingents hang on the wall behind. Within the dioramas, Osborne based the “frozen” action on famous paintings and details from history he thought were important. An officer, or as Osborne calls him, the coward, fleeing from the battle on horseback. Blood on the sword of another officer known for his brutality. A dismembered arm lying amid the soldiers. General George Washington, depicted with brown hair. (It hadn’t yet turned white, Osborne explained.) “They’re an excellent example of these battles,” Snyder said. “They’re very detailed and intricate.” The curator said her favorite detail is a small picture of a General’s wife on his desk inside a tent. “It’s just amazing.” The project will be housed at the museum through mid-May, Snyder said.

History of a historian

Osborne said he initially planned to focus the project on the Battle of Yorktown, but his teacher encouraged him to address the “entire southern campaign of the American Revolution.” Lexington, Concord, (the first battles of the war) Saratoga (where the British surrender 5,700 troops) — those battles are well known, Osborne said. “From Saratoga they drop off.” The Battle of Yorktown had been special to Osborne since visiting the historical site in Yorktown, Virginia, on an eighth-grade field trip. “That’s what got me into the Revolution,” he said. “I was fascinated. Here’s a bunch of colonist farmers who say, ‘Hey, we’re going to take on the strongest army in the world.’ That kind of underdog story was fascinating to me.” The southern

campaign that interests Osborne is an underdog story itself, both in that it is under-reported in the history books and in the battles of which it consists. At the October 1777 Battle of Saratoga, the British surrendered about 5,700 troops to Major General Horatio Gates. However, the British didn't authorize peace negotiations until months after the Battle of Yorktown in 1781, where Cornwallis surrendered. Before that, the battles of Camden and Guilford Courthouse were both British victories, yet uniquely positioned the British army for the crucial defeat in Yorktown. He said he wanted to take on the southern strategy because, "just the fact that it's a part of the war no one's ever heard of," he said. "A lot of the southern battles are completely forgotten."

Moving forward

Osborne seems to have as good a handle on the future as he does on the past. He's gobbling up history classes at Surry Community College and plans on transferring next year to UNC Greensboro to earn his bachelor's and master's degrees in history. After that, Osborne would like to teach history at either the high school or college level while he earns his PhD. In the meantime, he doesn't draw a line between work and fun. Osborne became involved in reenactments a couple of years ago, and while that's not especially shocking for a history buff, Osborne said he had no interest in the activity until attending one for the first time in 2014. "Some of my teachers would say 'you're going to be a re-enactor,'" he recalled. "I said, 'I'd rather just stay here and read about it.'" After witnessing the drama first hand, Osborne and his dad, Lauren Osborne, decided to give it a shot. Now, they're both hooked. "It's like you're right in the middle of the battle," Taylor Osborne said, with smoke everywhere, chaos, and with even a scripted battle, things not going according to plan. "That's how it was in real life."