



SOUTH CAROLINA

Scene of Most Revolutionary Battles

By Nancy Cathcart

Chronology of Beaufort County Battles	
Battle of Port Royal	Feb. 12, 1779
Battle of Coosawhatchie	May 3, 1779
Battle of Fort Balfour, Pocatoligo	April 13, 1781
Battle of Savannah River	Feb. 24, 1782
Battle of Beaufort	March 13, 1782
Battle of Port Royal Ferry	Sept. 2, 1782

South Carolinians, long preoccupied with the traumatic conflict of the 'War between the States,' have overlooked the part their state played in the Revolution. More battles were fought here than in any other state — some 137 in all. The Battle of King's Mountain, furthermore, was a critical one which changed the course of the war and led to Cornwallis' surrender. Six of these major confrontations took place in Beaufort County.

Few people know that two signers of the Declaration of Independence fought side by side to chase the British from Port Royal Island in 1779. Tourists and residents alike are familiar with the hauntingly beautiful tabby ruins of Sheldon Church where each Easter a worship service is performed. Only those who have read the historical marker there are aware that it was burned by British Loyalist forces during the march on Charleston.

Purysburg, a long-abandoned town on the Savannah River outside of present-day Hardeeville, was probably the most important military garrison on the lower Carolina coast. Over 2500 troops were at one time stationed there. Another little-known historical fact about this era of Low Country history is the capture of Savannah by the British in 1778 because a British colonel found a secret passage through the swamps and attacked from the rear. When summer came to the Low Country and Sea Islands, however, all this activity ceased. The militia refused to fight in the excessive heat and went home to tend their crops and families . . . Such are some of the curious aspects of this war which split Carolinians between Whig and Tory loyalties.

The Revolution on the South Carolina coast largely bypassed the Sea Islands such as Hilton Head. According to one historian, the islands were too spread out and difficult to defend and their occupation was not considered strategic. Bloody battle, however, was waged from the swamps of the Savannah River at Purysburg north to Coosawhatchie Bridge and Pocatoligo (today crossed by Highway 17). Another major skirmish occurred along the slopes of "Tullifinny Hill" now occupied by the Point South development and transected by Interstate-95.

The first of these six major Beaufort County battles occurred in February of 1779. The British had sent 300 men to occupy Port Royal Island and General Moultrie responded by gathering 300 militia at what is now Whale Branch bridge over Highway 21. Moultrie ferried his troops across the Branch to Port Royal and drove the British from the Island, killing eight of them and wounding 22 in the process. Among the conquering forces in this battle was the select Charleston Batta-

lion of Artillery. Two of its captains were Thomas Heyward Jr. and Edward Rutledge — both signers of the Declaration of Independence and members of Congress. Heyward was wounded in the skirmish. (Short of men, the artillery captains had manned the guns themselves — each one pointing, ramming, sponging and firing the guns.)

Following this victory one of the most tragic epics in the Low Country war for independence began. General Benjamin Lincoln stationed at Purysburgh, made the mistake of leaving the coast and advancing on Augusta. Gen-

“Henry Laurens was captured and later released in exchange for Cornwallis at the war’s end.”

eral Augustine Prevost, head of the massive British forces stationed on the other side of the Savannah River, took this opportunity to begin a major move on Charleston — plundering, burning and pillaging unguarded plantations as he went. In this sackage his forces were aided by Indians and runaway slaves who had joined the huge army of 6000 as it moved up the coast 35 miles inland from Hilton Head.

Some of the sharpest fighting in this advance occurred at Tullifinny and Coosawhatchie bridge. Lt. Col. John Laurens with a small force of 100 American volunteers disputed the march of the enemy at Coosawhatchie. Laurens was wounded in this rash action against Prevost’s force and nine of his 18 Continental (regular Army soldiers) were killed. Laurens, who was known as a brave, but over-zealous soldier, was later killed during the closing months of the war in another impromptu action on the banks of the Combahee River. It was his father, the great statesman Henry Laurens, who was captured on a secret diplomatic mission to the Netherlands and imprisoned in the Tower of London. Laurens was later exchanged for Lord Cornwallis and became part of the peace mission in Paris at war’s end).

As the British in Prevost’s march on Charleston proceeded up Tullifinny Hill between Coosawhatchie and Pocotaligo, the American forces drew back

toward Charleston burning the bridges behind them. The British were being aided at this point by a Loyalist sympathizer and Beaufort District resident, Col. Andrew DeVeaux, who spied for them and even stole horses for them from his cousins. DeVeaux, in a burst of Loyalist zeal, decided to burn Sheldon Church, the seat of the prominent Bull family and considered the second most beautiful church in South Carolina. This he did and today only the tabby ruins remain (albeit some of the largest and most impressive on the coast). DeVeaux was a prominent figure in another Low Country battle. He was in command at Fort Balfour in Pocotaligo when it was taken in April 1781 by the American forces without a fight.

Prevost eventually pulled back in his assault on Charleston with the imminent arrival of Lincoln’s forces from Augusta. As the British were driven back toward Savannah, the Low Country was again overtaken by Revolutionary battle.

These were months of deep tragedy for the area round Hilton Head Island. As the British retreated hundreds of slaves taken from the plantations or who had flocked to join the British forces followed the fleeing army. (Some 25,000 slaves were taken by the British during the war and sold in the West Indies). The black camp-followers died by the dozens—of camp fever — or of starvation. As the British moved toward Savannah by way of the Sea Islands, these displaced ex-slaves tried desperately to go along, clinging to the boats used to ford the rivers and sounds. According to accounts at the time, their hands were chopped off or battered and they were left to fend for themselves. Many of the diseased slaves were herded on to Otter Island where they died in droves, their bones later covering the ground.

By 1782 in Beaufort County the British were on the defensive. One of their last major stands in this district was at Port Royal ferry. There two British galleys lay at anchor. The Americans were able to run one aground and capture it.

As Prevost moved out of the Port Royal area and Beaufort he left a garrison in the city which spent much of its time plundering the homes of the natives. This retreat of Prevost’s was facilitated by the same Colonel DeVeaux who burned Sheldon. His partisan relatives in the Low Country, however, never caught up with him and after the war he went to England where he lived in high style driving his carriage and fine horses through the streets and amazing the British with his equestrian prowess. He eventually returned to America and married a wealthy woman who lived on an estate on the Hudson River. Nevertheless,

his extravagant tastes left him penniless at his death.

“The following day the British fleet put to sea.”

With the evacuation of Charleston by the British (they had finally captured the city), the war in South Carolina and the Low Country drew to a close. A historian of the day describes this final dramatic scene of the conflict. “It was a grand and pleasing sight to see the enemy’s fleet, upwardly 300 sail, lying at anchor from Fort Johnson to Five Fathom Hole, in a curve line, as the current runs, and what made it more agreeable, they were ready to depart . . .” General Moultrie was in the rear as the Americans advanced into the city. Then came the Governor of the State attended by General Nathaniel Greene and 200 cavalry. The following day the British fleet put to sea.



General Benjamin Lincoln

(Photo courtesy South Caroliniana Library from the book *Battle Ground of Freedom* by Nat and Sam Hilborne, The Sandlapper Story, Inc. Lexington, S. C.)