

Indigo Planted At Point Comfort

S.C. Militiaman James Davant
(1744-1803)

S.C. Militiaman Charles
Davant (1750-1781)

By Dr. Robert E.H. Peeples

James and Charles Davant were 14 and 8 when their father John settled on Hilton Head's Point Comfort Plantation in 1758, coming from Edisto Island's tired soil to plant indigo.

They knew little about fertilizer then and bothered still less about it. Their brother Isaac, 16, and sister Mary, 10, came too, but were gone before the Revolution; Mary married inland at 16 and Isaac died in 1772. When their father died in 1768 the three boys continued the indigo planting with the help of 12 slaves. The next year James married Lydia Page.

Also in 1769, island planter Richard Bland took to wife Elizabeth Fendin of St. Helena's Island, settling six slaves and 1,600 pounds currency on her in their marriage agreement. When he died in early 1776 Militia Capt. Lewis Bona and Pvt. Charles Davant showed his estate to the appraisers, one of whom was James Davant. The young widow Bland, with two babies and 25 slaves to manage, needed help. That summer Charles Davant became master of Two Oaks Plantation as he married the widow Bland.

By the time war's violence came to Hilton Head, following the December 1778 fall of Savannah to the British, James Davant had lost two of his five babies. Charles was a father, too. Bouncing baby boy Charles Jr. was born in November 1777.

During 1779 and 1780 James was on duty with the Militia 285 days, resisting both the British campaigns from Savannah to Charleston, the first successfully. Charles was also on the mainland on scouting duty under Col. Benjamin Garden in 1779, in company with islander friend Christopher Rankin (who would succeed him as husband to Betsy Fendin).

Happily, both brothers managed to avoid Continental Gen. Benjamin Lincoln's

entrapment when he lamely surrendered on May 12, 1780, 5,000 troops and the City of Charleston, one of the Revolution's most grievous blunders.

Gen. McCrady wrote that "after the 6th of October 1780 there was not a Continental soldier in all South Carolina." Yet from the debacle arose the relentless South Carolina partisans who, under the leadership of Generals Francis Marion, Thomas Sumter and Andrew Pickens, so harassed (in the truest sense of the word) the British that what was left of their grand army under Lord Cornwallis fled northward and collapsed gratefully into the arms of an astonished George Washington at Yorktown in October 1781.

By virtue of their naval superiority the British still easily held both Charleston and Savannah. But Fort Balfour at Pocatigic had already surrendered and Wiggins Hill was won in April, Parker's Ferry in August. Col. William Harden, area commander, could truthfully report to Gen. Marion, "I have been able to keep the area from Purrysburg to Pon Pon (Edisto) clear." On the coast itself the Tories and Indian allies of the British still harassed vulnerable patriots.

Three separate sources tell the story of the Hilton Head Militia unit's receiving garbled intelligence early in December that a war party from Daufuskie's Royal Militia unit was scheduled. Determined to give them a warm reception, the Militia met early at the Muster House and proceeded to Long Island where a clear watch could be kept on all movement across Calibogue Sound. Hours passed and the night grew chilly. They concluded their intelligence had been faulty and eventually headed for their homes, warm firesides and beds. Alas, the wily enemy under Royal Militia Capt. Philip Martinangele had earlier ascended Broad Creek with muffled oars and stationed themselves in ambush at Big

Gate (where present Marshlands Road runs southward from Mathews Road). They had only to wait patiently until some patriot appeared to open the gate en route home.

Charles Davant and John Andrews were riding together. James Davant had turned off onto Point Comfort Road five miles earlier. Suddenly the sound of shots shattered the silence as 31-year-old Charles leaned from his saddle to open the gate. He felt the sting of the hot lead and simultaneously saw Capt. Martinangele and his son Abraham with their muskets smoking. He spurred his horse homeward to Two Oaks House (on present Leg-of-Mutton Road). There his waiting wife had heard the shots, had roused their four-year-old son and hurried down the front steps towards the approaching horseman. Breathing heavily, Charles managed to keep his balance until he could fall into their loving arms.

Years later his son Charles, then an old gentleman, pointed to a spot in the yard of Two Oaks and told the young Rev. Henry Talbird, "He fell there, and lived only long enough to tell how he had been shot, and to name two of his murderers. Standing over his dead body I, as a boy, vowed that I would kill those men if I lived to be a man."

That fierce duty was taken from him. At Christmas a detachment of Militia styling themselves "The Bloody Legion", commanded by Capt. John Leacraft but significantly including James Davant and Israel Andrews, brothers of the two ambushed comrades, mustered for the trip to Daufuskie. There Israel Andrews delivered the coup de grace to Capt. Philip Martinangele. Others found 27-year-old Abraham Martinangele sick in bed and holding his infant daughter Margaret in his arms. He was, nevertheless, quickly done to death, his wife and three small daughters plundered of most of their possessions. Such is the violence of war.

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