Roving bandits were no match against forces of Jacob Rumph

By JOHN HALL
Special to The State

Before the Revolution, gangs of bandits were active in the South Carolina Upcountry. Groups of citizens calling themselves "Regulators" formed vigilante groups to combat the criminals.

But bandits continued long after the War for Independence had ended. Indeed, fighting Upcountry lawlessness and anarchy was one of the most serious tasks facing the state government throughout the 1780s.

Capt. Jacob Rumph, a militia officer, was chosen to lead a contingent of State Rangers whose task was to hunt, kill or capture the bandits. For a while, Rumph was a popular hero, his name as well known as any Pinckney, DeSaussure or Laurens.

Bandits and armed bands of outlaws, many of them Tory partisans, American deserters and runaway slaves, caused havoc in the Backcountry after the British evacuation of South Carolina. Gangs of criminals terrorized isolated dwellings, robbed farmsteads, intimidated magistrates and juries, murdered, assaulted and stole from anyone traveling alone or unarmed.

Merchants carrying goods into the Backcountry, or farmers moving produce to market, were liable to be robbed, tortured and killed. After years of bitter warfare and bloody partisan conflict, many isolated areas of the Backcountry were reduced to a state of virtual anarchy.

Judge Aedanus Burke, after traveling in the Backcountry in December 1783, wrote a letter to Governor Guerard concerning the plight of the inland inhabitants:

"The good people of the District of Ninety Six are exposed to great distress and perpetual alarms, by a few outlyers, or banditti, who infest that part of the country. They carry on their villainies without molestation, being well mounted, and the inhabitants plundered of good horses to pursue. The people without protection of laws, are afraid."

The following December, Burke wrote a similar, but even more impassioned letter to the governor:

"It is not in my power to give ... an Idea how much the poor people of this district are worried and half ruined by a set of horse thieves and an outlying Banditti that constantly beset the roads, rob the inhabitants and plunder their dwellings. No man has security for even a worthless plow horse and where any Gentleman keeps a good riding Horse he must watch them day and night. As to trade and commerce, it is at an end in that district unless Government take some measures for exterpating the Outlyers."

Backcountry farmers were understandably reluctant to take their wagons to market in Charleston, as they were likely to be robbed either going to or returning from the city. Bandits operated most frequently on trade and commercial routes, just as highwaymen did in Britain.

There were a number of well-publicized murders of men traveling between Charleston and the Backcountry. In mid-February, a party of bandits attacked three wagoners near Orangeburg, murdering one of them. In the same month, James Booth and his "small band of ruffians" robbed and murdered a doctor on the Saltketcher Road.

On the afternoon of Wednesday, March 26, 1783, Simon Berwick was shot by two men 12 miles north of Dorchester. One of his murderers was later identified as a bandit called "Crazy Miller," a 30-year-old veteran of the Revolutionary War.

Many veterans had turned to crime and banditry in the years following the war. Some found it impossible to find work or support themselves during an economically depressed time. Others, like "Crazy Miller", were apparently unable to readjust to a peaceful society, preferring to continue to live in armed gangs much as they had during the war.

To increase the chance of catching bandits, the Assembly offered rewards for the most notorious criminals and gang leaders, plus a complete pardon to any bandit who informed on his colleagues. The rewards offered were enormous, frequently over 100 guineas, and were sufficient to induce a number of men to risk their lives by tracking bandits.

Respectable Carolinians feared these men, who were felt to have been brutalized by the years of bloodshed.

The General Assembly had to act quickly to combat the bandit problem or else lose the support of inland inhabitants. In 1784, the legislature raised the punishment for those convicted for the first time of horse stealing from whipping to death.

Between June 1783 and November 1784, courts outside Charleston sentenced at least 15 men to be hanged. Nevertheless, few bandits were captured, and the majority of those executed were petty thieves. Clearly, making punishments more severe would have little impact unless some way could be found to bring the bandits to justice.

To increase the chance of catching bandits, the Assembly offered rewards for the most notorious criminals and gang leaders, plus a complete pardon to any bandit who informed on his colleagues. The rewards offered were enormous, frequently over 100 guineas and were sufficient to induce a number of men to risk their lives by tracking bandits.

One bounty-hunter tracked a criminal for two weeks, finally shooting him in a remote part of Georgia and bringing back the corpse to claim the reward. "Crazy Miller" was captured in May 1783, shortly after a large reward was offered for him dead or alive. A friend had informed on him.

In addition to offering substantial rewards for the capture of specific bandits, the General Assembly raised a company of mounted Rangers, "not only for the protection of the people, but for the purpose of detecting and bringing to Justice such notorious offenders who disturb the peace, Tranquility and Harmony of this Country."

This was a highly popular action among Backcountry residents, who were delighted to see professional armed soldiers hunting the bandits.

Twenty soldiers, all experienced veterans and expert guerrilla fighters, were formed into a highly mobile, well-armed unit led by an equally experienced commander, Capt. Jacob Rumph.

Rumph was born in Orangeburg District on July 9, 1752, the son of Jacob Rumph and Ann Dattwyler. During the Revolutionary War, Rumph became a captain in the Orangeburg militia and fought in a number of battles and skirmishes.

He gained the attention of the General Assembly when, in February 1783, he led his militia company against a large party of bandits. Such aggressive action was not common among militia officers, who were frequently accused of avoiding fighting. The governor felt sure that Rumph was the ideal man to lead the special anti-bandit Ranger unit.

Rumph's men were chosen for their willingness to fight and were well-mounted and provisioned to enable them to actively pursue bandit gangs. The results were impressive.

In February 1784, five bandits plundered a Mr. Waring of Cane-Acre of horses and clothes. Rumph's men tracked the gang and surprised them.

Two "notorious offenders" were killed, another captured. Of the two who escaped, one was badly wounded, supposedly mortally. All the stolen horses were recovered.

South Carolinians were delighted, and the newspapers were filled with graphic accounts of Capt. Rumph's actions. The *Weekly Gazette* was full of praise for the courageous Rangers who provided such an "essential service to the community."

The destruction of the bandit gang, it was believed, would act as "a warning to all such bad men, that vengeance, sooner or later, is sure to overtake."

Apparently the warning was well taken. The presence of Rangers had a dramatic impact on bandit activity in South Carolina. Criminals moved further inland or south into Georgia, out of reach of Rumph's men.

Judge Burke was soon able to report, "At this time and for Months past, the district of Orangeburg has been as quiet and secure as any part of this Country, owing to the activity and prudence of Captn. Rumph."

Jacob Rumph settled near Turkey Hill in Orangeburg. He speculated in land, purchasing nearly 300,000 acres between the North and South Edisto rivers, and became a wealthy and highly respected man.

In 1791, he was appointed lieutenant colonel of the state militia, and in 1808, a brigadier general. Between 1785 and 1795, Rumph represented Orange Parish in the General Assembly and went on to become a state senator.

He died on Oct. 10, 1812, leaving a wife and nine children, and was buried in the family burial ground near Orangeburg.

Though long forgotten, Rumph was once one of the best known, and most heroic, figures in South Carolina, the brave "Foe of the Banditti."