

Captain James McPherson

The Indian Fighter

Commander of the S.C. Rangers

By Robert E. H. Peebles

Sitting alone outside her door, her husband having gone hunting, Rachel McPherson was suddenly aware that three Indians hideously smeared with war paints had stepped from the woods quite near her. She was terrified with fright but had presence of mind enough to conceal it. She looked steadily, unflinchingly, into their faces. Two of the braves sprang forward to seize her, tomahawks aloft for a fresh scalp. Instantly the third brave restrained them:

"No! No touch! She Jimmy squaw!"

And the three backed into the forest, disappearing from the young wife's sight.

Jimmy was Captain James McPherson, the Indian Fighter, whose fame was such that even the Indians dared not molest his family for fear of reprisal. Born in Carolina in 1688, Jimmy was the son of James McPherson who came from Badenoch, Invernesshire, Scotland, where his brother was the "Cluny" or Chief of Clan McPherson.

By 1710 in both North and South Carolina the expansion of the English colonists had put serious pressure on the Indians. The Lords Proprietors had ordered that a new town be laid out, to be called "Beaufort Town" after one of their number. In June 1711 the Indians "complained that several white persons are settled within ye limits of their settlement whereby ye said Indians are damnified by ye stock of ye white men"

The situation came to a head at nearby Pocotaligo on Good Friday, 15 April 1715 when old Thomas Nairne, the Yemassee Agent, John Wright, Thomas Ruffly, John Cochran, William Bray, Samuel

Warner, along with some ninety colonists, traders, planters and their families were surprised at daybreak with the Yemassee War Cry and Slain.

The Indians had painted their faces and bodies in red and black rays to resemble devils coming out of Hell. The red meant war and the black meant death without mercy to their enemies.

Fortunately, two men escaped to spread the alarm. Within hours nearly 400 colonists saved themselves by crowding aboard a smuggler's vessel recently captured in Port Royal harbor. While one band of Yemassee burned Port Royal, another terrorized St. Bartholomew's Parish east of the Edisto River, where another two hundred white settlers were massacred.

Governor Craven rushed to mobilize the militia of Colleton County and established martial law. Three days later at the Saltkehatchie River his two hundred and forty militiamen routed a force of upwards of five hundred Yemassee warriors. Pocotaligo was recaptured and by autumn the Yemassee had withdrawn to Sapelo Island. From Sapelo they raided coastal plantations for several decades.

For his part in the War against the Yemassee James McPherson was rewarded with a tract of former Indian lands in what was to become Prince William Parish. He frequently had to defend it against marauding Indians. During one such desperate defense his wife, Rachel, loyally helped her husband by loading muskets. In the excitement of the struggle, she repeatedly pushed her hair back from her forehead with the back of her right hand. Shortly afterwards she gave birth to a fine boy, <sup>James</sup> whose hair perversely stood up in front throughout his life.

on 15<sup>th</sup> 1736 the South Carolina Assembly passed an act to establish the Rangers "to preserve the frontiers of this Province from the incursions of the Indian enemies." At that time James McPherson was chosen to take charge of the Rangers. He went to manage and visit landholdings to clear and cultivate. But in response to the call of his State, he devoted himself to organizing the small but amazingly effective force which was to guard the southern and western frontiers for two long years. Under his leadership they ranged up and down the coastal waters as far north as the Altamaha River (present Dawson), then considered the southern boundary of South Carolina. The South Carolina Rangers played a vital role in safeguarding the British colonies against both Indian and Spanish incursions.

ESCORTS GEN. OGLETHORPE

A high point in the service of the South Carolina Rangers came in February 1733 when "pursuant to a Resolution of the General Assembly of South Carolina", as that august body later putted itself on the book in its Journal, Captain James McPherson and fifteen of his Rangers escorted General James Oglethorpe, his sloop and five boatloads of original Georgia colonists, from Beaufort to the present site of the City of Savannah.

The Rangers "covered and protected the new settlers until they embarked themselves and as they had occasion" as the official report to the South Carolina Assembly records it. Their contribution deserves more notice than historians have been wont to give them.

The number of Rangers was first increased to twenty and then to thirty as the Journal of the General Assembly

shows The Company consisted of 100 men. Captain ... was paid 279 pounds per year. He must receive 166 pounds per year for ... A further ...

- |              |             |
|--------------|-------------|
| Jacob ...    | Joseph ...  |
| William ...  | William ... |
| Lawrence ... | George ...  |
| Richard ...  | William ... |
| James ...    | John ...    |
| William ...  | William ... |
| Richard ...  | Richard ... |
| James ...    | James ...   |
| William ...  | William ... |
| Samuel ...   |             |

The first list of names was ... by Captain ... at ... month. These included:

- James ...
- John ...

In 1737 the Rangers were sent to ... at ... they still ...

In March 1739 ... Rangers were ...

General James Oglethorpe wrote to Lt. Gov. William Bull of South Carolina on 29 Dec. 1739 outlining his needs for a proposed siege of St. Augustine. He asked for "as many horsemen as can be had, who may pass over the River Savanna, and passing the Oatmulgy and Oacony, and from thence to the Ferry on the River Altamaha, where they may pass over into Spanish Florida. Captain James McPherson can show them the path, for I think the people of Carolina would do very well to raise a troop of Rangers under the command of Captain McPherson who is a very good officer."

Captain McPherson and his Rangers were still on duty in March 1740. After the Battle of Bloody Marsh in 1742 there was no longer any danger from the Spaniards or the Indians and Captain McPherson retired to his plantation in Prince William Parish. Although he was often called "Major" McPherson, his obituary in the South Carolina Gazette on 4 April 1771 reads:

"On the 6<sup>th</sup> ult. died at his Plantation in Prince William's Parish, aged 83 years, Captain James McPherson, a Native of this Province, who in the first Indian War, and at several other periods since, served this country with Honour and Reputation. As he was remarkable for his Honesty, Generosity and Humanity, and more particularly for his friendly disposition, so his Death is universally regretted."

He left five sons; Joshua, Job, Ulysses, Isaac and John, the latter the father of General John McPherson. He also left three daughters: Kessiah, Susannah, and Elizabeth, who married Capt. Silas Miles of St. Paul's Parish. The town of McPhersonville was named for a descendent of Capt. James McPherson.