

## Islanders In History

# Militia Captain Was Island Planter

By Dr. Robert E.H. Peeples

Captain John Leacraft  
(1762-1806)

Hilton Head Island's roster of Revolutionary War era Militia captains included Capt. James Doharty, Capt. John Talbird, Capt. Lewis Bona and Capt. Charles Floyd.

The first two were half-brothers, sons of the daughter of a Swiss gentleman-soldier who had fought as an officer in the Tuscarora Indian War (1712) and the Yemassee Indian War (1715). Her father had given her to a young friend, British Subaltern James Doharty, one of the island's earliest land owners. The Dohartys' only son, Capt. James Doharty (1743-1779) inherited his father's Skull Creek plantation. Their only daughter, Mary Doharty, married Edward Leacraft and her two sons became active patriots while still teen-agers.

JOHN LEACRAFT was only 17, William Leacraft not quite 15, when they accompanied their uncles, Capt. James Doharty and Capt. Thomas Talbird, into hiding at Doharty's Bear Island Plantation on the mainland (near present Moss Creek Plantation). The Granville County Regiment had just suffered betrayal and serious defeat on John's Island. Another uncle, Lt. John Talbird had been badly wounded, left behind as a prisoner of war, his fate unknown. Still another uncle, Pvt. Richard Talbird, had been killed in the February Battle of Port Royal Island.

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Actually, John Leacraft and his uncle, Capt. Thomas Talbird, had

fled inland to join Col. William Harden's command under Gen. Francis Marion, the "Swamp Fox". The following year at the surrender of Charleston, May 12, 1780, Continental Gen. Benjamin Lincoln's entire command of more than 5,000 soldiers was lost to the British, one of the worst blunders and disasters of the the entire Revolutionary War. John Leacraft was among the prisoners of war. When honorable terms were offered, he accepted parole. But when the British broke the terms of parole by arresting 129 of the leaders of South Carolina and confining them aboard the infamous prison ships *Pack Horse* and *Torbay* in Charleston harbor, John Leacraft and most other Carolinians on parole quickly took up arms again.

In slightly more than a year, South Carolina's three great Militia leaders, Gen. Francis Marion, Gen. Thomas Sumter and Gen. Andrew Pickens, under the brilliant command of President John Rutledge, so thoroughly harassed and frustrated Lord Cornwallis that the morale of his army disintegrated and he fled precipitously from South Carolina, gratefully surrendering to an astonished George Washington at Yorktown, Oct. 19, 1781. But the war continued more than two years.

Young John Leacraft matured into a skilled guerrilla captain. When only 19 he received a direct Continental commission from Continental Gen. Nathaniel Green, early in 1781. On April 7 his commander, Col. William Harden, wrote to Gen. Francis Marion, "I have been able to keep from Purisburg to Pon Pon (Savannah River to Edisto River) clear." Four days later his optimistic intelligence was more nearly factual as he and his patriots, including John Leacraft, captured an astonished Col. Nicholas Lechmere, commander of the British Granville County Regiment, as he sat drinking with Col. Thomas Fenwick in Van Biber's Tavern near their stronghold, Ft. Balfour at Pocatigo. Col. Harden sent his brother, Maj. Edward Harden, to demand the surrender of the fort. And to their complete surprise, the garrison did just that, without a struggle.

THE CAROLINIANS there captured three colonels, one major, three captains, three lieutenants and 60 privates of Col. Fenwick's command, plus one lieutenant and 22 dragoons with their horses. The Royal Militia in Granville County never recovered from this loss.

But John Leacraft's work was not complete. He could never forget the violent night in 1779 when Royal Militia Captain Richard Pendarvis and Lt. William Patterson had repeatedly shot and finally killed his beloved uncle, Capt. James Doharty, disfiguring and mutilating his corpse. Straight from Ft. Balfour at Pocatigo Capt. Leacraft led his detail to the Montpelier Plantation (now called Palmetto Bluff) home of Capt. Pendarvis on south May River.

It was literally "Friday the Thirteenth" for both "Tory Dick" Pendarvis and Lt. Patterson. Word of the fall of Ft. Balfour had already reached them. They were preparing to seek refuge in flight to St. Augustine, Florida. That was not to be.

As they mounted their horses, they were surrounded by the patriots: Capt. John Leacraft, William Leacraft, Joseph Blackwood, William Bettison, Thomas Bettison and Nathan Gamble. Their faces were grim. When Pendarvis, a true gentleman and a direct descendant of King Edward III of England, saw that he could not escape, he ripped open his fair linen shirt, bared his chest and shouted, "Shoot and be

damned!"

Capt. Leacraft aimed his pistol and fired, killing him instantly. Then he drew his sword and ran Patterson through. The death of Capt. James Doharty was avenged.

The Georgia Gazette in Savannah carried a complete account of the affair in its issue of April 19, 1781, from the royalist point of view, noting that Pendarvis was survived by his widow. She was the former Margaret Martinangele, ~~sister~~ <sup>daughter</sup> of Royal Militia Capt. Philip Martinangele of Daufuskie Island, ~~formerly a~~ <sup>son of Philip's</sup> planter of Hilton Head Island and a native of Rome, Italy. The Pendarvises had no children. His vast Montpelier Plantation was inherited by his half-sister, Elizabeth Pendarvis, wife of S.C. Militia Capt. John Screven (1750-1802) and thus escaped confiscation by the 1782 "Jacksonborough" Legislature. In 1783, the widow married Capt. William Edwards Mongin of nearby Walnut Grove Plantation.

John Leacraft continued the work of winning independence

for Granville County from his Skull Creek plantation on Hilton Head Island, also watching over the family of his prisoner-of-war uncle, Capt. John Talbird, whose wife was delivered of a son, Henry Talbird, on the very day of Lord Cornwallis' surrender at Yorktown.

Then ~~in December~~ <sup>22 October</sup> the entire island was electrified with the tragic story of the murder of Pvt. Charles Davant in the ambush arranged at Big Gate by Royal Militia Capt. Philip Martinangele of Daufuskie Island.

THAT FINAL STRONGHOLD of Toryism had to be reduced. Plans were carefully laid. At Christmas a detachment of the Hilton Head Island Militia, styling itself "The Bloody Legion" in seeking blood vengeance for the shed blood of its own martyr, mustered for the trip across Calibogue Sound to Daufuskie. Capt. John Leacraft, holding the island's only Continental commission, took command.

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## Militia Captain...

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At the Martinangele mansion, Pvt. Israel Andrews was detailed to deliver the *coup de grace* to Capt. Philip <sup>brother</sup> Martinangele. Others found his son, the 27-year-old Abraham Martinangele, sick in bed and holding his infant daughter Margaret, named for her Aunt Margaret, widow of Capt. Pendarvis, in his arms. He, too, was quickly done to death for his part in the death of Pvt. Charles Davant. His wife and three small daughters were plundered of most of their possessions. There would be no further trouble from Daufuskie Island even though the British occupation of Savannah continued until July 11, 1782.

One historian of the Revolution wrote, "After the peace John

Leacraft retired to his plantation on Hilton Head and lived many years, but he left no family." Another recorded the fact that he raised his Uncle John's son, Henry (Yorktown) Talbird who lived his entire life of 65 years on the shore of Skull Creek. The 1790 Federal Census showed that John Leacraft was a large planter, employing 33 slaves in his establishment.

The Charleston Courier on August 27, 1806 noted, "Departed this transitory life at his plantation on Hilton Head Island, on the 15th instant, John Leacraft, Esq., after a tedious illness." He was a man who fought unceasingly to win independence, continually risking his life and property.