



Beaufort County 250 Committee
Revolutionary War
Battle Summaries

*The Battle of the
Rice Boats*

*Also Known As
The Battle of
Yamacraw Bluff*

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Georgia, the youngest and most sparsely populated of the thirteen colonies, was founded in 1732 as a buffer between British South Carolina and Spanish Florida. By the 1770s, the economy of Georgia depended heavily on agriculture, particularly rice cultivation in the Lowcountry and coastal regions, and on the labor of enslaved West Africans. Savannah, the colonial capital, was a critical commercial port and hub for rice exports.

As revolutionary sentiment spread throughout the colonies, Georgia's political and social landscape remained divided. Many residents, particularly a wealthier merchant class and landed coastal planters, retained strong loyalty to the British Crown. Others, especially backcountry settlers and younger men influenced by the radical rhetoric of liberty and self-governance, gravitated toward the Patriot cause. These tensions delayed Georgia's full embrace of the Continental Congress's resolutions, making it the last of the thirteen colonies to send delegates. By early 1776, however, Patriot leaders in Georgia had gained influence, forming a Provincial Congress and taking steps to control the colony's defenses. British authority, centered in Savannah, was increasingly challenged by the growing assertiveness of the local revolutionary movement.

Rice was not only Georgia's chief export but also a critical supply for British forces, particularly in the West Indies and in Florida, where food was scarce. With Britain besieging Boston, and after the Battles of Lexington and Concord, the British army was concentrated in Boston and was held captive there by the Continental Army for almost an entire year. Troops in the city could only get in or out, or get supplies, by sea. In December of 1775, a fleet was sent to Georgia to buy rice and provisions for the isolated troops. The ships began arriving at Savannah in January and were at anchorage in Tybee Roads at the mouth of the Savannah River during the month of February, while negotiations with local merchants for the sale of the rice were taking place. Royal Governor Wright of Georgia had declared that the ships should be supplied when the ban on rice exports would expire at the beginning of March.

On March 1, 1776 eleven American merchant ships filled with rice sat at the docks in Savannah, ready to set sail. Some of these ships were owned by people who did not support the American cause and were planning to ignore the ban on exporting rice to sell it for the best price possible, most likely to the waiting British buyers. The Continental Congress had previously banned all rice exports, but the Council of

Safety, the controlling body of the fledgling American government, worried that British warships anchored at Tybee Roads would take advantage of this expiration and forcibly seize the rice. Accordingly, the Council enacted several strict measures to prevent the seizure: (1) No ships with rice or other goods could leave port without special permission; (2) Any losses from this blockade could be reimbursed by the Continental Congress; and, (3) Rudders, sails, and rigging of the ships in port were to be removed and stored safely, making the vessels immobile. Georgia Militia Colonel Lachlan McIntosh was tasked with enforcing these orders.

On March 2nd, the Council also ordered that all property belonging to known Patriots and supporters of the American cause, including houses, ships, and even property owned by widows and orphans, be appraised. If these were damaged or destroyed in defense of the city, the Council would ask Congress for compensation. However, anyone who fled Savannah during the crisis would not be eligible for reimbursement and would be considered as having abandoned the Patriot cause. The Council also resolved that if the town or ships were at risk of falling into enemy hands, they should be burned rather than surrendered.

As the Georgia Council of Safety was taking precautionary measures, British naval officers, frustrated by failed negotiations to purchase food for Northern operations, and eager to secure supplies, decided to seize the rice by force. On February 29, 1776, British warships including the *HMS Scarborough* (20 guns), *Tamer* (16 guns), *Cherokee* (10 guns), and *Hinchinbrook* (8 guns) moved up the Savannah River. They were accompanied by around 200–300 British soldiers and marines under Major Grant.

After checking the Back River depth near Hutchinson Island, two British ships moved upriver. One reached a position directly across from Savannah, while the other, the *Hinchinbrook*, ran aground at low tide trying to circle the island to be positioned to fire on the city from above. It came under fire from Patriot riflemen led by Major Joseph Habersham, who forced the crew off the deck. Unfortunately, due to lack of boats, Habersham couldn't board the vessel to capture it. With the rising tide the boat was freed and it moved off

During the night of March 2nd, British troops quietly landed on Hutchinson Island, crossed it, and at 4:00 a.m. on March 3rd, they took control of the rice-laden merchant ships docked across from Savannah. Their move was so stealthy that it wasn't until 9:00 a.m. that Savannah's leaders even realized what had happened. There was suspicion that some ship captains may have surrendered their vessels without resistance. Two sailors covertly brought the news ashore and reported that Captain Rice, who had been assigned to dismantle the ships as ordered by the

Council of Safety, had boarded one of the vessels and was taken prisoner by the British.

The town of Savannah erupted in alarm. Colonel McIntosh quickly gathered 300 men and rushed to Yamacraw Bluff. There, they built a makeshift battery with three four-pounder cannons pointed at the ships. Before opening fire, the Patriots sent Lieutenant Daniel Roberts and Captain Raymond Demeré under a white flag of truce to negotiate the release of Captain Rice and his crew. However, in disregard of their flag, when they boarded the British ship, they were arrested and held as prisoners. After one-half hour, when the truce envoys didn't return, the Americans hailed the ship through a megaphone demanding the release of the prisoners. The British responded with insults. In reply, the Patriots fired two cannon shots at the vessel. The British then offered to talk ... if two trusted men would come aboard. Captains Screven and Baker were sent with 12 men of the St Johns Rangers, and they rowed under the stern of the vessel where they demanded the return of the prisoners. Incensed at an insult from someone on the British ship, Captain Baker fired his weapon at someone on deck, provoking the British to return fire with small arms and swivel guns. One Patriot was wounded, and the boat was nearly sunk as the two officers pulled back under fire until out of range. The Patriot battery on the bluff then opened up on the British ships, leading to a four-hour exchange of gunfire.

Seeing that negotiation had failed, and to prevent the British seizure of the rice, the Council of Safety ordered the captured ships to be burned. Volunteers, Captain Bowen, John Morel, Lieutenant James Jackson, Thomas Hamilton, and James Bryan, set fire to the *Inverness*, a ship filled with rice and deer hides, and sent it drifting down the river. Two British ships were soon set aflame. The British troops panicked and scrambled into the marsh, where they were picked off by American riflemen and artillery. The chaos intensified as the flames spread. Some ships were able to escape upriver under protection from a British schooner; three others burned and two more were captured. The two British ships captured, commanded by Captains Inglis and Wardell, were neither burned nor able to flee. They were boarded by Captain Screven and brought ashore, along with their crews, who were now prisoners. Writing that evening to their commander, Commodore Barclay, Inglis and Wardell informed him of their position and requested an exchange of prisoners, but Barclay summarily refused.

On the other side of the Savannah, South Carolina had sent 500 reinforcements under Colonel Stephen Bull, 150 of them volunteers from Charleston and 350 militiamen, many of them from the Beaufort camp and the adjacent Beaufort District. Crossing near the seaward end of Hutchinson Island, Bull and a company

of Rangers from Beaufort District arrived in time to join some of the Georgia militia to force the British to abandon most of the ships they had captured. In the end, three rice boats were burned, six were dismantled, and two managed to escape. Twelve other rice boats were able to escape down the Back River channel, but they were captured by the British ships at Tybee Roads and their cargos confiscated to be shipped north. Before leaving the area, a detachment of British Royal Marines landed on Skidaway Island to seize more supplies but were repelled by local militia under a Lieutenant Hext. In another late skirmish on the shores of Cockspur Island, two British officers, Lieutenants Oates and Laroach, were killed. Although Governor James Wright tried to claim British success in a March 10 letter to Lord Dartmouth, saying they left with 14 or 15 ships carrying 1,600 barrels of rice, this was greatly exaggerated. He also falsely claimed no English troops were lost.

In response to the continued imprisonment of Captain Rice and the two Patriot envoys, Georgia authorities arrested numerous prominent Loyalist members of the colonial assembly, including James Edward Powell, Anthony Stokes, Josiah Tattnall, and John Mullryne. Some Loyalist merchants were also forced to leave town by the Sons of Liberty and took refuge with the British fleet. After negotiations, the British agreed to release the Patriot prisoners on March 20 on the condition that arrested council members be freed and allowed either to stay in Savannah (if they promised not to aid British forces) or leave the colony, which they would be allowed to do safely.

On March 30, having accomplished their mission, the fleet set sail from Georgia with Governor Wright aboard, ending British rule in Georgia for the time being. The city would be retaken by the British, however, in 1778. The fleet, which was intended to supply the troops in Boston, was diverted when it was learned the British had abandoned the town. They first went to Newport, Rhode Island where the local militia fired on them when they tried to land, and they eventually ended up joining the British in Nova Scotia.

In the wake of the engagement, Georgia joined the other colonies more fully in the fight against British rule, and the memory of resisting the Royal Navy in Savannah's waters would remain a point of pride for local Patriots. Ultimately, the battle was a critical early step in Georgia's transformation from a reluctant colony to an active participant in the American Revolution.

Second, the battle provided a rallying point for the Georgia revolutionaries. It had demonstrated their willingness to fight and defend local interests and resources, and with the active cooperation of South Carolina forces, the engagement also vividly

reinforced the value of unity between Continental and local militia forces in resisting British encroachment.

Third, the denial of the full British rice supply contributed to broader logistical and resource difficulties for British forces in East Florida and the Caribbean where food sources were especially scarce. The loss of provisions forced British commanders to redirect resources and reinforced the challenge of maintaining imperial control in the southern colonies.

Though relatively minor in terms of casualties or territory gained, the Battle of the Rice Boats had profound consequences. First, it represented the collapse of British control over Georgia, at least temporarily. With Governor Wright gone and British forces withdrawing to sea, the Patriots asserted control over Savannah and the surrounding region. Despite this victory, Georgia's revolutionary success would not be permanent. In December 1778, British forces invaded and recaptured Savannah, beginning a prolonged campaign in the South that would see brutal fighting, shifting alliances, and devastating consequences for both Patriot and Loyalist communities.

Sources:

The History of Georgia: Revolutionary Epoch by Charles Colcock Jones (1883)