

Beaufort County 250 Committee
Revolutionary Era Biographies

Jim Capers
African-American Hero
of the Revolutionary War
in the Lowcountry

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SOUTH CAROLINA

Jim Capers: An African American Patriot of the American Revolution

Born into bondage in colonial South Carolina, Capers rose to become a respected drum major and guerilla fighter in the Patriot cause, serving in some of the most pivotal and bloody battles of the American Revolutionary War - including the Battles of Beaufort and Eutaw Springs. His life, service, and legacy highlight the often-neglected contributions of African Americans to the birth of the United States and stand as a testament to the complex and enduring struggle for liberty and recognition.

Jim Capers was born on September 23, 1742, on an island plantation owned by Richard Capers slightly north of Charles Town in South Carolina. Three Capers brothers, Gabriel, Richard, and William, of French Huguenot descent from Wales were among the earliest English settlers in the Charles Town colony area and they established their plantation on the barrier island that later bore their name. According to Richard Capers's 1763 will, Jim was one of the most valuable enslaved individuals in the estate, valued at £300 by the standards of that time.

Whether Capers remained enslaved or obtained his freedom by the time of the Revolution remains a matter of scholarly debate, though pension records suggest he may have been free by the time of his enlistment in 1775. The other contention is that Jim was assigned by his master Richard Jr as body servant to his son William, who was enlisted as a Lieutenant in June of 1775. Regardless of his formal status, what is clear is that Jim Capers had the heart of a patriot and the courage to serve.

In June 1775, at the age of 33, Capers enlisted in the 4th South Carolina Regiment as a drum major. In 18th-century military structure, the position of drum major was no ceremonial role. On the battlefield, drum signals conveyed orders that could not be shouted above the roar of musket fire and cannon blasts. In camp, the drum marked daily routines such as wake-up calls, musters, meals, formations and drills. As such, Capers held a position of importance and responsibility—one that placed him in the thick of the action and among the most visible and audible symbols of military order.

Capers saw extensive combat during the Southern campaign of the war, beginning with the Battle of Savannah in 1778. He was engaged during the 1779 Siege of Savannah as American and French forces tried, and ultimately failed, to retake the city from the British. His unit was nearly enveloped by the British when they used a path through the undergrowth to enfilade the regimental line he was in, and Capers among about half of the men escaped capture or death. He later served during the fall of Charleston

in 1780, where Patriot forces were overwhelmed, over 5,000 of them captured, and the city was occupied by British troops.

In the chaos that followed, many Patriot soldiers, including Capers, regrouped under the leadership of General Francis Marion - the famed "Swamp Fox" - and engaged in small-unit guerrilla warfare across the Lowcountry. With Marion and his Partisan Brigade, Capers was active near the Battles of Camden and Hobkirk's Hill, and he was directly engaged in the Battle at Biggins Church in July, 1781.

One of the most significant events in Capers's service came prior to the Fall of Charleston, on February 3, 1779, at the Battle of Beaufort, also known as the Battle of Port Royal Island. This engagement was part of the British southern strategy following the capture of Savannah. British Regular forces, 200 plus strong, under Major William Gardner landed on Port Royal Island with the intent to capture Beaufort and its port to establish control of the Port Royal Sound as a staging ground for further attacks on Charleston. They were met by American forces led by General William Moultrie, among which were about 250 local militia commanded by General Stephen Bull, a small contingent of Continentals, a company of Jewish soldiers from Charleston, and, notably, several African Americans. Drummer Jim Capers, in a company under Lieutenant John Brown, was among them.

The battle was fought on open ground near Gray's Hill. British regulars advanced in line from a wooded area to the north of a swamp but were met with coordinated fire from American artillery and musket lines positioned on a slight rise behind felled trees to the south of the swampy area and perpendicular to the only road, on a causeway, leading to Beaufort. Capers, as drum major, would have played a vital role in maintaining order, as he relayed commands through drum calls and boosted morale through drum cadence. After an intense 45-minute exchange, as ammunition on both sides was running low, the British were forced to retreat first, leaving the Americans in control of the field. The battle marked a rare but important Patriot victory in South Carolina, one when militia did not break and run at the sight of British Regulars with fixed bayonets, and at a time when British dominance in the South seemed inevitable. It was the first time in the war in South Carolina that the Patriots defeated British Regulars in a land-based battle.

Capers's contributions did not end there. After his capture at Charleston and parole, he returned to militia service with his master's grandson, now Captain Wm Capers. He continued to serve with distinction in Marion's brigade, engaging in small raids and ambushes in the swamps and forests of the Lowcountry. At the September 8 Battle of Eutaw Springs in 1781 - one of the last major battles in the South, and very likely the bloodiest of the Revolutionary War - Capers was gravely wounded. He

sustained two saber cuts to the chest, one to the face, and was shot through the side by a musket ball that reportedly killed the drummer standing directly behind him. Despite his injuries, Capers survived, returned to service three weeks later, and may have been at Yorktown on October 19, though Marion's Partisan Brigade was not officially present. After the surrender he shipped to Philadelphia on temporary duty for an unspecified assignment and was returned by ship to Charleston. He was honorably discharged in 1782.

Following the war, Capers returned to Sumter County and married a woman named Millie, who was still enslaved, in 1826. Together, they moved to Alabama where they had six children. In 1849, Capers, then over 100 years old, applied for a Revolutionary War pension in Pike County, Alabama. Records indicate that he lived on a plantation owned by Norman McCleod where Milley was still enslaved. Although he lacked official discharge papers, his application and good character was supported by testimony from Mc Cleod and local landowners and fellow veterans who attested to his long and honorable service. He was granted a modest pension of eight dollars per month but died in 1853 at age 111 before receiving his first payment.

Jim Capers was buried in Pike County. His story has not been forgotten. In 2015, the Alabama Society of the Sons of the American Revolution officially marked his grave, recognizing his contributions to the American cause.

Today, Capers is increasingly recognized as a pioneering figure in the history of African American military service. The Battle of Beaufort, where he played a visible and vital role, has drawn renewed attention from historians and preservationists. There are efforts underway to erect a monument to Capers on the site of the battlefield at Eutaw Springs, where a 7-acre parcel will be dedicated to a park in his name. A fitting but overdue tribute to a man who fought for a country that had yet to recognize him as a citizen.