Beaufort County 250 Committee
Revolutionary Era Biographies

Captain John Joyner
South Carolinian Naval Hero

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SC 250 ANNIVERSARY American Revolution | BEAUFORT COUNTY SOUTH CAROLINA

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Captain John Joyner

John Joyner was born circa 1720, likely in coastal South Carolina or in Beaufort, North Carolina, into a family of planters and tradesmen of English descent. By the time the American colonies edged toward rebellion in the 1770s, Joyner had settled in the Beaufort District of South Carolina - an agriculturally rich and strategically significant coastal region bounded by rivers, marshes, and the Atlantic shoreline. As tensions with Britain escalated, Joyner aligned himself with the emerging Patriot movement.

By early 1775, Joyner had become active in the local militia organization, joining the ranks of other Beaufort-area men determined to defend their liberties against royal encroachment. From his plantation on St Helena Island between Beaufort and Battery Creek, he was dependent on the deepwater creeks of the area for transport and, though he was valued as a dragoon, Joyner soon was appointed to service as a scout boat captain out of Port Royal before the start of war. In July 1775, appointed by General Stephen Bull to lead the Beaufort District Militia in intercepting a British shipment of arms, he participated in the seizure of the HMS Philippa in what was likely the first, large-scale armed encounter between British and Patriot forces during the war in SC, and was involved with several early patrol encounters with British vessels and privateers

John Joyner entered Revolutionary naval service at a time when the young United States had no formal navy to speak of. Following the outbreak of war, naval defense was organized at the state and privateer levels. Joyner, a seasoned mariner with previous experience along the Atlantic coast in Georgia near Frederica or in the Caribbean, before his service in Beaufort District waters, was commissioned an officer in the South Carolina Navy. Operating out of Charleston and Beaufort, his ship was assigned to the disruption of British supply lines and occasional support of American and French forces in the Caribbean

In May of 1780, the fall of Charleston to the British marked a dire turning point for the South Carolina Patriots. British commanders believed the colony effectively subdued, and many residents were pressured into swearing loyalty to the Crown. The main naval base in the southeast was now in British hands, and many of the Navy's ships were captured or destroyed, rendering centralized naval command impossible. However, smaller-scale, mobile operations out of obscure, inland waterways continued, and Joyner refused to take the oath of allegiance to the Crown and returned to sea to continue his mission of interception and confiscation of British supplies.

In late 1781, Joyner was appointed a captain, and second in command of the *USS South Carolina*, then under the command of Commodore Alexander Gillon, a Dutch-born American officer tasked with deploying vessels off the Carolinas to harass British shipping and supply Patriot forces with captured goods. The *South Carolina* was a formidable frigate for its time - armed with 28 twelve-pounders and 12 six-pounders, with a crew complement nearing 450 men.

The *USS South Carolina* - also known early on as *Indien* - was one of the largest and most powerful warships in the American fleet. Originally constructed in France for the American commissioners in Europe, the ship was a 40-gun frigate designed for speed and endurance. Delays in its delivery and various diplomatic entanglements meant the vessel did not reach American service until relatively late in the war, by which time it had been renamed *South Carolina* and was placed under the authority of the South Carolina Navy.

During its brief but impactful operational period, *South Carolina* cruised the Atlantic and Caribbean, capturing multiple enemy merchantmen and privateers. Joyner, as a captain aboard or over one of the ship's auxiliary vessels or prize crews, was instrumental in directing boarding actions, overseeing navigation and combat preparations, and managing the handling of captured prizes. When Gillion had to engage in some political-legal matters with the courts in Luxembourg, he turned command over to Joyner.

The vessel's greatest success came in late 1782, when the *South Carolina* captured several British merchantmen and enemy privateers, bringing needed supplies and morale boosts to the American cause. After assignment to patrol for and support blockade runners off Virginia and the Delaware Bay, *South Carolina* engaged with the *HMS Monk*, capturing her in one of the most significant victories against the Royal Navy during the entire war. Reports from the period highlight that these captures disrupted British trade routes and weakened Loyalist resupply efforts.

However, the ship's fortunes reversed dramatically in December 1782, when the *South Carolina* attempted to leave the neutral port of Philadelphia and run the British blockade at the mouth of the Delaware River with three merchant ships. Unfortunately, British intelligence had been alerted to the ships' movement. As the *South Carolina* attempted to make for open water, it was intercepted by a squadron of British frigates—*HMS Diomede, Quebec, and Astraea.*

In the fierce engagement that followed, *South Carolina*, despite her size and firepower, was outmaneuvered and overwhelmed by the combined British force. After a

prolonged battle and heavy casualties, Joyner, who refused to surrender the ship, fired a last salvo at the British pursuit vessel *Diomede* but it was futile. Now hemmed in by the enemy, Commodore Gillon surrendered the ship on December 20, 1782.

Captain John Joyner was among the officers captured and taken as a prisoner of war. What happened with Joyner afterward is a matter of debate as there are no definitive records. Some accounts have him severely wounded during the engagement and dying of his wounds about a week after capture. Other accounts have him exchanged as a prisoner in New York at the end of the war and sent back to Beaufort to resume his plantation life, where he died in 1796 and was buried in St Helena Churchyard. However, a recently discovered document indicates that in March of 1784, Joyner was brought before a Naval court of inquiry surrounding the loss of *South Carolina* and was honorably acquitted of any wrongdoing, so his death in 1796 appears to be the actual outcome.