



Beaufort County 250 Committee
Revolutionary Era Biographies

*General Stephen Bull
Commander of the
Beaufort District Militia*

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Beaufort County 250 Committee Biographical Sketch
Stephen Bull
Patriot Commander of Beaufort District Militia

Stephen Bull, born around 1733 in Prince William's Parish (present-day Beaufort County, South Carolina), was a planter, legislator, and Revolutionary War officer who played a significant role in South Carolina's struggle for independence. A member of one of the colony's oldest and most prominent families, Bull broke ranks with many of his Loyalist-leaning relatives to join the Patriot cause.

The son of Stephen Bull Sr. and Martha Godin, and the nephew of Lieutenant Governor William Bull Jr., Stephen Bull was deeply entrenched in the Lowcountry elite. He was raised at Sheldon Plantation and came of age during a period of British colonial consolidation. His early public service included appointment as a justice of the peace in 1756 and election to the Colonial Commons House of Assembly from 1757 to 1760. However, by the early 1770's, Bull had aligned himself with the movement for American independence.

Bull's Revolutionary War service was extensive and dedicated. In February 1775, as South Carolina mobilized against British authority, he was appointed colonel and commander of the Beaufort District militia. His leadership quickly became critical in the securing of strategic supplies and defending of key positions.

In June 1775, Bull led a daring and successful mission to intercept and capture a British powder ship, *HMS Philippa*, off the coast, seizing over 16,000 pounds of gunpowder. This powder was crucial in arming Patriot forces in both South Carolina and Georgia, as well as providing badly needed munitions to General George Washington in the Siege of Boston. A second interception later that summer, reportedly from the British ship *Mary Gordon*, netted another 11,000 pounds. These early victories gave Bull a strong reputation as an effective and daring militia commander.

In 1776, Bull led his men into Georgia and helped occupy Savannah, supporting Patriot forces and working to suppress Loyalist activity in the region. As his grandfather, William, had co-founded the Georgia colony with James Oglethorpe, his efforts naturally contributed to stabilizing the southern flank of the rebellion and demonstrated his capacity for cross-border coordination with Georgia Patriots. In recognition of his leadership, Bull was promoted to Brigadier General of the South Carolina militia in March 1778. That year, he commanded South Carolina troops on

the Southern wing of the American Army in the campaign to invade British East Florida. Although the campaign failed to achieve lasting strategic gains, it marked Bull as a central figure in the region's military affairs.

His most notable battlefield moment came in February 1779, when he and his troops helped repel a landing and assault by British Regulars on the port town of Beaufort during the Battle of Port Royal Island. Bull served under General William Moultrie in what became the first land-based Patriot victory over the British following British reinforcements in the South. His regiment's actions helped secure the Beaufort District temporarily from further incursion, boosting morale and halting British momentum along the coast.

However, the war's tide turned in 1780. As British forces under General Henry Clinton captured Charleston in May, the Patriot defense in the Lowcountry disintegrated. Bull's Beaufort regiment, already worn by losses and attrition, effectively collapsed. With the fall of Charleston, Bull withdrew from active military service and, rather than take the oath of allegiance to the Crown, he went into voluntary exile in Virginia and later Maryland, avoiding imprisonment but ending his active command.

Following the end of hostilities, Bull returned to South Carolina and resumed public life. He served in the South Carolina House of Representatives from 1783 to 1790, helping guide the state through its post-war reconstruction and reintegration into the newly formed United States. Though elected twice to the State Senate, Bull declined to serve, preferring to remain active at the local level and attend to the affairs of operating his lands.

He married twice: first to Elizabeth Woodward, and later to Ann Barnwell in 1772. With Ann, he had three daughters - Charlotte, Mary, and Sarah. His family, though touched by the disruptions of war, remained one of the most influential in the Beaufort region.

Stephen Bull died in 1800. He was initially buried at Ashley Hall but was later re-interred at Magnolia Cemetery in Charleston. Though not as widely recognized as other Revolutionary figures, Bull's contributions - both in militia command and post-war governance - left a lasting impact on the Beaufort District and the state at large.