



Beaufort County 250 Committee
Revolutionary Era Biographies

Thomas Heyward, Jr
South Carolina
Signer of the Declaration
and
Beaufort District Patriot

By
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Beaufort County 250 Committee Biographical Sketch
Thomas Heyward Jr
South Carolina Signer and Revolutionary Patriot

Thomas Heyward Jr., a native South Carolinian and one of the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence, was a devoted patriot, lawyer, and soldier whose contributions to the American Revolution were marked by bravery, sacrifice, and an unwavering commitment to the cause of liberty. Born into the South Carolina Lowcountry elite, Heyward was deeply influenced by the ideals of the Enlightenment and became one of the state's most prominent revolutionary figures.

Born on July 28, 1746, at Old House Plantation in St. Luke's Parish (present-day Jasper County), Heyward was the eldest son of Colonel Daniel Heyward, a wealthy rice planter, and Mary Butler Heyward. Like many young men of his class, he received a classical education. He studied law at Middle Temple in London, where he was exposed to British political institutions and English philosophies of constitutional governance. While in England, Heyward became increasingly sympathetic to the growing colonial resentment toward Parliament's interference in colonial affairs.

Heyward returned to South Carolina in 1771, fully trained in law and ready to serve his community. He quickly gained prominence as a lawyer and became involved in local politics. In 1772, he was elected to the Colonial Commons House of Assembly. His entry into public life coincided with escalating tensions between Britain and its American colonies. Heyward emerged as a vocal advocate of American rights and self-government, which put him in opposition to his father's political leanings.

Daniel Heyward Sr. was a prominent and conservative rice planter in the South Carolina Lowcountry, with strong economic and social ties to the British imperial system. Like many elite planters of his generation in the Lowcountry, he had benefited from royal patronage, protection, and trade. The senior Heyward is often described as loyal to the Crown, or at the very least opposed to radical upheaval. They became estranged during the opening months of the war, and Daniel died in 1777 with their relationship unresolved.

As the revolutionary fervor intensified, Heyward joined South Carolina's Council of Safety and was elected a delegate to the Second Continental Congress in 1776, where he represented South Carolina alongside Edward Rutledge and Arthur Middleton. At the age of 30, he affixed his name to the Declaration of Independence, affirming his willingness to risk his life and fortune for American liberty. Signing the document

marked a turning point for Heyward, binding him to the cause and putting him in open defiance of the British Crown.

Heyward returned to South Carolina shortly after signing the Declaration and immersed himself in the military and political struggle at home. He served as a circuit court judge but also took up arms when his state called upon him. He joined the South Carolina militia, eventually earning a commission as a captain in the First Regiment of Artillery. He participated in key engagements in the southern theater of the war, including the Battle of Port Royal Island, the Siege of Savannah, and the defense of Charleston.

In May 1780, Charleston fell to British forces under General Sir Henry Clinton. Heyward, then actively serving with South Carolina's militia, was captured along with over 5,000 American troops. The British transported Heyward and other prominent patriots to St. Augustine, Florida, where he was held as a prisoner of war. During his captivity, he endured harsh conditions and had limited communication with the outside world. Yet, even in imprisonment, he remained a staunch advocate for the revolutionary cause. In 1781, he was released as part of a prisoner exchange and returned to a South Carolina ravaged by war.

Heyward resumed public service soon after his return. In 1782, he was re-elected to the South Carolina legislature and also returned to the bench as a judge. That same year, he presided over the trial and condemnation of several Loyalists who had supported British rule during the occupation of the state. These trials were controversial but reflected the deep divisions and raw emotions that defined the postwar South.

Despite the turbulence of war, Heyward continued to work toward the establishment of a stable government in South Carolina. He supported the ratification of the state and federal constitutions and helped guide South Carolina through the difficult transition from a colony to a republican state. Heyward eventually retired from public life in the late 1790s, turning his attention back to his plantation and family.

Though not as widely known as other founding fathers, his contributions were significant. He was one of only four South Carolinians to sign the Declaration of Independence and among the few signers who actively fought in the war and suffered imprisonment for the cause. Thomas Heyward Jr. died on March 6, 1809, at the age of 62. He was buried in the family cemetery at Old House Plantation. His legacy endures in South Carolina's Revolutionary history, remembered as a man who gave not just his signature but his service and sacrifice to the birth of a nation

