



Beaufort County 250 Committee
Revolutionary Era Biographies

*Colonel William Harden
Ranger Commander
of Beaufort District*

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Beaufort County 250 Committee Biographies Colonel William Harden

Colonel William Harden, a figure of regional military prominence during the American Revolutionary War, emerged from the swamps and sandy woods of South Carolina's Beaufort District to lead one of the most effective partisan commands operating in the southern theater. Though less well-known than contemporaries like Francis Marion or Thomas Sumter, Harden's role in resisting British occupation in the Lowcountry was instrumental in keeping Patriot hopes alive during the darkest years of the war in South Carolina.

Little is known about William Harden's early life, though he is believed to have been born in the South Carolina backcountry around the mid-18th century. By the time of the American Revolution, Harden was a resident of the Beaufort District. As an expansive and strategically significant region encompassing the Sea Islands and mainland territory between the Savannah and Combahee Rivers, the area was rich in rice and indigo plantations and vital to British efforts to pacify the rebellious southern colonies following their capture of Charleston in May 1780.

In the wake of Charleston's fall, the British Crown declared the colony conquered, and many Lowcountry residents, including prominent planters, were compelled to take loyalty oaths. Like many Carolina patriots, Harden initially refused the oath and went into hiding, but the tide soon began to shift as the resistance reorganized under guerrilla commanders, one of whom was Harden. In the late summer of 1780, Harden emerged as a Patriot leader in the southern Lowcountry. Commissioned as a colonel of South Carolina state troops by Governor John Rutledge, he formed a mobile force composed primarily of mounted militia drawn from the plantations and pine forests of what is today Jasper, Hampton, and Beaufort Counties. Harden's mobile command often operated with minimal supplies and relied on hit-and-run tactics, local intelligence, and the knowledge of the terrain to avoid direct confrontation with superior British and Loyalist forces.

One of Harden's earliest and most celebrated actions occurred in March 1781, when he led a swift and daring raid on the British outpost at Fort Balfour in the town of Pocotaligo. The fort, garrisoned by British regulars and Loyalist troops, controlled access to the South Carolina interior and guarded an important crossing of the Pocotaligo River. With approximately 75 men, Harden approached the fort under cover of darkness and enveloped its defenses. Cut off from reinforcements and besieged, the defenders, many of whom had Patriot sympathies, mutinied and forced the surrender. This victory, though small in scale, provided a crucial morale boost to

the Patriot cause in the region and disrupted British control of the Beaufort hinterlands.

Following the raid, Harden's fame grew, and his force expanded. His men—often referred to as “Harden's Rangers” - engaged in frequent skirmishes with Loyalist bands and British patrols across the lower part of the state. In coordination with Francis Marion and other militia leaders, Harden's operations were part of a broader Patriot strategy of irregular warfare that kept British forces stretched thin and constantly harassed in their rear areas.

Harden's success was due in no small part to his familiarity with the geography of the Lowcountry which he used in developing his unconventional tactics. He used the tidal creeks, swamps, and dense woods to his advantage, frequently striking quickly and withdrawing before British reinforcements could arrive. He also enjoyed the support of local Patriot sympathizers, including planters, enslaved individuals who served as guides and scouts, and small farmers who opposed Loyalist dominance. In 1782, as British forces began to withdraw from South Carolina in preparation for the end of the war, Harden's units continued to press against remaining Loyalist elements. His name appears in various dispatches and correspondence of the time, often cited for his courage, brutality, effectiveness, and commitment to the cause of independence.

At one point, Harden was considered for promotion to General of the Militia. Despite his success he faced criticism from traditional military leaders for his men's lack of discipline and was passed over for promotion to General in favor of John Barnwell, forcing Harden to resign his commission in Nov 1781. However, Harden's men refused to obey Barnwell and forced Barnwell's resignation. Francis Marion then assumed command from too distant a post and Harden's company fragmented into Patriot gangs, many of them committing awless acts against the Loyalists in the area.

At the end of the war, Harden was elected early as a senator and was present at the Jacksonboro Assembly in Jan 1782. He later returned to private life in Beaufort District, where he was recognized as a local hero and a symbol of resistance. Like many Revolutionary officers, he was entitled to receive compensation in the form of land grants or property for his wartime service. He appears in public records as a landowner near Pocotaligo and a respected figure, though he never achieved the broader fame of other partisan leaders. He is believed to have passed away in Nov 1785, and genealogical records indicated he was deceased before 1789. Although it is reported he was buried on his Pocotaligo plantation, it is believed he may be buried in the Prince William Parish Church (Old Sheldon) Churchyard.