



Beaufort County 250 Committee
Revolutionary Era Biographies

William Hazzard Wigg
Daring and Resilient
Patriot Leader

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SC250
ANNIVERSARY
American Revolution

BEAUFORT COUNTY
SOUTH CAROLINA

BC 250 Committee: Biographical Sketch
Major William Hazzard Wigg
Daring and Resilient Patriot Leader

William Hazzard Wigg lived with his wife on their plantation on the Okatie River on the land of present-day Oldfield Plantation. By the time of the Revolution he owned over 1,000 acres on the Okatie, 400 acres in St Marks Parish, lots in Beaufort, and other land in the area. At age 29 in 1775, he entered service as a Captain of Cavalry in the infancy of the Beaufort District Militia.

With the Ranger unit, he first saw active service in the expedition into East Florida under General Stephen Bull and Colonel William Thomson, in the Battles at Coosawhatchie and Stono Ferry, in the Siege of Savannah where he served under D'Estaing's command, and at the Siege of Charleston where he was captured and imprisoned. Alexander Garden reported that, at Coosawhatchie, Colonel John Laurens was probably indebted for his life to Captain Wigg, who gave Laurens his horse to carry him from the field, incapable of moving after he had been severely wounded and had his horse shot from under him.

In the aftermath of the battle, as Wigg was returning to the line after leaving Laurens with the surgeons, he met the retreating Americans and learned that the enemy had captured a close friend and relative named Cuthbert (John). Hurrying to the side of the road where the British Army would have to pass, he hid in ambush until the prisoners were brought past at the end of the column. When Cuthbert appeared, Wigg dashed from the underbrush, grabbed him, pulled him up across his saddle and galloped off into the shadows of the nearby swamp. Thought by some to be a legend, this incident was recorded by historian Garden shortly after the rescue.

Wigg's chosen war horse, named Independence for his spirit, was a magnificent Roan, eighteen hands high, that had been foaled at his Okatie Plantation on July 4, 1776 and trained by Wigg personally. Independence was generally recognized to be the "strongest and fastest horse in Beaufort". In a subsequent instance, when Wigg was carrying dispatches for General Bull and was being pursued by Tarleton's dragoons north of Port Royal Island, to avoid being trapped at the edge of the water and captured with sensitive information, he spurred his horse on into the Port Royal River and swam the horse across, "attempting what no man had dared before or since". And in one colorful version of the story, Wigg had beaten off the hungry sharks with his saber as Independence carried them across.

Following the Siege of Charleston, Wigg and many other American officers captured were imprisoned on the ship *Pack Horse*, anchored in Charleston Harbor. While in

prison, Wigg's brother-in-law by marriage, Isaac Hayne, was sentenced to hang because of his refusal to join the British Army. Wigg was the only American allowed by the British to accompany Hayne to the gallows in Charleston, and his passionate anti-British speech after the execution to the assembled citizens resulted in an unheard of and extraordinary punitive expedition to burn the Wigg plantations. A trial document from the time states:

“Immediately after the execution, a special expedition by water was dispatched with orders to plunder and destroy the property on his (Wigg) two plantations lying on the Okatee River in St Lukes Parish, Beaufort District. Within about twenty days all the perishable property of William Wigg was swept away from him. His slaves were wodd. His crops were left to waste. His buildings were put to the torch. His flocks and herds were given to the slaughter knife, and his horses were carried off to the enemy's lines at Savannah. In short the plantations Mr. Wigg had left flourishing were now converted into a wilderness.”

This act, against the conventions of war and against the person and property of a prisoner of war resulted in a later claim, the famous Wigg Claim, against the United States government.

When the British started to evacuate Charles Town in 1782, they ordered the schooner *Pack Horse* to proceed to New York for a prisoner exchange under the guard of a frigate. An incident occurred during the voyage at night that allowed the 36 prisoners from Beaufort District to take control over the prison ship and evade the frigate escort under the cover of darkness. They grounded the ship near Halifax, NC, scattered into the woods and assembled in the city before making their way south through the pine barrens while avoiding British and Loyalist patrols, and made it back to Beaufort about six week later. But Wigg did not walk.

Captured also by the British at Charles Town was the horse, Independence. He had been taken to Savannah initially and given to a British dragoon, who was then later shipped to North Carolina by transport and assigned to station in Halifax. In hiding while assembling, Wigg had seen the British officer riding the horse and after he had moved to a better vantage point, a short shrill whistle caused Independence to rear, unseat his rider, and gallop up to Wigg, who was quickly up in the saddle and riding back to Okatie. Independence lived until 1807 and was buried with military honors.

Following the war, William Hazzard Wigg was rebuilding his plantations, adding to his land holdings, and taking part in civic affairs. He was a trustee on the first board of Beaufort College and one of three men appointed commissioners for rebuilding the court house and gaol in Beaufort in 1781 and for selling the land that the Fort Lyttleton had stood on. In May of 1788, Wigg was a member of a State Convention which ratified the Federal Constitution, and he also served in the South Carolina . House of Representatives.

William Hazzard Wigg died of pleurisy in 1798, having had only one son. That son, William Hutson, had only one child, William Hazzard Wigg II, who was named for his grandfather. Wigg II inherited his father's lands and fortune at his death in 1827, but by the early 1850's had moved the family to Washington, DC where he was finally successful in prosecuting the family suit for the Revolutionary War losses of his grandfather. The case was noteworthy because the plunder of Wigg's property had been "done in violation of the terms under which Charleston had capitulated. Namely, that the prisoners under that capitulation should, when paroled, remain in peaceable possession of their property." Amazingly, after a decade of hearings, the "famous Wigg Claim" was settled in 1858, awarding the family \$43,000 in pre-Civil War dollars.