

Beaufort County 250 Committee
Revolutionary War
Battle Summaries

*Loyalist Capture of
Beaufort
March 1782*

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In the early decades of the Eighteenth Century, Beaufort had been the southernmost frontier town in the American Colonies of Great Britain. Following the Indian Wars (1711-1728) and the forced removal of the Yemassee from the land north of the Savannah River, the countryside beyond the Combahee River offered fresh new opportunities for the long-time residents and new European arrivals in Charleston. Established families among the coastal aristocracy and wealthy merchants acquired land in the Southern parishes and dominated the political leadership in the new colony of South Carolina, as well as the growing government organization in the Beaufort District.

Many of these new settlers, especially in the coastal areas, were descendants of the Barbadian and English families who had first come to the shores of the newly granted Province of Carolina from 1670-1690. As such, they typically had strong allegiance to the Crown and from the beginning of hostilities tended to be staunch Loyalists. Other newer settlers, and many of the merchant class, typically settled on the mainland and upriver and without any particular loyalty to England, most often leaned decidedly to the Patriot cause. As a result, Beaufort District had a strong, economically and politically powerful Loyalist population and, at the same time, a widely-distributed and growing collection of residents who had less cause to oppose the Patriot movement.

The geography of the District further intensified and reinforced a strong partisan sentiment in the Lowcountry - rivers, estuaries and fingers of water separating long peninsulas of land were areas that tended to attract inhabitants of similar political persuasion. In early Revolutionary years, the lands near Beaufort and Savannah and along the rivers nearby, Loyalists were dominant, while in the interior and upriver on the mainland, far more broadly distributed, Patriots were in force. And the source of these opposing forces were not limited to Beaufort District, as Loyalist and Patriot militias from neighboring Georgia and Colleton District were frequently operating in the area as well.

Emblematic of this conflict was the relationship between the Stephen Bull and Andrew DeVeaux IV families of the Laurel Bay area of Port Royal Island. Both Bull and DeVeaux were Beaufort born and had been neighbors for years when the war began. Bull, at roughly age 40, was commissioned in the Beaufort District militia in 1775, while DeVeaux, only 17 at the time, enlisted as a Patriot. Stephen Bull and his cousin John endured a divided family and were the only members of the large Bull clan who declared allegiance to the Patriot cause. DeVeaux's father was a

prominent, wealthy planter and an outspoken Loyalist when hostilities began, and he was subjected to constant insults and harassment by Patriot sympathizers in the Beaufort environs. Andrew's enlistment as a Patriot caused extreme friction within the family, and after two years of mistreatment of his father, an incident involving Bull caused him to switch sides.

In 1778, DeVeaux organized what was described as a "group of Loyalist ruffians" to disrupt Patriot meetings and harass Patriot sympathizers in and around Beaufort and when British troops arrived on Port Royal Island in February 1779, he assisted their landing and directed the English in the burning of the neighboring Bull homestead and the plundering of nearby Patriot homes. After the failed attempt to capture Beaufort and the defeat in the Battle of Port Royal Island on February 3, in return for his risk and demonstrated loyalty, DeVeaux was commissioned a Major in the Royal Foresters a Beaufort and Colleton District Loyalist militia unit. In that capacity he reported to the infamous Edward Fenwick, who had commanded Loyalist militias in the Lowcountry following the capture of Charlestown and who had forced the conscription of captured Patriots into British Loyalist service. As the British attempted to restore Royal civil control in the colony, both Fenwick and DeVeaux became known for and despised in the Beaufort District because of their brutal and draconian actions.

Major British land operations stalled following Cornwallis' defeat at Yorktown. By March of 1782, while treaty negotiations were underway, British forces were largely confined to the coastal enclaves of Charleston and Savannah. John Cruden, the British commissioner of sequestered estates, struggled to feed the city's growing population of soldiers and Loyalist refugees. The severe supply shortages that necessitated aggressive foraging expeditions.

Facing mounting Patriot strength and presence, and unable to mount large-scale inland campaigns, the British employed small, mobile naval units—galleys and sloops—to strike exposed coastal towns for grain, salt, and naval stores. A Beaufort native who had navigated area waterways prior to defecting to the British, DeVeaux possessed intimate knowledge of the Port Royal Sound's complex tidal creeks. This allowed him to avoid traditional defensive positions and escape detection through using back channels and creeks.

Given the Loyalist presence in Beaufort, DeVeaux decided to press Patriot forces that he knew were recently depleted due to parole enforcement. On February 24, 1782, after staging a demonstration on Bull's garrison in the town, DeVeaux had demonstrated his tactical reach by surprising Patriot Colonel Edward Barnwell on his mission to protect rice plantations along the Savannah River, killing six men and

capturing five during a mission to intercept rice supplies. By using the sloops at his disposal, DeVeaux had sailed men to the Savannah River and landed them in position to ambush Barnwell's unit as it approached the location..

Back in Beaufort, Brigadier General John Barnwell's command was reduced to fewer than 50 active militiamen. Recognizing they could not hold the town against a waterborne landing supported by ship-mounted cannons, the Patriots adopted a "watch and wait" strategy, expecting DeVeaux's return. When the HMS *Adder* and *Scourge* were sighted coming up the Beaufort River, Barnwell gave the order to withdraw, conceding the town to avoid a pitched battle they were certain to lose. The Loyalists anchored in the bay and rowed landing craft into the town, occupying it without opposition.

While the Patriot forces abandoned Beaufort, they martialled in the surrounding area employing asymmetric and guerilla tactics to harass the occupation. Lacking the numbers for a sustained defense, the militia conceded the town proper but maintained a presence in the surrounding countryside to limit Loyalist foraging and movement. The militia, consisting of fewer than 50 men, shadowed DeVeaux's movements from a distance, "watching and waiting" for easy opportunities to pick off individual Loyalist soldiers through targeted sniping. When DeVeaux led a small party of 14 men to recover a sunken privateer in Moss Island Creek and a captured ship in Capers Creek, Barnwell's Patriots staged ambushes inflicting casualties.

These tactics eventually made the occupation untenable, and DeVeaux's forces withdrew from Beaufort around March 25, 1782 and headed to the defenses of Charleston where they remained on station until the British evacuation of Charleston in December 1782. As of the evacuation the Royal Foresters effectively ceased to exist as a unified military entity, and most its members became involved in the broader displacement of Southern Loyalists. But a few remained loyal to DeVeaux and sailed with him to St Augustine on December 14, 1782.

There DeVeaux united with a distant relative, William Lyford Jr, with whom he began to plan an expedition to recapture Nassau Bahamas from the Spanish. Lyford, also from the Beaufort District, was a skilled waterman as a young man and prior to the Revolution had been commissioned in 1766 by the Royal Governor of Georgia as the official pilot of the Savannah River and bar. In 1769 he served as a consultant for the Georgia and SC governments to determine the best location for a lighthouse on Tybee Island, and in the early years of the war served as a master seaman and privateer in Bahamian and West Indian waters.

In St Augustine DeVeaux and Lyford pooled their resources and expertise to organize a private, volunteer expeditionary force to launch an unauthorized but

successful campaign to seize Nassau and return its control to Britain. In April 1783, Lyford piloted the expedition's vessels as they bypassed Spanish defenses by using his extensive knowledge of uncharted channels through the hidden reefs in Bahamian waters. His naval maneuvering was instrumental in carrying out the daring raid by distracting the Spanish Navy while DeVeaux's small force of roughly 220 men successfully outmaneuvered 600 Spanish soldiers and captured the Bahamian capital without firing a single cannon shot.

Following the victory, the Treaty of Paris and the eventual handover of East Florida to Spain both men received land grants in the Bahamas for their service. Lyford was awarded 448 acres on the west end of New Providence, an area now known as the world-renowned Lyford Cay, which bears his name today. DeVeaux received Cat Island and lands on Exuma where they initially settled as "Loyalist Refugees". But back in South Carolina, the state legislature placed prominent members of the DeVeaux family on confiscation lists, seizing their estates and preventing their return to Beaufort.

The Loyalist Capture of Beaufort in March 1782 been a bold and desperate attempt to regain control of the key strategic harbor and port at a time when Patriots were asserting dominance in the Beaufort District overall. It marked the final episode of Loyalist retaliation and retribution in what had been a vicious and devastating civil war on the border of the Southern frontier of the American Colonies and in a region which had served as an embattled corridor for the movement of armies during the four years before the end of the war in the South.