



Beaufort County 250 Committee
Revolutionary Era Biographies

*A Settling of Scores
In the Lowcountry*

*A Series of Retaliatory Incidents Between the
Hilton Head Island Patriot Militia
and the
Southward Beaufort District Loyalist Militias
During the Revolution in 1780 and 1781*

*By
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A Settling of Scores In the Lowcountry

The Series of Retaliatory Incidents Between the Hilton Head Patriot Militia and the Southward Beaufort District Loyalist Militias During the Revolution

By Richard Thomas
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The murder of Charles Davant the night of October 22 or 23, 1781 near the intersection of modern Marshland Road and Mathews Drive was not considered a mystery for even a second. A contingent of British regulars from the Savannah garrison, led by a Major Maxwell and members of the Daufuskie Island Royal Militia, led by Captain Phillip Martinangele, had rowed up Broad Creek with muffled oars to set an ambush at Big Gate. Big Gate was the cattle gate and fenced entrance to a road leading along the northwestern bank of Broad Creek to several plantations and to the shores of Calibogue Sound near Spanish Wells.

On October 19, or slightly earlier, a British raiding party supported by Daufuskie Island militia had landed on John's Island (Jenkins Island) and marched to burn homes along Skull Creek, including those of John Leaycraft and John Talbird, both staunch Patriots who were suspected of participating in attacks on two Loyalist leaders. Then, two days later, the Hilton Head militia received intelligence that a party of Daufuskie Royal Militia would be crossing Calibogue Sound and landing on Hilton Head to conduct further raiding. A scout patrol was mustered to give the expected intruders an unexpected reception. As the night passed in the areas of expected landings, no enemy was sighted and the members of the local militia patrols concluded the intelligence had been flawed.

Returning to the militia muster house east of the Broad Creek headwaters, sited adjacent to the current grounds of the Zion Chapel of Ease Cemetery, the patrol disbanded after ending its rounds, and its members returned to their homes as night broke into dawn. Charles Davant and John Andrews (or Andress) rode together as they made their way home after patrol duty, both headed to their land on the north side of the creek. When they reached Big Gate, the cattle gate at the juncture of the main road and the road leading along Broad Creek to Muddy Creek and Mongin's Bluff (Spanish Wells), Davant leaned down from his horse to unlatch the gate. Shots rang out striking both Davant and Andrews. Glancing toward the flash of the muzzles, Davant glimpsed the face of Phillip Martinangele and his brother. As his startled horse bolted and galloped the distance to the Davant home at Two Oaks Plantation, where the intersection with Leg O Mutton Road is now located, the mortally wounded Davant clung desperately to its mane. With the sound of approaching galloping hoofbeats at such an unnatural hour, Davant's wife came out to see her husband fall from his horse, and with his dying words he uttered, "Get Martinangele".

The Davant murder was not an isolated incident. In fact, it was possibly the first of a series of five related incidents, depending on when you interpret they started ... a series of retaliatory strikes by the partisan sides of local militia in the area. From the onset, the War for Independence created divisions among the American people: communities, neighbors and even families split, some becoming Patriots or Whigs,

supporting the Revolution, while others, the Loyalists or Tories, most often the members of South Carolina's oldest settler families, remained staunchly devoted to the Crown. The necks of land and islands separated by water in the local area tended to concentrate the allegiance to either side in separate locations, and this geography intensified the territorial nature of the divisions. Plantation owners on Hilton Head Island and nearby mainland areas were nearly all Patriots, while on Daufuskie Island and the May River necks nearer Savannah, they were Loyalists. The deeply devoted loyalties, reinforced by divisive geography, led to severe clashes and unnaturally prolonged enmity between the partisan forces and citizens.

The genesis of Charles Davant's murder seems to have been early in the British occupation of the mainland. After the fall of Savannah in December 1778, the English command began to infiltrate the land north of the Savannah River. In April 1779, a skirmish between the Continental Army forces of General Benjamin Lincoln, supported by local militia, and British regulars resulted in the wounding and subsequent death of a popular British officer. The killing was reportedly at the hands of the Beaufort District Militia, and prominently among them, members of the notorious Hilton Head unit. Vengeance for the killing of the British officer became a motivation for the further recruitment of Loyalist militia in the area, and it stoked the resolve of the most ardent Tories in the vicinity of Savannah to take measures to avenge the loss of their officer.

When Charleston was captured by the British in 1780, nearly 5,500 Patriots were captured and imprisoned. Most were later paroled, vowing not to resume service in resistance to English dominion. However, when British Commanding General Clinton unilaterally changed the terms of parole, most Patriots considered it a violation of their agreements and a legitimate reason to return to the Rebel forces. Some of the leaders in the Beaufort District Patriot militia were among these parolees, including John Leaycraft, Captain of the Hilton Head militia. James Doharty (also Doherty and Dougherty) of neighboring Bear Island, a high-tide island off the coast of modern Colleton River Plantation, had avoided capture and returned home to lead a reforming Ranger unit. Doharty was Captain of the Beaufort District Southward Regiment of Foot and the senior commander of all militia forces south of the Broad River.

Attempts by the British to re-capture the leading parole violators proved futile as large numbers of them joined roving guerilla units or mounted Ranger units to avoid detection and imprisonment. Both Doharty and Leaycraft had temporarily been members of Harden's Rangers, an organized unit out of Lower Granville District, and both were highly vocal supporters of active Revolutionary interests in lower Beaufort District.

On the May River neck now known as Palmetto Bluff, Josiah Pendarvis owned a 640-acre plantation known as Montpelier. In 1780, his son Richard, who had been given a 200-acre parcel on the northeastern part of the land, built his home overlooking the May River and brought his new bride, Margaret Martinangele of Daufuskie Island, there to live. Due to his ties to the Martinangeles, and probably because Richard's family had a 100-year history in the Carolina colony and could trace its ancestry back to the earliest English settlers, he was fiercely loyal to the Crown and was known as "Tory Dick" among District Patriots. Being a Tory in the Lowcountry of South Carolina was not unusual after the British occupied Savannah. Many of the Scottish and English colonists who made their homes

among the coastal lands and islands felt the British would prevail and, accordingly, became Loyalists. William McKimmie, the owner of the plantation neighboring Montpelier to the south, was also an ardent Tory with strong ties to the British garrison in Savannah. The British “Southern Strategy” was based on loyalties such as theirs, and once Charleston had fallen to the English, Tories like Mc Kimmie and Pendarvis, among others, probably believed they had made a sound choice.

Pendarvis, a former friend and neighbor of Doharty, had been stridently outspoken against Doharty’s “violation of his parole” and his leadership role with the Beaufort District Militia and had repeatedly called for his arrest and execution for his “traitorous” behavior. In December 1780, Pendarvis and a Tory gang set out to “apprehend one Doharty” and ensure his appropriate punishment. What happened when Pendarvis arrived unexpectedly at Doharty’s home depends on which version of the story you choose to believe. The day of the clash, Doharty had assembled several members of the Southward Regiment of Foot’s leadership cadre at his Bear Island home. They included Captain Thomas Talbird of Beaufort, a cousin, and Captain John and William Leaycraft of Hilton Head, who were his brothers-in-law. The Tory version, in the Loyalist *Royal Georgia Gazette* of January 4, 1781, asserts that as the Pendarvis party approached the house, Doharty and the six or seven men with him opened fire, killing one of Pendarvis’ men and wounding another. Pendarvis and his men returned fire, killing Doharty as the rest of the men fled.

The Patriot version is very different. According to Joseph Johnson’s 1851 work, *Traditions and Reminiscences of the American Revolution in the South*, Doharty was warned that a group of Tories was headed to murder him, and he decided to ambush his attackers. But as the assembled Patriot group was leaving the house to set the trap, Pendarvis and his gang arrived. Doharty, after he had warned his men to hide, be ready to fire and run, if needed, went to meet the approaching column. Through the descending darkness, Pendarvis asked, “Are you Captain Doharty”. Advancing to shake the leader’s hand, he answered, “I am,”. Realizing then that a trap was surely being set, the Loyalists fired, wounding Doharty, and as Doharty lay on the ground they fired again, killing him this time. After witnessing the murder from the shadows, Talbird and John Leaycraft escaped in their boats across Mackay’s Creek, but 14-year old William Leaycraft was found hiding in the Doharty house. The Tories brought him outside, strung a rope around his neck and suspended him repeatedly over a limb trying to force him to divulge the whereabouts of the others. The younger Leaycraft refused despite the torture and threat of death, and because the Tories admired the boy’s courage, they released him and he fled into the woods. John Leaycraft vowed, along with other members of the Hilton Head militia, to avenge his uncle’s death and his brother’s torture. This latter version is one most prevalently echoed in family letters and stories of the Revolution in these parts.

Shortly afterward, some men of the Beaufort District Southward Regiment were involved with Harden’s Rangers in maneuvers near the Pocotaligo River. The earlier Patriot victory and subsequent withdrawal at Ft Balfour had particularly threatened Loyalist partisans in southern Beaufort District, as the dispersed Patriot militiamen from Harden’s unit began conducting spontaneous raids, and many Loyalists sought temporary refuge from the raiding in the area. A report that Pendarvis was at home preparing for an escape to the British garrison in St Augustine reached Leaycraft’s attention either at his Hilton Head home or near Fort Balfour, depending on which version of the story you follow. In the one, Leaycraft and a group of militia from Hilton Head, soon to be known as the Bloody Legion, rode directly to

Montpelier from the Island, and in the other they rode from Fort Balfour. On reaching the Pendarvis home, they found Pendarvis and his Lieutenant, William Patterson, with their boat loaded for the departure. Again, there are two versions of what happened next.

According to family history, as the Pendarvises were preparing to leave on April 17, a house servant informed them that a large Rebel scouting party, led by the vengeful Leaycraft, was approaching down the road. Though Margaret wanted Pendarvis to hide, when he realized the Patriots had arrived and that there could be no escape, he said to her “I will immediately go out to them and offer myself up as a prisoner of war and in a very short time I will be exchanged”. However, apparently forgoing surrender as an option, Pendarvis turned with his pistol to face his attackers and said, “Shoot and be damned” as he fired. Leaycraft also fired, and Pendarvis fell dead in front of his home as Patterson ran for the dock and was killed there. The Patriot version claims that following the ride to Montpelier at breakneck speed, Leaycraft found Pendarvis and Patterson at the dock ready to board their boat for St Augustine. Coming face to face with the startled Pendarvis, Leaycraft shot him in the head with his pistol, then drew his sword and ran Patterson through on the dock.

Where the incident actually took place is also a matter of debate. The Loyalist Savannah newspaper article mentions the May River home at Montpelier where Pendarvis was killed, and that is generally accepted as a matter of fact. Other Patriot accounts mention Pendarvis as a neighbor of Doharty who had a home at Buckingham Plantation. It was nearby, on the Mackeys Creek shoreline toward Savannah from the Doharty home on Bear Island. The proximity of a Buckingham Plantation location to Leaycraft’s home on Hilton Head favors the quick response by Leaycraft, but in both accounts, the mention of the raiding party arriving by horseback would support the Montpelier location, part of what is today known as Palmetto Bluff.

Regardless of what actually transpired, the *Royal Georgia Gazette* ran this account on April 19, 1781:

“Late Friday afternoon Captain Richard Pendarvis was shot dead within 90 yards of his house on the River May, where one William Patterson was also barbarously murdered. The perpetrators of these murders consisted of a Rebel officer and five men, the names of four of them are: Leaycraft, a prisoner on parole, Blackwood, Bettison, and Nathan Gamble, who had received and were then under protection. The villains then went to the house and insulted Mrs. Pendarvis with opprobrious language, and on leaving the plantation took with them three horses and Captain Pendarvis’ gun.”

With the leadership of the May River militia dispatched and the sentiments of the area Loyalists shaken, the Royal Militia of Daufuskie, headed by the new widow Pendarvis’ brother, chose to retaliate for this atrocity. The capture of several British officers and two schooners loaded with British supplies off Hilton Head in September, and the still searing memory of Pendarvis’ murder, prompted the Daufuskie militia to join with some British regular troops out of Savannah to launch raids on Patriot homes on Hilton Head, where the schooners were said to have been taken in captivity. On or about October 19, British soldiers and militia from Daufuskie landed on John’s Island at Hilton Head to burn homes and capture slaves on the land along Skull Creek ... the homes of John Leaycraft and John Talbird, an avid Patriot who was then a wounded prisoner-of-war on a ship in Charleston harbor, were especially targeted for the raid.

The raiding column was under the leadership of a young officer in command of the Tory unit from Daufuskie, who was Phillip Martinangele's brother, Isaac. The column neared the home of John Talbird, imprisoned at the time in Charleston harbor, and Mary Ladson Talbird, the mistress of the house, who was nine months pregnant at the time. Ms. Talbird had previously warned her slaves to run and hide in the woods so they would not be taken by the British to the West Indies and she emerged from inside to plead that her home be spared. The young militia officer-in-charge was married to a sister of Ms. Talbird, but despite her pleading, told her that he was duty-bound to burn the home as ordered. But he reasoned that, as the contents and furnishings were not mentioned in the order, they could be spared. Before setting fire to the dwelling, he ordered his men to carry out all the belongings inside and place them under a great oak tree in a nearby meadow. The British column torched the house as Mary Talbird stood weeping by the tree, and when the raiding party had departed, the Talbird slaves came out of hiding and built a thatched dwelling for her under the limbs of the tree beside the furniture. That tree, a mature live oak at the time of the raid, is still standing over 240 years later and is locally called the Talbird Oak. To add significance to this chapter of the retaliatory incidents linked to Charles Davant's murder, the burning of the home happened on October 19, 1781, the same day that Mary Talbird gave birth to her first-born son Henry in the palmetto frond hut under the tree, and the same day that General Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown.

But the word of the Yorktown surrender did not reach the area for several days, and Charles Davant's death would take place three days later on October 22, 1781. The retaliation for his ambush murder occurred in December that same year. Another version of this story has both the raid and the murder occurring in early December, but this does not correlate with the Yorktown date, which is substantiated by the birthdate of Henry Talbird.

Charles Davant's brother James, who lived at Point Comfort Plantation on Broad Creek, vowed to avenge his brother's death since the moment he was advised by his sister-in-law what had happened. In the early weeks following the murder, members of the Bloody Legion plotted revenge on the Martinangele family members who had been sighted at the point of the ambush. James Davant and Isaac Baldwin (also Bolden) took the lead in planning and the date decided on was to be during the Twelve Days of Christmas. The Patriot version of the revenge mission is as follows.

On December 23, a raiding party of eight or nine men departed from Hilton Head by boat to row to the Martinangele Plantation on the south tip of Daufuskie Island. The appointed executioner of Phillip Martinangele was Israel Andrews, brother of John Andrews, who was wounded in the ambush at Big Gate along with Davant. When the raiders broke into the plantation manor house, they found the family at breakfast, except for Martinangele, who was in bed ill. While the gang held his wife, Andrews shot Phillip Martinangele dead where he lay. Afterwards, they dragged the family outside the house, plundered their belongings and set fire to the mansion. Another version of this story has the raiding party finding Philip and a brother Abraham Martinangele sleeping, and has them both being shot by the executioner(s) in retaliation for the murder of Charles Davant. However, in the subsequent will of Mary Martinangel, recorded in 1893, Abraham is mentioned as an heir to 200 acres of her property.

The Tory versions are both recorded as follows:

From the January 30, 1782 *Royal Gazette* of Charles Town, SC:

“We are informed from Savannah that about Christmas last a gang of banditti came to a house on Daufusky Island, where Captain Martinangel of the Royal Militia was lying sick, and whilst two of them held his wife, another named Israel Andrews, shot him dead; they afterward plundered Mrs Martinangel and her children of everything they had. These wretches came from Hilton Head, they stile themselves the Bloody Legion, and are commanded by John Leaycraft. The following is a list of the gang: John Erving, Lewis Bona, Daniel Savage, Christian Rankin, James Davant, John Bull, James Erving, James Allan, Charles Floyd, Isaac Davids, Nathaniel Gambal (Gamble), William Chiswell, Thomas Roberts, John Mongin Sr, John Mongin Jr, David Ross, Patrick McMullin, Isaac Bolder (Bolden or Baldwin), Meredith Rich, John Fendon (Fendin), William Scott.”

And from the Martinangele family account in *“Record of the Martinangele Family Connection with the Mongins of South Carolina”* copied in 1899:

“Lee Craft’s party landed on Daufuskie Island. There they visited the Martinangel plantation. Phillip de Martinangel had been very ill and they had left his little daughter Margaret, about three weeks old, on the bed with him. The breakfast table was set waiting the assembly of the family when lo, the stillness of the scene was interrupted by the visit of Lee Craft’s party. They entered and the family fled like frightened birds. They stole the silver from the table. Then they entered the room of the invalid and murdered him in his bed and left yelling like so many bloodhounds set loose. When quietness returned to the family, the husband was no more and the little baby was nearly strangled in her father’s blood.”

Fighting among partisans would go on well after the British Parliament voted to suspend warfare in the American Colonies in February 1782 and generally would last throughout the former Colonies until remaining British troops were finally redeployed following the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1783. But the bitter enmity that had shattered families and divided partisans in the Lowcountry lasted even longer along the South Carolina and Georgia coasts. As former Loyalists changed allegiance to support the new government in their new country, Tory holdouts in southern Beaufort District converged on Daufuskie Island. In recognition of this Loyalist concentration on its shores, Daufuskie would earn the nickname “Little Bermuda” from the Patriots in the area.

The fervor of Patriots on Hilton Head and the nearby mainland waned only slowly, and a local legend that derives from the oral tradition of old area families, and from a few family papers written well after the incident, including the Martinangel family papers mentioned above, holds that the last armed conflict of the American Revolution likely occurred between the remnants of the Hilton Head’s Bloody Legion and the last Tory holdouts on Daufuskie in the summer of 1785.

According to the lore, some former Hilton Head militiamen learned that the last Tories on Daufuskie were gathering their belongings to pack onto boats so they could travel to refuge in the British islands of the Bahamas. Harboring the deep resentment and spirit of vengeance that had fueled so many conflicts during the war years, the partisan Patriots could not resist one last chance to wreak havoc on their Tory counterparts. It is reported that the small Loyalist fleet was leaving from Bloody Point at the southern tip of Daufuskie and near the former Martinangele plantation, when a group of boats bearing Hilton Head’s former militiamen sailed around from the western side of the island. Shots were fired at the Tories, and the fire was returned as the Tories sailed into the distance, but no casualties, either Patriot or Loyalist, were reported from the skirmish. Specific contemporaneous documentation of this incident has not

been discovered to date, but family papers and the oral tradition has supported its veracity throughout the years.

If true, it may have been the last armed conflict between Patriot and Loyalist partisans in the American Revolution. At the very least, it serves to vividly illustrate the extremely deep divisions that existed in the local area during the period 1775-1785. In either case, it would be the last in a series of incidents related to the murder of Charles Davant, the only known killed-in-action casualty on Hilton Head Island during the Revolutionary War.