Beaufort County 250 Committee
Revolutionary War Biographies

# *John "Captain Jack" Stoney*
# *Patriot and Privateer of the Southern Coast*

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SC 250 ANNIVERSARY American Revolution | BEAUFORT COUNTY SOUTH CAROLINA

# John (Captain Jack) Stoney, Sr
## Feared Privateer and Leader of the Hilton Head Militia

John Stoney Sr.—better known along the Carolina and Georgia coast as "Captain Jack"—stands as one of those larger-than-life figures who bridged the worlds of maritime commerce, war, and frontier leadership in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Emigrating from Ireland to America in 1774, on the turbulent eve of the American Revolution, Stoney arrived at a moment when imperial authority in South Carolina was beginning to fray. Charleston in 1774 was a bustling Atlantic port, deeply tied to British trade but simmering with political unrest. For an ambitious Irish immigrant like Stoney, the Carolinas offered opportunity—but also danger. Within a few short years he would transform himself from a newly arrived immigrant into a feared and prolific privateer operating in the waters of South Carolina, Georgia, and East Florida, and later into a civil and militia leader in the Beaufort District, whose influence carried through the War of 1812.

Sailing on his merchant schooner, *Saucy Jack*, from Knockshegowna, County Tipperary in Ireland with his wife Elizabeth and infant son James, Stoney landed in Charleston mid-year in 1774 intending to operate his merchant vessel out of that port. Reportedly, while provisioning for his first voyage, he met an old friend from Tipperary on the docks, and the friend advised Stoney that he could accumulate wealth much more quickly being a privateer than a merchant mariner. Immediately applying for a letter of marque, Stoney was granted his privateering license by then Governor John Rutledge and began seizing enemy cargoes off the South Carolina coast. When the South Carolina Navy formed in 1775, Stoney was conscripted as a privateer member of that force, and now English ships became targets in addition to the Spanish and occasional Dutch traders.

Apparently sensing more opportunity in the waters to the south of Charleston, he relocated to Hilton Head, arriving in 1776 and, with the wealth from the sale of his previous plunder, purchased acreage on the Island. His primary landholding, 805 acres, was at what he called Otterburn Plantation, deepwater frontage on sheltered Broad Creek where he built a modest home and dock at which he moored the *Saucy Jack*. At the same time, he purchased about 1100 acres on the southern end of the Island known as Braddocks Point Plantation from Beaufort merchant Andre Verdier. Intending to farm indigo on his properties, with the decline of the indigo market after the declaration of war due to multiple factors including embargoes, he concentrated on his privateering venture for the duration of hostilities.

When open conflict erupted in 1775, maritime skill became one of the most valuable commodities in the South. The southern coastline was a watery frontier of rivers, sounds, inlets, and barrier islands. Whoever controlled those channels controlled intelligence, supplies, and escape routes. British shipping to and from Savannah and St Augustine, and occasionally from Beaufort, offered an especially target-rich environment for privateers. For Stoney, his location at Hilton Head was highly advantageous and nearly in direct line of sight to the approach from the sea to the Savannah River mouth. Stoney quickly adapted to his environment given that privateering blurred the line between commerce and warfare as a form of legalized predation aimed at weakening British supply lines while enriching patriot operators and investors.

Operating out of Beaufort and Hilton Head waters, Captain Jack became known for bold coastal raids and swift pursuits through the maze of tidal creeks and sounds. The waters off Port Royal Sound, Calibogue Sound, and the approaches toward Savannah were ideal for fast schooners and shallow-draft vessels. British supply ships, Loyalist traders, and smaller naval craft all became potential targets. Unlike deep-water naval engagements, privateering along the southern coast required intimate local knowledge. Sandbars shifted, tides ran fast, and fog could hide either hunter or prey. Stoney's reputation grew not merely because he captured vessels, but because he did so repeatedly and aggressively. Contemporary coastal communities remembered him as a relentless presence—part protector, part predator—depending on one's loyalties.

His activities extended southward into Georgia and even the waters of East Florida, where British strongholds remained active. He may have, on rare occasion, ventured into Caribbean waters, but conclusive documentation of this is not available. Yet, it is alluded to in local histories and family lore. Revolutionary Warfare in the South was not confined to grand set-piece battles; it was a mobile conflict of raids, seizures, and partisan violence. Stoney's privateering formed part of this broader maritime struggle that helped starve British garrisons and disrupt Loyalist commerce.

When Charleston fell to the British in 1780, many Patriot leaders either fled or adapted to partisan warfare. The Beaufort District—encompassing today's Beaufort County and surrounding inland areas—became a contested zone. Plantations were plundered, enslaved laborers fled to British lines seeking freedom, and allegiances and families were fractured. Between infrequent raids into British controlled waters, Captain Jack transitioned from brigand at sea to militia leader on land. An expert horseman, he joined the small contingent of Hilton Head dragoons that often fought on the mainland with larger Ranger companies. There, his maritime background

proved invaluable. Coastal militia units often coordinated with boats for rapid movement, surprise landings, and intelligence gathering ,,, the geography of the Lowcountry meant that waterways were roads. A leader who understood both naval maneuver and terrestrial skirmishing held a distinct advantage. During later years of the Revolution and more frequent time at home, his family grew, adding a son, John Jr, and a daughter.

After the Revolution, men like Stoney did not simply fade into civilian obscurity. The coastal economy remained maritime, and veterans of privateering often reinvested their experience into trade, ship ownership, and regional defense networks. Stoney did this. He also converted his lands early to the cultivation of sea island cotton. The same skills that enabled wartime proficiency—navigation, gunnery, crew discipline—translated into peacetime enterprise. When son James turned 16, he left Otterburn for Savannah to earn his fame and fortune, returning three years later in 1793 with neither, but bringing with him a wife. Initially, James and his Elizabeth lived at Otterburn with his parents, but friction between the two women, and with children coming to the younger Stoney, Captain Jack, now known as "Old Jack" to distinguish himself from his son John, was induced to give the Otterburn land and enslaved workers to James as his property.

By this time, Stoney Sr had built a thriving sea island cotton factorage business and was able to ship cotton directly from both Otterburn and Braddocks Point docks to the Savannah market for sale and shipment to Europe, eliminating the middle-man and increasing the profitability of the business considerably. On giving Otterburn to James, he began building his wife and remaining children what he called "a proper home" on the ridge at Braddocks Point. It became the only tabby 'mansion' on Hilton Head and one of only two masonry structures built on the Island until the 1990's. Stoney would live there for his remaining years, and John Jr would have a residence there beginning in the early 1800's.

With both his sons now grown, Stoney Sr decided to have them run the cotton factorage offices in Charleston and Savannah, with John Jr moving north to the city and James running the Savannah office with his home on Hilton Head at Otterburn. Captain Jack then lived the life of a gentleman farmer as a member of the planter elite and began an involvement in civic affairs, soon becoming the local Worshipful Master at Hilton Head's Masonic Lodge and devoting the rest of his time to hunting and fishing.

When the United States again went to war with Great Britain in 1812, the southern coastline once more braced for naval conflict. Though older by then, Stoney's earlier experience made him a valuable figure in coastal defense circles. Privateering revived

as an American strategy, and southern ports outfitted vessels to disrupt and harass British shipping much as they had three decades earlier. Stoney Sr purchased a second vessel, which he named *Jack's Favorite*, armed it heavily, and operated her as a privateer under his original letter of marque. The older *Saucy Jack* sailed only in local waters, while *Jack's Favorite* roamed the southern coast and was reported to have operated frequently in Bahamian waters under Stoney's hired commander.

The War of 1812 saw British naval forces probing the southeastern seaboard. The coasts of Hilton Head and lands along Port Royal Sound and the Broad River were targeted in retaliation for their former Patriot resistance in the Revolution. Shipyards in the area, three in Hilton Head and two in Beaufort, were virtually destroyed, and the wooden shipbuilding industry never recovered prior to the age of steam powered and screw-driven boats. Coastal communities constantly feared raids and blockades. Veterans of the Revolution—particularly those with maritime experience—were called upon to organize militia, coordinate lookout systems, and, in some cases, sponsor or command private armed vessels.

Stoney's dual identity and experience fit perfectly into this defensive framework. For communities in Beaufort District, his presence symbolized the resilience that had carried the region through the Revolution: the same man who had resisted British power in the 1770s stood ready again, now in his late Fifties, in the 1810s. John Stoney Sr., "Captain Jack", embodied the maritime character of so much of coastal South Carolina's wartime experience. Unlike northern narratives that center on large naval battles or inland campaigns, the southern war was deeply amphibious. Creeks, sounds, and river mouths were 'battlegrounds'. In such a watery labyrinth, men like Stoney thrived.

After the 'Second War of Independence' Captain Jack retired completely from the conduct of the family business and devoted himself to his passions of fishing and hunting. James continued to operate the business and run the Savannah office, while John Jr remained in Charleston. Old Jack's best friend on Hilton Head was William Pope Sr, also a dedicated fisherman and hunter, and the largest landowner in Hilton Head's history with over 8,500 acres in several plantations, including two along the Port Royal Sound shore. The Pope home was at Coggins Point Plantation, and to the north, across the bordering Fish Haul Creek, was their Fish Haul Plantation, which Pope kept wooded for use as a hunting preserve. It was to this land in 1821 that Pope invited Stoney to join him for a hunt with their sons James and William Jr, also known as Squire Pope, who were also best friends.

The party, mounted and carrying loaded muskets, were driving game through the woods and toward the marsh where they would have open shots. Stoney halted to

adjust his stirrup, holding his musket under his right arm while leaning down to the left. As he leaned, the rifle slipped, and when the stock hit the ground as he tried to grab it, the weapon discharged hitting Old Jack in the head and killing him instantly. Not wanting his mother and sister to have to see Stoney in that mangled condition, James asked Pope if they could bury his father where he fell on the Pope Land. Naturally, Pope Sr consented and summoned slaves to dig the grave, and during the brief ceremony at graveside, James asked Pope if, when he died, he could also be buried on the land next to his father. Pope again consented.

James died unexpectedly six years later, at age 37, and father and son lay at rest side by side on the Fish Haul land until the early 1960's when the land was being cleared for development. In an overgrown wooded area, the workers came across the brick sarcophagus with a granite top marked James Stoney. Unless the grave were to be moved, development could not proceed there, so the then owners of the land requested that the Zion Chapel of Ease Cemetery accept the remains. Permission was given and the sarcophagus disassembled, moved, and reassembled, with the disinterred remains reinterred inside, at the Zion Cemetery site where they rest today.

John Stoney Jr attempted to operate the Stoney cotton business and lands from Charleston, but several factors combined over the next ten years to put the company in deep debt. In 1837, with $400,000 owed to debtors, the Stoney properties were taken in receivership by the Bank of Charleston, and the Stoney family dispersed to Georgia and the lands around Charleston where many descendants remain to this day.