Beaufort County 250 Committee
Short Stories of Beaufort District
In the Revolutionary War

The Beaufort Assembly of 1772

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SC 250 ANNIVERSARY American Revolution | BEAUFORT COUNTY SOUTH CAROLINA

The Beaufort Assembly of 1772

In the early 1770s, as tensions with Great Britain escalated, the quiet coastal town of Beaufort, South Carolina, became the stage for a political confrontation that would echo all the way to the Declaration of Independence.

By 1772, South Carolina's economy was booming, but its relationship with Britain was rapidly deteriorating. At the center of the conflict stood Royal Governor Charles Greville Montagu and the colony's elected Commons House of Assembly. Their most bitter dispute revolved around money—specifically, who controlled public funds. For years, the Assembly refused to pass tax legislation unless colonial money was allocated to support the legal defense of John Wilkes, a radical member of Parliament and a symbol of resistance to royal authority. Montagu and the Crown flatly rejected the demand. Montague was also denied a permanent residence in Charleston.

Frustrated by opposition leaders from the Charleston area, Montagu resorted to a dramatic and unprecedented maneuver. In what he called a "constitutional operation," he moved the meeting place of the Commons House seventy miles south, from Charleston to Beaufort, where some residents promised him a governor's palace should the seat of government be transferred to Beaufort. The governor believed Charleston legislators would be unwilling to travel or remain away from their businesses long enough to sustain their resistance. Through distance, inconvenience, and repeated postponements, Montagu hoped to fatigue the Assembly into compliance.

The plan failed spectacularly.

On October 8, 1772, at the District Courthouse, a site now occupied by the Beaufort Arsenal, the town hosted one of the most distinguished political gatherings in South Carolina's colonial history. Leaders from across the colony made the arduous journey, including Christopher Gadsden, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, John Rutledge, William Moultrie, and Thomas Heyward Jr. More representatives attended the opening session in Beaufort than had ever assembled in Charleston—a decisive rebuke of the governor's strategy.

Embarrassed and outmaneuvered, Montagu abruptly dismissed the Assembly after just three days, postponing all business and ordering members back to Charleston. The Commons House responded with fury. Its Grievance Committee accused the governor of acting out of "ill-will to the body of free men" and condemned the Beaufort summons as an insult to representative government.

Among those shaped by this confrontation was Thomas Heyward Jr. Just four years later, he would serve as a delegate to the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia and sign the Declaration of Independence.

There, in 1776, Thomas Jefferson gave national voice to what Beaufort had already experienced firsthand. The Declaration's fourth grievance condemned King George III for calling legislatures to "places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant... for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance."

The Beaufort Assembly of 1772 was not merely a colonial dispute. It became proof—etched into America's founding document—that royal authority had crossed a constitutional line.

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Full Text of 4th Grievance in the Declaration of Independence

He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their Public Records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures.