

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

*Beaufort District:  
Harbor of Defiance*

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## Beaufort District - Harbor of Defiance

The rising swells of resistance and calls for independence flooded the Beaufort District in South Carolina, quickly sweeping the men and women of the region into a war that would alter their lives forever.

Support the King and our mother country? Or take up arms with those speaking of new rights and new governments? As both sides would learn, the land between the Combahee and Savannah Rivers, today's Beaufort, Jasper, Hampton, and Allendale Counties, became a true... 'Harbor of Defiance.'

The Beaufort District's Revolutionary residents were early participants in opposing British rule. The pre-emptive relocation of South Carolina's Royal government to Beaufort in 1772, with the establishment of the Beaufort Assembly, enraged patriots throughout the American colonies. This example of imperial overreach was included as the fourth of twenty-seven grievances enshrined in the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776.

Well before independence was declared in Philadelphia, patriots in the Beaufort District were taking action. In July 1775, men of the Beaufort District intercepted a shipment of much-needed gunpowder and munitions sailing into Savannah, Georgia. Four thousand pounds of that confiscated gunpowder was later sent to George Washington's army outside Boston, a testament to the Beaufort patriots' commitment to the larger revolution. Beaufort men fought in battles, raids, and skirmishes far afield from their homes. When the British arrived outside Charleston Harbor in June of 1776, Beaufort men helped defend the exposed rear of the strategic palmetto fort on Sullivan's Island from British attack. When news of the American victory at the Battle of Sullivan's Island on June 28, 1776, reached the Continental Congress in Philadelphia, it was celebrated by the delegates and strengthened patriot resolve.

Following the British occupation of Savannah in 1778, General Augustine Prevost attempted to seize Augusta, Georgia. A diversionary movement into Port Royal Sound was repulsed on February 3, 1779, at the Battle of Port Royal Island by 300 Patriot militiamen, marking the first land-based victory by the Americans over the British in the war in South Carolina. Serving as an artillery Captain in that battle was Thomas Heyward, Jr,

again risking his life in combat on the home front.

On April 28, 1779, Prevost launched an advance with an army of over 5,000 Regulars and Loyalists across the Beaufort District toward Charleston. Turned back at the city's gates, he withdrew down the coast. During the retreat south, the British marooned hundreds of enslaved people on Otter Island and established a 1,000-man garrison at Beaufort and Port Royal Island.

In September 1779, upon the arrival of the French West Indies Fleet, American and French forces, including the Beaufort District Militia, laid siege to Savannah, Georgia. The British garrison on Port Royal Island, under Lieutenant Colonel John Maitland, made a remarkable movement from Beaufort to Savannah, saving the city from capture.

Beaufort was reoccupied after the successful defense of Savannah and served as a jumping-off point in February 1780 for Banastre Tarleton's British Legion during the campaign that captured Charleston. After which, for over a year, the Beaufort District became dominated by Loyalists.

The geography of the District, with numerous islands and fingers of water penetrating inland, reinforced the degree of separation and the intensity of the enmity between neighbors.

The City of Beaufort had what was called "a Tory reputation," with many wealthy, early-settler families who had come directly from England or Barbados and were loyal to the Crown. The May River necks toward Savannah, and the mainland tended to be strongly Loyalist, and Daufuskie Island earned the name "Little Bermuda" as an enclave of radical supporters of the British.

Hilton Head Island was a staunch Patriot stronghold, as were the areas now known as Bluffton and Okatie, along with most of the lands upriver and inland from the coast.

William Harden of Prince William Parish was a particularly effective partisan leader. His militia harassed the British in late 1779 and early 1780. Many paroled militiamen from the Beaufort District, captured in Charleston in May 1780, later joined units such as Harden's in waging

partisan warfare against the British and Loyalists.

At sea, men from the region harassed and disrupted British shipping along the coast. John Joyner captained the Continental frigate *South Carolina* off the entrance to Chesapeake Bay, and though Port Royal Sound was largely defenseless against British men-of-war, several former ship captains in the South Carolina Navy, including John Cutler Braddock from Beaufort and John Stoney from Hilton Head Island, converted local merchant vessels into armed privateers that prowled the nearby waters.

While Lord Cornwallis focused on defeating General Nathanael Greene in the Piedmont region, the patriot forces from the Beaufort District displayed remarkable resilience. They continued to fight throughout Georgia and South Carolina, repeatedly frustrating British attempts to quash resistance in the area.

Even after Cornwallis' surrender at Yorktown, the Beaufort District was far from peaceful. Fighting continued long after the October 1781 date, with British Regular and Loyalist units staging raids on Hilton Head and Pinckney Islands on the very day that Cornwallis surrendered. Beaufort and Port Royal Island were occupied in November 1781 by the Patriots, though Loyalists under Andrew DeVeaux IV would recapture the town and hold it for a period in March 1782.

General Stephen Bull, the patriot commander of the Beaufort District Militia, stood against the rest of his family. Before the war, the Bull family feuded with the neighboring DeVeaux family. Early in the war, Andrew DeVeaux IV served in the Beaufort District militia, but 'turned coat' after a series of incidents against his family. DeVeaux led a band of South Carolina Loyalists known as the Royal Foresters during Prevost's raid through the Beaufort District, during which DeVeaux and his compatriots burned Stephen Bull's home, Sheldon, and Prince William Parish Church, which Stephen's father had built. Bull would have his final revenge when the state of South Carolina confiscated all of DeVeaux's property in 1782 and forced him and his family into exile in the Bahamas.

Even after the British Parliament voted in February 1782 to end the war, fighting between Loyalists and Patriots in the Beaufort District continued.

In August of 1782, the final battle within the region was fought. At the Battle of Tar Bluff, Colonel John Laurens, son of the former President of the Continental Congress, was killed leading a charge. His tragic death would mark the last field-grade officer killed in action during the Revolutionary War.

Recreation against Loyalists by Patriot victors would reach new heights between July 1782 and September 1783, as lawless gangs from both factions roamed and pillaged.

Even after the 1783 Treaty of Paris was signed, fighting between loyalists and patriots in the region continued. In 1785, a group of former militiamen from Hilton Head Island raided Daufuskie Island, attacking Tories who were preparing to depart for the Bahamas. In what some scholars consider the final action of the entire Revolutionary War. Shots were fired by both sides, with neither side reporting any casualties.

When the guns finally fell silent after nine years of unrelenting struggle, the Beaufort District - this 'Harbor of Defiance' - found itself free from its British masters. But the cost of this freedom had come at a very high price. Neighbor against neighbor ... churches and homes burned ... families torn asunder ... In the wake of the Revolutionary War, a new dawn would arrive - one that would usher in a nation unlike any other, with a government by the people, for the people of the Beaufort District and the United States of America.