

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

*Naval Warfare
In Beaufort District*

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American Revolution

BEAUFORT COUNTY
SOUTH CAROLINA

Naval Warfare in Beaufort District

With its deep rivers, tidal creeks, and barrier islands, the Beaufort District became an active theater of naval warfare during the American Revolution. South Carolina fielded more warships than any colony except Massachusetts, and local captains like John Joyner and John Stoney helped turn these coastal waters into a battlefield—harassing British supply lines from Charleston to Florida.

The Philippa Affair – June 1775

In the summer of 1775, Patriot leaders learned that a British shipment of treaty goods, which included a large cache of gunpowder, was bound for Savannah—supplies intended to arm the Creeks, Britain’s Indian allies. Two barges under Captain John Barnwell were sent from Beaufort to Bloody Point to better monitor the entrance to the strategic Savannah River.

The barges, commanded by John Joyner and John Bull of the Beaufort District, received aid from Georgia revolutionary Joseph Habersham, who quickly armed a schooner named *Liberty* with carriage guns and swivels.

On July 7, the British schooner *Phillippa* anchored off Tybee Point, waiting for a pilot. The next day, *Liberty* closed in. At four o’clock, musket shots cracked across the water as Captain Oliver Bowen of the *Liberty* raised a white flag bordered in red, with the word “Liberty” boldly marked in the center.

The stunned British ships were escorted to Cockspur Island, surrounded by Patriot militia, and stripped of their cargo—16,000 pounds of valuable gunpowder. Four thousand pounds from that cargo were rushed north to the Continental Congress and ultimately to Washington’s army outside Boston.

The Seizure of the Betsy – August 1775

Only weeks later, Beaufort waters again played a decisive role. Captain Clement Lempriere sailed the armed sloop *Commerce*, carrying Beaufort men, toward Florida, intent on intercepting another powder shipment.

On August 8, he captured the brigantine *Betsy* off the St. Augustine bar. Aboard were 11,000 pounds of gunpowder headed for Loyalists and British allies. Escorted safely into Port Royal, the cargo was secured by local militia.

Most of the powder was sent to Charleston, multiplying the colony’s supply nearly tenfold—and denying Britain a critical advantage in the southern war.

The Battle of the Rice Boats – March 1776

The following spring, Royal Navy warships pushed up the Savannah River to seize ships carrying rice supplies desperately needed by Crown forces.

Under cover of darkness, British forces captured the rice ships opposite Savannah. But before they could escape, Patriot artillery opened fire. For four hours, cannon thundered across the river.

Rather than surrender the rice, Patriot volunteers set some ships ablaze. Drifting downriver, they ignited other British ships. As the British sailors and soldiers fled into the nearby marshes while American rifle fire cut them down. Ships burned, others were retaken, and the British withdrew empty-handed.

Though small in scale, the battle ended the Crown's control of Georgia for the next several years —and proved that determined militia and sailors could defeat the Royal Navy in southern waters.

Conclusion

These were not isolated incidents. More than fifteen naval engagements followed, and Beaufort District privateers captured over fifty British vessels. Together, these naval engagements show how the war for independence was won not only on South Carolina's battlefields, but also in the coastal waters of the Beaufort District.