Beaufort County 250 Committee
Revolutionary Era Biographies

Major John DeTreville

Brave Patriot Commander and British Secret Agent

By
Richard E. Thomas

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Douglas R. Dorney, Jr

SC 250 ANNIVERSARY American Revolution | BEAUFORT COUNTY SOUTH CAROLINA

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Patriot Commander and British Secret Agent

Major John La Boularderie De Treville was born in January 1742 in Acadia— part of modern Nova Scotia. He came from a family of French nobility reduced in status by British conquest. In 1760, during the cataclysmic struggle of the Seven Years' War, De Treville joined the Legion Britannique as a first lieutenant, serving in Germany under Ferdinand of Brunswick. In that service he became acquainted with a young British officer named Charles Cornwallis, a connection that would echo through his Revolutionary War years.

After the Legion disbanded in 1762, and after his father's death in 1771, De Treville emigrated to South Carolina. There, he aligned with the Patriot cause, and by January 1776 he was a lieutenant of artillery in the 4th South Carolina Regiment, commanding a battery in Charleston during the battle of Sullivans Island and afterwards serving in the southern parishes. In December 1778, just after the British seized Savannah, he married Sarah Julia Wilkinson of St. Helena Parish, Beaufort, establishing himself in the Lowcountry elite community. In February 1779, in command at Fort Lyttelton on Port Royal Island, he confronted a British advance under Major William Gardner from the land and the sea. When the militia moved from town to meet Gardner's regiments, in the face of the approaching British men-of-war and in the absence of information as to why they vacated the area, the logical assumption was desertion or flight in the face of the enemy. De Treville made the decision and order Captain James Doharty of the Hilton Head militia to spike the cannons, spark the fort, and live to fight another day.

Within forty-eight hours he and his men had joined General William Moultrie and 300 soldiers to fight in the Battle of Port Royal Island several miles north of the fort he had abandoned. He distinguished himself at the battle, also known as the battle of Beaufort (or Gray's Hill) and was commended by Moultrie for his composure and courage. He was later wounded in the Siege of Savannah and returned to Charleston as a battery commander for the city's defense in 1780. Up until this point, despite the abandonment of the fort, he was considered a courageous and loyal Patriot officer.

In May 1780 Charleston fell, and De Treville became a prisoner of war and was soon paroled. He was active in some capacity that allowed him free passage within Patriot lines and access to British command, but evidence indicates De Treville's

first appearance as a spy is in British correspondence on June 13, 1780 when Major Archibald McArthur of the 71st Regiment sent "Captain Treville" to deliver notice of his arrival in Cheraw Hills, South Carolina. By June 30, DeTreville had arrived by horse in Charleston with his intelligence from North Carolina. Cornwallis noted in his journal that "Monsieur Treville returned with information that he saw 2,000 Maryland and Delaware troops at Hillsborough under Major General de Kalb". In early September, De Treville was summoned again from his parole in Beaufort to report to Charleston. When there, he reported to Cornwallis that "several men of Colonel Lechmere's battalion of Beaufort District Loyalist militia declared to him that they would join the rebels" whenever they could. This was later borne out when Lechmere's men, enveloped by Colonel William Harden's rangers in the siege at Fort Balfour in Pocotaligo, mutinied and forced the fort's surrender without a shot having been fired.

That September, he reappeared with a comprehensive and accurate assessment of American strength in North Carolina, allegedly after being paid in guineas and $7,000 in secret-service funds. He named commanders, counted artillery pieces, described cavalry and infantry contingents and numbers, and identified the locations and movements of Continental and militia forces. Even more consequential, he relayed tactical insights gleaned from General Thomas Sumter, noting that militia would pierce flanks and harry the British in the "Indian method" from cover. Those predictions matched what the British faced in their difficult advance, occupation, and retreat in North Carolina soon thereafter.

In late 1780, DeTreville pushed the masquerade further, passing among American leaders in Wilmington and Hillsborough. Pierce Butler vouched that he had heard De Treville called a zealous and diligent officer and sent him to Governor Abner Nash with letters, unaware—or uncertain—of the duplicity. By Butler's account, De Treville was also providing intelligence on the British to American leadership. But whether De Treville intended to play both sides or simply used American trust to extract better intel for the British is unknowable. But his activities raised suspicions. By January 1, 1781, Nathanael Greene had "good reason to believe" De Treville was indeed spying for Cornwallis and ordered Lieutenant James Bruff to arrest him. The order came too late or collided with other events; British records note De Treville had already been seized, narrowly escaped hanging, and made his way to Charleston by January 2. Incredibly, he then accompanied the British expedition that entered Wilmington. William Hooper, a Signer of the Declaration of Independence, remarked that the British force was "escorted" by a Frenchman named Treville.

After that, his espionage career ended, and his activity is unclear. Some records list him as exchanged as a prisoner in mid-1781; others insist he had "joined the enemy." What is clear is that his life remained centered in Charleston. Two of his children were born there in 1782. At the same time, word of his suspected treachery spread in the Lowcountry. In August 1782, when Greene ordered him back to duty, DeTreville refused, sending a passionate letter protesting an "unjust censure" and condemning the public cruelty of accusation without trial. He recorded his several movements in North Carolina, emphasized that loyal Americans had accompanied him on journeys, and implied that malice had fueled the charges against him. There is no surviving reply from Greene and no record of any formal sanction by either South Carolina or Continental authorities. When the British evacuated Charleston in December 1782, DeTreville made another surprising choice: he stayed.

Again, De Treville's actions present an enigma. Why remain and risk persecution when departure promised safety among Loyalist refugees? Perhaps he believed that British papers masked his identity well enough prevent his treachery from being revealed. Perhaps his young family, his wife only twenty-one and pregnant twice in two years, made exile impossible. Perhaps he reasoned and calculated that South Carolina, torn asunder by civil war, would ultimately choose reconciliation over vengeance. Whatever might have guided his decision, the next years tested it. In 1784, public quarrels erupted in Charleston over his loyalty. He was accused by two former Continental officers of a direct, personal relationship with Cornwallis before the war and having served him directly. Simultaneously, a separate dispute with Captain Adrian Proveaux sparked from heated words to swords drawn, a midnight challenge, a caning at the City Tavern, and a hand-to-hand fight that had to be separated. Challenges to duel ensued.

The controversy spilled into the press. Despite taking measures to counter much of the insinuation, he could not disprove the insult to his honor. Without proof, he argued, no man could be condemned. In the end, the threatened duels never came off. De Treville, although damaged in reputation, was neither prosecuted nor forced to exile.

Three potential explanations for his actions have blurred the questioning of his character. One is coercion. Scholarship has shown that in 1780–1781 hundreds of American prisoners in the Charleston area were forced or compelled by oppressive circumstance into British service. The second is opportunism: a calculation that British victory would leave Loyal men in favor. The third is the double-agent theory, suggested by his ease of circulation and conversation among Patriot leaders and their momentary trust. The record indicates that he assumed an exceedingly dangerous

role, drew very near to the gallows, and navigated his way back to civilian life without trial for treason.

After 1785, the records vary. A few hint that he died in 1791, with the means of his death argued. One account claims that duels left wounds, the effects of which later proved fatal. Another declares he succumbed to a long and painful illness, presumed to be pleurisy. Both may be true. He was only forty-nine when he died.

One fact points to the fact that he may eventually have been reintegrated into post-War society. A grandson, Richard De Treville, became lieutenant governor of South Carolina, a sign both of reputation rehabilitation to some degree, and of acceptance by the community to a considerable extent. The reintegration of former Loyalists by society and the State of South Carolina in the wake of wartime devastation was a reconciliation born of necessity as much as, or more so, than grace.

Sources:

Much of the information in this biography is derived from the research and writing of Douglas R. Dorney, Jr in his article "Captain John deTreville: Continental Officer and British Spy" in the Journal of the American Revolution, The War Years (1775-1783), dated November 12, 2019.

This article can be found online at: https://allthingsliberty.com/2019/11/captain-john-de-treville-continental-officer-and-british-spy/

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