

Beaufort County 250 Committee
Revolutionary War Biographies

John Laurens
Revolutionary, Soldier, Diplomat
and
Advocate for Earned Emancipation

By
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BEAUFORT COUNTY
SOUTH CAROLINA

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Introduction

Few officers of the American Revolution compressed as much activity into so short a life as John Laurens of South Carolina. Born into the highest level of the colonial Lowcountry elite in 1754, Laurens was educated in Charleston, Geneva, and London before abandoning the study of law and returning to America during the Revolution. Between 1777 and his death in 1782, he served as an aide-de-camp to George Washington, fought at Brandywine, Germantown, Monmouth, Savannah, Charleston, Yorktown, and numerous lesser engagements, was wounded repeatedly, became a prisoner of war, represented the United States on an important diplomatic mission to France, participated in the storming of Redoubt No. 10 at Yorktown, and helped negotiate the surrender of Lord Cornwallis's army. He returned afterward to South Carolina, where the war continued, and was killed at the Combahee River on August 27, 1782, at only twenty-seven years of age.¹

He was the son of Henry Laurens, one of South Carolina's wealthiest merchants and planters, a President of Continental Congress, and a man deeply involved earlier in life in the Atlantic slave trade. John Laurens, nevertheless, became the most persistent prominent white South Carolinian of the Revolutionary generation to advocate the enlistment of enslaved African Americans as soldiers and their emancipation in return for military service. In the political and racial world of Revolutionary South Carolina, his position was unquestionably radical.² He belonged to a society whose wealth, political power, and social structure rested heavily upon racial slavery, yet he fought for a Revolution justified in the language of natural rights and liberty. His experiences in the Continental Army increasingly brought those conflicting principles into confrontation.

Laurens' military career and his effort to enlist and emancipate enslaved soldiers were not separate chapters in his life. They developed together. The manpower crisis he witnessed as a soldier gave urgency to ideas about slavery that he had already begun to formulate, while his conception of revolutionary citizenship increasingly led him to

regard military service as a path by which enslaved men could claim freedom. The repeated rejection of his proposal by South Carolina consequently demonstrates both the transformative possibilities of the Revolution and the limits beyond which most white South Carolinians were unwilling to permit it to go.

The Making of a Revolutionary

Laurens was born in Charleston on October 28, 1754, the son of Henry Laurens and Eleanor Ball Laurens.³ Few young men in British North America entered life with greater advantages. The Laurens family occupied an important place in South Carolina's commercial and planting elite. Henry Laurens accumulated wealth through commerce, plantation agriculture, land, and slaveholding, and earlier in his career had been extensively involved in the slave trade.

After early schooling in Charleston, Laurens traveled to Europe in 1771. He studied in Geneva, where he encountered an intellectual environment associated with republican government, Protestant learning, and Enlightenment thought. In 1774 he moved to London to study law at the Middle Temple.⁴ It is likely that the derogatory attitude of most European elites toward America and Americans as crude, backwoods, cousins began to turn his sympathies toward the Revolutionary cause. As the imperial crisis intensified in America, Laurens followed events from abroad and became increasingly impatient to participate personally.

The decision was complicated by his private life. In 1776 he married Martha Manning, daughter of William Manning, a London merchant connected with Henry Laurens. Martha was pregnant when John prepared to return to America. Their daughter, Frances Eleanor, was subsequently born in England. Laurens nevertheless sailed for South Carolina in December 1776.⁵ He would never see his daughter and would never again live with his wife.

For John Laurens, duty to the revolutionary cause increasingly superseded personal security and domestic obligations. A surviving letter written to Martha on November 9, 1777, demonstrates that the separation was not necessarily intended to be permanent. The letter never reached her; the vessel carrying it was captured by the

Royal Navy, and the document survived among British prize records.⁶ By the summer of 1777, Laurens had traveled north with his father, who was serving in the Continental Congress. There the young South Carolinian entered the military world that would dominate the remainder of his life.

Laurens joined George Washington's headquarters during the summer of 1777 and was formally announced as an extra aide-de-camp in September. Following the Battle of Germantown, during which Washington noticed Laurens' aggressive posture, Washington appointed him a regular aide with the rank of lieutenant colonel.⁷ The appointment was significant. Washington's aides were not merely secretaries. They drafted correspondence, transmitted orders, carried sensitive information, communicated with generals and political leaders, and frequently acted as the commander in chief's personal representatives. Service at headquarters exposed Laurens to military affairs on a continental scale.

It also brought him into close association with Alexander Hamilton and the Marquis de Lafayette. The young officers shared ambition, education, revolutionary enthusiasm, and a desire for active military distinction. Laurens and Hamilton formed a particularly close friendship, documented by extensive correspondence that continued even when their assignments separated them.

A Bias for Action

Yet Laurens differed from the stereotypical staff officer in one striking respect: he persistently sought combat. At Brandywine on September 11, 1777, Washington's army attempted to prevent General Sir William Howe from advancing on Philadelphia. The Americans were defeated after Howe maneuvered around their right flank. Laurens exposed himself conspicuously during the fighting and established the reputation for personal bravery that followed him thereafter. At Germantown on October 4 he again participated directly in combat and received a wound in the shoulder. Washington appointed him a regular aide-de-camp two days later.⁸

Laurens's willingness to expose himself to danger impressed contemporaries, but the admiration was sometimes accompanied by concern. Courage in eighteenth-century military culture was indispensable to a gentleman officer; Laurens carried that

ideal toward what could become recklessness. The winter of 1777-1778 at Valley Forge added another dimension to his military education. Laurens witnessed the Continental Army's shortages, administrative weakness, and manpower difficulties. He also observed Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben's efforts to impose greater uniformity and discipline upon the army. It was during this period - not after the British shifted their principal military effort southward - that Laurens began developing his proposal for recruiting enslaved African Americans.

The Black-Conscription Proposal

By February 2, 1778, Laurens was corresponding with his father about raising Black troops. In that letter he reported that Washington regarded the large enslaved population of the southern states as a military resource that ought not to be ignored. The surviving documentary record shows that John and Henry Laurens discussed the proposal at considerable length during 1778.⁹

Laurens's reasoning combined military necessity with a developing ideological critique of slavery. The southern states possessed enormous populations of enslaved people but comparatively limited numbers of white men available for prolonged Continental service. Britain had already demonstrated its willingness to exploit slavery as an American vulnerability. Lord Dunmore's 1775 proclamation in Virginia had offered freedom to enslaved people belonging to rebels who reached British lines and served the Crown. Thousands of African Americans throughout the war sought freedom by escaping to British forces.

Laurens proposed reversing that strategic equation. Enslaved men should be recruited into American service, trained as soldiers, and rewarded with freedom. The idea was radical in South Carolina for reasons extending far beyond military organization. Enslaved people represented enormous capital investment. Arming them challenged deeply entrenched assumptions concerning racial hierarchy and social control. Emancipating them in exchange for military service implied that enslaved men possessed qualities - courage, discipline, loyalty, civic usefulness - that slave society routinely denied or minimized. Laurens also moved beyond a purely

utilitarian argument. His correspondence increasingly rejected claims of inherent Black inferiority. He argued that slavery, rather than nature, had degraded those held within it. Military training and the prospect of liberty, he believed, could produce effective soldiers. His plan contemplated selected enslaved men becoming soldiers under white officers and receiving freedom as a reward for service. Owners would be compensated. The proposal therefore retained elements of the property system even while creating a mechanism for destroying the status of slavery for those who served. But, most Southern officers found the racial implications of what Laurens proposed to be unacceptably radical. A slave who became an armed soldier of the republic and then a free man had crossed several of the most important boundaries upon which the racial order depended.

Monmouth, Rhode Island, and Revolutionary Honor

Laurens continued to distinguish himself militarily in 1778. At Monmouth Court House on June 28, Washington's army attacked the British column evacuating Philadelphia for New York. The battle became notorious for the confrontation between Washington and Major General Charles Lee after Lee's advance force withdrew unexpectedly. Laurens again exposed himself to fire to rally the men and received a minor wound.¹⁰ Following Monmouth, Laurens served as a liaison with the French forces associated with the Rhode Island campaign. His command responsibilities there earned him broader notice. On November 5, 1778, Congress offered him a Continental commission as lieutenant colonel in recognition of his "patriotic and spirited services" and "brave conduct in several actions," particularly his conduct in Rhode Island.¹¹ Laurens initially declined, unwilling to accept advancement merely as a reward for conspicuous bravery if it unfairly passed over experienced officers.

The controversy surrounding Charles Lee soon became personal. Washington had Lee court-martialed for disobedience, misbehavior before the enemy, and disrespect toward the commander in chief. Laurens became one of Washington's strongest defenders. After Washington personally forbade Alexander Hamilton to duel with Lee in defense of Washington's honor, Laurens issued the challenge

himself. On December 23, 1778, Laurens and Lee fought a duel. Alexander Hamilton acted as Laurens's second. Laurens wounded Lee, after which the seconds ended the affair.¹² The episode reflected the culture of honor among eighteenth-century officers, but it also revealed Laurens's intense personal loyalty to Washington. Military service for Laurens was inseparable from concepts of reputation, courage, loyalty, and honor. Within months, however, conditions in his native South Carolina altered the direction of his career dramatically.

South Carolina in Danger, 1779

The British capture of Savannah in December 1778 inaugurated a sustained southern offensive. Georgia became the immediate base from which British forces threatened South Carolina. Laurens now revived his Black-soldier proposal with urgency. On February 17, 1779, he wrote Henry Laurens that the salvation of South Carolina might depend upon major foreign intervention or his "black project." In March he sought congressional endorsement before returning south.¹³

Congress responded on March 29. It recommended that South Carolina and Georgia raise three thousand able-bodied Black men, organize them into separate battalions commanded by white officers, and emancipate every man who served faithfully until the end of the war. Each soldier was also to receive fifty dollars, while owners were to be compensated.¹⁴ On the same day, Congress granted Laurens a lieutenant colonel's commission. The journal does not explicitly state that Congress appointed him commander of the proposed Black corps, and that distinction is notable.¹⁵

Laurens arrived in a South Carolina whose political leadership was unwilling to follow him. He was elected to the state House of Representatives and attempted to obtain approval for his plan. Resistance was overwhelming. Owners objected to the loss of valuable property. With the shadow of slave revolts prominent in the memory of prosperous South Carolinians, most of them feared placing firearms in the hands of enslaved men. Others rejected the implicit recognition that Black men could become legitimate defenders of the state and acquire freedom through military service.

Laurens persisted. Writing Hamilton from Charleston on July 14, 1779, he explained that he felt obligated "in the light of a Citizen" to continue his efforts as long as any hope remained. South Carolina's army had been severely depleted, he observed, while conventional methods of obtaining manpower were politically unpopular. The state, he warned, might become the victim of its inhabitants' own "supineness and improvidence."¹⁶ The letter demonstrates that Laurens regarded the project not as an abstract humanitarian exercise but as a central obligation of citizenship and military defense. South Carolina nevertheless refused.

Coosawhatchie, Charleston, and Savannah

Laurens's return to South Carolina did not confine him to politics. During the British invasion of 1779 he participated in active operations designed to slow Major General Augustine Prevost's advance toward Charleston. At the Coosawhatchie River in early May, Laurens commanded an American rear guard detachment and was wounded severely in the right arm early in the delaying action against Prevost's column. He was carried from the field over the saddle of the war horse, Independence, owned by William Hazzard Wigg of Beaufort District, thereby saving his life.. Contemporary and later documentary annotations agree that the wound deprived the American force of his services at a critical moment.¹⁷

When Prevost subsequently threatened Charleston, Laurens strongly opposed Governor John Rutledge's extraordinary proposal to preserve the city through a negotiated neutrality that would remove South Carolina from active participation in the war. Laurens's opposition was consistent with his broader conception of honor: independence could not be preserved by abandoning the common cause when his own state was endangered.¹⁸ Before Rutledge could propose his resolution to Prevost, with the British army at the Gates of Charleston, Prevost received word that an American army of roughly 6,000 men was moving to attempt to retake the bastion of Savannah. The withdrawal of his 5,000 men across the sea islands without the benefit of ships for transport, was a marvel of military maneuver.

The southern theater exposed Laurens directly to the strategic problem behind his Black-regiment proposal. South Carolina possessed a comparatively small white population spread across a large territory, while substantial numbers of militia were reluctant or unable to remain continuously in the field. The enslaved population, meanwhile, constituted a majority in much of the Lowcountry. British commanders understood the vulnerability. Laurens believed South Carolina did not.

Later that year he participated in the Franco-American attempt to retake Savannah. A French fleet under Vice Admiral Charles-Hector, comte d'Estaing, joined American forces commanded by Major General Benjamin Lincoln. After siege operations failed to produce a British surrender, the allies launched a major assault on October 9. Laurens commanded an infantry column in the decisive and failed attack against Spring Hill Redoubt, in which Admiral-General D'Estaing received multiple severe wounds and General Casimir Pulaski, the Father of American Cavalry, was killed leading a charge.¹⁹ The assault was disastrous. French and American troops advanced against prepared British fortifications and suffered extraordinarily heavy casualties without breaking the defenses.

Laurens performance at Savannah underscored previously-demonstrated characteristics: a bias for action, a willingness to expose himself to fire without concern for his own safety in order to inspire his men, and an impetuous inclination toward reckless judgment.

Charleston, Defeat, and Captivity

The British returned to South Carolina in overwhelming strength early in 1780. Sir Henry Clinton landed an expeditionary army south of Charleston and gradually enclosed the city while the Royal Navy established control of its water approaches. Major General Benjamin Lincoln commanded the American defense. Laurens participated in the siege, commanded reconnaissance efforts, and reported intelligence to Washington concerning British landings, naval movements, and the forces threatening the city.²⁰

The American defensive position deteriorated steadily. British siege lines approached the Patriot works; supplies dwindled; avenues of escape disappeared. After approximately six weeks of siege operations, Lincoln capitulated on May 12, 1780. More than 5,612 American troops became prisoners, constituting perhaps the greatest American military disaster of the Revolution. Laurens was among them.²¹ The British required Lincoln's troops to march out with colors cased and denied them the full honors of war. Initially paroled, Laurens spent months unable to resume unrestricted military service. He was exchanged in November 1780 and almost immediately Congress entrusted him with an assignment of extraordinary importance. A year and a half later, Laurens would remember those conditions when the strategic situation was dramatically reversed at Yorktown.

Special Minister to France and Benjamin Franklin

By late 1780 the American war effort faced a financial and logistical crisis. Continental currency had collapsed, the army lacked supplies, and continued French support was essential. Congress selected Laurens as special minister to France. The appointment was striking. Laurens was only twenty-six. Benjamin Franklin, one of the most internationally respected Americans of the age, was already minister in Paris. Laurens was not sent to replace Franklin but to communicate the urgency of America's military needs and obtain immediate assistance.

Laurens reached France in March 1781. His relationship with Franklin was fundamentally different from his friendships with young officers in Washington's headquarters. Franklin was nearly fifty years older and possessed vastly greater diplomatic experience. The arrangement contained potential for friction: Congress expected Laurens to press the French government energetically, while Franklin understood the court, European credit, and the limitations of the alliance more intimately. The surviving correspondence shows, however, a serious and increasingly warm working relationship. Franklin assisted Laurens financially and administratively and expressed remarkable confidence in him. On May 17 Franklin told Laurens that,

were Laurens not so well suited to the military profession, Franklin would be happy to see him return to France as his successor, adding that Congress "could not put their Affairs in better Hands."²² That endorsement from Franklin is evidence that Laurens's abilities extended well beyond battlefield courage.

Laurens did not single-handedly "win" French aid, as some popular accounts imply. French policy, Franklin's diplomacy, existing alliance commitments, European finance, and strategic calculations all shaped the result. Laurens nevertheless brought urgency and persistence. His correspondence from Brest in late May records his efforts to assemble cargoes, substitute available military stores when requested articles were delayed, arrange shipping, and secure specie. On May 28 he reported that the frigate *Resolue* and accompanying vessels were ready for sea; on May 29 he described changes in the arrangements for transporting specie; on May 30 he was still pressing Franklin to obtain further remittances.²³ The mission resulted in substantial French financial and material assistance, including a six-million-livre grant whose proceeds were divided between specie and the purchase of supplies. Laurens returned with 2.5 million livres in specie and ships carrying badly needed military stores.²⁴

Relationships With the Wider Revolutionary Leadership

Laurens's diplomatic mission briefly placed him within the wider network of American statesmen in Europe, but the character of those connections varied greatly. John Adams corresponded with Laurens during 1781, yet the authoritative Adams Papers indicates that Adams apparently never met him personally. Their connection should therefore be described as professional correspondence rather than friendship.²⁵ This distinction matters because later narratives sometimes gather famous founders into a single social circle that did not actually exist. Though Laurens and he corresponded on the *Earned Emancipation* issue, Thomas Jefferson requires even greater caution. No evidence establishes a significant personal relationship or sustained correspondence between Jefferson and John Laurens.

No relationship was more consequential to Laurens's military development than that with George Washington. Washington's military family gave the young South

Carolinian access to strategic decision-making and influence in those circles, and it required discretion as well as courage. Washington repeatedly trusted Laurens with sensitive duties. The strongest demonstration came at Yorktown, when Washington selected him to represent the American army in negotiations over Cornwallis's surrender.

Alexander Hamilton was Laurens's closest personal relationship within headquarters. Their surviving correspondence is characterized by unusual emotional intimacy and intellectual candor. Hamilton supported Laurens's Black-soldier project and became one of the correspondents with whom Laurens could express both political frustration and personal ambition. Their friendship also repeatedly intersected with military honor: Hamilton served as Laurens's second in the duel with Charles Lee, and both men participated in the assault on Redoubt No. 10 at Yorktown.

The Marquis de Lafayette formed another important relationship. Lafayette admired Laurens's courage while recognizing the extreme degree to which he exposed himself. More than four decades later, after his celebrated return to the United States, Lafayette wrote a remembrance of his former comrade. He described Laurens's services as brilliant, devoted, and steady and emphasized a disinterestedness that approached disregard for his own safety and interests whenever the American cause was involved.²⁶ Lafayette had actually served with Laurens, and his characterization accords closely with the wartime record.

Yorktown

The Yorktown campaign represented the high point of Franco-American military cooperation. Washington and the comte de Rochambeau moved American and French forces from the New York region toward Virginia while Admiral de Grasse brought a powerful French fleet into the Chesapeake. The French naval victory off the Virginia Capes prevented Cornwallis from receiving reinforcement or escaping by sea.

Laurens rejoined Washington there and again sought combat. On the night of October 14, American light infantry assaulted British Redoubt No. 10 while French

troops attacked Redoubt No. 9. Alexander Hamilton commanded the principal American assault force; Laurens participated in the attack. The capture of the redoubts allowed the allied siege works to advance close enough to make Cornwallis's position untenable.²⁷ On October 17 Cornwallis requested negotiations. The following afternoon the British commissioners, Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Dundas and Major Alexander Ross, met at Augustine Moore's house with the allied representatives: the vicomte de Noailles for the French and John Laurens for the Americans.²⁸ The choice of Laurens carried particular meaning. He had been among the officers who surrendered at Charleston in 1780. Now he helped determine the terms imposed upon a British army.

The negotiations continued for hours. Washington insisted that the British receive essentially the same military honors that Clinton had allowed the Americans at Charleston. The final terms required Cornwallis's troops to march out with colors cased. Later accounts preserve dramatic dialogue in which Laurens explicitly invokes Charleston when British officers protest. The precise wording should be treated cautiously, but the underlying point is securely documented: the Charleston precedent governed the surrender, and Laurens was a particularly appropriate American officer to enforce it.²⁹ On October 19, Cornwallis's army surrendered. Laurens had traveled an extraordinary distance in seventeen months: from capitulant at Charleston to American commissioner at Yorktown. Yet he did not regard Yorktown as the end of the war. Charleston remained occupied. He went home.

Return to South Carolina: Laurens and Nathanael Greene

The surrender at Yorktown did not end the Revolution in South Carolina. Charleston remained in British hands, and British and Loyalist forces continued to conduct operations into the surrounding countryside. Nathanael Greene's campaigns had progressively confined British power toward the coast, but the Lowcountry remained contested. Laurens could reasonably have considered his service complete. He had survived four years of dangerous military service, imprisonment, an Atlantic diplomatic mission, and the Yorktown campaign. Instead, he returned to South Carolina and joined the forces serving under Greene.

Greene was fundamentally different from Laurens as a military personality. Where Laurens was inclined toward aggressive personal action, Greene had become a master of strategic patience, maneuver, logistics, intelligence, and preservation of forces. Service under Greene placed Laurens under one of the Revolution's most sophisticated operational commanders.

Laurens acquired responsibilities beyond leading men in battle. Reminiscent of Yorktown, he became involved in intelligence gathering around British-held Charleston and in the detailed work of maintaining American positions near the city. A surviving six-page letter to Greene dated March 20, 1782, provides unusually concrete evidence. Laurens proposed adjustments to forward positions and defensive works, discussed manpower, lamented shortages of arms and clothing, and reported the capture of a British schooner by Captain Rudolph.³⁰ The document is particularly meaningful because it reveals Laurens functioning not as a romantic battlefield hero but as an operational officer thinking about fortification, supply, labor, enemy movement, and riverine activity.

Jacksonborough and the Final Failure of the Black-Regiment Plan

Laurens simultaneously returned to the political struggle he had begun three years earlier. The South Carolina legislature assembled at Jacksonborough in early 1782, the first major legislative gathering after the British conquest of the state. Laurens again attempted to secure authorization for recruiting enslaved men. Again the proposal failed.³¹ The failure was revealing. South Carolina had suffered invasion, occupation, military defeat, economic devastation, and a brutal civil conflict between Patriots and Loyalists. Thousands of enslaved people had escaped, been removed, changed hands, or sought freedom behind British lines. African Americans had served on both sides of the Revolution. Northern states had employed Black soldiers, and Rhode Island had raised a regiment including formerly enslaved men.

Yet South Carolina's political leadership remained unwilling to adopt Laurens's plan. The obstacle had never been military necessity alone. His proposal threatened the relationship between race, slavery, property, and political power. If an enslaved

man could earn freedom by defending the state, then military service conferred a claim to liberty. If Black soldiers could display courage equal to white soldiers, racial assumptions used to justify enslavement became more difficult to sustain. If the state could transform enslaved property into armed defenders of independence, slavery itself ceased to appear wholly inviolable.

The 1782 failure is especially important because it demonstrates that the rationale for Laurens' proposal had outlived the immediate emergency of 1779. Had the idea merely been a temporary response to invasion, he could have abandoned it after Yorktown. Yet he returned to it when the existential military crisis had passed. Laurens had reached a point at which military necessity and revolutionary ideology converged. South Carolina had not.

Combahee River and the Death of John Laurens

By the summer of 1782 the outcome of the Revolution was scarcely in doubt but fighting continued around Charleston, where the remnants of British forces in the South were confined. Extreme supply shortages for the 15,000 British and Loyalist troops and citizens taking refuge dictated that British forces still conducted foraging expeditions into the countryside to obtain food and supplies. One such operation moved into the Combahee River region in August. Greene sent Brigadier General Mordecai Gist to intercept it, and Laurens joined the operation despite illness.

The circumstances of Laurens's final action can be reconstructed more meaningfully than the common description of a "minor skirmish" suggests. The South Carolina Historical Society's account, based on its Laurens materials and the military record, places approximately fifty men under Laurens's immediate command against about 150 British soldiers. The British appear to have received warning of the American approach and were prepared. Laurens nevertheless advanced at daybreak rather than wait for Gist and nearby reinforcements to establish a battery downriver at Tar Bluff to engage the British force in its withdrawal after pillaging plantations along the Combahee River.³² See a more complete and representative account on the Beaufort 250 website under History, Battle Summaries, at:

The consequences were severe. The British had crossed upriver from Laurens and marched downriver along the bank, flanking Laurens men at their position. British fire struck the American detachment almost immediately. Nineteen of Laurens's men were wounded, three were missing, and two were killed, one of them Laurens, who was leading a charge to break through the British line in an attempt to disperse the volume of fire. The circumstances are significant when evaluating Laurens as a soldier. His death was not merely a random battlefield misfortune. It reflected the same willingness to force action that had been visible since Brandywine. That characteristic had repeatedly produced admiration; at Combahee it proved fatal. This does not diminish his courage. It defines it more precisely. Laurens possessed genuine battlefield fearlessness, but fearlessness could become tactical impatience.

The irony was extraordinary. He had survived Brandywine, Germantown, Monmouth, Rhode Island, Coosawhatchie, the bloody assault at Savannah, the siege and surrender of Charleston, captivity, wartime Atlantic crossings, and the storming of Yorktown's defenses. He died in a comparatively small engagement after Yorktown had effectively decided the outcome of the war. He died that night on August 27, 1782, at twenty-seven years of age, the last American field grade officer to be killed in the entire Revolutionary War.³³ His death shocked his friends. For Washington, Hamilton, Greene, Lafayette, and others who had known him in battle, the loss represented not merely the death of a courageous officer but the destruction of a promising postwar career. The counterfactual question is unavoidable: what political role might Laurens have played in South Carolina had he survived? The evidence cannot answer it, but the question matters particularly because his ideas about slavery were still developing when the record abruptly ends.

Was John Laurens an Abolitionist?

Modern discussions of Laurens frequently center on whether he was an abolitionist. The question requires precision. If "abolitionist" means an advocate of

immediate, universal, uncompensated abolition of slavery and complete racial equality in the sense associated with some nineteenth-century antislavery movements, the term is misleading. Laurens did not anticipate or formulate such a program.

His principal proposal involved military emancipation in return for service: enslaved men would enter service, owners would receive compensation, and soldiers who completed their service would become free. The plan initially depended upon the necessities of war and retained the assumption that enslaved people could be treated as property for purposes of compensating their owners.

By the standards of South Carolina in 1778-1782 Laurens occupied an extraordinary position. He rejected the assumption that African Americans lacked the capacity to become disciplined soldiers. He attributed degradation to slavery rather than innate racial incapacity. He repeatedly advocated arming enslaved men. He insisted that military service should culminate in emancipation. And he persisted despite repeated rejection by the political class into which he had been born.

The significance becomes clearer when considered against his own interests. Laurens belonged to one of South Carolina's wealthiest slaveholding families. He had every social and economic incentive to defend the existing system. Instead, he identified a fundamental contradiction within it. This does not make him a modern egalitarian. It does make him one of the most advanced antislavery thinkers among the political and military elite of Revolutionary South Carolina. Because Laurens died at twenty-seven, historians cannot know where another decade of political experience might have taken him. One cannot assume that he would inevitably have become an advocate of general emancipation nor can they dismiss the possibility. The evidence ends in 1782.

Laurens as a Military Officer

Laurens's reputation for courage is so prominent that it can obviate a more difficult question: was he a good soldier? His bravery is beyond any serious dispute. Congress formally recognized his conduct. Washington trusted him. He repeatedly distinguished himself under fire. He accepted dangerous assignments and suffered

multiple wounds. But personal courage is not necessarily correlated with military judgment. Laurens sometimes displayed a willingness to seek danger that bordered on recklessness. This can enhance tactical command, but it can be dangerous in a strategic capacity. He never commanded an army, brigade, or sustained independent campaign comparable with those of Nathanael Greene, Daniel Morgan, Anthony Wayne, or Lafayette.

His military importance arose from versatility and the scope of his capability. He was simultaneously a staff officer, combat leader, liaison officer, political advocate, intelligence organizer, diplomat, and confidential representative of senior commanders. Washington's confidence is particularly significant. The commander in chief depended upon aides for discretion as much as courage. Laurens handled sensitive correspondence and missions. At Yorktown Washington selected him as the American commissioner in negotiations culminating in the surrender of a British army. Congress likewise trusted him with an independent diplomatic mission at a critical moment. Franklin judged him capable of major public responsibility. Greene employed him in the complicated operational and intelligence environment surrounding Charleston. The record therefore does not support reducing Laurens to an impetuous young aristocrat seeking glory. His superiors repeatedly assigned him responsibilities requiring judgment and discretion.

Conclusion

John Laurens lived only twenty-seven years, and his significant public career lasted scarcely five. Yet within those years he experienced an extraordinary portion of the American Revolution. He fought at Brandywine and Germantown, endured Valley Forge, fought at Monmouth and in Rhode Island, returned to defend South Carolina, campaigned for the enlistment of enslaved soldiers, fought at Coosawhatchie and Savannah, endured the siege and surrender of Charleston, became a prisoner, crossed the Atlantic as an American diplomat, helped secure French financial and military assistance, returned to fight at Yorktown, participated in the capture of Redoubt No. 10, helped negotiate Cornwallis's surrender, and then returned once more to South Carolina to continue fighting.

Washington trusted him with confidential military service and the Yorktown negotiations. Hamilton became his intimate friend and intellectual confidant. Lafayette remembered his devotion decades later. Franklin saw in him abilities sufficient for high diplomatic responsibility. Greene employed him in a sensitive and critical role in the demanding final operations around Charleston. Adams knew him through correspondence, while Jefferson is more appropriately understood as a revealing ideological contrast than as a personal associate. These distinctions matter because Laurens's importance does not require an invented intimacy with every famous founder; the relationships that are actually documented are remarkable enough.

His death at the Combahee River on August 27, 1782, ended a career that contemporaries had every reason to expect would continue into the political life of the new republic. But Laurens's greatest historical importance may lie in an enterprise that failed. His effort to create Black military units in South Carolina never received the state support necessary to make it a reality. Judged solely as policy, the campaign was unsuccessful. Judged historically, its importance is much greater. Laurens recognized that enslaved African Americans were not simply property to be protected during wartime. They were potential participants in the Revolution. If they fought for American liberty, he concluded, they acquired a compelling claim to liberty themselves. There is an ironic foreshadowing in Laurens' "Earned Emancipation" proposal of what would eventually happen about 90 years later in the early years of the American Civil War prior to Emancipation.

This proposition struck directly at the structure of South Carolina society. Laurens did not develop a complete program for abolishing slavery. His plan retained important limitations: military service rather than universal human right provided the immediate mechanism for emancipation, white officers would command the proposed units, and owners were to be compensated. Yet those qualifications should not obscure what was extraordinary about his position. A son of the South Carolina slaveholding elite repeatedly asked his state to arm enslaved Black men, recognize their capacity as soldiers, and emancipate them for defending American independence. South Carolina repeatedly refused.

The contrast provides perhaps the clearest measure of Laurens's significance. His military experiences had carried him beyond the conventional political meaning of independence toward a more troubling question about the Revolution itself. If Americans justified resistance to Britain by appealing to liberty, natural rights, and opposition to arbitrary power, could those same principles remain permanently confined by race in the American system of slavery? In the decades following the Revolution, slavery became more rather than less deeply embedded in the state's economy and political order. The revolutionary opportunity Laurens perceived closed rather than expanded.

His short life therefore illuminates both what the American Revolution accomplished and what it left undone. John Laurens was a South Carolina patriot, a Continental officer of exceptional courage, a trusted member of Washington's military family, an effective diplomatic agent, and a soldier who remained in the field almost until the Revolution's end. But his enduring importance arises from something more. He recognized, however, incompletely an unstated incongruity and an inherent hypocrisy - that a revolution fought in the name of liberty had created a question that independence from Britain alone could not answer. That question was slavery. And in Revolutionary South Carolina, almost alone among men of his rank and social position, John Laurens insisted that it be confronted.

Notes

1. Gregory D. Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000); Gregory D. Massey, "Laurens, John," *South Carolina Encyclopedia*, updated August 9, 2022.
2. Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, especially the chapters treating the 1778-1782 Black-soldier project.
3. Massey, "Laurens, John"; Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*.
4. Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*; "John Laurens," National Park Service.
5. Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*.
6. John Laurens to Martha Manning Laurens, November 9, 1777, High Court of Admiralty Prize Papers, The National Archives (UK), discussed in The National Archives, "Love letter from John Laurens to his wife Martha Manning."
7. Editorial annotation to John Rutledge to George Washington, June 6, 1777, The Papers of George Washington, Revolutionary War Series, Founders Online.
8. Ibid.; Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*.
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