

Beaufort County 250 Committee
American Revolution
Position Paper

*Beaufort District:
The Path To Independence*

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SOUTH CAROLINA

Beaufort District 250 Committee

The Path to Independence for Beaufort District

By the time of the July 4, 1776 adoption of the Declaration of Independence by Continental Congress, forces driving separation from the rule of English monarchy had been stirring the people of Beaufort District to action of various sorts for over fifteen years. This paper will examine the most consequential of those actions leading from the depths of oppression to the light of liberty from British domination and the exercise of freedom in self-governance for South Carolina and Beaufort District alike.

Macro Forces Fueling the Drive for Independence

While the Stamp Act Congress, convened in New York in 1765, marked the first unified colonial action against British policy, starting with the Boston Massacre in 1770 increasingly oppressive acts or omissions by British governors and military forces, primarily in the Northern colonies, inflamed revolutionary sentiments from New England to Georgia.

The burning of the *HMS Gaspee* in 1772, the imposition of the Tea Acts in 1773, the levying of the Coercive Acts of 1774, including the Quartering Act, and the Quebec Act of 1775 were the intolerable measures imposed by Parliament and King George III that finally sparked the flame of resistance into open rebellion at Lexington and Concord.

Then, throughout the Colonies between May 1775 and July 1776, more than 90 local and state declarations of independence - including district resolutions, instructions to delegates, and provincial acts - were adopted. These documents, often referred to by historians as the "other declarations of 1776," were issued by town, county, district and provincial bodies to effect and support independence from British rule before the Continental Congress adopted the national Declaration on July 4, 1776.

Key Pre-July 4, 1776 Declarations and Actions:

- ***Mecklenburg Declaration/Resolves (May 1775/1776)*** - While a May 20, 1775, "Mecklenburg Declaration" is generally considered by modern scholars to be inauthentic (likely a misremembering of the May 31, 1775, Mecklenburg Resolves), North Carolinians maintain they were first, and the date is on their state flag.
- ***North Carolina (Halifax Resolves - April 12, 1776)*** - The first officially recognized action by a colony authorizing its delegates to vote for independence.
- ***South Carolina (April 23, 1776)*** - Chief Justice William Henry Drayton's declaration that the law of the land warranted the end of King George III's authority.
- ***Rhode Island (May 4, 1776)*** - The first colony to officially renounce its allegiance to the British Crown, effectively declaring itself a sovereign state.
- ***Virginia (May 15, 1776)*** - The Virginia Convention instructed its delegates to propose independence, leading to the Lee Resolution.
- ***Local Declarations (May-June, 1776)*** - Numerous town and county meetings, such as those in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania (e.g., Philadelphia, Chester County), passed resolutions demanding separation.
- ***The Lee Resolution (July 2, 1776)*** - Congress passed Richard Henry Lee's resolution, formally severing ties with Britain two days before approving the final wording of Jefferson's document.
- ***Other Significant Actions*** - Diverse, locally-initiated statements or formal declarations of separation or independence were a response to the Royal government's increasing restriction of rights, the broad publication of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, and Parliament's Prohibitory Act of 1775, which John Adams termed the true "Act of Independency"

South Carolina's Trajectory

In the South Carolina backcountry as early as 1763, the Regulator Movement emerged as a form of vigilante defiance against the perceived neglect of the government which was based in coastal towns and cities. Landowners formed "Regulator" groups to enforce law and order, at times forcibly taking over court functions in districts where the government had failed to provide them. The

movement was fueled by deep resentment over taxation for services not provided, primarily the lack of law enforcement in rural areas, and over a lack of representation in the Commons House of Assembly.

From 1765-1772, responding to citizen unrest, resentful elected representatives in the Provincial Assembly began exerting their influence through major acts of formal resistance:

- ***Stamp Act Congress Participation (October 1765)*** - South Carolina was a leader in the first coordinated colonial resistance. Congressional delegates Christopher Gadsden, Thomas Lynch, and John Rutledge attended the Stamp Act Congress in New York. They helped draft the "Declaration of Rights and Grievances," which formally asserted that only colonial assemblies had the right to tax the colonists.
- ***The Sons of Liberty Demonstrations (1765-1766)*** - Following Gadsden's leadership, the Sons of Liberty in Charleston organized mass meetings under "Liberty Trees." They used public demonstrations and effigy burnings to force the resignation of stamp distributors, effectively nullifying the Stamp Act in the colony before its official repeal.
- ***The Non-Importation Agreements (1769-1770)*** - In response to the Townshend Acts, South Carolina merchants and citizens adopted formal "Non-Importation Agreements." These were collective pledges to boycott British goods to pressure Parliament into repealing the new taxes.
- ***Legislative Defiance of the Bill of Rights Society (1769)*** - The South Carolina Commons House of Assembly formally defied Royal authority by voting to send 1,500 pounds sterling to the Bill of Rights Society in London to support English radical John Wilkes. This act of defiance led the Crown to issue "Additional Instructions" in 1770 that effectively paralyzed the colonial government, as the Assembly refused to operate
- ***The Association (1775)*** - In June 1775, the SC Provincial Congress adopted "The Association," a document signed by citizens across the state—including many in the Beaufort District—pledging to sacrifice their lives and fortunes to resist British tyranny.

The Adoption of the South Carolina Constitution (March 26, 1776)

On March 26, 1776, the South Carolina Provincial Congress adopted a new Constitution, making it the second of the thirteen colonies (after New Hampshire) to establish an independent government. This document transformed the colony into an independent republic with its own President (John Rutledge), a bicameral legislature, and a judiciary. By creating this constitutional framework, South Carolina effectively ended British royal rule within its borders, even though the document was initially designated "temporary" until a reconciliation could be reached.

Regional and Local Resolutions

Beyond the provincial constitution, other formal acts of resistance served as more local pronouncements of separation:

Drayton's Charges (April-May 1776) - As a consequence of the adoption of a constitution, Supreme Court Chief Justice, William Henry Drayton, delivered direct charges to district grand juries across the state, including the Beaufort District representatives, essentially declaring that King George III had abdicated his government and that South Carolinians were no longer bound by his laws.

On April 23, 1776, Chief Justice William Henry Drayton delivered his monumental charge to the Grand Jury in Charleston, declaring that royal authority had legally dissolved. This charge was delivered at the Old Exchange in Charlestown. It served as the starting point for his circuit through the Beaufort, Georgetown, Cheraws, Camden, and Ninety-Six districts, ensuring that the legal argument for independence was formally "proclaimed" to the citizenry throughout South Carolina. As Drayton personally presided over four of the districts, his charge for Beaufort District was delivered in Orangeburgh. The exact wording of the most famous passage from the address is:

"The Almighty setteth up; and he casteth down: He breaks the Sceptre and transfers the Dominion: He has made Choice of the present Generation to erect the American Empire. ... From a short Retrospect, it is evident, the Work was not the present Design of Man."

Drayton used the platform to provide a legal and moral justification for claiming independence, asserting:

- 1) ***The Dissolution of Allegiance*** - He argued that since King George III had violated the "natural rights of mankind" and the terms of the British Constitution, the people were "absolved from their allegiance".
- 2) ***A New Sovereignty*** - He clearly stated, "The American States are become dissolved from the British Dominion," and characterized the current conflict not as a rebellion, but as the birth of a new empire.
- 3) ***A Moral Mandate*** - He concluded that to "repine" or regret the separation would be "impiously to question the unerring Wisdom of Providence".

Following the presentation at the Old Exchange in Charlestown, he delivered formal presentations throughout early 1776 to grand juries in various districts (Georgetown, Cheraw, Ninety-Six, and Orangeburgh among them) echoing the same sentiments of independence and acting as de facto local declarations.

Following Drayton's early May presentation, on May 20, 1776 the Grand Jury of Orangeburg District issued its *Address and Declaration of Separation from the English King* to Chief Justice Drayton as "a bold and early assertion of American independence in the South Carolina backcountry." By the time in July the national Declaration was adopted, the state had already been operating as a sovereign entity for over three months.

Key Revolutionary Actions in Beaufort District Prior to the Declaration:

While representatives from Beaufort District were integrally involved with action at the colonial level, the people of Beaufort District were directly responsible for several early acts of resistance:

- 1) ***The Beaufort Assembly Defiance (1772)*** - This event is directly referenced as the fourth grievance in the U.S. Declaration of Independence. To avoid the "hostile" influence of Charleston, Royal Governor Lord Charles Montagu moved the assembly to Beaufort, an "unusual, uncomfortable, and distant"

location. The local assembly's refusal to cooperate became a foundational example of colonial resistance.

- 2) ***Provincial Government Formation (1775-1776)*** - Numerous Beaufort District representatives participated in the First and Second Provincial Congresses in Charleston. In March 1776, these bodies adopted a temporary constitution for South Carolina, creating a self-governing "republic" months before the national declaration.
- 3) ***The Philippa Affair*** - Beaufort was the site of early military action against the British. In July 1775, local militia under Colonel Stephen Bull captured a British ship, *HMS Philippa*, carrying 16,000 lbs of gunpowder off the coast, which was then distributed to patriot forces in Georgia and South Carolina. Half of the SC share was later shipped to George Washington's army for use in the Siege of Boston.
- 4) ***Capture of The Betsey*** - In August 1775, the Patriot vessel *Commerce*, captained by Clement Lempriere and crewed by Beaufort District militia, captured the *HMS Betsey* off the coast of St Augustine. The 12,000 lbs of gunpowder and other munitions confiscated were taken to Charlestown where they were added to the stores of ammunition for the SC military, which were dangerously low at the time.
- 5) ***Battle of the Rice Boats*** - When a British fleet anchored off Savannah harbor in February 1776 to load a cargo of rice for troops in the North, the sale was denied by the Patriot Assembly of Georgia and the British ships attacked. On March 2-3 a four-hour cannon battle at Yamacraw Bluff was followed by the setting aflame by about 500 militia from Georgia and South Carolina, many from Beaufort District, of two rice boats which floated downriver to ignite the British ships, forcing their retreat and departure without the needed supplies.

The road to independence for the Beaufort District and South Carolina was paved by over fifteen years of escalating defiance, shifting from early legislative protests and economic boycotts to the establishment of a sovereign provincial government by March 1776.

Through pivotal local actions - such as the Beaufort Assembly Defiance, the daring, armed seizure of British gunpowder in the Philippa and Betsey affairs, and the legal formalization of separation through Chief Justice Drayton's charges - the region effectively severed ties with the British Crown months before the formal adoption of

the national Declaration. By July 4, 1776, the district had already transitioned from a neglected colonial outpost to an active, leading participant in a self-governing republic, having sacrificed its resources and security to secure a "moral mandate" for American liberty.