

Beaufort County 250 Committee
Revolutionary Retrospectives

The Unquiet Year

Military Activity in Beaufort District 1777

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SC 250 ANNIVERSARY American Revolution | BEAUFORT COUNTY SOUTH CAROLINA

The Unquiet Year: Military Activity in Beaufort District - 1777

In the conventional history of the American Revolution in South Carolina, 1777 can easily disappear. It falls between the dramatic British attack on Charleston and the Cherokee War of 1776 and the opening of Britain's Southern Strategy in late 1778. There was no major battle in Beaufort District during 1777, no invasion comparable to Augustine Prevost's march through the district in 1779, and no engagement comparable to the Battle of Port Royal Island. Yet a closer examination reveals that 1777 was anything but an inactive year along South Carolina's southern frontier.

During those twelve months Beaufort was being transformed into a fortified naval station, military supply point, military shipbuilding center and vital link in the waterborne communications route connecting Charleston with Savannah. At the same time, the growing British and Loyalist threat from East Florida was beginning to give the islands and waterways of Beaufort District a strategic importance that would become unmistakable two years later.

The district entered 1777 already militarized. At the center of its defenses stood Fort Lyttleton, guarding the Beaufort River and the approaches to the town. The fort had assumed new importance after independence because Port Royal Sound offered one of the finest natural harbors on the southern Atlantic coast. An enemy vessel entering the sound could threaten Beaufort itself, but could also gain access to a complex network of rivers, creeks and inland passages leading south toward Hilton Head, Daufuskie and Savannah and northward toward Charleston.

The Beaufort defenses were therefore part of something considerably larger than the protection of one town. They guarded a gateway into the southern South Carolina Lowcountry.

The military establishment at Fort Lyttleton demonstrates that state authorities understood that danger. In early 1777 the fort was not merely an abandoned colonial installation occupied by a handful of guards. It contained artillerymen, gunners, matrosses, officers and substantial military stores. The artillery was being exercised and the garrison trained. William Harden, one of the important Patriot military figures of the Beaufort District, remained associated with the fort during the opening months of the year.

Francis Marion Comes To Beaufort

The strategic importance of the district became especially apparent early in 1777 when events in Georgia drew South Carolina forces southward. British East Florida, centered on St. Augustine, had become a refuge and military base for Loyalists driven out of Georgia and the Carolinas and for escaped slaves seeking their freedom through British service. From there, British regulars, provincial troops, Loyalist rangers and their Indian allies could move northward into Georgia. Georgia consequently represented the vulnerable southern flank of the American states - and Beaufort District stood immediately behind it.

When Fort McIntosh in Georgia came under threat in early 1777, South Carolina attempted to send assistance. On February 28, 1777, William Moultrie ordered Francis Marion to take

detachments of South Carolina Continental troops southward. His instructions sent him to "Beaufort Port Royal," where he was to collect military stores before proceeding through the inland passage toward Savannah. That seemingly mundane order tells us something important about Beaufort's early wartime role. Moving troops by water avoided many of the difficulties of the primitive Lowcountry roads and the numerous rivers separating Charleston from Georgia. The intricate network of sounds, rivers and creeks surrounding Beaufort therefore constituted a Revolutionary military highway.

Marion's expedition did not save Fort McIntosh. The movement through the inland waterways took too long and the American position fell before assistance could arrive. But the episode establishes that by early 1777 Beaufort was already functioning as an intermediate military base between Charleston and the Georgia frontier.

Beaufort Develops as a Naval Depot

Even more revealing was what occurred during the spring. South Carolina had created its own state navy in 1775, and in 1777 the government began developing a naval force specifically associated with Beaufort. Local shipbuilding capability was a factor that made that possible. One of the central figures was James Black, the Beaufort-area shipwright whose connections to the inter-related Ash, Mongin, Martinangel and Watts families of the southern Sea Islands created a powerful shipbuilding resource.

In April the South Carolina Navy Board was corresponding with Black concerning construction of a vessel that became known simply as the Beaufort Galley. This was not an insignificant patrol boat. On April 11 the Navy Board sent Black two 18-pounder cannons and provided instructions for their installation. The guns were to be positioned so that they could fire ahead of the vessel. The combination of heavy artillery with a shallow-draft galley was particularly appropriate for Beaufort's waters. Such a vessel could operate in rivers and sounds where larger ocean-going warships had less freedom of movement. The government wanted the ship completed quickly.

On May 6 the Navy Board wrote to Captain James Doharty, former scout boat pilot and leader of the Beaufort District Militia South of the Broad River, instructing him to hasten completion of the *Beaufort Galley*. Doharty was told to enlist at least twenty seamen, and the warship was authorized a first lieutenant, second lieutenant, purser, boatswain and gunner. Naval stores were to be forwarded from Charleston to Beaufort. The contemporary Navy Board correspondence survives in *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*. This was clearly no informal local defense craft. South Carolina was establishing a commissioned naval vessel at Beaufort with officers, crew, heavy guns and logistical support from Charleston**.**

The identities of its officers make the story even more interesting from a Beaufort District perspective. Doharty was a local figure with connections to the Talbird family as a stepson of family patriarch Henry, whose strategically important lands along Whale Branch later become important in reconstructing the British operations preceding the Battle of Port Royal Island in 1779. Doharty's brother-in-law, Thomas Talbird, was appointed first lieutenant of the *Beaufort Galley*, while James Hunly became second lieutenant.

By November the mission of the vessel had been stated explicitly. President John Rutledge directly instructed Doharty to take the galley to Beaufort and employ it in the defense of Beaufort's port and the southern coast and inlets.

The wording of the order is important in understanding the mission of the warship assigned to Beaufort. The *Beaufort Galley* was not merely a floating battery intended to remain immediately off the town. Its defensive responsibility extended into the coast and inlets of southern South Carolina. That placed the waterways surrounding Port Royal, Hilton Head, Daufuskie and the approaches toward Savannah within the strategic environment for which the Beaufort naval establishment existed.

Two Vessels Called Beaufort

The story becomes slightly confusing because there was another vessel associated with the town: the state sloop *Beaufort*. The sloop and the *Beaufort Galley* were separate vessels.

The sloop was sent to Beaufort around 1775 for alteration and fitting out, with James Black again involved. It could carry stores and cargo while also possessing armed capability. During 1777 it helped sustain the developing naval establishment at Beaufort, including carrying equipment required for the galley and delivering munitions to guard posts. Its activities also reveal the extraordinary geographical reach of Revolutionary Beaufort District.

Rice could leave the district aboard a state vessel, move through the Atlantic into the Caribbean, and be exchanged in French-controlled ports for commodities needed by South Carolina. The same vessel could return carrying naval materials required for the defense of Port Royal. The *Beaufort* performed these duties during its service. Consequently Beaufort's Revolutionary network was not simply the Beaufort-Savannah corridor, it was increasingly Charleston-Beaufort-Savannah-Caribbean, with British East Forida and St Augustine looming beyond Georgia.

Hilton Head and Daufuskie

Hilton Head and Daufuskie occupied an especially sensitive position within this developing system. They both possessed southern extremities that offered an open field of observation to the Southern approaches to an inland passage that could extend north to Charles Town. They also stood between Port Royal Sound and the Savannah River approaches. Calibogue Sound and the waterways behind the islands offered passages through which small vessels, scout boats, privateers and military transports could move without venturing far offshore.

Moreover, the political divisions that would eventually make this area the scene of intense Patriot-Loyalist violence were already developing. Families and individuals throughout the southern Sea Islands were being forced to choose between the revolutionary government and continued allegiance to Britain. The significance of the islands in 1777 was primarily strategic, political and maritime. They formed the southern doorway to Port Royal.

The Enemy To the South

Behind virtually everything occurring at Beaufort was the growing danger presented by British East Florida. As of 1756, St. Augustine provided Britain with a secure base south of the rebellious colonies. Loyalists displaced from Georgia and South Carolina could find refuge there, while provincial forces could move northward against Georgia. Beaufort occupied an intermediate and uncomfortable position. It was not yet on the front line, but the front line was moving toward it. Georgia served as a buffer and if Georgia collapsed, the southern South Carolina coast would become exposed. The waters around Daufuskie, Hilton Head and Port Royal Sound would then become avenues of invasion rather than merely commercial waterways. Events in 1778 and 1779 would prove that concern entirely justified.

The British Chart the Battlefield To Come

Against this background, the appearance in London of Des Barres's magnificent 1777 chart of Port Royal acquires additional interest. Published on August 10, it depicts precisely the maritime landscape that South Carolina was attempting to defend: Port Royal Sound, Beaufort, the Sea Islands and the navigable channels through them. Depth soundings, shoals, channels and coastal features provided mariners with the information necessary to negotiate one of the most complicated coastal environments in British North America.

The chart was not necessarily created because Britain intended to invade Beaufort in 1777. Des Barres's *Atlantic Neptune* was a much larger imperial hydrographic undertaking of the Southeast coast, and the Port Royal chart drew upon earlier surveys deposited with British authorities, such as Gascoigne's May 15 1776 chart. But its military usefulness is unmistakable, and it would be naïve to conclude that, at a time when the need to shift British force to the Southern theater was being realized in the North, the precision of the charts was accidental. At almost exactly the same time that South Carolina was building a galley to defend Beaufort's coast and inlets, British naval officers were gaining access to exceptionally detailed published charts of those same waters.

Two years later those waters would become an active theater of war.

1777 - The Unquiet Year

Seen from Charleston, 1777 may look like an interlude. Seen from Beaufort, it looks quite different.

There were artillerymen drilling at Fort Lyttleton. Powder, shot, arms and cannon were being accumulated. Francis Marion and Continental soldiers passed through Port Royal on their way toward the threatened Georgia frontier. James Black was building and refitting vessels for military use. Captain James Doharty was recruiting sailors. Thomas Talbird was becoming a naval officer. Heavy cannon were mounted aboard a purpose-built galley. State vessels were carrying supplies between Charleston, Beaufort and the Caribbean. The waterways leading toward Savannah were functioning as military transportation routes. Beyond Georgia lay British East Florida and an expanding Briish-Loyalist military presence.

No great battle occurred in Beaufort District in 1777, but the machinery of war was being assembled and activated. That is what makes 1777 important. It represents the transition between Beaufort's early participation in the Revolution and the transformation of the district into an actual theater of war. The fort, shipyards, inland passages, militia, state navy and politically divided Sea Island population that existed in 1777 would become components of a much more violent struggle after the British captured Savannah in December 1778.

Within weeks of that event, British forces would enter Beaufort District waters and attack Patriot lands and homes on Hilton Head Island and along the Broad River from Port Royal Sound. On February 3, 1779, the quiet preparations of 1777 would give way to the Battle of Port Royal Island. And, two months later, General Augustine Prevost would lead an army of 3,000 to the gates of Charles Town before he would have to withdraw to defend his headquarters and garrison in Savannah.

In that sense, 1777 was not really Beaufort District's quiet year between wars. It was the year the district actively prepared for the war that was coming.