



Faculty Forum



You Cannot Conceive The Many Without The One
-Plato-

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Watch Your Step: Treading on Local History

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In a recent American History survey class, I took an informal count of the number of students who had visited Fort Sumter in the Charleston Harbor to find that only about ten percent of my students had seen the fort that symbolizes the beginning of the Civil War. I found this fascinating yet disappointing. Just a few years ago, I traveled ten hours from Ohio to Charleston with the primary objective of seeing Fort Sumter. I questioned, as many historians do, why students (and others) do not appreciate the history in their own backyard. Perhaps because, too often, local histories are a hodgepodge of reminiscences, inaccurate statements and genealogy listings, but the early history of the lowcountry also unfolds into captivating drama from the time of early Indians, the coming of white Europeans and the reliance on slave labor, to the American Revolution and the Civil War and still continues today.

When I moved to South Carolina last August, I was intrigued with many aspects of my new home and I spent several weekends exploring the natural and historic characteristics of the area. Perhaps one of the most striking words of advice I received was the phrase “watch your step.” This was not because of cracks in the sidewalk, which are a common pitfall in Ohio, but in this case the advice was to be wary of poisonous snakes existing in the area. I would like to return that same advice back to the people of lowcountry and say “watch *your* step” because you are treading on a wealth of interesting history.

Let’s return to Fort Sumter, not to rehash the beginning of the Civil War, but to the name itself. Fort Sumter, like so many other places in South Carolina, was named after Thomas Sumter. Born in Virginia in 1734, Sumter served in campaigns against the Cherokee Indians through which he learned enough about the Indian lifestyle to serve as their interpreter on a trip to England. Afterwards, he settled in the backcountry of South Carolina. During the American Revolution, a British raid led by Sir Henry Clinton, destroyed Sumter’s home and ransacked the surrounding area. In retaliation, Sumter organized an independent military force whose use of guerilla warfare succeeded in destroying British supply lines. Today’s popular culture has made another South Carolinian, Francis Marion, famous as the “Swampfox;” but

Sumter and other leaders of the guerrilla militia units also provided essential resistance to the British, clearing the way for the new American Republic. Whether readers recognize it or not, Thomas Sumter's name enters into our vocabulary at least every football season. Thomas Sumter, a key player in the American Revolution and participant in early government, was nicknamed the "Gamecock."¹

Many historians assert that "all history is local history" as the events that we study in American History survey classes reverberate from local areas onto the worldwide scene. What happened in Allendale, Barnwell, or Walterboro is reflected in the broader spectrum of the events that make history. This history can be seen in the names of rivers, streets, and towns and took place in the swamps, plantations, and villages all around us. "Watch your step" and you will see an array of history that has always been right before your eyes.

Early white settlement in the Carolinas began along the Ashley and Cooper Rivers at Charles Town. Slowly the settlement grew to incorporate more land-land occupied by many different Indian tribes. Relationships between Native Americans and colonists were often complicated and rarely stable. The first Indian wars of the region occurred in 1671, shortly after white settlements were established. Indian warriors raided these English communities most likely in retaliation for stolen food or the occupation of Indian lands. As a result, the colonists organized and attacked the small and weak Kussoe and Stono nations who lived nearby. These Indians were captured and sold into slavery. Fearing more raids from hostile Indians, colonists enticed the friendly Westo Indians of the area into an alliance for defense and trade. The Westo

performed admirably for the colonists, warring against and enslaving many of the nearby Indians in return for coveted English trade goods. When this relationship soured, the English switched alliances and encouraged the Creek Indians to attack their traditional enemies, the Westo. This war resulted in near total destruction of the Westo Indian nation.²

The alliance with the Creek Indians, whose homeland lay to the interior of the colony, protected the inland boundaries of South Carolina but left its coastal areas vulnerable to attack by the Spanish in Florida. In 1684, the Yamasee Indians of northern Florida accepted an invitation to settle between the Combahee and Savannah Rivers as a buffer against Spanish invasion. In 1712, the Yamasee Indians further ingratiated themselves to South Carolina when they accompanied Indian trader, and later Revolutionary War hero, Colonel John Barnwell in the suppression of the Tuscarora Indians in North Carolina. The Yamasee, like the Westo before them, recognized the power of the English settlers and their weapons and strove to ally themselves with a powerful protector.

However, the Yamasees' desire for English trade goods, such as metal, jewelry, cloth, trinkets and especially weapons, placed the Indians in serious debt to English traders. In an effort to get their payment, these traders began to kidnap and sell Yamasee women and children into slavery. Frustrated and angry, the Yamasee revolted on April 15, 1715. Neighboring tribes, including the Creek, allied with the Yamasee against the British launching the conflict known as the Yamasee War. The Indians killed ninety percent of the English traders to show their aggravation over what they felt were deceitful trading practices. South

Carolina's colonial population hurried to the safety of Charleston and abandoned settlements outside a thirty mile radius from the city.

The Yamasee were defeated in battle by the colonists at Port Royal and along the Salkehatchie River, resulting in their retreat to lands south of the Savannah River. The Creek Indians continued to carry on the Yamasee War until the fall of 1716 when their traditional enemy, the Cherokee, allied with the English to defeat them. Skirmishes continued for the next couple of years, inciting fear in the colonists of the lowcountry.³

Indian uprisings were the key threat to colonial livelihood during the early years of the white settlement of South Carolina. As a result, colonists armed their African slaves to fight off Indian raiders. However, as the number of African slaves increased in South Carolina, fear of a slave uprising overtook their fear of any potential Indian attack. Calls denouncing the arming of slaves reverberated through the colony. A lowcountry planter predicted a rebellion by warning that slaves were "too numerous in proportion to the White Men."⁴ By 1720, there were nearly twice as many black slaves as white colonists throughout South Carolina, and in some lowcountry parishes, slaves accounted for seventy-five or more percent of the population. The ratio on these plantations was even higher during in the hot summer months when the planters lived in their summer homes in Charleston, Summerville or Walterboro.⁵

Fear of a potential slave uprising did not curtail the demand for a large slave workforce on the lucrative rice plantations of the lowcountry. These slaves worked six days a week but generally had time off on Sundays. Fearing an uprising while the white colonists were congregating in church

precipitated the passing of the Security Act in 1739. This act required all white males to carry guns to church on Sundays in case of emergency or else be fined.

On the morning of Sunday, September 9, 1739, just twenty days before the Security Act went into effect, the most successful slave rebellion in American history occurred. A group of twenty slaves led by an Angolan named Jemmy assembled along the west bank of the Stono River. They broke into Hutchenson's store at Stono Bridge killing the two proprietors who lived there. Once armed, the band traveled along Pons Pons Road towards the freedom offered by the Spanish in St. Augustine. Part of this road can be followed today through the Great Swamp Sanctuary in Walterboro. Picking up recruits as they traveled through the lowcountry plantations, the force encompassed about one hundred by mid-afternoon. As the slaves rested near the Jacksonborough ferry on the Edisto River, Lieutenant Governor William Bull, out for a recreational ride, chanced upon the group. Immediately recognizing the gravity of the situation, he hurried to alert the colonists of the rebellion.

Twenty white Carolinians and forty of the rebels were killed in the clash to suppress the uprising. Captured slaves were questioned and many executed on the spot, several by decapitation, but about two thirds (perhaps sixty) of the slaves escaped to roam and terrorize the countryside. To discourage more slaves from joining the uprising, colonists posted the heads of executed slaves on mileposts along the roadways. For the next couple of weeks, patrols of white men and friendly Indians searched for the remaining rebels who, when captured, were killed.

The Stono Rebellion was neither the first nor the last attempt by slaves to escape from their situation; however, it is probably the most famous. The result of the Stono Rebellion created fear within the citizens of the Carolinas, especially those in areas with black majorities like the lowcountry. The following year, the South Carolina legislature enacted the Slave Code of 1740 that established regulations which would last until emancipation in 1865. These harsh slave codes prohibited slaves from earning money and obtaining an education. Legislatures hoped to prevent further rebellions by barring slaves from carrying weapons, leaving the plantation without written permission, or to meet in groups unaccompanied by white persons.⁶

The delicate balance of violence ebbed and flowed between the Native Americans, African slaves, and the white colonists throughout the eighteenth century, but a growing rift between England and her American colonies created a larger commotion by the 1760s and 1770s. British involvement in the French and Indian War (1754 – 1763) and the Cherokee War of the Carolina backcountry (1759-1761) left the British government under financial strain. The resulting debt caused Parliament to tax the colonists who benefited from English protection. Among the many acts considered offensive to the colonists was the Stamp Act of 1765 which required a revenue stamp for all paper documents and provided the Americans with the memorable slogan “No Taxation without Representation.” That October, the Charleston Sons of Liberty, led by Christopher Gadsden, rioted against the Stamp Act for two weeks. However, this show of displeasure against Great Britain, and others like it, represented only about half of the citizens of South Carolina. In 1775, when news of the Bat-

tles of Lexington and Concord reached the South Carolina legislature, the vote to raise troops and money for the colonial war effort passed by only a slim margin.⁷ Perhaps the division among its citizenry is one reason why so many Revolutionary War battles were fought in South Carolina.

One particular battle, fought in the lowcountry, shows the resolve of the South Carolina troops to protect their homeland. After the capture and execution of Jacksonboro planter, Colonel Isaac Hayne, on August 4, 1781, for treason against the British, the British army swarmed the lowcountry rivers, confiscating rice, which the colonists were selling to other European nations for much needed war materiel. The American officer in the area, Colonel William Harden, had only eighty men but was reinforced at his camp in Round-O by General Francis Marion and his troops. Establishing an ambush along the causeway leading to Parker’s Ferry that crossed the Edisto River on August 30, 1781, the battle erupted when a British soldier spotted the Americans. Although the momentum of a surprise attack failed, the Americans prevailed when the British left the battlefield and returned to Charleston.⁸ The Colleton County Historical and Preservation Society re-enacts this battle on Labor Day weekend every year.

Many people are surprised to realize that South Carolina witnessed the most battles of the American Revolution but few Civil War battles – a war that many Americans blame on South Carolina. The state was the first to secede from the Union after Abraham Lincoln was elected as President and the first shots of the war erupted over the Charleston Harbor at Fort Sumter. In the turmoil before war, many South Carolinians defended the South and its way of

life, which included slavery. U.S. Representative Preston Brooks of the Edgefield District nearly beat Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner to death with a cane. Sumner had insulted Brook's cousin, Senator Andrew Butler, by name in a speech to Congress which denounced "Mother Carolina" and the southern lifestyle dependent on slavery.⁹ Another advocate of slavery was James H. Hammond of Beech Island. His plantation bordered the Savannah River and his slaves supported his lifestyle. Since cotton was the primary export of most southern states and demanded by markets all over the world, Hammond believed that the plantation system, especially those producing cotton, were essential to the economy of the United States. In this context, Hammond asserted to the Senate of the United States in 1858 "you dare not make war on cotton. No power on earth dares to make war upon it. Cotton is king."¹⁰ The widening rift between ideologies of the North and South finally broke apart in 1861 resulting in the destructive Civil War.

The Civil War, fought between the United States of America and the Confederate States of America, devastated the country. More Americans from both sides were killed than in any other war and the nation's economy, especially in the South, was destabilized. After the fall of Atlanta in 1865, Union General William T. Sherman initiated a "scorched earth" policy by dividing his army to systematically march across the Confederacy destroying everything in its path. Many Georgians complained of the destruction, asking the Northern Army, "Why don't you go over to South Carolina and serve them this way? They started it."¹¹ Indeed, part of Sherman's army did enter South Carolina in Bamberg County not far from Highway 641 between the East and West campuses of USC Salkehatchie. On

February 2 – 3, 1865, South Carolina militia put up the only serious resistance to Sherman's army in its "marched to the sea." Confederate General William J. Hardee had asserted that "the Salk is impassable" believing that Union troops could not navigate through the rain filled rivers and swamps of southern South Carolina. The two day Battle of River's Bridge merely slowed the progress of the Union troops who then advanced to Columbia and destroyed the capital.¹² Shortly thereafter, the Confederacy deteriorated and the Civil War was over.

These are just a few of the important occurrences of history that played out in the Carolina lowcountry. Historical events surround us every day, whether we are interested in Native Americans, slave ancestors, war, or politics. Today, Indian arrowheads and artifacts can be found in freshly plowed fields reminding us of the vibrant Native American population that existed in the lowcountry. Historical markers explaining the establishment of early churches in the area often exemplify the beginnings of small communities and the people who founded them. Even along the rural roadways travelers can see family cemeteries marking generations of South Carolinians that witnessed the changes wrought by history in their own backyard. In the time I have spend writing this article, I have been introduced to many other important historical sites in the lowcountry, each of which I eagerly hope to investigate. I hope that readers will consider the many aspects of history in their own backyard. There is always something to find when you "watch your step," not just for poisonous snakes but for the valuable and interesting history that surrounds us every day.

ENDNOTES

¹ Walter Edgar, *South Carolina, A History* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 234-236.

² Neal Salisbury, "Native peoples and European settlers in eastern North America, 1600 – 1783," in *The Cambridge History of the Native Peoples of The Americas*, vol. 1, part 1, ed. Bruce G. Trigger and Wilcomb E. Washburn, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1006), 424-425; Edgar, 86 – 87.

³ Gary B. Nash, *Red, White and Black: The Peoples of Early North America* 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2000), 121-127; Edgar, 100.

⁴ Quoted in David Goldfield et al., *The American Journey* vol 1, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2007), 84

⁵ Edgar, 69.

⁶ Gordon Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1974), 308-320; Edgar 74 – 77.

⁷ Goldfield, 135-136; Edgar, 209,222
Evelyn McDaniel Frazier Bryan, *Colleton County, South Carolina, A History of the First 160 Years, 1670-1830*, (Jacksonville, Florida: The Florentine Press: 1974), 155-160.

⁸ Evelyn McDaniel Frazier Bryan, *Colleton County, South Carolina, A History of the First 160 Years, 1670-1830*, (Jacksonville, Florida: The Florentine Press: 1974), 155-160.

⁹ Edgar, 347-348.

¹⁰ James H. Hammond, *Selections from the Letters and Speeches of the Hon. James H. Hammond, of South Carolina* (New York: John F. Trow & Co., 1866), 311-322.

¹¹ James M. McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction* 3rd. ed. (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2001), 511; Edgar, 372.

¹² McPherson, 508.

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