

# Our People:

## William Henry Drayton

By Keith Krawczynski

On February 8, 1776, William Henry Drayton, president of the South Carolina provincial congress, became the first Carolinian to openly call for a break with the mother country, when he told his fellow congressmen that Britain's "hand of tyranny" directed against America had forced them to quickly decide between either "independence or slavery." This revolutionary rhetoric is ironic considering that Drayton began the rebellion as a member of His Majesty's government in South Carolina. Indeed, Drayton is one of the most enigmatic figures of the American Revolution for his sudden conversion from an outspoken Crown supporter to an ardent patriot in 1774. A recently published biography *William Henry Drayton: South Carolina Revolutionary Patriot* explains the motivations behind Drayton's conversion and, in the process, removes this influential and fascinating man from the shadows of history.

Drayton was born in St. Andrew's Parish in 1742 to John Drayton, a Lowcountry planter and member of the provincial council, and Charlotta Bull, daughter of Lieutenant Governor William Bull. In 1753 John Drayton sent young "Billy" to England to complete his education. After ten years of schooling at Westminster and Oxford, William Henry returned to South Carolina and soon married Dorothy Golightly, a young, wealthy heiress. Financially secure and politically well-connected, Drayton naturally sought political office. He won a seat in the General Assembly in 1765, but lost it three years later because of indifferent service.

Drayton continued his notorious conduct in 1769 by publicly attacking the extralegal nonimportation association for its use of strong-arm tactics to coerce individuals into their agreement, an unpopular stand which made him a pariah in Carolina society. Drayton quickly left for England where he spent the next year courting crown officials for a lucrative post back home. His obsequiousness earned him a seat on the South Carolina council. Instead of pulling him into the royal fold, however, Drayton's service in the council pushed him toward the patriot party. He soon discovered his fellow councilors, nearly all foreign "placemen," were ignorant of the law and indifferent to the welfare of the colony. When his uncle, Lieutenant Governor

William Bull appointed Drayton to fill a temporary vacancy on the placeman-dominated bench in 1774, the young Carolinian sharply rebuked his English-born colleagues for making grossly inaccurate judicial decisions. Accelerating Drayton's drive to rebellion was the Crown's appointment of Englishmen to several offices for which his uncle nominated him. One of these placemen foiled Drayton's scheme

to expand his land holdings by leasing 144,000 acres from the Catawba Indians, action which he believed exemplified the Imperial government's unwarranted encroachment against American liberties. Thus, when Parliament passed the punitively motivated Coercive Acts against Massachusetts in 1774, Drayton could no longer say "one word of favor of Administration." Accordingly, he penned a scathing public letter to the First Continental Congress defending American rights and attacking Parliament and the crown for "exercis[ing] despotism over America." During his tour of the circuit courts as assistant judge, Drayton urged grand jurymen to select "freedom over slavery" and to resist British authority.

Drayton's vocal defense of American rights made him one of the most popular patriots in the province. Whig leaders appointed him chairman of several revolutionary committees, which Drayton used to spearhead the local independence movement. Still, many backcountry residents remained loyal to the King. To suppress this menacing element, Drayton led a dangerous mission into the interior during the summer of 1775. Against great odds, he managed to recruit over 500 men into local militia units and to get pro-British sympathizers to sign a treaty of neutrality. Drayton returned to Charleston in triumph and was soon elected president of the Provincial Congress. He used his powerful position to push for warlike measures and the establishment of a government independent from Great Britain.

When Whig leaders did create a new state government in 1776, Drayton was appointed its chief justice. From the bench, he delivered rousing revolutionary charges and

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ABOVE: William Henry Drayton, courtesy of the South Caroliniana Library.

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blasted British peace proposals that did not include American independence. When the courts were closed, Drayton went to Virginia and North Carolina to recruit troops for South Carolina's defense and to Georgia to propose a union with its southern neighbor. As the region's leading Constitutional theorist, Drayton played the leading role in creating a more liberal state constitution in 1778. Not content with just improving the government at home, Drayton also proposed numerous improvements to the Articles of Confederation and created an alternate plan of union which he believed better guaranteed Americans' rights. In early 1778, Drayton was elected to the Continental Congress, where he demonstrated himself as one of the hardest working and most able delegates. In Congress, he strongly supported the French Alliance, opposed British attempts at reconciliation, compiled documents for a history of the Revolution and engaged in an acrimonious exchange with fellow South Carolina delegate Henry Laurens. Sadly, Drayton contracted typhus while in Philadelphia, where he died September 1779 at the age of thirty-seven. It is interesting to speculate on the impact Drayton might have played in erecting the nascent nation had he not died in the prime of life. His strong opinions on the Revolution's purpose, his many valuable talents and enormous energy all suggest that he would have had a considerable influence on the direction of the young republic.

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