

## Islanders In History

## Early Naval Hero Lived Here

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Capt. Jack Stoney (1748-1821)

The province of South Carolina was not a great naval power during her historically brief existence. But she did have her naval heroes.

One who called Hilton Head Island home for more than half his life, Capt. Jack Stoney, arrived in Charleston in 1774 from Knockshewanna, Tipperary, Ireland, with his wife Elizabeth Caulfield and their son James, born there in April 1772.

John Stoney loved the sea and he loved to fight. At Hobcaw, Billy Pritchard's shipyard on the Wando, he commissioned a ship which he christened the Saucy Jack. Capt. Jack and his Saucy Jack quickly became a Carolina legend.

At the outbreak of the Revolution Capt. Jack secured a Letter of Marque from John Rutledge, president of South Carolina, to operate the Saucy Jack as a privateer against all enemies of the Province. This was no simple Boston or Charleston Tea Party.

The privateers were a salty bunch. The British labeled them pirates and buccaneers with reason. In 1777 alone 467 British merchantmen were captured or

sunk by American privateers and other "authorized" cruisers. British marine insurance rates soared sky high. The embattled colonists called them patriots. In Charleston, Philadelphia and New York many a courtly elbow was bent in toasting the daredevil privateersmen.

They daringly matched their lightly armed schooners and brigs against English vessels carrying far heavier armament and larger crews. And frequently they bested them. Many of the privateers were fitted with antiquated cannon and deck swivels dating from the French and Indian wars. Their crews literally staked their lives on their judgment and ability, because capture often meant quick death or, at best, imprisonment in filthy prison ships overpopulated by rats and lice. On these hulks prisoners were fed a slim diet of tainted meat and rotten vegetables washed down with stagnant water. Capt. Jack managed to avoid such unpleasanties.

Instead he watched the British ships-of-the-line escorting heavily laden merchantmen along the Carolina coast towards St. Augustine where forces were being readied for the December 1778 attack on Savannah.

England began the war with 100 ships-of-the-line averaging 74 guns each, not to mention innumerable small vessels. From 1775 to 1778 when England could have pitted her vast arsenal of seapower effectively against the Colonies, her naval forces were passively used to protect her far-flung maritime commerce ("business as usual") and to keep open the supply lines to her army overseas. In vain, Viscount Barrington, secretary of war, urged, "Conquest by land is unnecessary when the Colonies can be reduced first by distress and to obedience by our marine totally interrupting all commerce and fishery, and even seizing all ships in the ports with very little expense and less bloodshed." English politicians rejected the very strategy by which the Union would bring the Confederate States to their knees 90 years later.

Thus, Capt. Jack's Saucy Jack was able, again and again, to cut a lagging merchantman from the southbound fleets, quickly disappearing with his prize up Calibogue Sound into Broad Creek where its cargo was transferred to Beaufort and Charleston. He knew well the splendid interconnecting system of back waterways by which

prizes could be speedily spirited away while British gunboats searched in vain. And the Saucy Jack was but one among the hundreds in the Colonial homemade ragtag fleet which managed heroically to outfight, outsail and outshoot the finest and best equipped navy that ever unfurled a sail.

By 1784 Capt. Stoney began investing his wartime winnings in prime Hilton Head Island indigo lands, establishing himself first at Otterburn (now Otter Hole) Plantation. A staunch Anglican, he and planter Isaac Fripp collaborated in building Zion Chapel of Ease of St. Luke's Parish, a "neat and commodious Church" 40 ft. by 30, of wood on a brick foundation. Divine Services were held every other Sunday. The Rev. William Graham, island landowner, often officiated; the Rev. Andrew McCully was elected rector in 1791, succeeded by the Rev. John O'Donnell in 1792.

Capt. Jack also bought Braddock's Point and Calibogia Plantations. By 1790 his establishment included 82 slaves. His family had increased by a son John in 1780, a daughter Elizabeth Mary in 1784. In 1793, he built the large tabby Braddock's Point House (now

called Baynard Ruins) and Otterburn became the seat of his elder son, Capt. James Stoney, upon his marriage to Elizabeth, daughter of Dr. George Mosse. The young couple spent their winters at Otterburn, their summers in their Beaufort town house. Capt. Jack continued to expand his island holdings, adding Fairfield and in 1805 Honey Horn Plantations. By then Sea Island cotton had replaced indigo as the island's premier crop.

The War of 1812 excited Capt. Jack to the extent that he commissioned a new privateer, the Governor Middleton. The early end of the war also ended its career. Capt. Jack continued his idyllic life of a planter-sportsman-sailor. In his 74th year in 1821, while shooting with his old friend Capt. William Pope of Fish Haul Plantation, he tripped and his gun discharged, killing him instantly. The Rev. Philip Mathews, elected rector of Zion Chapel in 1811, was called to read the Burial Office. Capt. Jack was buried where he fell, on a promontory overlooking the broad waters of Port Royal Sound. His remains were transferred to Zion Chapel Cemetery in 1963, the island's naval hero of the Revolution.