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Islanders In History

Plantation Was Patriot's Wedding Gift

Captain John Talbird
(1760-1825)

By Dr. Robert E.H. Peebles

The sole reason to single out Capt. John Talbird from the solidly patriotic and heroic family of planter Henry Talbird of Whale Branch Plantation, Port Royal Island, is that he lived and died on the Hilton Head Island plantation his father gave him for a wedding present.

Henry Talbird, son of Sir John Talbot, Lord Mayor of Dublin, had accepted the misspelling of his surname fixed to this very deed by a slovenly London clerk, land accepted in payment for his building an early Tybee lighthouse. The 200-acre plantation lay along Skull Creek, south of present Fort Mitchel which was not built until 1862. Nearby down the creek lay the similar plantation of John Ladson whose wife was Mary Ann Conyers, daughter of his business partner who owned the plantation north of Talbird's.

Eighteen-year-old John Talbird came by rowboat from Whale Branch down Port Royal Sound to Skull Creek to visit his beloved older half-brother, Capt. James Doharty who had inherited 100 acres on Hilton Head from his father, British Subaltern James Doharty. Doharty was much involved in the struggle to win the independence Congress had declared two years earlier in 1776. In fact, Col. Stephen Bull had appointed him captain still earlier in March 1776 and he was already a popular hero with

many Tory enemies.

But young Talbird's patriotism was temporarily diverted by the appearance of his neighbor's daughter, Mary Ann Ladson. It was "love at first sight" for both of them. They were married in December 1778 just as Savannah fell to the British. They built their home on the banks of Skull Creek in the area where the General Store now stands.

In the reorganization of the Granville County Militia which followed Savannah's fall, John was commissioned lieutenant in the company of his brother Capt. Thomas Talbird. On Feb. 2 they assisted their brother Capt. Doharty in the demolition of Fort Lytleton and joined Gen. Moultrie's forces in resisting the British in the Battle of Port Royal. Their 17-year-old brother Richard Talbird was among the eight patriots who lost their lives in forcing the British to retreat to Savannah. The Talbirds were more committed than ever to the American cause.

This American success encouraged Gen. Benjamin Lincoln, the Continental commander, to dispatch Gen. John Ashe across the Savannah River where he was completely routed at Briar Creek in early March. Talbird's company with Gen. Moultrie at his Black Swamp headquarters was forced to withdraw to Coosawhatchie when the British landed 2,000 regulars at Purrysburg. The attempt to deny the British a crossing of Coosawhatchie and Tulifinny resulted in another grievous American defeat and the first general invasion of Beaufort District by the plundering British with their royal auxiliaries, the dreaded Indian savages whose constant practice was to murder all women and children after scalping them. Panic gripped the lowcountry. Many militiamen were forced to return to their plantations to defend their families. Some were forced to apply to the British for the protection American arms could not provide. Not the Talbirds.

Capt. Thomas Talbird's company continued to contest the British advance, retreating to the

into hiding at nearby Bear Island where Doharty was discovered and killed.

Lt. John Talbird continued a prisoner of war until after the fall of Charleston in 1780 when he was paroled and returned to his Skull Creek home. There he had the joy of meeting his son John, born in the fall of 1779. But British naval power continued to dominate the sea islands. He was pressed to join a British military unit to fight against his fellow-countrymen—a course impossible for him. Under cover of darkness he made his way inland to join Col. William Harden's regiment under the command of Gen. Francis Marion, the Swamp Fox. But in the changing fortunes of war Lt. John Talbird was again taken prisoner by the enemy.

Back on Hilton Head Island his wife, Mary Ann Ladson Talbird, became a heroine, too. A servant ran up from the Skull Creek dock, crying, "Soldiers, Missus! Coming ashore!"

"Get the others and hide in the woods 'till I call you," was her reply as she hurried to her front piazza, young John held firmly by the hand. There she met a young British officer whom she instinctively invited to accept the hospitality of her home, offering to prepare refreshments. The officer apologized that he was under orders to burn her home, as well as those of all other known rebels between Beaufort and Savannah. However, he added that he was well-acquainted with two of her older sisters who were married to British officers. The house must be burned, he said, but he ordered his soldiers to pile all her furniture and belongings beneath a giant live oak some 160 yards inland. The furniture was moved out and the house burned. The tree still survives, having been a much-loved playground for several generations of Talbird children.

The British seized every slave and every horse they could find, transporting the former for sale to West Indian sugar planters. The horses were passed on to their cavalry units.

When the British had left, Mrs.

land accepted in payment for his building an early Tybee lighthouse. The 200-acre plantation lay along Skull Creek, south of present Fort Mitchel which was not built until 1862. Nearby down the creek lay the similar plantation of John Ladson whose wife was Mary Ann Conyers, daughter of his business partner who owned the plantation north of Talbird's.

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Capt. Thomas Talbird's company continued to contest the British advance, retreating to the hastily-constructed defenses of Charleston itself. The timely arrival of President John Rutledge from Orangeburg with a Militia army and Gen. Lincoln's tardy approach from Black Swamp induced the British to withdraw to James Island. Capt. Talbird's company and other units of the Beaufort Regiment camped on John's Island.

One historian's account claims the British surprised an out-sentinel from whom they extorted the countersign. Another source insists that a Barwell relative, Thomas Fenwick, actually betrayed the patriots. The result was a devastating surprise massacre in which Lt. John Talbird was wounded and captured, his life saved by a sympathetic British soldier. Capt. Thomas Talbird and Capt. Doharty escaped to go

inland to join Col. William Harden's regiment under the command of Gen. Francis Marion, the Swamp Fox. But in the changing fortunes of war Lt. John Talbird was again taken prisoner by the enemy.

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When the British had left, Mrs. Talbird called the 12 or 15 slaves who had escaped by hiding in the woods. She directed them in building in the edge of the woods several small cabins covered with palmetto fronds, camouflaged from the view of vessels sailing along Skull Creek. Her furniture and possessions were protected from the elements and she and her servants had adequate shelter.

In such a primitive cabin she gave birth to her second son, Henry Talbird, named for his grandfather, on the very day the exhausted Cornwallis, his army worn out and demoralized by the guerrilla tactics of South Carolina's Militia Generals Marion, Sumter and Andrews, surrendered lamely at Yorktown, Oct. 19, 1781.

Hilton Head Island was the home of Henry Talbird until his death 65 years later.