

*Francis Marion*

AN AMERICAN HERO  
(Unpublished)

Our South Carolina history has been vastly influenced by events in Europe, beginning with the explosion of knowledge generated by Gutenberg's invention of movable type in Strasbourg in 1437, which led to Martin Luther's nailing his 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg in 1517 and Captain Jean Ribaut's entrepreneurial voyage in 1562 when named our Port Royal Sound, a voyage bankrolled by Gaspard de Coligny, Admiral of France, leader of the Huguenot party. Where do you think we got our names Coligny Circle and Coligny Plaza? This evoked the nasty reaction of Katherine de Medici's 1574 St. Bartholomew's Day massacre of 30,000 Huguenots and to Henry IV's irenic 1898 Edict of Names, the Act of Toleration for the Huguenots which his great-grandson Louis XIV refused to tolerate, forcing 300,000 of France's finest, the Huguenots, to flee for their lives in every direction, the 1685 Revocation of the Edict of Names.

From Poitou, Benjamin Marion escaped to Charles Town to begin a new life as a farmer on land given him by the English lords Proprietors of Carolina. Ten years later he petitioned for citizenship, along with several hundred other Huguenots, including Anthoine Cordes from Languedoc, whose daughter Esther would grow up to marry Benjamin's son, Gabriel Marion, and become the mother of our hero, Francis Marion, born 1732 at their Goatfield Plantation on the upper reaches of Cooper River in St. John's Parish, Berkeley County. By then the Huguenots were substantial rice planters and Francis grew up with his brothers: Benjamin, Gabriel, and Job, on a family plantation in the Georgetown area, a thin, wiry, black-eyed, slightly hooked nosed lad, only 5 ft. 6 in. not a pretty boy, but independent, liked to hunt and fish, ride a horse, handle a bateau, what one might denigrate as something of a "river rat", except that as a bona fide member of the gentry, he was educated and well-mannered. Francis was given a body-servant, Oscar, who would stay with him as long as he lived, then be given his freedom. Francis was lucky, as well as tenacious, said to have survived a ship-wreck in the open sea in a small boat which he coaxed ashore. Georgetown is on Winyah Bay, a watery world where six rivers empty into the Atlantic.

Francis was 18 when his father died in 1750; returned to St. John's Parish and began planting rice with his brother Gabriel, but in 1756 he enlisted in the militia and fought against the Cherokees. Again in 1759 he joined governor Lyttleton's expedition as a private but returned to serve as tax inquirer and tax collector for St. John's Parish, and to expand his rice planting, leasing 200 acres on the Santee. But the military life was clearly Marion's avocation, if not his vocation, for by 1761 he was a lieutenant under William Moultrie in Col. Thomas Middleton's Regiment. Yet he firmly tied himself to his soil in 1773, buying Pond Bluff Plantation in St. John's Parish which he came to love deeply. His neighbors elected him to the House of the first Provincial Congress in 1775 and in Charleston he was promptly commissioned Captain, 2<sup>nd</sup> South Carolina Regiment 12 June 1775, participating in the seizure of Fort Johnson, James Island, from the royal government in September. Six months later in March 1776, months before the July 4 Declaration of Independence, the South Carolina General Assembly adopted its State

Constitution written by John Rutledge and later elected John Rutledge first president of the first American republic of which Francis Marion was a member.

Almost miraculously, Marion's Military Order Book of the 2<sup>nd</sup> South Carolina Regiment, covering the period 26 June 1775 to 1 August 1777 has survived, with general and special orders, troop dispositions, personnel strength, courts-martial and other daily military activities. Its 555 pages show that as commanders began organizing and training new regiments, officered by educated gentlemen and filled by rank and file soldiers, mostly hired or impress, establishing military discipline was the problem. And lest one thinks the problem was local, hear what one historian wrote how it was when George Washington took command of the Continental Army in July 1775: "soldiers wandered about, shooting their guns into the air, wasting ammunition, raising false alarms. They drank, fought, rioted, mutinied, and deserted. They neglected their duties and refused to obey orders." Congress passed the Continental Articles 30 June 1775, limiting the number of lashes given a soldier to 39 at one time, in line with the Massachusetts Code. This was revised upward to 100 lashes 20 Sept 1776!

The 2<sup>nd</sup> SC Regiment had 397 officers and enlisted men, 120 of whom had received military court-marshal ordered lashings. Some were repeat offenders; most were quickly cured. Among the latter was a grandfather of one of my great-grandmothers, Jacob Copeland who built his home in 1760 (still standing in present Ehrhardt). Doubtlessly he went AWOL to visit his family some fifty miles away.

Francis Marion was promoted to Major, February 1776, fought in the Battle of Fort Moultrie, Sullivan's Island, 28 June 1776, celebrated annually I Charleston as Carolina Day. In September 1776 he was promoted to Lt. Col. as the 2<sup>nd</sup> SC Regiment was taken into the Continental establishment. He had earned a reputation as a tough disciplinarian. One unhappy subordinate described Marion, then 44, as "an ugly, cross, knock-need, hooked nose, son of a bitch." (sic) He is said to have spent nearly two months camped on Hilton Head and fought in the October 6, 1779 Siege of Savannah when 600 patriots died in 55 minutes. Marion survived that and the defeat at Tullifinny Hill near Coosawatchie as the regiment retreated to Charleston. There during a gentlemen's Christmas dinner party, when the dining room doors were locked traditionally, until all "passed out", Marion refused this gentle tradition, boldly jumping from the second story window, breaking his ankle. He was taken to his beloved Pond Bluff to recuperate and thus escaped falling into British hands when Charleston surrendered May 12, 1780, the greatest American disaster of the war. Every city was in British possession, Washington's army checkmated. Marion gathered a handful of patriots and linked with Gen. Horatio Gates in North Carolina, but Gates had no use for Marion's ragtag band and sent them out as scouts. Thus they escaped the tragic defeat at Camden in 1780.

Back in South Carolina Governor John Rutledge commissioned Marion brigadier general to gather his friends and neighbors to do whatever they could to keep alive the spark of liberty. The British had defeated all Continental line forces in the south. Georgia was reorganized a royal colony, and would remain so. Was it true that "the seat of government in South Carolina" was the saddle of Governor John Rutledge's horse?

Absolutely! The legislature had given him “unlimited dictatorial power” just before its members were arrested and imprisoned. Rutledge used the principle of the “citizen soldier”, commissioning three militia generals—Francis Marion, Thomas Sumter, and Andrew Pickens—each responsible for recruiting and supplying his own brigade. Marion’s Captains were his Santee neighbors and friends, the Horry brothers, Peter and Hugh, great-grandsons of the Huguenot minister, the Rev. Pierre Robert.

Marion first developed an intelligence network, carefully planning ambushes and attacks on all British supply movements leaving Charleston for the interior. His most precious possessions were horses, necessary for mobility. Ammunition was always in short supply, his men often armed only with homemade swords fashioned from sawmill blades. Marion’s Brigade was composed entirely of volunteers, many who came and went as it suited them. Sometimes he had 200, sometimes only the core of 30. Rations were often short: wild game and range cattle which required salt, rarely available in their river swamp camps. Marion drank only water with vinegar and was always healthy. They survived on the ubiquitous sweet potato. The story is told that a young British officer visited Marion under a flag of truce on military business of exchanging prisoners of war and was offered the hospitality of sharing Marion’s lunch, consisting of roasted sweet potatoes. So amazed at the humble fare on which these partisan fighters subsisted and continued fighting as ferociously, skirmish after skirmish, that he returned to Charleston and resigned his commission. Years later around 1810 Charleston artist John Blake White, son of an officer in Marion’s 2<sup>nd</sup> SC Regiment, painted the scene: British officer in his flame-red uniform, Marion in his red “Eisenhower-type” jacket, wearing his old 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment leather helmet topped with a bunch of white feathers (for all of his men wore white feathers). Serving up potatoes was his faithful body-servant Oscar. Later Marion’s friend and cavalry Captain (still later Brig General Peter Horry) after Marion’s death wrote an account entitled “Marion’s Brigade”, for which he could find no local publisher, gave it to the Anglican itinerant Anglican priest, the same Parson Mason Locke Weems who had earlier written the popular and fanciful biography of George Washington. Weems re-wrote Horry’s history, embellishing and romanticizing it, and had Matthew Carey of Philadelphia publish it in 1809. An instant best seller! A New York physician, a foremost wood engraver, illustrated the 1812 re-print edition, transforming black Oscar into a smartly uniformed white soldier serving the roasted sweet potatoes, with a fanciful row of fine tents in the background. He also missed Marion’s partially burned leather helmet and white feathers!

But back to Marion’s two years as a guerilla among the Santee and Peedee swamps. His ambushes and surprise attacks on both Tory and British supply wagons and successfully eluding all the enemy’s frantic attempts to capture him, led to Colonel Banastre Tarleton’s sobriquet, “The Swamp Fox.” That he was! Never rash in attack! Never reluctant to retreat, knowing that the partisan must stay alive to fight another day. His major successes were at Black Mingo in September 1780, Tearcoat Swamp in October, Fort Watson in April 1781, Fort Motte in May, Quimby Bridge in July, and Eutaw Springs in September 1781.

Marion was elected to the historic famous Jacksonboro General Assembly on Edisto River 30 miles south of Charleston (still British occupied in January and February 1782), leaving Lt. Col. Peter Horry in command of the Brigade. Both Marion and Gov. John Rutledge opposed the confiscation of the lands of their recent Tory enemies (many of whom moved to Canada) but they were outvoted. He returned to the Brigade for a final victory at Wadboo Creek in August 1782, and having served three years without pay returned to Pond Bluff, to find it burned, his estate in ruins. With only 12 slaves he began rebuilding. He was elected to the SC Senate but never was a public speaker and avoided the limelight.

A bachelor during the War, Francis at age 54 married his cousin, Mary Esther Videau, on 20 April 1786 and her large inherited estate enabled them to live comfortably. The 1790 census shows Marion with 194 slaves. He was a member of the Constitutional Convention in 1790, General Assembly 1791, and the Senate 1792-94. His 1793 tax return shows he owned 1,527 acres in St. John's Parish and 330 acres on Pacolet River. He resigned as Brigade Commander in 1794 and died at his beloved Pond Bluff Plantation 27 Feb 1795, buried at Belle Isle, St. Stephen's Parish, in the Marion family cemetery near his brother Gabriel's home.

One can why Disney's Swamp Fox TV Series was such a success back in the 1960s and 70s. There is a Marion City, county and University here in South Carolina and a city or county named for him in most states. Without Francis Marion's Brigade "chewing to pieces Clinton's and Cornwallis' British army of occupation 1780-1782 leading directly to Cornwallis' surrender at Yorktown 19 Oct 1781, our American history would be quite different.

## A South Carolina Hero

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But South Carolina history has been vastly influenced by events in Europe, beginning with the explosion of knowledge generated by Gutenberg's invention of movable type in Strasbourg in 1437, which led to Martin Luther's railing his 95 Theses to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg in 1517 and Capt. Jean Ribault's entrepreneurial voyage on which he named our own Port Royal Sound in 1562, a voyage Franklind Ay proposed de Coligny, Admiral of France, leader of the Huguenot party. Where do you think we got the names of Coligny Circle and Coligny Plaza? This provoked the nasty reaction of Katherine de Medici's 1574 St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre of 30,000

Huguenots, and to Henry IV's ironic 1598 Edict of Nantes <sup>the Act of Toleration for the Huguenots</sup> which granted freedom, Louis XIV refused to tolerate, forcing 300,000 of France's finest, the Huguenots, to flee for their lives in every direction, the 1685 Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, from Porton

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their Opotfield Plantation on the upper reaches of Cooper River in St. Johns Parish, Berkeley <sup>County</sup>. By then the Magnolias

were substantial rice planters and wealthy in land and

slaves; each plantation a self-sufficient <sup>social and economic</sup> unit. Francis

grew up on a family plantation in the Georgetown area,

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Francis was 18 when his father died in 1750 <sup>with his brother Gabriel</sup> returned

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Almost miraculously, Mason's Military Order Book of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment, covering the period 26 June 1775 to 1 Aug. 1777, has survived, with general and special orders, troop dispositions, personnel strength, courts-martial and other daily military activities. Its 555 pages show that our contemporaries' begot at forming and training new regiments, officered by gentlemen and filled by rank and file soldiers, mostly hired or impressed, establishing military discipline was the problem. And lest you think the problem was local, hear what one historian wrote how it was when George Washington took command of the Continental Army July 1775: "Soldiers wondered about shooting their guns into the air, wasting ammunition, raising false alarms. They drank, fought, rioted, mutinied, deserted. Many neglected their duties and refused to obey orders." Congress passed the

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Matthew Carey of Philadelphia published it in 1809. An instant best seller! A New York physician, Alexander Anderson, a former wood engraver illustrated the 1812 re-print edition. He showed a white soldier serving up the potatoes with a <sup>rusty</sup> head new of tents in the background. He also mixed Mason's lecture between white factors.

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St. Stephens Parish, in the Mason's family cemetery near his brother

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Brigadier General Peter Henry who kept two of

those military orders Books, kept a journal, wrote the History of Mason's Brigade which Means records and published in 1809; Gen. Henry died in Columbia in 1815, buried in Trinity Cathedral Churchyard.

One can see why Diana's Swamp Jay TV series was such

a success back in the 1960s & 70s. There is a Mason city, country and university here in SC and a city on country named for him in most states. Without this choosing to pieces in Clinton and Comwallia. British army of occupation 1780-1782, leading directly to Cornwallia's surrender at Yorktown 19 Oct. 1781, our American history would be quite different.

"Song of Mason's Men" by William Cullen Bryant