

Battles at Sunbury

Located on the Georgia coast, Liberty County is one of the eight original counties created from colonial parishes on February 5, 1777. Seven were named for British political figures sympathetic to the cause of American liberty, and Liberty County was named to honor the early zeal for independence of the settlers of St. John's Parish.

In March of 1775, Liberty County citizens gathered in the Congregational Church at Midway, where they elected Dr. Lyman Hall, a Midway Church member, to represent them in the Continental Congress in Philadelphia, Georgia's only representative. They also sent several wagonloads of rice to feed the Continental troops surrounding Boston. A year later, Lyman Hall and another St. John's Parish resident, Button Gwinnett signed the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia.

By 1778, the American Revolution had reached a stalemate, so the British high command initiated a "Southern Strategy." Sir Henry Clinton ordered LtCol. Archibald Campbell to invade Savannah, restore British rule, and set the stage for the British capture of the other Southern colonies.

In a second strike from St. Augustine, British Gen. Augustin Prevost sent his younger brother, LtCol. Mark Prevost on a foraging expedition against the Liberty County settlements of Newport and Midway. He also directed Col. Lewis Valentine Fuser through the inland waterways to capture Sunbury, the second largest town in Georgia. On November 19, 1778, Prevost crossed the Altamaha River with 750 men and ravaged the plantations, killing or capturing the male citizens.

Meanwhile, Patriot Col. John White, commander of Continental and Militia troops at Sunbury, decided to make a stand against the British with 100 men and two pieces of artillery at Midway. On November 24, Patriot Gen. James Screven joined White with an additional twenty Georgia militia. They set up an ambush about a mile and a half south of the Midway Meeting House at a location called Spencer's Hill.

Loyalist LtCol. Thomas Brown of the Florida Rangers grossly overestimated the size of the Patriot forces, and decided to establish an ambush, coincidentally at the same location chosen by Screven. The Loyalist Rangers heard Screven and his Patriots approach, and realizing Screven's identity, the Rangers mortally wounded him. He was shot eleven times and died two days later while a prisoner of the British.

Bringing up British Regulars to reinforce the Rangers, Prevost's horse was killed and when he fell, the British faltered. The Patriots sensed victory, but Prevost remounted, the British recovered and the Patriots had to retreat toward Midway. In an effort to slow Prevost's advance, White forged an order from Patriot Col. Samuel Elbert for White to retreat where a large body of cavalry would attack Prevost from the rear. White also detached Patriot LtCol. John McIntosh and 127 Continentals to Sunbury to reinforce the artillery garrison at the fort.

After Prevost found the fictitious Patriot order and fearing his British force was in danger of being cut off and defeated, he burned the Midway Meeting House to rebuke the Patriots' rebellious actions. Receiving a report that British Col. Fuser's force had not arrived at Sunbury where they were supposed to rendezvous, Prevost decided to return to St. Augustine, taking with him large numbers of cattle, slaves and horses, thus leaving a devastated Liberty County.

Delayed by headwinds, Fuser's naval force reached Sunbury after Prevost had begun his return march to St. Augustine. Fuser's 500 men off-loaded field pieces on Colonel's Island and moved them to the land side of the fort, thus occupying Sunbury without firing a shot. Thinking Prevost in command of the area between Midway and the fort, Fuser demanded the fort's surrender on November 25, 1778.

Patriot LtCol. John McIntosh, defiantly replied, "We, Sir, are fighting the battles of America ... as to surrendering the fort, receive this laconic reply: Come and Take it!" Fuser, whose mission was to divert attention from Prevost's actions, refused to attack and returned with his flotilla to British East Florida. Previously unnamed, the fort was then called Fort Morris in honor of Capt. Thomas Morris, a Virginian and the garrison's Commander of Artillery.

On December 29, 1778, a three thousand man British army led by LtCol. Campbell captured Savannah. Realizing that he could not hold Georgia, Continental Gen. Robert Howe, ordered Patriot Maj. Joseph Lane to evacuate Fort Morris. Unfamiliar with the area, Lane requested a guide to assist in the garrison's removal. The citizens of Sunbury persuaded him to stay.

Lane maintained contact with the captains of the Patriot galleys *Bulloch* and *Washington* and the sloop, *Rebecca* but his designs for an escape by boat came too late. In January of 1779, after failing to comply with Howe's order to evacuate the fort, Lane found both Fort Morris and Sunbury surrounded by over 2,000 British Regulars, Loyalists and Indians. On January 9, 1779, after a three day siege and a brief heavy bombardment, Lane surrendered Fort Morris with 24 cannons and large quantities of provisions. The Patriots lost four killed, seven wounded and about 200 captured, and the British lost one killed and four wounded.

Having seized the fort, British Gen. Prevost renamed it Fort George in honor of George III, and Sunbury became a camp for paroled Patriot officers captured during the Battle of Savannah. These included Col. George Walton, one of Georgia's signers of the Declaration of Independence, Mordecai Sheftall, Continental Deputy Commissary officer, Capt. Thomas Morris and Maj. Joseph Lane.

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