

Frederica Naval Action

Patriots in the sparsely settled Georgia territory between the Altamaha and St. Marys Rivers were frequently harassed by raiders from British East Florida, who rounded what cattle they could find, and drove them back across the St. Marys River. Others pillaged rice and timber or took slaves from the plantations. In an effort to stop the depredations, Georgia had attempted unsuccessful military expeditions into East Florida in 1776 and 1777. The Third Florida Expedition was planned in 1778, when Colonel Samuel Elbert, in command of Georgia Continental Army and Navy forces, learned that the British vessels, HM frigate *Galetea*, HM brigantine *Hinchinbrook*, sloop *Rebecca* and an armed watering brig, were sailing in St. Simons Sound.

For harbor and river defense and to transport troops and supplies. Colonel Elbert was dependent upon the Georgia Navy galleys, four of which had been underwritten by the Continental Congress: *Lee*, *Washington*, *Bulloch* and *Congress*. All were constructed, launched and fitted out in Savannah during 1776 and 1777; and were under the command of Commodore Oliver Bowen. Although no drawings or specifications of the galleys exist, they were probably like those built by other states with two masts and triangular sails, and measured approximately seventy-foot keel, thirteen-foot beam, and four-one-half-foot depth amidships.

On 15 April 1778, when Colonel Elbert learned that four British vessels were sailing in St. Simons Sound, he detailed about 360 men from the Four Georgia Continental Battalions at Fort Howe to march to Darien. There, they embarked on three Georgia Navy galleys: *Washington* with Captain John Hardy in command, *Lee* under Captain John Cutler Braddock and *Bulloch* under Captain Archibald Hatcher.

By mid-afternoon of 18 April, the flotilla entered the Frederica River and anchored at Pikes Bluff, about a mile and a half above Fort Frederica. First to land were the troops under the command of Colonel Robert Rae and Major Daniel Roberts. Colonel Elbert then ordered Captain George Young and the artillery detachment to land and set up the field piece. Officers were designated to command troops on board each galley: Colonel John White on *Lee*, Captain George Melvin on *Washington* and Lieutenant Barnard Patty on *Bulloch*. Colonel Elbert then directed Colonel Rae with 100 men to march to Fort Frederica where British prisoners were taken. Other men in *Hinchinbrook* scouting party escaped by boat and rowed to *Galatea* in St. Simons Sound to alert British Captain Jordan, who then sent a ship loaded with soldiers, to assist *Hinchinbrook* and *Rebecca*.

By the time the intelligence about *Hinchinbrook* and *Rebecca* got back to Colonel Elbert, he deemed it too late in the evening to initiate an attack. Early the next morning, 19 April, the galleys sailed down the river to attack the British vessels, which were drawn up in their "order of battle." As Virginia Steele Wood, Specialist in Naval and Maritime History at the Library of Congress, describes the naval action: "It was probably soon after first light, nearly 5:30am, when Colonel Samuel Elbert preempted the British and commenced his attack on HM brigantine *Hinchinbrook*, the armed sloop *Rebecca* and the watering brig. A strong ebb was running in its first quarter, and by a freak of nature the wind had died thereby favoring the Americans and making it impossible for the British to carry out their plan of sailing directly into the galleys for boarding. Initially the galleys executed a few random shots as they rowed toward the enemy, then anchored at a safe distance of half a mile and began a heavy cannonade, firing right on target for several hours.

"Since the limited range of *Hinchinbrook's* and *Rebecca's* 4-pounders were no match for the galleys' heavier ordnance, all three British vessels began dropping down river. The officers fervently hoped they could find a place to maneuver and that a breeze would spring up to help them, but it was not to be. Believing they were in a deep channel they resumed moving downstream with the ebb when suddenly *Rebecca* grounded in a place the British called 'Raccoon Gut.' Almost immediately *Hinchinbrook* and the watering brig suffered the same fate.

Meanwhile the galleys, still firing, were closing fast, by then about 10 a.m. Being faced with imprisonment or abandoning ship the British crowded into their ships' boats leaving behind some of the Hinchinbrook's crew. Six to seven miles distant, HM Galatea was awaiting them in St. Simons Sound, and all who escaped made it safely on board."

Colonel Elbert sent Brigade Major Joseph Habersham to inform General Howe of the capture of the British ships. The Frederica Naval Action was a tremendous boost to Georgians' morale for it put out of action two ships that had been interrupting trade by capturing American merchant vessels off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia. The victory helped delay for over eight months a major move by the British to capture Fort Morris and Sunbury. It was also an excellent demonstration of just how effective heavily armed galleys could be in confined waters when pitted against blue-water vessels. The tidal currents, lack of wind and underwater shoals certainly affected the outcome, but credit must be given to Colonel Samuel Elbert for his courage, his tactics, his determination, the quality of his leadership, and to each of the officers and men who served under his command.

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