

The Revolutionary War by Sea

From the three ships that sailed into the first settlement at Jamestown (*The Susan Constant, Godspeed, and Discovery*) to the *Anne* that brought settlers to Savannah to form the last colony of Georgia, ships were an important part of survival to the 13 colonies. Americans depended on them for supplies and food from Europe. In turn the colonies provided a variety of export goods for Great Britain, including naval stores, and even some constructed ships.

Some Americans went back to Great Britain as sailors and served in the Men-of-War of the Royal Navy.

During the colonial wars between Great Britain, France, and Spain, Americans took part not only in the battles fought in the west along the frontier, but also in the North Atlantic and Caribbean. Among these famous seamen was Lawrence Washington, the older half-brother of George Washington.

In 1775 when Americans began

demonstrating their growing disappointment with British rule, their first action was against British ships. One of the most significant events of this period was the



Boston Tea Party, and it happened aboard a ship.

Once the revolution began, Americans recognized that events on the Atlantic Ocean would have a major impact on who would win the war. In the fall of 1775, Americans initiated a privateering campaign against British ships, and on October 13th, the Continental Congress decided to establish an American Naval force. The leaders hoped by creating their own navy, they would be able to defend themselves against British sea

power. To carry out this mission, the Continental Congress began to purchase, convert, and construct ships. These ships were small and called: frigates, brigs, sloops, and schooners. For the most part, American navy ships cruised independently or in pairs in search of smaller enemy supply ships. They tried to avoid whenever possible fights with the larger ships and the Royal Navy men-of-war.

Georgia and The Revolution!

In the early stages of the Revolution, Georgia managed to remain loyal to Great Britain. However, by late 1775, a group of Patriots formed in Savannah and soon



came into power in the Georgia legislature. They entered into a political conflict with Georgia's Royal Governor James Wright. In early 1776, Governor Wright ordered provisions be delivered to several British warships anchored in the Savannah River near Cockspar Island. Georgia's General Assem-

bledly refused to allow this and put Wright under arrest and drove him from capital. This ended British Rule in Georgia. Governor Wright, and several of his supporters who remained Loyalists, took shelter on nearby British warships.



Shortly after Wright got away, a group of merchant ships carrying rice to the colonists were attacked by British warships further up the Savannah River. The Americans cargoes of rice were seized. Georgians reacted quickly. About 600 Georgian militia were joined by 500 Whigs from South Carolina. They set the ship, *Inverness* ablaze and then cut it loose. The *fire ship drifted into the British ship the *Nelly*. These two ships drifted downstream, setting three more ships on fire. The British squadron was forced to retire.

**A fire ship, was a ship filled with combustibles, deliberately set on fire and steered (or, where possible, allowed to drift) into an enemy fleet, in order to destroy ships, or to create panic and make the enemy break formation).*

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The Frederica Naval Action- *April 19, 1778*

During 1776 and 1777, four heavily-armed ships were constructed in Savannah for the Georgia Navy. In Frederica River at St. Simons Island, beginning at dawn on April 19, 1778, three Georgia ships, the Lee, Washington, and Bulloch, attacked three British ships, the HM Brigantin, Hinchinbrook, the armed sloop, Rebecca, and a brig. The British attempted to retaliate, but were out-gunned and out-maneuvered. As they tried to gain an advantage by moving down river, their ships ran a ground. They then were abandoned, and captured by the Georgians. This remarkable victory boosted Patriot morale and delayed the British invasion of Georgia.

March 20, 1779 Abercorn Creek, Georgia - On March 20, the armed sloop HMS Greenwich and a British galley was sighted above Abercorn Creek, near Purysburgh. The South Carolina galleys Congress and Lee, and a sloop, were sent from Purysburgh to investigate the sighting of the British ships. The South Carolina galleys left after midnight, under the command of Capt. Robert Campbell. The British saw the Patriots coming and reinforced



themselves with an armed flat-boat. At 10:00 A.M., the naval battle began and lasted for three hours. After Campbell was killed, the Patriots decided to abandon the attack against the British.

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The Georgia Society of the Sons of the American Revolution has a project to focus on the Battles of the American Revolution in Georgia. Those battle sites focused on are:

1) Vann's Creek Skirmish, 2) Kettle Creek, 3) The Hornet's Nest, 4) Sieges of Augusta, 5) Brier Creek, 6) Sieges of Savannah, Sunbury/Midway/Fort Morris, and the Naval Action on the Frederica River. They have created a brochure on the Georgia Revolutionary War trail and a rack card for each site. This information can be found at any Georgia Welcome or Visitors Center. For more information or a copy of the brochure go to www.exploregeorgia.org

“The Revolutionary War at Sea” appeared in *Georgia Voyager* magazine, Fall 2009. It includes summary descriptions of the Battle of the Riceboats, the Frederica Naval Action and the Georgia Revolutionary War Trail. Each month, 20,000 copies are mailed to Social Studies teachers in schools in Georgia, and 4,000 copies of the magazine were distributed at the 2009 National Social Studies Conference in Atlanta.