



The Life of GENERAL WILLIAM MOULTRIE

By Warren Gardner

Will Moultrie

The American Revolutionary War produced the first class of heroes for the fledgling nation. Among the most prominent Southern heroes was General William Moultrie. Of the South Carolina native's Revolutionary accomplishments, the most significant was his successful defense of the port of Charleston in 1776. Later, he defended the city in 1779 and 1780. After his capture by the British following the city's surrender, he was seduced by the Redcoats to switch loyalties, an offer that he refused. After the war, Moultrie, like many Revolutionary heroes, became an influential politician, serving as governor of South Carolina for two terms.

William Moultrie was born on November 22, 1730 in the port town he was destined to defend. His father John Moultrie was a prominent Scot and an eminent physician, who received his degree from the University of Edinburgh. The elder Moultrie had emigrated with his wife Lucretia Cooper to Charleston in 1729, a year prior to the birth of William, their second son. William did not take a wife until the age of thirty, marrying Elizabeth Damaris de St. Julien on December 10, 1749. Thirty years later following the death of his first wife, he would repeat the ritual, when he married Ms. Hannah Lynch in October 1779 during a reprieve in the fighting in Charleston.

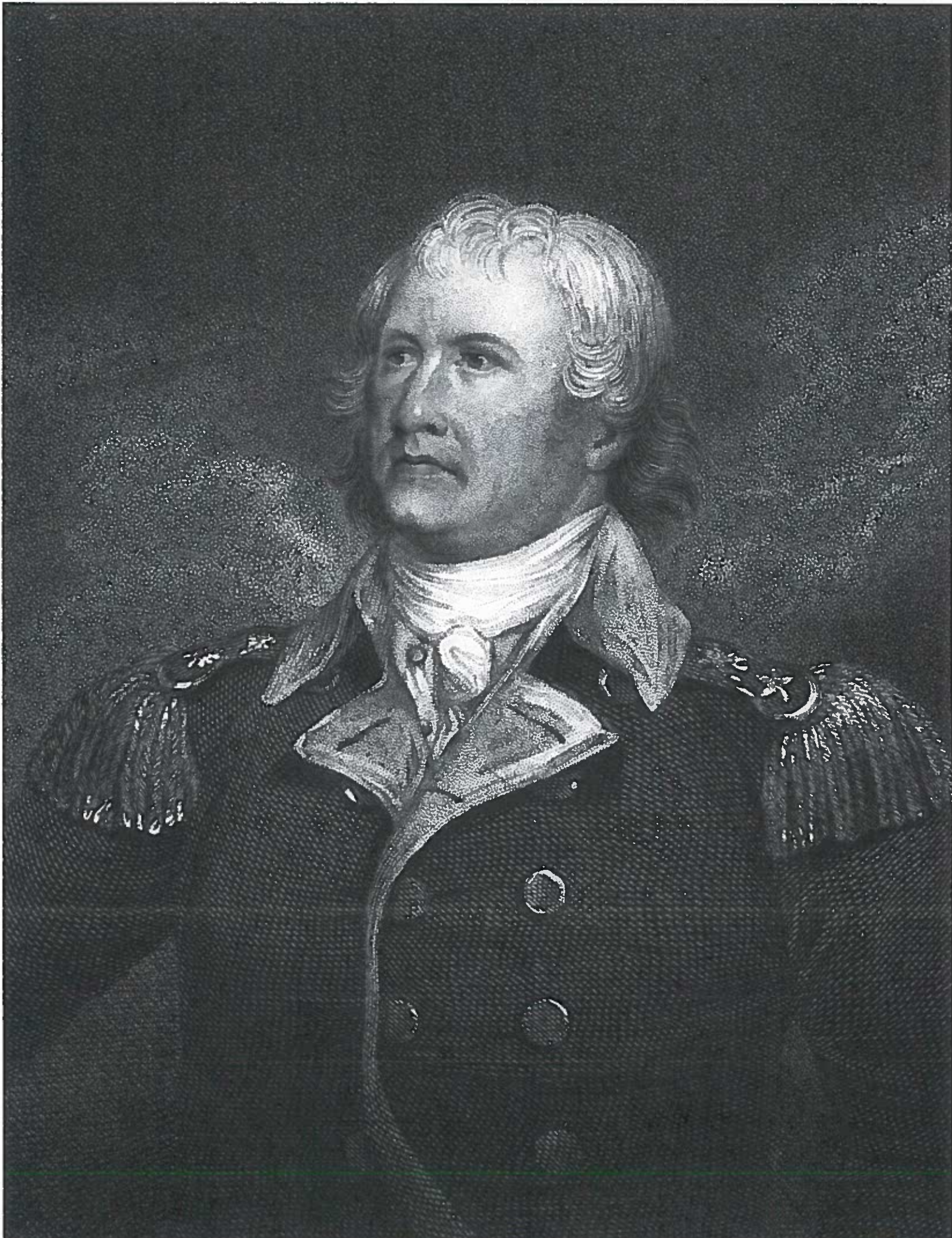
Prior to the Revolution, William Moultrie experienced his initial military action as a captain in the Cherokee Wars of 1759 and 1761. He served under the command of Governor William Henry Lyttelton in 1759. In the larger campaign of 1761, Francis Marion, who Moultrie later admired as "a brave, hardy, and active soldier and an excellent partisan officer," served as a lieutenant in Moultrie's company. In this struggle Moultrie and his men helped to defeat some 3000-4000 well-armed Indians.

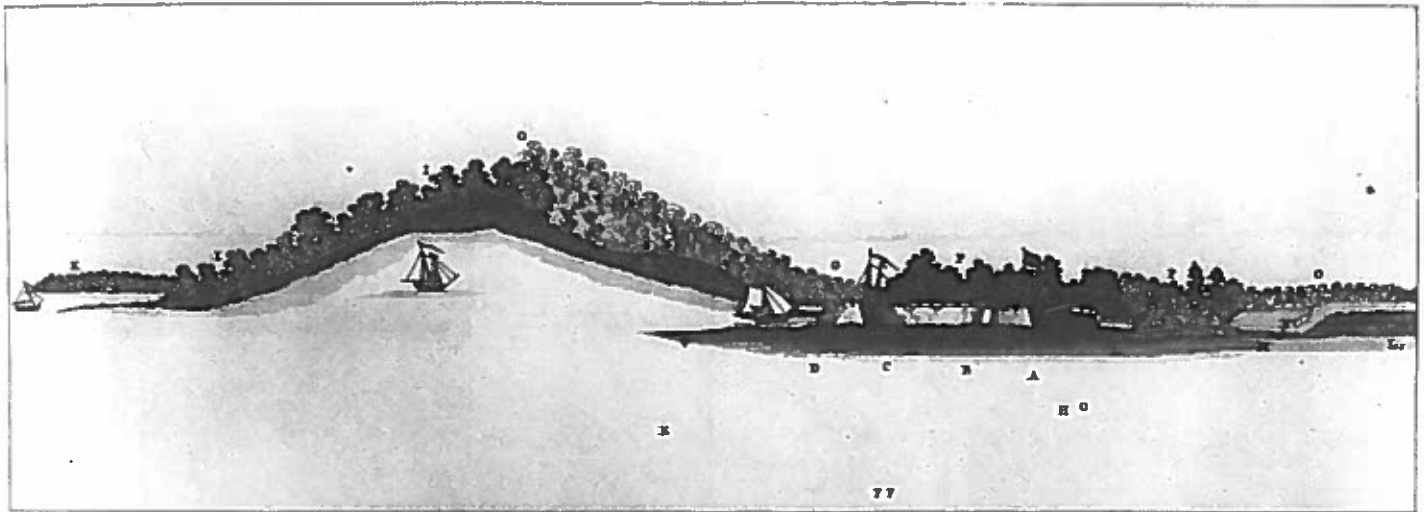
Between the Cherokee Wars and the American Revolution, Moultrie's status in the city of Charleston rose. As tensions mounted between loyalists and revolutionaries, Moultrie quickly recognized the need to recruit as many influential Southerners to the revolutionary cause as possible. He commented on the eve of the war that "it was thought not only useful, but political to raise them [officers]." In an effort to bring as many "influential men" to his side, Moultrie made it his task to deride loyalists like Colonel Scophol, whom he later referred to as "a stupid, ignorant, blockhead."

As 1775 drew to a close and the colonies flirted with war, the struggle between loyalists and revolutionaries heated up in South Carolina, resulting in the formation of three patriot regiments, one of which the Provincial Congress placed under Moultrie's command. On September 13, 1775, Moultrie was ordered to seize Fort Johnson, a loyalist stronghold on Charleston Harbor. The men of his command captured the fort with little resistance from the loyalists, who fled to British ships. Later, when the South Carolina flag was raised at the fort, Moultrie commented, "On its first being hoisted, it gave some uneasiness to our timid friends who were looking forward to a reconciliation. They said that it had the appearance of a declaration of war." It was quite possible that the flag raising was just that: a provocation of war.

ABOVE: "An Exact Prospect of Charlestown..." W.H. Toms after Bishop Roberts. Engraving on Paper. Courtesy of the Gibbes Museum of Art/CAA.

OPPOSITE: Major General William Moultrie. Edward Scriven engraving after J. Trumbull painting. From the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society.





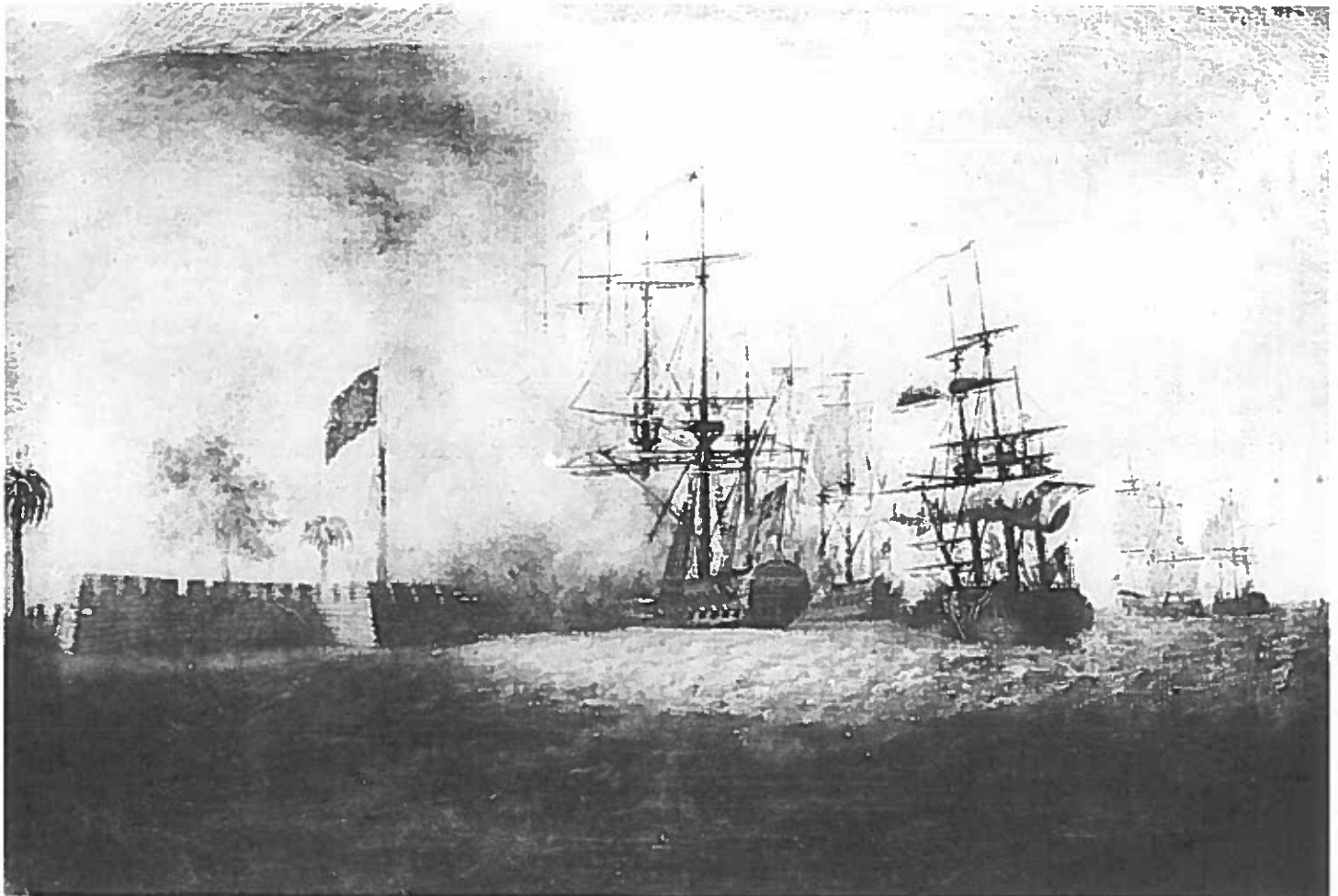
A. N. E. View of the Fort on the Western end of Sullivan Island with the Dispersion of His Majesty's Fleet Commanded by Commodore Sir Peter Parker R.N. &c. &c. during the Attack on the 28th of June 1776. which lasted 9 hours and 30 minutes.

A. The Active 28 Guns Capt. Williams. B. Bristol Commodore Sir Peter Parker R.N. &c. &c. of 50 Guns, Capt. Morris. C. Experiment 50 Guns Capt. Best. D. Saleby 28 Guns Capt. Simons. E. Byron 28 Guns Capt. Pownall. F. F. The Active of 28 Guns Capt. Atkins and Sphinx of 20 Guns Capt. Hunt on a Shoal the latter got off but the Active was burnt by our Ships the next Morning as it was impossible to get her off. G. H. The Thunder Bomb Capt. Reed with the Friendship Armed Vessel of 28 Guns Capt. Hoyle. I. Mount Pleasant. K. Hog Island. L. Sullivan Island and Fort. M. A. Narrow Mouth. N. An Arsenal built to defend the Island. O. The Commodore. P. The Myrtle Grove. Q. The Western end of Sullivan Island & Fort erected upon a Peninsula.

Engraved by Wm. Faden according to an Act of Parliament Aug 26th 1776. by Wm. Faden Surveyor of His Majesty's Charts &c.

To Commodore Sir Peter Parker R.N. &c. &c. This View is Most-humbly Dedicated and Presented by A. Coland. Tho. James R. R. of Wilkes June 30th 1776

ABOVE: Wm. Faden engraving of Fort Sullivan and Sir Peter Parker's fleet during the attack on 28 June 1776. From the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society.
 BELOW: "Sir Peter Parker's Attack against Fort Moultrie, June 28, 1776," oil on canvas, attributed to James Peale. From the collection of Ms. Margaret James, Urbana, Ohio.



Moultrie's struggle against loyalists soon turned into a struggle against the British Navy. On December 19-20, 1775, he undertook the "erection of a battery on Haddrell's Point," which forced British ships to leave their anchorage in Charleston harbor. The British ships then temporarily anchored off Sullivan's Island, northeast of Charleston, before departing. Because of the island's strategic location, Colonel Moultrie accepted the daunting task of constructing a fort there, despite Major General Charles Lee's claim that the position was "indefensible." To this assertion, Moultrie stated simply that he "could and would defend the island."

To defend Sullivan's Island, which was in Moultrie's own words nothing more than "a wilderness, covered with oak, myrtle, and palmetto trees," the colonel supervised the construction of a fort that was intended to hold 1000 men upon completion. Moultrie's men erected the fort's walls with two walls of palmetto trunks, and between these walls the patriots poured sand, so that the walls measured sixteen feet thick.

The fort on Sullivan's Island (unofficially called Fort Sullivan and later renamed Fort Moultrie) was only partially completed when a newly arrived British fleet attacked on June 28, 1776. Clearly, fire superiority belonged to the British, for they had 270 guns situated on the decks of their men-of-war compared to a mere 25 guns within the fort's walls on the shores of Sullivan's Island. Despite the superior British firepower, the fort's walls "harmlessly swallowed up . . . many of the cannon balls . . . by the sand and 'spongy' logs." Moultrie later recounted a conversation that occurred before the battle as the British fleet crossed the bar. A visitor to the fort commented: "Well, Colonel, what do you think of it now?" Moultrie replied: "We should beat them." The man protested: "Sir, when those ships come up alongside of your fort, they will knock it down in a half of an hour." To this the Colonel resolutely responded: "Then we will lay down behind the ruins and prevent them from landing." Strong was Moultrie's desire to see the fort defended.

A letter from Robert Pringle, a soldier in Moultrie's command at Sullivan's Island, related to his brother the day's events. He spoke with high praise of his commander's gallantry, stating that "the Colonel and the whole Garrison would have done honor to the best troops in the world." Also, Pringle quoted the losses at "about twelve men killed and 23 wounded." Such paltry losses despite the fact that General Lee, who was awaiting attack on Charleston proper, "says he had never in the whole course of his military service (and few officers have seen so much) seen or heard so dreadful a cannonade."

After eleven and half hours of heavy bombardment from both sides, the British retreated. While Moultrie's losses had been nearly inconsequential, the British fleet had suffered greatly, reportedly with 115 soldiers, sailors, and marines dead and 65 wounded. Furthermore, three British ships, *Acteon*, *Sphinx*, and *Syren*, ran aground at the mouth of Charleston in an attempt to enfilade the fort. *Sphinx* and *Syren* were refloated, but *Acteon* stuck fast, and her crew set the vessel afire to prevent its capture. Every British vessel

involved in the attack was damaged.

Upon returning to Charleston, Moultrie and his troops were justly rewarded for their bravery. One prominent citizen, William Logan, sent his compliments and begged "the acceptance of a hogshead of Antigua rum." Meanwhile, the ladies of the town presented the Colonel with a pair of colors, and the fort on Sullivan's Island was immediately renamed Fort Moultrie.

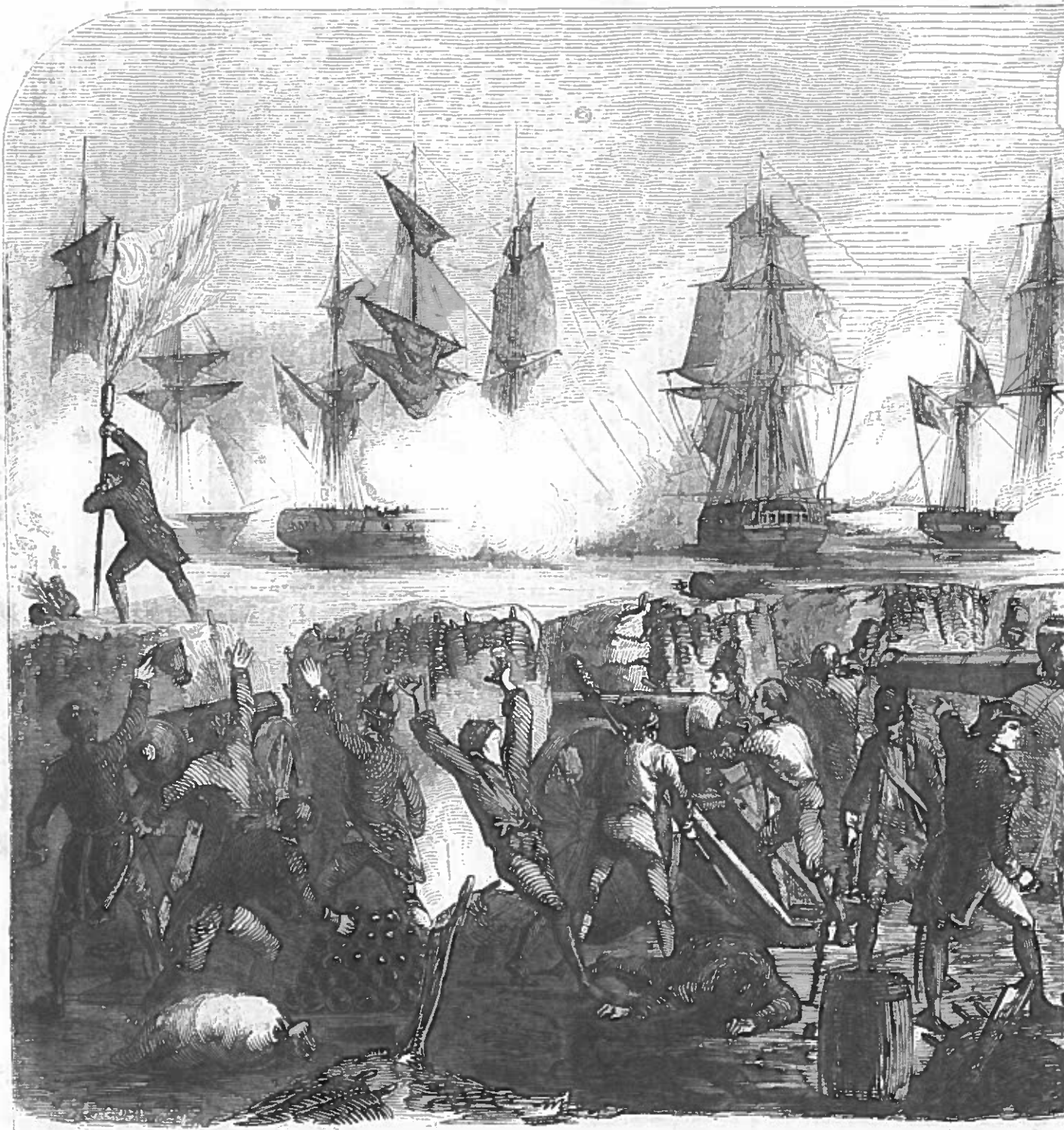
The defense of Fort Sullivan represented one of the great Patriot victories of the Revolution in the South. Pringle suggested that had Sullivan fallen, Charleston would have suffered a similar fate, despite the presence of Major General Lee and his troops. Historian Edward Riley has advanced similar arguments, suggesting that "the American victory at Fort Moultrie, combined with that at Moore's Creek Bridge in North Carolina, turned aside the one combination of circumstances that might have made British conquest possible." As a result of his valor, Moultrie obtained the rank of brigadier general.

This advancement meant that Moultrie had become second in command of the Southern Department, which was headed by Major General Benjamin Lincoln. Lincoln had become head of the department on December 19, 1778 and was immediately confronted with the problem of defending Savannah from an impending attack by Lieutenant Colonel Archibald Campbell and his 3500 British regulars from Florida. Lincoln's strategy proved horribly ineffective, resulting in the loss of Savannah on December 29. Following the city's capture, Lincoln waged a multi-front war with the British along the coast and the interior between Savannah and Charleston.

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Having given Moultrie control of 300 state militia troops, Lincoln asked his general to guard his route of retreat as he attempted a poorly planned attack on Savannah. On February 3, 1779, Moultrie engaged British forces at Port Royal Island just outside the town of Beaufort. There, Moultrie's troops defeated a British expeditionary force led by Major Gardiner, which had been ordered to cut off Lincoln's retreat. Lincoln later expressed his feeling of elation, "that Moultrie had handled the militia so effectively against the regulars." Had Moultrie's timely victory been stalled, Lincoln would have found himself in an untenable position—trapped between British forces giving chase from Savannah and Gardiner's expeditionary regulars.

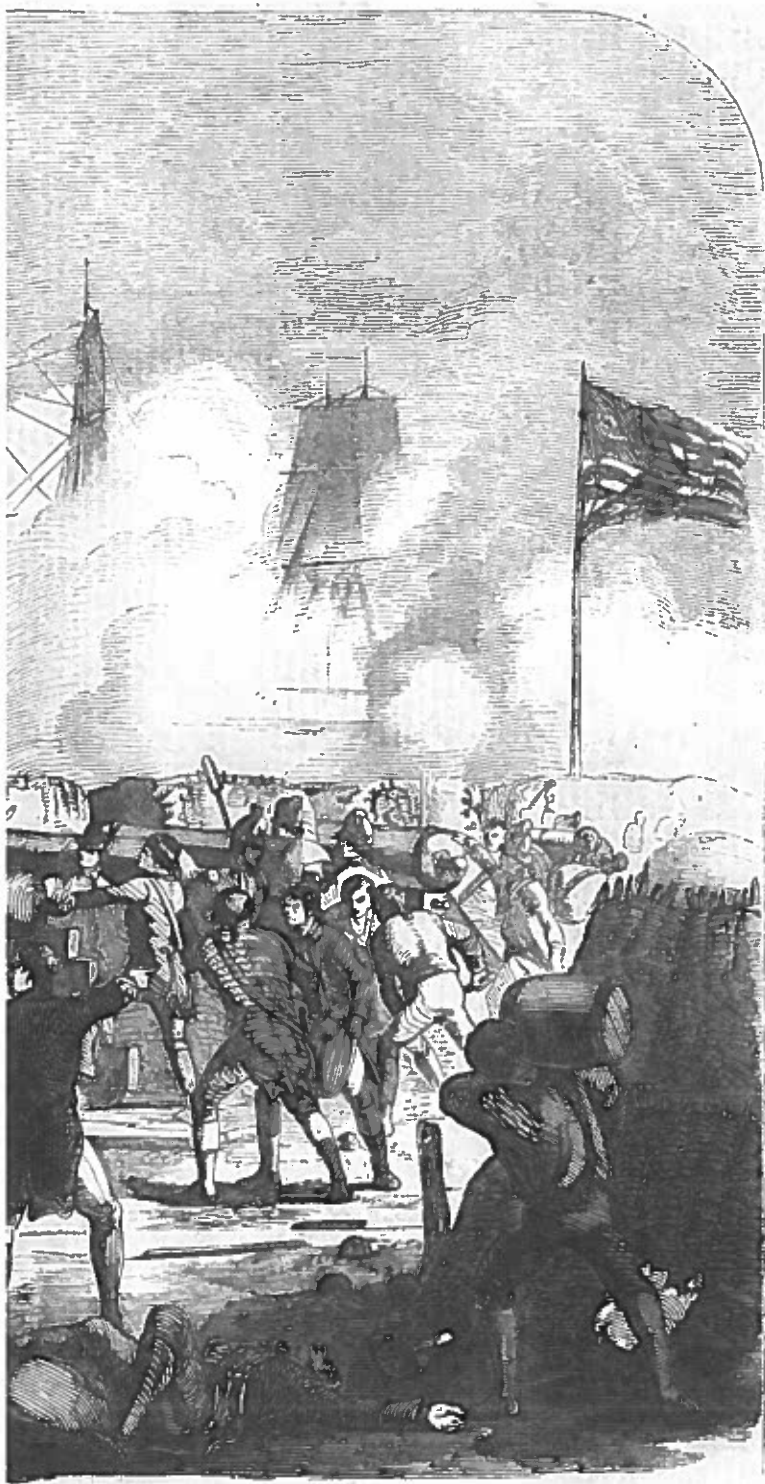
Unable to ignore his hopes for regaining a foothold in



Georgia, Maj. General Lincoln called the Black Swamp Council on April 19, 1779 to draw up plans for accomplishing this objective. It was there that Lincoln decided that his next target would be Colonel Campbell's forces in Augusta. Lincoln's attack on Augusta, though, proved to be yet another rash and ill-planned undertaking. He decided to split his forces to protect the passages between Augusta, Savannah and Charleston. For this purpose, he left Moultrie in command of 1,000 troops to defend the town of Purysburg and the Black Swamp area. Lincoln supposed that by these measures, "the coastal region of South

Carolina might be secured from attack." Unfortunately for Moultrie, Lincoln's plan for him was as unrealistic as his attempt to conquer Augusta, for he seemingly had not considered the numerical superiority of British troops near the coast under the leadership of General Augustine Prevost.

Prevost, leading his regiment of loyalists from Georgia and Florida, dislodged Moultrie from Purysburg, forcing him to retreat towards Charleston. His line of retreat jeopardized, Lincoln decided to turn back from Augusta and rush to Charleston's defense. Although his forces were scattered along the Atlantic coast and the South Carolina back



ABOVE: "The Attack on Fort Moultrie, Sullivan's Island, South Carolina, on June 28, 1776," from *Harpers Weekly*, June 26, 1858.

country, they did communicate, for copies exist of Moultrie's contact with John Rutledge, the governor of South Carolina and primary defender of Charleston with his force of 3,000. Moultrie's description of the retreat to Charleston recorded in his *Memoirs of the American Revolution of North and South Carolina and Georgia* best reveals the confusion of the day. In a May 8, 1779 entry, he wrote:

At this time there never was a country in greater confusion and

consternation; and it may be easily accounted for when five armies were marching through the southern parts of it, at the same time, and all for different purposes: myself retreating as fast as possible to get to town, the British army of 3000 men commanded by General Prevost in pursuit of me; General Lincoln with the American army of 4000, marching with hasty strides to come up on the British, Governor Rutledge from Orangeburgh, hastening to get to town lest he get shut out; and Colonel Harris, with a detachment of 250 Continentals, pushing on with all possible dispatch to reinforce me.

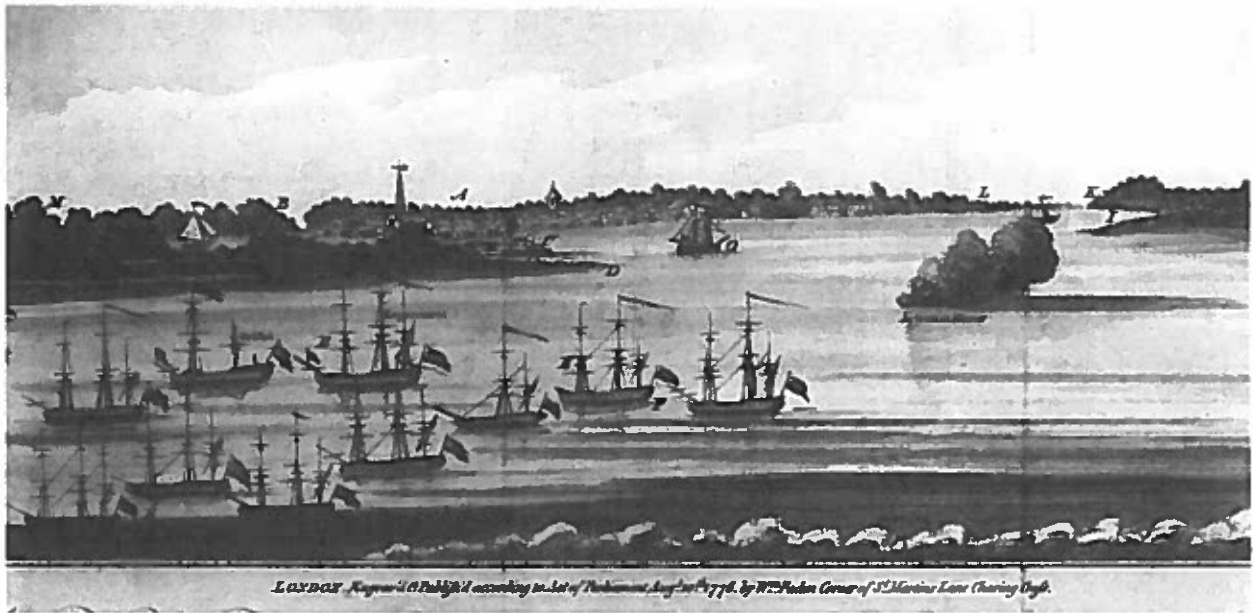
Moultrie concluded that, "in short, there was nothing but a general confusion and alarm."

Rutledge's army reached Charleston on May 4 and proceeded to ready the town for siege. Moultrie's men, having received reinforcement from Harris' Continentals, entered the gates five days later with General Prevost on their heels. The British began the siege two days later, but Lincoln successfully lifted the siege on May 14 when he arrived from the south with his force of 4000 men. Lincoln then forced Prevost to split his forces and retreat to James Island and Johns Island to the southwest of Charleston. Refusing to endanger his troops, though, Lincoln was slow to attack Prevost's encampment; such indecision would prove disastrous as the summer of 1779 wore on.

Following his confused campaign against Augusta, which resulted in the needless endangerment of Charleston, Benjamin Lincoln wrote to General Washington to resign his position. He claimed that he was suffering from depression. The Charleston press no doubt contributed to his state of mind by continually questioning his leadership abilities considering "the Briar Creek route, the abortive Augusta campaign, the subsequent loss of Georgia, and [Prevost's] attempt on Charleston." His understanding of local circumstances also came under attack, as he was far from his native land of New York. On June 9, 1779, Moultrie replaced Lincoln, but confronted with the task of heading the entire Southern cause, the South Carolina officer wished for Lincoln to continue in his post. Perhaps Lincoln simply needed encouragement, and now Moultrie came to his aide psychologically, reminding the Major General of his successes and the South's need of his abilities. He also reinforced Lincoln's flagging self-confidence in his contentions to the press that "the Major General is a brave, active, and very vigilant officer."

Finally, on June 20, 1779, Lincoln organized an attack on Prevost's forces, part of which were still camped at Stono Ferry. He planned for Moultrie to command a diversionary force of 800 men that would draw British attention from their defense of Johns Island and eventually participate in a pursuit of the retreating British. Unfortunately, this expedition also failed, for Moultrie was not successful in diverting British reinforcements or in assisting Lincoln's attack on Stono Ferry. Legend has it that Moultrie hosted a party in Charleston the evening before the battle, and missed the morning tide while he bade farewell to his guests. Regardless, the assault was a disaster, and Lincoln lost his chance to destroy the British force, which the British fleet soon rescued from the coastal islands.

Following his failure, Lincoln devised another attack on



LONDON: Negroes in England according to Act of Parliament, August 1778. by Wm. Faden, Governor of St. Martin's Lane (Charley Day).

“At this time there never was a country in greater confusion and consternation; and it may be easily accounted for when five armies were marching through the southern parts of it”

the Georgia coast, this time concentrating on Savannah. Having learned his lesson at Augusta, Lincoln left Moultrie in command of a small regiment to defend Charleston. Bolstered by a force of 4000 French troops led by Admiral d'Estaing, Lincoln resolutely marched his army to the gates of Savannah, where Prevost again acted as his nemesis. Moultrie later recalled Lincoln's confidence, remembering that “no one doubted but that we had nothing more to do than march up to Savannah and demand a surrender.” At Savannah Lincoln was deftly outfoxed by his British counterpart. Prevost, acting on knowledge that reinforcements were on the way, asked Lincoln for a day to decide whether to surrender the city to the revolutionaries. Lincoln agreed, and during the night Prevost's reinforcements arrived. On October 9, 1779, Lincoln and d'Estaing launched a series of frontal assaults on the British lines, which resulted in a costly defeat and Lincoln's eventual retreat to Charleston.

As the year 1779 drew to a close, the British forces, under the command of Sir Henry Clinton, who had recently arrived from the war in New York, mounted a counterattack on Charleston. In February 1780, Clinton, Earl Cornwallis, and 8500 British and German troops arrived at Charleston. Not wishing to subject their armies to the depletion incurred by a direct attack, the generals implemented siege tactics. Finally, in mid-May, the order was given to attack the weakened revolutionary forces. Moultrie

later described the artillery fire of the night of May 9, declaring that “it appeared as if the stars were falling on the earth.”

On May 12, Charleston surrendered, an event which Moultrie dubbed as “one of the greatest disasters suffered by the Americans during the whole war.” General Moultrie surrendered with the rest of Charleston's garrison. As a prisoner he learned from a British officer that “Charleston had made a gallant defense but the town contained a great many rascals who came out every night and gave Clinton information concerning the garrison and its dispositions.”

The British, on whom General Moultrie had exacted great losses, recognized the importance of gaining such a military figure. They made numerous attempts to get Moultrie to revoke his revolutionary fervor, for they realized that if they could convince him to change sides, they would gain a masterful commander and destroy the morale of other Southern revolutionaries.

While other Patriot officers renounced their revolutionary desires, Moultrie remained loyal to the American cause. Despite numerous inducements from Charles Grenville Montagu, former royal governor of South Carolina, to join the British and go to Jamaica, Moultrie would not be swayed. In response to Montagu's claim that he “could quit [the Revolution] with honor and reputation,” Moultrie showed his character, responding by letter while a prisoner:

You call upon me and tell me I have ‘a fair opening of quitting that service with honor and reputation’ to myself by going with you to Jamaica. Good God! Is it possible that such an idea could arise

ABOVE: Wm. Faden engraving of Charleston from the Bristol the day after the British attack on Fort Sullivan. Note the Aetion in flames on the right side of the image. From the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society.

RIGHT: Portrait of Governor William Moultrie, by Charles Fraser, 1802. Courtesy of The Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore.

in the breast of a man with Honor? Would you wish to have that man whom you have honored with your friendship to play the traitor? Surely not.

And again, in a subsequent letter:

You say by quitting this country for a short time, I might avoid disagreeable conversations, and might return at my own leisure and take possession of my estate for myself and for my family; but you have forgot to tell me how I am to get rid of the feelings of an injured, honest heart, and where to hide myself from myself. Could I be guilty of such business, I should hate myself and shun mankind.

Despite the best efforts of Montagu and the British, Moultrie remained loyal to the revolutionary cause and was not released until February 19, 1782, when he and others were exchanged for British Major General John Burgoyne. Shortly after his repatriation, Moultrie was promoted to the rank of Major General.

One can see the beginnings of Moultrie's social and political abilities during his time spent as a British prisoner. Not only did he show great character in his rebukes to British offers, but he also revealed his social conscience in his disapproval of the British treatment of prisoners. South Carolina historian Yates Snowden recognized Moultrie as the much needed "champion" for the cause of American prisoners. Snowden claimed that ever since the "defeat of General Gates in August 1780, there is evidence to show that the British . . . considered the American cause lost, and threw their prisoners of war aboard prison ships, crowded to suffocation and infected with the most virulent type of smallpox." While Moultrie did not experience such conditions himself, there is evidence that his troops were imprisoned on a British ship anchored in Charleston harbor.

From the time of his release to the war's end, Moultrie did little, for the war in the South had nearly come to a close. Upon hearing of the British evacuation of Charleston on December 14, 1782, he later wrote in his *Memoirs* of the "great joy that was felt on this day by the citizens and the soldiers." Later, when he had more time to reminisce, he recounted how "it was a proud day for me, and I felt myself much elated at seeing the balconies, the doors, and the windows crowded with patriotic fair, and the aged citizens and others congratulating us on our return home, saying, 'God bless you gentlemen! You are welcome home, Gentlemen!'

Both citizens and soldiers shed mutual tears of joy."

Like many of the Revolutionary war heroes, Moultrie's leadership skills dominated his life after the war. He busied himself with political, social, and historical concerns. He was elected governor of South Carolina in 1785. Among the accomplishments of his first term (1785-1787) were the unification of the up and low counties "in a movement of industrial, commercial, social, and educational properties" and the establishment of Columbia as the state capital. This represented Moultrie's ability to compromise, for in allowing the state capital to be located in the interior, Moultrie guaranteed "the rights of the people of the up-counties to be provided with a judicial and governmental center convenient to their homes and interests generally."

Moultrie's second term (1792-1794) was less successful, for he encountered the difficulties posed by the insurgent French Jacobins and Edmund Genet. During his second term, also, the cotton gin was introduced, forever altering the essence of South Carolina agriculture.

As a historian, Moultrie provided us with a first hand account of the events of the Revolutionary arena surrounding Charleston. His *Memoirs* were published in 1802, and they include not only accurate accounts of events but also insightful commentary. For example, Moultrie charged Lincoln, in his move to attack Augusta, with committing "an error of risking a country to save a town." Three years later, on September 27, 1805, William Moultrie died of natural causes.

William Moultrie was truly an American hero. His allegiance to his country throughout the war was characteristic of many typical American revolutionaries. Furthermore, he embodied the incorruptible soldier of the American Revolution in the South.

Following the example of President Washington, Moultrie continued to perform dutiful allegiance to his nation, shifting from military to political affairs after the war. He readily adapted the lessons learned as an officer of the Revolutionary War to his duties as governor of South Carolina, recognizing the need for strong leadership in the politics of the newborn state governments.



Warren Gardner is a graduate student in history at the University of Oregon. This essay was runner-up in the North Callahan Historical Essay Contest, sponsored by North Callahan, Professor Emeritus of History at New York University.