

Sea Island Lady Showed Her Toughness

By Robert E. H. Peebles

Not all women, or men, are demonstrably brave but one Hilton Head Island property owner and sometime resident was a true heroine of the Revolution and was so recognized at the time.

She was born Sept. 11, 1749, on St. Helena's Island, ninth child of planter Jonathan Norton. He had her duly baptized in 1750 in St. Helena's Church, Beaufort, where he was elected Vestryman the following year. Her eldest sister Sarah became a permanent resident of Hilton Head in 1752 when she married Samuel Green of Fish Haul Plantation. It was a brief trip by boat across Port Royal Sound with eight strong black oarsmen.

Elizabeth Norton lived the carefully sheltered life of young ladies of her time and station. With her sisters and cousins she spent much time indoors or on the broad porches of Norton Hall. The Carolina sun was ruinous to delicate complexions. Servants did the gardening, food

preparation, cooking, laundry and other household chores. She did learn to ride horseback sidesaddle on the 596-acre plantation but her other accomplishments were limited to the lady-like doings of the era: playing piano or harp, water coloring, reading, sewing, especially embroidering the fine linen and cotton fabrics for sachets, doilies, tablecloths, sheets and pillow slips, tatting, knitting and crocheting. Many hours were spent in visiting relatives and in entertaining those who came to visit. Visitors were a prime source of news.

By the 1775 outbreak of the Revolution, Elizabeth was married to planter and patriot Capt. John Joyner, delegate to South Carolina's First Provincial Congress. Her brother just older, William Norton, had married Mary Godfrey of the old Carolina family of Col. John Godfrey; they had several small children. William was captured by the British after the fall of Savannah and refused to accept the King's Protection and join the Royal Militia. Word came to Elizabeth

that her soldier-brother was ill in the enemy camp with no one to care for him. Her own husband was away with the army; her father had died in 1774; her sister-in-law was in the state of advanced pregnancy. She would have to save her brother.

Donning her riding costume with its voluminous skirts, she fixed a white feather plume to her cap to identify her American sentiments. She rode boldly to the commanding officer of the British army. From him she demanded a permit to take her sick brother to her home to nurse him back to health. He was unable to refuse her. Then she bravely invaded the enemy camp, found her ill brother and had him placed on her horse. Right through the enemy troops she led her mare with her previous burden.

With her white feather defiantly waving, "every British officer pulled off his cap as she passed, and the ranks were opened for her to pass through." Her grandniece in recording the story later gratuitously added, "The Yankee (1865) army never

did anything like that!" Revolutionary soldier William Norton was saved to fight on until victory came with the evacuation of Charleston by the British in December 1782.

Elizabeth's husband, John Joyner who had 50 slaves and many acres in 1790, died leaving her independently wealthy. She married Rev. William Eastwick Graham, rector of St. Helena's Parish, who himself had 52 slaves and a plantation on Hilton Head Island in 1790. Following her second husband's death in 1800, "Aunt Graham", as she was affectionately called by her many nieces and nephews since she had no children of her own, lived chiefly in her town house on Broughton at West Broad Street in Savannah until 1806 when she built Graham Hall on her plantation near Robertville. There she lavishly entertained her family, providing a handsome setting for several long-remembered wedding parties, until her death at the age of 83 in 1832.

She is buried in Robertville Cemetery.

ELIZABETH NORTON JOYNER GRAHAM