The Commanders and Chaplains of the American Revolution

Part Eleven: Preparing for Victory in South Carolina

Lord William Campbell

Governor Josiah Martin

Almost immediately after the battles of Lexington and Concord in April of 1775, the Royal Governors of South Carolina and North Carolina found themselves unwelcome in their respective colonies. Lord William Campbell, the newly-appointed Governor of South Carolina, arrived in Charleston to take up the reins of government on June 18th. He was informed by the Council of Safety that he would perform only the ceremonial functions of his office. After numerous political struggles with the revolutionaries in September, Governor Campbell dissolved the Assembly, closed the Crown offices and retired on board the *HMS Cherokee*, a British sloop-of-war outside Charleston Harbor.[1]

Governor Josiah Martin, at New Bern, North Carolina, had much of the same experience. After his home was attacked by Whigs on April 24, 1775, Martin took refuge in a small coastal fort. Martin wrote Lord George Germain, Secretary for the American Colonies, that he had hordes of Loyalists who would help restore royal authority. He claimed he could raise 9,000 Tories if London would just send arms. Once again the British flag would fly over North Carolina![2]

Messages from the two governors germinated in London in the last weeks of 1775. General William Howe, already planning an attack on New York, presumably to make up for his stalemate in Boston, objected to a deployment southward because sending troops to the Carolinas would delay his operations. Howe's objections came too late, for

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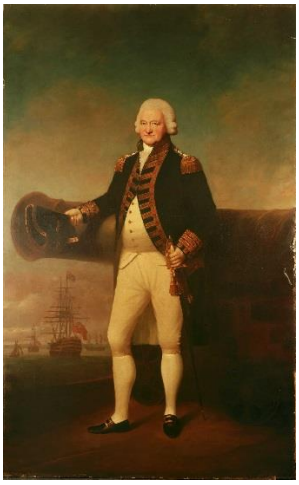
[1] Terry W. Lipscomb, *The Carolina Low Country and the Battle of Fort Moultrie* (Columbia, SC: South Carolina Department of Archives and History, 1994), p. 12.
[2] Don Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence: Military Attitudes, Policies, and Practice, 1763-1789* (New York, 1971), p. 135.

a British armada carrying troops to Carolina had already set sail from England under the command of Admiral Sir Peter Parker.[3]

Second in command to General Howe, Major General Sir Henry Clinton would command the over-all effort in the South, deferring to Parker in naval matters. In January of 1776 Clinton departed for North Carolina with a few hundred troops detached from the army in Boston to link up with Governor Martin's "horde of Loyalists" and Admiral Parker's British regiments and warships due momentarily in North Carolina.

Sir Henry Clinton



Sir Peter Parker

General Clinton arrived in North Carolina in early March expecting the best. He found less than that. There were no Loyalist regiments waiting for him. Rebels had crushed them two weeks earlier at the Battle of Moore's Creek Bridge near Wilmington. Nor was Parker's armada there to greet him. Tossed by raging Atlantic storms during hurricane season, Parker's ships did not arrive until six weeks later.[4]

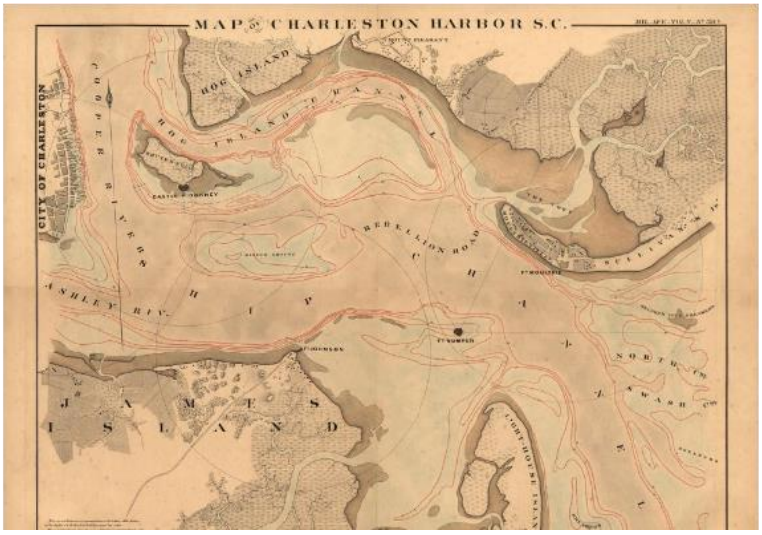
Ever the strategist, Clinton decided that a campaign in North Carolina would not produce the Loyalist support he desired. But Charleston, as the richest city in the Deep South, and presumably the gateway to many Loyalist settlers who owed their land grants to the King, could be an acceptable second choice. Indeed Lord George Germain wrote to General Clinton, "If you should judge it expedient to proceed in the first place to South Carolina, as Charleston is the seat of commerce of all that part of America…the

[3] John Ferling, *Almost a Miracle: The American Victory in the War of Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 126.
[4] Ibid., p. 127.

restoration of the legal government there must and will have very important consequences."[5]

Clinton knew, even with the five regiments of troops and the 10,000 muskets Sir Peter Parker was bringing from Ireland, that capturing and garrisoning Charleston might be an objective for the future, but not for the present. However, if he could take the small, unfinished fort on Sullivan's Island, he could control the port and thereby deny its use to the rebels. A small, secure victory might be better than an insecure gamble.

With the regiments from Ireland and an armada of fifty ships, General Clinton arrived off South Carolina early in June of 1776. Given his resources, including the formidable firepower of Parker's fleet, he foresaw an easy go of it in taking Sullivan's Island. There was a dreamy quality to Clinton's thinking. It was never clear who would garrison Sullivan's Island or how it could possibly be supplied. Usually the most logical of British generals, Clinton appears to have succumbed to the pulsating passion to do something, anything, and to pray that it worked.[6]



Nineteenth century map of Charleston Harbor with Sullivan's Island hooking from the right and the City of Charleston in the top left at a distance of approximately four miles.[7]

[5] Terry W. Lipscomb, Op.cit., p. 21.
[6] John Ferling, Op. cit., p. 127.

[7] Courtesy of the Library of Congress Map Division, G3912.C4 18-- .B6.

The tactical strategy Clinton and Parker discussed was rather simple. Since Clinton commanded the land forces, he would take six regiments and parts of two others to Long Island just northeast of Sullivan's Island. There, under the cover of naval gunfire from Parker's fleet, the redcoats would wade or float across the Breach Inlet to flank the fort. Meanwhile, Sir Peter Parker's ships of the line would engage the fort to prevent patriot reinforcements from opposing the crossing.

The weather and the tides, however, did not cooperate with the British plan. It took almost three weeks for Parker's fleet to cross the sandbars to get into proper range to shell the beach and the fort.

Readying the Defense

The patriot Council of Safety in Charleston, headed by lawyer and future Governor John Rutledge, knew they needed to strengthen their defenses. On the 8th of January a committee of the Council visited Sullivan's Island, surveyed its military potential, and recommended that a strong fort should be built there. Three days later the full Council of Safety contracted with one Cornelius Dewees for the delivery of palmetto logs at the cost of one shilling per foot.[8]

In early February Colonel Christopher Gadsden, a firebrand for revolution, brought English newspaper accounts from Philadelphia of General Clinton's impending expedition to Charleston and a resolution from the Continental Congress urging South Carolinians to make a vigorous defense and opposition by all possible means.[9] Gadsden's intelligence caused enough alarm that planters began moving their families and valuables out of the city. Batteries of cannon were set up for temporary defense, and on March 2nd the Council of Safety ordered Colonel William Moultrie to take command of Sullivan's Island.

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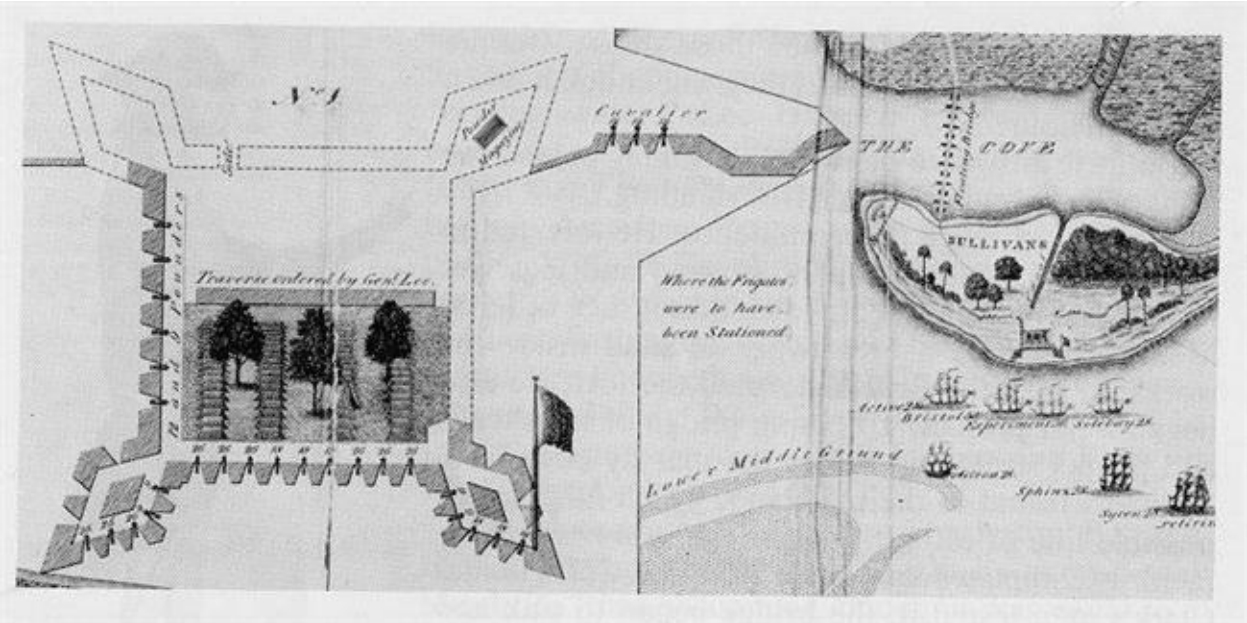
[8] South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, S.C.: *Collections*, 3:151; 156-157
[9] Terry Lipscomb, Op.cit. p. 22.

William Moultrie, Colonel of the 2nd S.C. Regiment of Provincial Troops, Commander of Fort Sullivan in 1776 and future Major General and Governor of South Carolina

The purpose of building a fort on Sullivan's Island was, of course, to prevent the British warships from entering Charleston Harbor. The "fort" that Colonel Moultrie commanded, however, was not much more than a stack of logs and mounds of sand. On June 20, 1776 the 2nd South Carolina Provincial Regiment, fresh from the Charleston garrison, began the work of building a structure on Sullivan's Island that might withstand a hurricane of shot and shell from the British Navy. [Private] Edward Hall of Lt. William Capers' company described the effort:

> We received orders on the 20th of June to leave the "Half Moon" fort, and, by a transport vessel, were landed on the west side of the island, where we found the other part of the regiment, commanded by Col. Moultrie, and joined them by day and night in strengthening the large work which was being erected. Our work was assigned on the southwest side of the fort, which is built entirely of the palmetto logs, made in the form of pens, and the interior filled with sand. By the morning of the 26th we had mounted two 32-pound cannon, and were so well fixed as to receive a compliment from Col. Moultrie …Never have I seen men work so faithfully. It was evident that we were going to have a great fight, and to have a place in the drama was the ambition of every member of the company. [10]

[10] Terry W. Lipscomb, Op. cit., p. 42. Note: The Half Moon fort was a bastion at the end of Charleston's Broad Street defending Charleston Harbor.



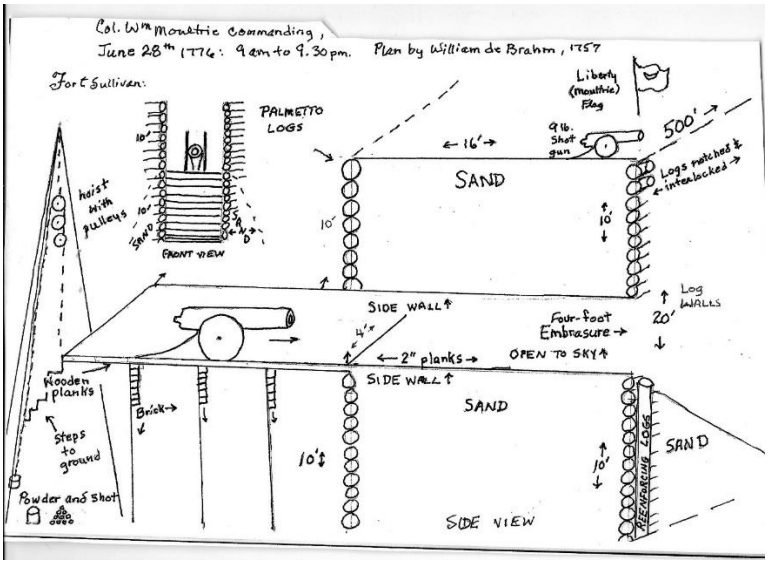
The Half-Finished Fort Sullivan As It Appeared to the British on 28 June 1776 with A Partial Bridge of Boats to the Mainland - Courtesy of the Charleston Preservation Society

It was essential that the patriots construct as much cover in the fort for themselves as possible. The British fleet under Sir Peter Parker consisted of eleven warships, two of them, the *Bristol* and the *Experiment* mounted fifty guns each. They were flanked by two 28-gun frigates, the *Active* and the *Solebay*. A third line of frigates, the *Sphinx*, the *Actaeon*, and the *Syren* added another 60 guns, twenty each. This gave the British a minimum of 216 cannon to bear on the fort, not including the *Thunder*, a bomb ketch capable of high-angle mortar fire.

But the British thought the fort was made of wood, not palmettos backed with 16 feet of sand. Nor did they realize that reinforcements for the Americans were on the way.

The effect of firing a 32 pound cannon ball into a combination of palmettos and sand is not unlike firing a rifle into a barrel of tar. The palmetto is a relative of the cabbage plant and does not fracture as much as it bends. When backed by 16 feet of sand the result is a virtually impenetrable barrier to 18th-century artillery even at the close range of 400 yards.

Colonel Moultrie also placed some of his smaller artillery, called Cavaliers, in redoubts outside the fort and added ports in the stockade walls for his infantry to use with their muskets, just in case the British made it to the rear of the fort.



A Sketch of Fort Sullivan following the description of Captain Peter Horry of the 2nd South Carolina Provincial Regiment: " [The fort walls were] 500 feet long, 16 feet thick [filled with sand] and [rose] 10 feet above the gun platforms which were supported by brick pillars. There were ports for 31 cannon plus loop holes for riflemen (with muskets). Colonel Moultrie was commanding with Lt. Col. Isaac Motte on the right and Major Francis Marion on the left."

The fort followed a plan drawn by William de Brahm, Engineer and Surveyor General for the Southern Colonies. De Brahm designed the defenses of Charleston in 1752 and Fort George near Savannah in 1757.

Mobilizing the Clergy

Like the other 12 colonies, South Carolina was predominantly Protestant in its religious configuration. In 1775 there were 22 Anglican churches, 38 Presbyterian churches, 60 Baptist churches and meetinghouses, one Independent-Congregationalist church, three Huguenot communities, four Lutheran communities and six Quaker meetinghouses settled in the colony.[11] There was not yet a Roman Catholic church but

[11] John W. Brinsfield, *Religion and Politics in Colonial South Carolina* (Easley, SC: Southern Historical Press, 1983), pp.63, 172.

there was a home-synagogue named Beth Elohim for Spanish and Portuguese Jews. All of these communities were affected by the American Revolution in one way or another.

Among the first ministers to volunteer for service in the American cause were the Rev. William Tennent III from the Congregational Church in Charleston, the Rev. Oliver Hart from the Baptist Church in Charleston, and the Rev. Richard Furman from the High Hills of Santee Baptist Church in what was called the Backcountry. Tennent, educated at Princeton and Harvard, saw an opportunity to disestablish the Church of England as a tax-based and favored denomination. He also railed from the pulpit, from newspaper articles, and from the floor of the Commons House of Assembly against the taxes imposed on Americans from Parliament—including the Church Tax.

Oliver Hart, by trade a carpenter from Bucks County, Pennsylvania, was converted by the preaching of the Rev. George Whitefield and the Rev. William Tennent II during the Great Awakening. He became a member of the Philadelphia Baptist Association before accepting a call to the Baptist Church in Charleston.

Richard Furman was the son of a magistrate, Judge Wood Furman, and a boy preacher. Richard was just 19 years of age when he was ordained into the Baptist ministry.[12] As pastor of the High Hills of Santee Baptist Church, he spoke and wrote constantly against both Parliamentary and local church taxes. When the British appeared off the Carolina coast, Furman marched with his brother Josiah's militia unit to resist any British incursion.[13]

From July to September, 1775, Tennent and Hart rode 400 miles through the Backcountry from Charleston to the Spartanburg District and back asking citizens to support an "Association" to resist "arbitrary Impositions from a wicked and despotick Ministry" of King George III. Signing the Association [for Defense] would include repelling British troops by force repeatedly "until a Reconciliation shall take place between Great Britain and America."[14] Just to make sure the people got the point, the two preachers were accompanied by Judge Henry Drayton from the Provincial Council of Safety and Colonel Richard Richardson with six hundred militiamen available and loyal to the Continental Congress.[15]

Henry Purcell and Fellow Chaplains

Another clergyman who took a direct route in supporting soldiers as well as the movement toward American Independence was the Rev. Henry Purcell. Born in

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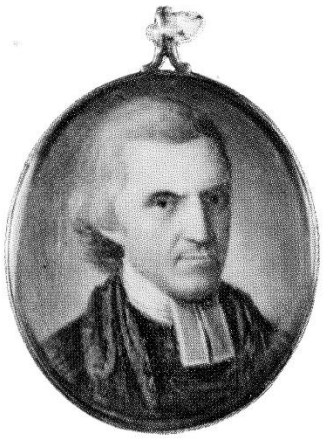
[12] Ibid., p.77.
[13] Richard Furman is therefore regarded as a militia chaplain, though with a short term of service. He later became the pastor of the First Baptist Church in Charleston for 30 years, and is the only known Protestant chaplain to have a university named after him.
[14] From a copy sent from Governor William Campbell to the Earl of Dartmouth, 26 June 1775, British Public Record Office [London] Microfilm v.229, p. 86.
[15] John W. Brinsfield, Op.cit., p. 93; L.L. Owens, *Oliver Hart 1723-1795, A Biography* (Greenville, S.C.: 1966), p. 16.

Hereford, England in 1742, Purcell graduated from Oxford at the age of 21 and was ordained a priest in the Church of England in 1768. Initially he served as a curate in two small churches in Essex before accepting an appointment as a chaplain in the British Army.

In 1770 Henry, his wife, Sarah, and three children travelled to Charleston under a license granted by the Bishop of London. His first church as rector was St. George's in Dorchester, northwest of Charleston, in 1771, followed by Christ Church Parish in 1772.



Chaplain Henry Purcell, courtesy of the Gibbes Museum of Art, Charleston SC

When the American Revolution broke out, Purcell sided with the Americans. He was made a chaplain to the 2nd South Carolina Provincial Regiment under the command of Colonel William Moultrie. During the battle for Fort Sullivan, Chaplain Purcell was serving within the walls of the fort, providing ministry for 435 officers and men, 36 of whom were sick from various diseases.[16]

It is not known why Henry Purcell sided with the Americans. He may have simply decided that the patriots had a just cause. Whatever the reasons, he was in good company. Of the 26 Anglican clergymen in the colony, only six remained loyal to England throughout the war.[17]

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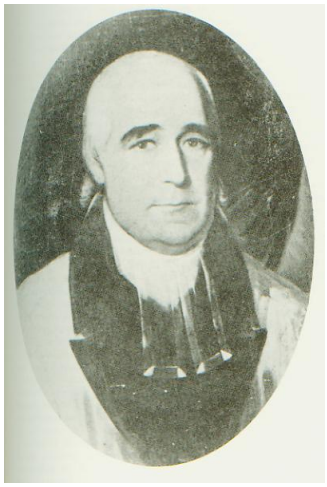
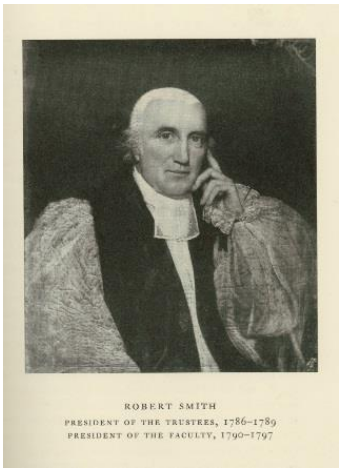
[16] Georgia Muldrow Gilmer, "Battle of Fort Sullivan: Events Leading to First Decisive Victory," in *American Revolution Roster, Fort Sullivan 1776-1780* (Charleston, SC: Fort Sullivan Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution, 1976), p.68.
[17] John W. Brinsfield, Op.cit., p.171.





The Rev. Richard Furman

Bishop Robert Smith

Other South Carolina clergy who served as patriot chaplains during the war included the Rev. Robert Smith, a future Episcopal bishop, who fought with his musket as well as with his prayers; Baptist Chaplain Edmund Botsford of Williamson's Militia; the Rev. Paul Turquand, Episcopal chaplain of the Huguenot Battalion; Rev. Samuel Hart, Episcopal chaplain with the 1st South Carolina Provincial Regiment; the Rev. Christian Streit, pastor of St. John's Lutheran Church in Charleston and chaplain to the 8th Virginia Continentals; and the Rev. Richard Furman, Baptist, in Captain Josiah Furman's Militia Company.