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Editors note: As our state commemorates the bicentennial of the completion of Ft. Moultrie on Dec. 19, 1809, the "Swamp Fox History" pages of this magazine will showcase South Carolina's epic service at the fort in a personified three-part series called "If These Walls Could Talk."

Hey ya'll! Welcome to Ft. Moultrie! I live here on beautiful Sullivan's Island, S.C. On Dec. 19, 2009, my friends in South Carolina will be celebrating the bicentennial of my completion. Of course, for a fort born in February 1776, I had already witnessed some very exciting events way before I was ever completed.

My life began during a tumultuous time in S.C. Until 1774, most South Carolinians had enjoyed a happy co-existence with Great Britain. In fact, nine of the 10 wealthiest businessmen in the American colonies lived in S.C. However, when King George III levied higher taxes to help pay off his war debts, a cry went out "taxation without representation is tyranny!" In response, the first Continental Congress, made up of great men from S.C. and the other 12 American colonies, met. After the King rejected their Declaration of Colonial Rights in May 1775, our S.C. General Assembly felt an obligation to ensure our people were protected.

To accomplish this, they established a Committee of Safety. Soon after, this committee ordered its Citizen-Soldiers to act. On Sept. 15, 1775, Charleston residents awoke to find Ft. Johnson, across the harbor from me, under colonial control. An indigo blue flag with the word "Liberty" inscribed in the center of a silver-colored gorget sewn onto the top left-hand corner replaced the British flag. With the raising of the "Liberty Flag" South Carolina had committed herself to the American Revolution.

For the next several months, S.C. patriots strengthened fortifications around Charleston Harbor in anticipation of a British assault to regain control of Charleston. Because they considered my strategic position the key to Charleston Harbor, officers such as Capt. Peter Horry arrived in February 1776, to begin my construction. Shortly thereafter, he said I was looking like an "immense pen, 500 feet long and 16 feet wide, filled with sand to stop the shot." With my delivery date coming sooner than expected, they didn't have time to ship in standard fort building materials. Instead, they used palmetto trees which grow in abundance around here. It's a good thing too 'cause when Col. William Moultrie arrived here in March, he didn't think much of my growth spurt! His boss Maj. Gen. Charles Lee, the American commander in the south was even less impressed when he got here June 8. He considered me a trap and "slaughter pen," whatever that meant! I knew better. Little did they realize, the palmetto logs they built me with would end up being my best defense.

The day for me to prove my worthiness as a fort came on June 28, 1776. By then, I was square in shape with a bastion at each angle. Although only two sides of my wall were completed, they were strong. They consisted of two parallel rows spaced 16 feet apart filled with sand. My merlons were 16 ft. thick, filled with sand and rose 10 ft. above cannon platforms supported by brick pillars. In other words, I was built to keep my Soldiers safe.

I'll never forget June 28. Around 9:30 in the morning, I could see British Commodore Peter Parker and his squadron of 11 ships sailing toward me from Morris Island. I could also hear the musket and cannon fire echoing from what we now call the Isle of Palms as Britain's Maj. Gen. Henry Clinton aided by Lord Charles Cornwallis and 2,500 redcoat soldiers and marines attempted to cross Breach Inlet (between the Isle of Palms and Sullivan's Island) on my left. Col. William Thompson's

se Walls Could Talk

Part 1: America's First Decisive Victory in the South

Story and photos by Maj. Scott Bell, S.C. National Guard Historian

Continentals and a couple hundred of our S.C. militia, aided by a strong current, kept beating Clinton's forces back.

It's fortunate they were able to because my commander, Col. Moultrie and Capt. Francis Marion, who came to be known as "The Swamp Fox," had their hands full facing down Parker's 270 guns with only 31 cannons and a mere 10,000 pounds of gunpowder. At the beginning of the battle, I could hear Moultrie telling his men "make every shot count" and they did! Holes were soon visible in every ship within range, especially Parker's largest ships, the *Bristol* and the *Experiment*. The artillerymen firing from my platforms were not only very accurate, they were also very smart. Oftentimes, they would fire red hot cannonballs at the British! Several times, we thought the *Bristol* and *Experiment* might catch fire. I could barely see through all the smoke.

Although we only had enough shot and gunpowder to fire at the British once every 10 minutes or so, they had no such shortage. They fired at me for nine-and-a-half hours but my soft, spongy palmetto logs absorbed the impact every time. Fact is, about the only time I got nervous was when both the *Bristol* and *Experiment* swung broadside at me once and fired all their cannons simultaneously. It was a lucky volley. Shook me to my foundations but I held true.

Have you ever heard of Sgt. William Jasper? I saw the phrase "courage under fire" personified by him this day. What a hero! The Liberty Flag's mast was shot in two by a cannonball right about the time the British lost a frigate attempting to outflank us. Leaping down from his position, Jasper retrieved the flag under a hail of British cannon fire and was pulled back over the wall to the cheers of everyone here. Col. Moultrie brought him a makeshift staff. I was so proud. Jasper attached the flag and mounting the parapet shouted, "Don't let us fight without a flag!"

The day ended well for the patriot cause. Despite the pounding, we lost only 12 men and won America's first decisive southern victory in the American Revolution. Parker lost 70 sailors and another 130 wounded. Every person on the quarterdeck of Parker's *Bristol*, the flagship of the fleet, was killed or wounded, including Parker who had his britches torn off, and backside laid bare by shrapnel. Boy, was that a "full moon!" By nightfall, Parker broke off the attack, picked up Clinton's forces and sailed back north.

As you can imagine, patriots throughout S.C. and all around the new nation, were mighty proud of what we accomplished here June 28. Until then, I was known simply as the log fort on Sullivan's Island. Soon after, the leaders in S.C. gave me Col. Moultrie's last name. I was finally "somebody." What an honor! Every time I hear my name -- Ft. Moultrie -- spoken, my walls swell with pride remembering a great man who inspired over 400 patriots to risk all on a hot June day in the pursuit of freedom. A year later, the citizens of Charleston started hosting annual commemorations on the anniversary of the triumph here. Years later, the S.C. General Assembly honored me again. Each time you look at the S.C. flag, you'll see symbols of this great American victory. The palmetto tree represents my defenders resilience against the tyranny of Britain. The silver crescent depicts the accoutrement worn on the ether caps of Moultrie's men which also flew on the Liberty Flag. The indigo blue color of the flag is also representative of the uniform color of my defenders, who used indigo -- one of South Carolina's big cash crops at the time -- to dye their uniforms.

Lizzie Taylor (left) and Joy Sasnett, students at Heathwood Hall Episcopal School, are taught the history of the symbols of the South Carolina flag by Buddy Sturgis, the Director of the S.C. Military Museum.

Yep! As I mentioned at the beginning of my story, by the time I was completed 200 years ago in December 1809, I had already witnessed some very exciting events. As thrilling as the American Revolution was, wait 'til you hear about all the rest of the wars I've been a part of. After all, I'm the only unit of the National Park System where the entire 171-year history of American seacoast defense (1776-1947) can be traced. Wait until next time, I've only just begun to reveal my secrets!

John Blake White gave his *The Battle of Fort Moultrie* to the U.S. Senate in 1901 so "the sons may know how their fathers fought to secure the precious boon of liberty." Col. William Moultrie and Capt. Francis Marion are featured in the center right foreground.