

Museum Around the Corner

The Georgetown County Historical Society Museum

Francis Marion ©

There is enough information about Francis Marion to fill many books, and quite a few exist that are great reads. Although no likenesses exist of him, descriptions of his physical appearance seem fairly uniform. He was quite short and some say he was very bow legged. His facial features seem to be that he had a large nose and smallish eyes, and there can be no doubt about his ability to lead his men. Although the local militia (citizen soldiers) followed him faithfully, they did abandon him temporarily at planting and harvesting times and for times of family need, but they returned when the call came. His charismatic nature caused his men to be devoted to him and his cause.

His main assignment during the Revolutionary War was to harass the British in many small encounters. His guerilla warfare, hit and run ambushes, caused great consternation among the British. As they were marching along, they had no defense against ambush attacks. Marion was able to frustrate them endlessly by scattering their troops, stealing their supplies, and sometimes interrupting their communications.

Although he was born in Berkeley County at Goatfield Plantation, his family moved to Georgetown when he was quite young. He grew up here, as well as in the swamps of the Lowcountry. He found that a special breed of horses suited his purposes better than any other while riding in the marshy, treacherous swamps. Marsh Tacky horses were a hearty breed and developed from Spanish horses brought to the South Carolina coast by Spanish explorers, settlers and traders as early as the 16th century. The Marsh Tacky is known by its ability to work in water and swamps without panicking. They tend to be sure-footed, sturdy, smart, and able to survive in challenging coastal environments, which well suited the purposes of Francis Marion and his men. These are considered critically endangered now and a few can be seen at Brookgreen Gardens.

On a pleasant evening in May of 1780, Francis was attending a gentlemen's party at 106 Tradd Street in Charleston. The custom of the day was for the host to lock all the doors and pocket the key. No one could leave until all the liquor was consumed. Not being a drinking man, Francis found his way to the second floor where he jumped out of a window, but broke his ankle in the fall. He limped away to recuperate at a friend's plantation. One week later, on May 12, 1780, Charleston fell to the British. Francis Marion was not there thanks to his accident, and was not captured along with 5,000 + American soldiers, the largest capture in American history. He would have been there but for the broken ankle and would have been only a name on a list had he been captured instead of the hero he became.

Francis had a good spy network in the Lowcountry. Shopkeepers in Charleston were especially helpful. When British officers and soldiers were in their shops, sometimes vital pieces of information were overheard. One hat maker would place a red feather in a hat in his window whenever he had information and either Francis or one of his men would casually stop by to retrieve the intelligence. Another story is that here in Georgetown, notes would be left in a cleft in a particular headstone in Prince George Cemetery to relay important information.

Although Francis himself did not own property in the city of Georgetown, it is known that his brother, Gabriel owned Lot 82 on Prince Street, and on October 28, 1772 Gabriel sold the lot to his brother, Job. This is located on the north side of Prince between Broad and Orange.

Another brother, Issac Marion, married Rebecca Allston who inherited Lot 130 from her father, John Allston. Francis' mother, Esther, lived there with her daughter. Isaac died on May 31, 1781 and was buried in the Prince George church yard near one of the Northern corners of the church.

John Allston, who married Esther Marion (Francis Marion's sister) wrote a will March 21, 1749 which was proved May 11, 1750 in which he left the use of his home in Georgetown [Lot 84 at the northwest corner of Prince and Broad] to his mother-in-law [Esther Cordes Marion, mother of Francis Marion] for life, and after her death, to his wife during her widowhood.

To many of us who were children in the winter of 1959-1960, we first learned about Marion from Walt Disney on his regular weekly TV show. The series told the story of Marion very well, true to the historical details, except to his physical attributes. The star of the show was a name familiar to us even today – Leslie Neilson, a dashing, handsome young patriot.