

Museum Around the Corner

Georgetown County Historical Society Museum

Almost everyone knows about Francis Marion, the legendary American patriot general in the Revolutionary Army in South Carolina. Born in Berkeley County in 1732, he grew up in Georgetown, probably on a farm nearby. He developed a fascination with ships, and even sailed aboard a schooner at the age of fifteen, but after suffering the traumatic incident of being adrift in a lifeboat for a week, he gave up his dreams of a sea-faring life. He instead began to explore the swamps and back country on hunting and fishing expeditions. With his knowledge of these remote areas, he was able to base his encampment and successfully fight the British during the Revolutionary War.

After serving during the campaign against the Cherokee from 1759 - 1761, he returned to the life of a planter along the Santee River. In 1775 with hostilities rising against the British, Francis was again called to duty and in June of 1776 found himself at Fort Moultrie during a British naval attack. Thus began his illustrious career as one of the most effective military leaders in South Carolina history. His intimate knowledge of the swamps and back country proved invaluable in his ability to attack and melt away into terrain where no British soldier would dare step.

A legend stated that British General Banastre Tarleton, upon chasing Marion and his men yet again into the swamps, raised his fist at the fleeing Marion and reportedly yelled, "You wily Swamp Fox, only the devil can get you". It turns out that this may be an invention of author Parson Weems in his writings of Francis Marion. Weems also invented the story of George Washington cutting down the cherry tree, another flight of fancy.

When the war ended, his Pond Bluff plantation in Berkeley County was in ruins having been plundered by both sides. Almost penniless, having never been paid for his services with the militia, he was able to get his plantation into a workable state. He was finally awarded a gold medal by the State Senate in 1783 and was given a comfortable salary as commandant of Fort Johnson.

On April 20, 1786 he married Mary Esther Videau. Although the marriage was a happy one, they remained childless. With Mary's family fortune, he was able to resign his post at Fort Johnson and build a new house at Pond Bluff. He remained active in community life, helping to draw up the State Constitution in 1790. Although in declining health, he was still active in the militia until 1794. His final days were spent visiting friends and former colleagues. He died on February 27, 1795 and is buried in Berkeley County.

Francis Marion did have a talent for guerilla tactics, but his real greatness was that he was never infected by the spirit of cruelty and revenge that usually accompanies such fighting. His epitaph states he "lived without fear and died without reproach." There is much more to the story of Francis Marion, how he "walked on water", his secret signals, his physical appearance and where his family lived in Georgetown.