

Museum Around the Corner

The Georgetown County Historical Society Museum

Two British Commanders of Georgetown ©

On July 1, 1780 Vice-Admiral Mariot Arbuthnot with Capt. John Plumer Ardesoif seized ships in Georgetown harbor and sent sailors upriver in armed barges to plunder Patriot plantations. These British officers then read General Sir Henry Clinton's recent two proclamations to the residents of Georgetown informing them that they now must take up arms against the Patriot rebels.

Major John James, the recognized patriot leader of the Kingstree Regiment, now that Col. Archibald McDonald was on parole after being captured at the fall of Charlestown, decided to ride down to Georgetown and find out from the source if his men were truly expected to take up arms against their fellow Patriots. Major James rode into Georgetown, wearing the plain garb of a small-time country planter, and was presented to Capt. John Ardesoif at his headquarters, not far from his nearby ship.

Capt. Ardesoif, surprised that such an emissary might come to visit him, answered, "The submission must be unconditional." To Major James's next question as to whether the local inhabitants would not be allowed to stay at home, upon their plantations, in peace and quiet... Capt. Ardesoif replied, "Although you have rebelled against his majesty, he offers you a free pardon, of which you are undeserving, for you ought all to be hanged, but as he offers you a free pardon, you must take up arms in support of the cause."

Major James stated that the people he represented would not submit to such terms, and Capt. Ardesoif responded, "You damned rebel. If you speak in such language I will immediately order you to be hanged up to the yard arm..." Since Capt. Ardesoif was getting quite angry and he wore a sword, Major James quickly grabbed a chair and brandished it in the face of the angry British officer, then quickly retreated out the back door, mounted his nearby horse, and made his escape into the country.

The house that was the scene of this story was located at the northeast corner of Broad and Front Streets. It has long been demolished but a picture of it can be found in the Georgetown Digital Library.

The next commander of Georgetown was Major James Wemyss. He was considered to be the second most hated man in the British Army, after British Colonel Banastre Tarleton. The story of the skirmish at Black Mingo is given by Sarah F. Rhem in the Georgetown Times of May 14, 1970.

"After a temporary withdrawal to North Carolina, the general's [Francis Marion's] return to South Carolina was hastened by reports from scouts he had sent on ahead. They brought back despairing pleas for help. Wemyss, with 500 men had cut a swath across the country 70 miles long and 15 miles wide. Everything of any value had been looted, then they burned every Whig [patriot] plantation house, every granary, every boat he could find. Men, women, and children were taken prisoner if he thought they were rebels. Wemyss even had one woman beaten. Marion and his men travelled by night and day, covering 60 miles in 48 hours to reach Lynch's Creek. Here they joined Major James (hero of the story above) and Captain Mouzon with a large body of men.

By then even Tory [British sympathizers] settlers were running in panic before the angered brigade. So was Wemyss himself. He sought shelter in Georgetown having managed to elude Colonel Peter Horry, still posted near the roads leading into town. So that quarry got away for the time.

Captain John Coming Ball commanded a large body of Tories at Black Mingo Swamp about 15 miles from Georgetown. The Swamp Fox found them at Shepherd's Ferry on the south side of the creek. The only approach was a causeway leading to the plank bridge at Willtown not quite a mile from the ferry. The Tories were having a party at the "Red House", as Patrick Dollard's Inn was called, for it was built of red brick, but the guards heard the sound of horses crossing the plank bridge and sounded the alarm. Despite the alarm, Marion used another of his effective maneuvers – encirclement. This maneuver, coupled with the surprise night attack, made for a short, sharp battle, but a bloody one. Fully one third of all combatants were either killed or wounded. The Tories lost half of their number and their commander Ball. Others surrendered to Marion and offered to join his brigade, while others beat a hasty retreat to the creek's edge, jumping into hidden boats and headed for Georgetown. When the Tory Captain Ball fell, one of Marion's men grabbed the reins of his riderless horse. That fine and fast horse, renamed "Ball" for his former owner, was for years the private saddle horse of Marion, and his pet.

The skirmish of Black Mingo was considered one turning point of the war in the South for it destroyed the first completed stronghold of a series planned by the British, to be developed on the road from Georgetown to Camden."

The Journal of the American Revolution of November 27, 2018 reports that "Major Wemyss came to be commander of Georgetown on July 11, 1780 after the surrender of the American army at Charleston on May 12, 1780. He was ordered to march part of the 63rd Regiment sixty miles up the coast to Georgetown to bring order to the Williamsburg district and to help form a regiment of Loyalist militia. Wemyss found few men worthy of leading the Loyalist cause in the surrounding area. Patriot sympathies in the Georgetown region were strong and their growing militia discouraged the Tories from turning out in sufficient numbers. After being in Georgetown for ten days, Wemyss informed British General Lord Charles Cornwallis that the longer he remained in the region, the more he discovered "the disaffection of the people" and added "the motions of the rebels on the frontier will of course add to their audacity."

Cornwallis began to have his doubts about Wemyss' mission to Georgetown. He informed the major, "there can be no hopes of peace and quiet until we can advance, nor can you in the present situation of things do any good towards forming a militia at Georgetown. I cannot therefore approve of you making any longer stay there." He ordered Wemyss to march his men to the High Hills of Santee.