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ENOUGH GUNPOWDER TO START A REVOLUTION

Jon R Hufford

Middle Georgia College

On June 27, 1775, Governor Sir James Wright, expecting interference with British shipping at the entrance to the Savannah River, wrote to Admiral Sir Thomas Graves, commander of British naval forces in North America, entreating him to send a sloop-of-war to defend the approaches to the river.¹ His immediate concern was to assure the safe arrival of the merchant ship *Phillipa*, which had left London on the second of May with thirteen thousand pounds of gunpowder, small arms, and casks of musket balls, a cargo intended for the Indian trade and for British troops and loyalists in Georgia and eastern Florida, the *Phillipa* was due to arrive in Savannah shortly, so the tone of the governor's letter was urgent. It would have been frantic had the governor been able to foresee events of the next few weeks. The *Phillipa's* cargo, intercepted by rebels, was destined to play an important role in the initial campaigns of the American Revolution.

Fulfillment of the governor's desire to keep Georgia loyal to England during the rapidly expanding confrontation between mother country and colonies depended to an important extent on continuing the alliance with the Creek and Cherokee Indian nations.² Captain John Stuart, British agent to the Indians, possessed great influence over them. Wright speculated that, once Stuart's Indian charges had received their share of the gunpowder and shot, Stuart would be in a position to ensure their support of His Majesty's colonial government. Thus far, Georgians had been quiet, if not completely loyal, and Wright had not needed troops and ships-of-war to bring this about. However, Charleston, a hot-bed of rebellion in the southern provinces, was exerting significant influence on the small but growing number of colonial patriots in Savannah. Wright knew that some Georgia citizens were already preparing secretly to overthrow the colonial government and establish a committee of safety and provincial congress in its place.³ He was aware of the serious consequences for England if the cargo should fall into patriot hands and was determined to do all in his power to see that this could not happen.

¹ In this letter the Governor mentioned another letter sent to him by the Earl of Dartmouth some time earlier which explained that an order had been sent from the Admiralty to the admiral directing him to send an armed ship to Georgia. John Drayton. *Memoirs of the American Revolution*, 2 vols. (Charleston, 1821; repr. New York, 1969), 1: 348-50; and Ronald G. Killion and Charles T. Waller, *Georgia and the Revolution* (Atlanta, 1975), 140, 141.

² The Indians of Georgia outnumbered white settlers in 1775. Allen D. Candler, comp., *The Revolutionary Records of the State of Georgia*, 3 vols. (Atlanta, 1908), 1: 300-1.

³ William Harden, *A History of Savannah and South Georgia*, 2 vols. (Chicago, 1913; repr. Atlanta, 1969), 1: 178, 1.

One week earlier, on June 20th. Wright had written to his administrative superior, William Legge, Earl of Dartmouth, who was Secretary of State for the Colonies, expressing his suspicion that Charleston patriots had plans to seize the *Phillipa's* shipment. He explained that some South Carolinians feared that when the munitions had been distributed Captain Stuart would incite the Cherokees to attack settlements.⁴ A few Charlestonians were using this fear to persuade men to enlist in the "Liberty Boys" and assist in an effort to seize the *Phillipa*. As the governor saw it, everything depended on Admiral Graves' cooperation.

The Admiral might very well have sent a sloop-of-war as requested if Wright's letter of June 27th had reached him. However, agents of the Charleston Committee of Safety had intercepted that letter and substituted a forged one explaining that Georgia was peaceful and needed no military assistance.⁵ A few days earlier a party of about forty Beaufort "Liberty Boys" commanded by Captains John Barnwell and John Joyner had set out in two small barges for Bloody Point and Tybee Island, the landfall for all ships entering the Savannah River.⁶ Their purpose was to take the *Phillipa*.

Over Governor Wright's protests, the Georgia Provincial Congress met on the 4th of July at Tondee's Long Room in Savannah. One of its final acts was to offer assistance to Barnwell and Joyner in taking the *Phillipa*.⁷ It informed the South Carolinians that a small British armed schooner had unexpectedly arrived at Tybee from Saint Augustine, Florida, and it offered to help take that vessel also. This offer was accepted, and the Georgia Congress dispatched to Tybee its newly commissioned schooner, the *Liberty*, commanded by Oliver Bowen and Joseph Habersham.⁸ Thus began a cooperative venture which was to develop into one of the earliest naval operations of the Revolution. No fighting took place and consequently there were no casualties, but the result of this operation was

⁴. Allen D. Candler and Lucian Lamar Knight, comps., *The Colonial Records of the State of Georgia*, 26 vols. (Atlanta, 1904-1937), vols. 27-39 manuscripts at Georgia's Department of Archives and History, 38, pt. I: 475-77.

⁵. This forged letter also commented on the earlier letter from Dartmouth but explained that there was no longer a need for an armed vessel. John Drayton. *Memoirs of the American Revolution*, 2 vols., supra.

⁶. William Bacon Stevens, *A History of Georgia*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1847-1859), 2: 103.

⁷. *Ibid.*

⁸. The *Liberty*, formerly the *Elizabeth*, was owned by Samuel Price and Richard Wright of Savannah. Price cooperated with the Congress acting as ship's pilot following its commissioning. Allen D. Candler and Lucian Lamar Knight, comps., *The Colonial Records of the State of Georgia*, 26 vols., vols. 27-39 manuscripts, 38, pt. I: 614, 615.

acquisition of a much-needed supply of gunpowder and small arms for the Georgia and South Carolina militias and the fledgling American army then encamped outside Boston.

As soon as the *Liberty* was discovered approaching Tybee, the British schooner put to sea. Its captain had decided that a fight with this newly arrived opponent, assisted by the smaller vessels which he knew were present at nearby Bloody Point, would be too one-sided.⁹ Consequently, when on July seventh the *Phillipa* anchored off Tybee Bar to await its pilot, there was no British naval presence to afford protection. The *Liberty* was waiting out of sight not far from Tybee and on the morning of July eighth approached to within three or four miles before anchoring in a location the *Phillipa* would have to pass as it moved upriver.¹⁰ That move began in the early afternoon of the same day. Too late the *Phillipa's* captain, Richard Maitland, spotted the *Liberty* waiting, full of armed men and mounting ten six-pound cannon ready for action. Before he realized fully what was happening, two warning shots were fired at the *Phillipa*. After a futile attempt to escape, Maitland hove to and responded to the *Liberty Boy's* demand to identify his ship. During a short discourse in which Maitland declined Bowen's offer to act as pilot, a flag with the words "American Liberty" stamped on it was hoisted to the schooner's masthead. There was no longer room for doubt; the rebels had revealed their identity.

Before anything could be resolved, sudden contrary winds followed by an ebb tide forced both vessels to anchor. They remained at anchor until the following morning. Then Maitland had little choice but to obey Bow-en's order to accompany the *Liberty* up the Savannah to Cockspur Island, where there was an encampment of about three hundred armed men.¹¹ Shortly after both vessels anchored there, they were joined by the South Carolina barges. Bowen, Joyner, and Seth Cuthbert of Savannah led a boarding party which forced Maitland to hand over his ship's papers, including the cargo manifest. Then Joseph Habersham came aboard with a written order from the Georgia Provincial Congress which authorized him to seize all the arms, gunpowder, and whatever else was included in the cargo.¹² When the unloading had begun, Maitland was allowed to depart for Savannah in order to inform Governor Wright of what had happened. The rebels recognized that there was little else he could do.

⁹. *Ibid.*

¹⁰. Affidavit of Richard Maitland, 21 September 1775. Allen D. Candler and Lucian Lamar Knight, comps., *The Colonial Records of the State of Georgia*. 26 vols., vol. 2 manuscript, 38, pt. 1; 606-614

¹¹. *Ibid.*

¹². *Ibid.*

An account of events following Maitland's departure can be constructed from the affidavits of Samuel Burnett, the *Phillipa's* chief mate, and Richard Scriven, her steward, who gave their stories to William Addington, Justice of the Peace for Middlesex, England, almost two years later. All the gunpowder, along with a few kegs of musket balls, was transferred to the *Liberty*. But there was no room aboard the *Liberty* for most of the kegs and the small arms, so the *Phillipa's* crew was instructed to keep her at anchor near Cockspur Island until further notice. A guard was left on board to make sure these instructions were carried out. On July twelfth the *Phillipa* received instructions from the Georgia Committee of Safety to proceed to Savannah.¹³ There a second boarding party, led by William Platt, a Savannah merchant, and under the overall direction of the Committee, unloaded the rest of the cargo into boats and transported it to the city magazine for storage. Both the mate and the steward took pains to explain that the entire crew was under duress and obliged to carry out the "Liberty Boys" demands.

Maitland had returned to his ship before July twelfth, aware that British civil and military power was no longer effective in Georgia.¹⁴ The Committee of Safety now governed the province. Governor Wright had urged Maitland to leave a deposition with Anthony Stokes, the King's Chief Justice, but he knew that any warrants Stokes might issue were unenforceable. For his part, Maitland prudently put off taking this action until September for fear of reprisal. The necessity of having the cargo's bonds cancelled finally forced him to follow the governor's advice.

Eventually the *Phillipa's* cargo was divided. Georgia's share was substantial—nine thousand pounds of gunpowder and most of the small arms. The "Liberty Boys" of Beaufort got the rest. Following the urgent request of the Continental Congress sitting at Philadelphia, five thousand pounds of Georgia's share of the powder was sent to that city. The troops of Richard Montgomery and Benedict Arnold used some of it during their invasion of Canada in November. Much of the rest enabled George Washington's army to drive the British forces under General William Howe out of Boston in March of the following year.¹⁵ The Georgia militia found its portion useful later on, when fighting began in the southern provinces. One week after July fourth, 1775, Georgia had shed its loyalist stance and was moving toward active and significant participation in the rebellion.

¹³. Affidavits of Richard Scriven and Samuel Burnett, 10 January 1777. Old Baily Sessions Papers, Greater London Record Office, Middlesex Records. London, England.

¹⁴. Allen D. Candler and Lucian Lamar Knight, comps.. *The Colonial Records of the State of Georgia*. 26 Vols., Vols. 27-39 manuscripts. 38. pt. 1: 613, 614.

¹⁵. Hugh McCall, *the History of Georgia*, 2 vols. (Savannah: 1811-1816; repr. Atlanta, 1909). 291; and William Bacon Stevens, *A History of Georgia*, 2 Vols. 2: 104.