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Joseph Woodruff

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Karen H. Helbling

History 300

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Joseph Woodruff

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Joseph Woodruff

Joseph Woodruff was born in England around 1735. He acquired land in St. Andrew's Parish and lived there with his wife, Mary Forrester. Eventually earning the rank of Colonel, one of his many duties during the Revolutionary War was that as Quartermaster General for Georgia in 1781. In 1782 he was elected Collector for the port of Savannah. He was re elected in 1783 and 1784. He was also active in Savannah as a vestryman of Christ Church, and as a member of the "Citizen's Society". Outside of Savannah, he served as Justice for Liberty County. In January 1799, Joseph Woodruff died in McIntosh County (formerly St. Andrew's Parish).

FORWARD

What follows is a profile of an American patriot: Joseph Woodruff. He was active in both military and political affairs during the eighteenth century in Georgia. In order to understand the information more fully, it is important to understand the Government structure of Georgia during that time.

Georgia was operating as an independent state. The main governing body was the Georgia State Assembly. The regional governing structure was the House of Assembly. Its members were elected and had the power to amend and repeal laws. The Executive Council was an advisory portion of the House of Assembly. Members of the Executive Council were consulted for their suggestions, but were essentially powerless. Members of the Executive Council were elected by the House of Assembly.¹

It is also important for the reader to realize that there may very possibly be additional information on Joseph Woodruff in the Georgia Historical Society, although such information was not available for consult at the time of this writing.

The time period of, and surrounding the American Revolution was both exciting and perilous. Events happened quickly, while individuals struggled for freedom, equality and a better way of life.

Representative of this period in time was Joseph Woodruff. Perhaps Joseph Woodruff was not as intelligent or successful as George Washington or General Oglethorpe. Perhaps he was, but he was certainly not as remembered. Although his was not a name of fame and honor, Joseph Woodruff was just as ambitiously concerned with the values of Revolution as were the men who were marked throughout early American history.

Although details of the early years in Woodruff's life can not be documented, he was born around 1735², near London. He is believed to have left England for the West Indies while he was still quite young, and from the islands came to America just before 1770³.

1770 was a good year for Joseph Woodruff. Obviously he was eager to be involved in the activities of revolution in his new home. This was demonstrated as he was commissioned Ensign into the State Army of Georgia on May 21. His first assignment was in the 1st Regiment of the 8th Foot Company under the command of Captain Philip Box⁴. This was Woodruff's "foot in the door", so to speak. It was in the same year that he was granted 500⁵ acres in St. Andrew's Parish. So, even by present standards, one might assume that Joseph Woodruff was working in the right direction

for that "better way of life".

His success in the army was apparent as he was promoted to Lieutenant on January 17, 1771, then Captain on May 20, 1772. He continued his work in the infantry with the Fourth and Sixth Companies of Foot, until he was re-commissioned Captain by the Georgia Council of Safety on December 12, 1775. In this capacity he was assigned a Marine Company command. In October 1776, Woodruff was ordered to station boats between Broton Island and Fredrica along the coast of Georgia. This strategy was intended to prevent the British from coming to and from St. Augustine, (a British stronghold). Woodruff's duty in this area was cut short in December of 1776 when he was captured by the British, and taken to St. Augustine.

There was some evidence that Woodruff was neglecting the duties of his Command when he was captured, as seen in an excerpt from this letter from Colonel Lachlan McIntosh to Brig. General Howe.

"...One of our guard boats which should have been stationed at the dividings was pleasuring and idling their time at Sapelo Island and a few days ago a little Schooner from Augustine decoyed Captain Woodruff and three of his men on board and carried them off."

Coincidentally, the 500 acres that Woodruff owned in St. Andrew's Parish was located along the Sapelo River.

Despite the suspicions of unprofessional behavior, Woodruff was exchanged for British officer Lieutenant Beecher by the end of ¹² 1776.

Joseph Woodruff was capable in more than the infantry and marine facets of the State Militia. In August 1778 he was appointed by the Georgia State Assembly to be State Artillery Officer. Obviously the legislatures had faith and trust in Woodruff since this position entailed great responsibility. As Artillery Officer, Woodruff was to collect and take charge of all artillery, then store the inventory in the yard of the Council ¹³ House. It was during this service that he was promoted to Major.

This state appointed position was Woodruff's first step into the inner circle of the local political arena. His second step took place three months later in November, when he was appointed Commissary of Prisoners, and it was recommended by the House of Assembly that Woodruff receive pay for that position. As Commissary of Prisoners, Woodruff was probably responsible for ¹⁴ supplying provisions for British prisoners.

Ironically, just as Woodruff's military career was developing into a political career, the British government declared the Disqualifying Act of 1780; within which, Joseph Woodruff was named. The British Disqualifying Act rendered the people named in it incapable of holding or exercising any office in the Province of Georgia. This act denounced the rebellion as "most

audacious and wicked and unprovoked." This act also referred to
the government as a "pretended independent state".¹⁵

Joseph Woodruff was evidently not disturbed by the Disqualifying Act. On August 20, 1781 he was appointed Deputy Quarter Master General by the House of Assembly, and readily accepted his new post. This assignment earned him the promoted rank of Colonel.¹⁶

Unfortunately, only three days after his new appointment, Woodruff encountered some resistance. The Executive Council was made aware that Colonel Clarke had sent the Governor a letter outlining disputes concerning Woodruff's position. The House of Assembly ordered Woodruff to remain Deputy Quarter Master General until the matter could be resolved.¹⁷ As Deputy Quarter Master General, Woodruff was responsible for providing food, clothing and equipment to the army, and was permitted to employ assistants and apply for the purchase of negroes. Woodruff continued his role as Deputy Quarter Master General until January 11, 1782, when he was asked to return all property of a public nature to the State as soon as possible.¹⁸

It seemed that Joseph Woodruff was hardly discouraged by his removal from the Deputy Quarter Master General post. He was quite busy with other, more political positions. When the House of Assembly met in August 1781, Woodruff was elected Executive Council Member representing Liberty County, Commissioner for

Liberty County (another representative position), and was also appointed Assistant Justice of Liberty County. It appeared it was at this time that Woodruff received, or assumed the title "Esquire".¹⁹ The appointment of Assistant Justice was changed to Full Justice when the House of Assembly met on January 12, 1782.²⁰ He was also re-appointed in May of the same year.²¹

Striving for a higher political position, Woodruff probably campaigned for a seat in the House of Assembly, but on April 22, 1782, it was resolved that he was not eligible. He could not meet the resident requirements for Liberty County as outlined in the Georgia Constitution.²²

On August 4, 1782, Woodruff was elected by the House of Assembly to be Collector for the Town and Port of Savannah. He was re-elected into this position in 1783 and 1784.²³ After his last term as Collector, Joseph Woodruff's political desires apparently waned. There was evidence that he was involved in social organizations such as the Freemason's Society, Christ Church, and the Citizen's Society, but no verification of these activities was found.²⁴

Upon examination, Joseph Woodruff's public life proved quite interesting, but of equal interest (but less public knowledge), was his private life. Information referring to his family was mentioned only in legal documents.

Woodruff was married to a woman named Mary Forrester in Jamaica,
before he came to America. Mary came into the marriage with a
daughter named Mary Ann. There was no evidence to prove whether
Mary Ann was the child of a previous marriage, or was
illegitimate. Regardless, Joseph gave Mary Ann his name. During
their marriage, Joseph and Mary had three sons: George, Joseph
and James. An indenture document dated March 2, 1789 lists many
of the Woodruffs' possessions, including fine mahogany furniture,
silver, china, livestock as well as 29 slaves. This document
provided insight into the rather proper lifestyle the Woodruffs'
led.

There was no sign of what became of Mary Forrester. Mary Ann
married Colonel Ferdinand O'Neal Esq. of Camden County on March
27, 1787. Woodruff's sons were noted only briefly in land
transactions in Liberty County

Besides taking care of his family, Joseph Woodruff was also
charitable in some other documented cases. In February 1783, he
appealed to the board of the House of Assembly to assume the care
of a female child named Susannah Hammond who had been abused by
the British in Burke County. His appeal was granted, and he took
possession of the girl.

The next case was rather amusing. On June 15, 1784, Woodruff
applied for funds for his troops amounting to 6.2 pounds. The
funds were not granted until December 28, when it was revealed

the money was needed to purchase liquor for the militia on the Fourth of July. This meant that Woodruff paid for the liquor himself.³²

In contrast with his public life, Joseph Woodruff died quietly in January 1799, on his property in St. Andrew's Parish.³³ St. Andrew's Parish was named Liberty County, then later became McIntosh County.

At the time of this writing there was no memory of Woodruff on or around the land that was once his, nor was a grave site found. A simple death notice was printed in the January 31, 1799 edition of the Georgia Gazette stating:

"DEATHS. Last week in McIntosh County, Joseph Woodruff, Esq."

ENDNOTES

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12. Ga. Hist. Soc, Collections: Lachlan McIntosh, p. 29
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14. Ibid., p.116
15. Candler, Colonial Records, Vol. I
16. Candler, Rev. Records, vol. III, p. 21
17. Ibid., vol. II, p. 253
18. Ibid., vol. III, p. 71
19. Ibid., pp. 8, 13, 15
20. Ibid., p. 75
21. Ibid., p. 107]

Endnotes continued

22. Ibid., p.89
23. Ibid., pp. 187, 246, 535
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25. Ibid
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27. Ibid
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29. Ibid
30. Annals of Georgia, Liberty County Records, vol. I, p. 10
31. Candler, Rev. Records, vol.II, p.462
32. Ibid., pp. 660, 772
33. Savannah, (Georgia), Georgia Gazette, 31 January 1779

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