



# FRANCIS MARION

Swamp Fox of South Carolina



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## FORGOTTEN HEROES OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Nathanael Greene: The General Who Saved the Revolution

Henry Knox: Washington's Artilleryman

Francis Marion: Swamp Fox of South Carolina

Daniel Morgan: Fighting Frontiersman

John Stark: Live Free or Die

Scott Kaufman



**DEDICATION:** To my grandmother, Ruth Kaufman.

Frontispiece: Two members of Francis Marion's militia comfort American prisoners they have just rescued from British soldiers. By using small bands of fast-moving soldiers to surprise their enemies, Marion's men were able to keep up the fighting in South Carolina long after other Americans had given up.

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# Why Francis Marion Should Be Remembered

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“I am extremely pleased with your management & success & request you earnestly to continue your Hostilities against our Tyrannic and cruel Enemies. . . . The Enemy may be much distracted and divided by your different attacks & the Country well covered by your Joint endeavors.”

—Horatio Gates, letter to Francis Marion, October 11, 1780

“When I consider how much you have done and suffered, and under what disadvantage you have maintained your ground, I am at a loss which to admire most, your courage and fortitude, or your address and management. Certain it is no man has a better claim to the public thanks, or is more generally admired than you are. History affords no instance wherein an officer has kept possession of a country under so many disadvantages as you have; surrounded on every side with a superior force; hunted from every quarter with veteran troops, you have found means to elude all their attempts, and to keep alive the expiring hopes of an oppressed Militia, when all succour seemed to be cut off. To fight the enemy bravely with a prospect of victory is nothing; but to fight with intrepidity under the constant impression of a defeat, and inspire irregular troops to do it, is a talent peculiar to yourself.”

—Nathanael Greene, letter to Francis Marion, April 1781

“He was reserved and silent, entering into conversation only when necessary, and then with modesty and good sense. He possessed a strong mind, improved by its own reflections and observations, not by books or travel. His dress was like his address—plain, regarding comfort and decency only. In his meals he was abstemious, eating generally of one dish, and drinking water mostly. He was sedulous and constant in his attention to the duties of his station, to which every other consideration yielded. Even the charms of the fair, like the luxuries of the table and the allurements of wealth, seemed to be lost upon him. The procurement of subsistence for his men, and the continuance of annoyance for his enemy, engrossed his entire mind. He was virtuous all over; never, even in manner, much less in reality, did he trench upon right. Beloved by his friends, and respected by his enemies, he exhibited a luminous example of the beneficial effects to be produced by an individual who, with only small means at his command, possesses a virtuous heart, a strong head, and a mind directed to the common good.”

—Henry Lee, in *Memoirs of the War in the Southern Department* (1812)

“Resolved, That the thanks of the United States, in Congress assembled, be presented to Brigadier General Marion, of the South Carolina Militia, for his wise, gallant, and decided conduct, in defending the liberties of his country.”

—Congress of the United States, October 29, 1781

“Your conduct merits the applause of your countrymen. Your courage, your vigilance, and your abilities have exceeded their most sanguine expectations, and have answered all their hopes. Whilst the virtue of gratitude shall form a part of our national character, your important services to this country can never be forgotten.”

—President of the Senate of South Carolina, February 28, 1783

“We, citizens of the district of Georgetown, finding you no longer at our head, have agreed to convey to you our grateful sentiments for your former numerous services. . . . Our children shall hereafter point out the places and say to their children, here Gen. Marion, posted to advantage, made a glorious stand in defence of the liberties of his country; there, on disadvantageous ground, retreated to save the lives of his fellow citizens. What could be more glorious for the general commanding free men than thus to fight, and thus to save the lives of his fellow soldiers?”

—William James, address at Marion’s retirement from the South Carolina militia in 1794

“Marion’s hit-and-run tactics against the British during Cornwallis’ advance into the South proved effective. . . . His attacks showed how a tiny band of skirmishers, who had the advantage of terrain on their side, could unhinge the operations of a much larger body of traditionally deployed troops, even troops who had been led to expect this type of attack.”

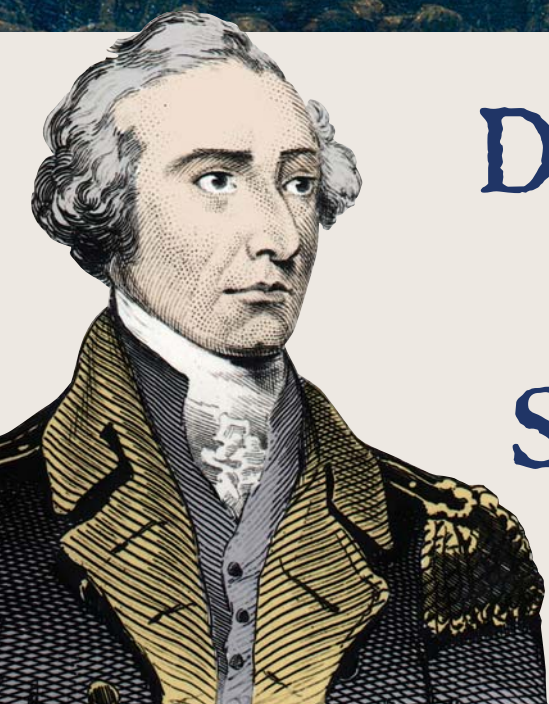
—Historians John Keegan and Andrew Wheatcroft, in *Who’s Who in Military History* (1996)

“As a classic guerrilla leader Marion’s only peers in American history were such great native warriors as Osceola or Cochise. . . . Marion for the most part engaged in the stock-in-trade of guerrillas throughout the ages: ambushes and hit-and-run raids. He dispersed and disappeared when the odds were against him, and reappeared after his enemies announced that he had been driven from the field. . . . His attitude and actions were largely governed by the principle of cooperation. Overall the dark-visaged little genius . . . put the common cause ahead of himself.”

—Historian John Buchanan, in *The Road to Guilford Courthouse* (1997)



Francis Marion (opposite, bottom) was a 44-year-old major in the South Carolina militia when a British fleet arrived at Charleston in June 1776. Although the defenders were outnumbered, they successfully fought off the British naval attack. In this painting of the attack on Fort Sullivan, Marion and other officers are pictured at lower right conferring with their commander, William Moultrie.



## DEFENDER OF FORT SULLIVAN

“A fleet, a fleet, ho!” shouted a lookout, as British ships sailed into view of Sullivan’s Island. It was June 1776, and the American soldiers defending Charleston, South Carolina, had been expecting an attack for months. Charleston was among the most important seaports in the 13 American colonies. If the British captured the port, they could flood the southern colonies with soldiers and supplies, and squash the spreading rebellion there.

The revolt against British rule had begun in the spring of 1775, when colonists in Massachusetts clashed with British troops at Lexington and Concord. Many Americans had been angry about British government policies for a long time, so the *insurrection* soon spread to the other colonies.

## DIVIDE AND CONQUER

In 1776, General William Howe, the commander of British forces in North America, devised a plan to divide and conquer the rebels. Howe and other British leaders believed that the desire for independence was strongest in northern colonies like Massachusetts and New York, but that most people in the southern colonies would remain loyal to the king. Howe planned to send a small army to stamp out the rebellion in the South, expecting *Loyalists* to support the British troops. His main force would be sent to capture New York. This would cut off Massachusetts from the rest of the colonies, and make it easy to defeat the rebels in the north.

Taking the South was supposed to be the easy part of the plan. But by the time the British fleet arrived at Charleston, Loyalist forces in South Carolina had already been defeated. Instead of finding supporters, the British found a small group of *Patriots* prepared to fight the most powerful navy in the world.

About 1,200 members of the South Carolina *militia* were responsible for defending Charleston. The militia was

made up of soldiers who volunteered to serve when needed, without pay. They carried their own weapons and did not have much military training. Some 435 soldiers were stationed at a fort on Sullivan's Island and ordered to guard the harbor. Colonel William Moultrie was in charge of the defenders. One of the officers serving under him was a major named Francis Marion.

No paintings were made of Francis Marion when he was alive, so all the pictures of him are based upon the writings of people who knew or met him. He was short—barely five feet tall—with a slim, awkward-looking body, a thin face, and dark eyes. Marion was quiet and serious. Although he did not look like a leader, he had a way of inspiring the men who served under him.

## AN UNFINISHED FORT

Fort Sullivan was supposed to have been protected on all sides by thick stone walls. But the fort had not been completed—only the east and south walls, facing the harbor, had been finished. Also, there had not been enough stone to build the walls, so the soldiers used palmetto logs instead. Fort Sullivan had only 30 cannons, while the 50 ships of the British fleet carried 270 cannons. Major General Charles Lee, commander of the American army in the South, was so sure the British would capture the fort that he did not give the defenders very much gunpowder.

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On June 28, the British warships moved into Charleston harbor and began to fire on Fort Sullivan. But their attack did not go well. Rather than destroying the fort's walls, the British cannonballs simply sank into the soft palmetto logs. And because the harbor was shallow in some places, the British ships had trouble maneuvering without running aground. British General Henry Clinton landed troops on another island, hoping they could wade through the water and attack Sullivan's Island from the rear. However, the water was too deep for the British soldiers to cross, and they had to return to their ships.

Meanwhile, the Patriots were dealing with their own problems. Because of the fort's shape, only 25 cannons could return fire. Also, the Americans had only enough powder for each cannon to fire 28 rounds, so every shot had



This drawing shows the British fleet in Charleston harbor during the attack on Fort Sullivan. To the right is the burning ship *Actaeon*. The woodcut was first published in London in August 1776.



During the Battle of Fort Sullivan, Marion commanded a battery of cannon on the left side of the unfinished fort.

to count. Marion and the other defenders aimed carefully, and soon four British warships had been damaged. One, the *Bristol*, had been hit 70 times. Three other ships became stuck on a *shoal* as they tried to sail around the fort and attack an unprotected side. The British had to abandon and burn one ship, the *Actaeon*. As it became clear that the fort could withstand the British attack, General Lee rushed more gunpowder and ammunition to Fort Sullivan. Finally, the enemy fleet withdrew. As the ships sailed from the harbor, Marion was granted permission to fire a parting shot.

## A SURPRISING VICTORY

The Battle of Fort Sullivan was a great victory for the Patriots. Although 17 Americans had been killed, at least 115 British sailors had died and several warships had been badly damaged. The British had wasted 32,000 pounds of gunpowder firing thousands of rounds at the fort, causing little damage. The Americans needed only 5,000 pounds of powder to drive them away.

### — FAST FACT —

The palmetto tree appears on the state flag of South Carolina because of its importance in protecting Fort Sullivan in 1776.

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The defenders of Fort Sullivan gave hope to the Patriot cause. They had stood against the most fearsome navy in the world with cool gallantry and won a battle against dire odds.

Most importantly, their successful defense of Fort Sullivan caused the British to abandon their plans to invade the southern colonies in 1776. Thanks to their improbable victory, Francis Marion and the other soldiers were celebrated as heroes throughout South Carolina. Within a few years, however, Marion would take on an even more important role as a Patriot leader during the American Revolution.



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