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S. C.—Biography—Winn, Richard

Richard Winn 1750-1818

Patriot, Soldier, Statesman, Citizen

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The first white settlers came to Fairfield county about 1745. They settled on Beaver Creek near Broad river in the western section of the area. These were soon followed by others, English, Irish Welsh, Scotch and French Huguenots. There was an infiltration of Virginians who came sometimes singly and sometimes in groups.

Among these immigrants from the Old Dominion were three brothers—John, William and Richard Winn. They came from Fauquier county, where their father Minor Winn (1704-1778) was a man of property, parts and influence. He was of Welsh descent and his family belonged to the gentry in the mother country. Minor Winn married Margaret O'Connor of Ireland. They reared five sons and three daughters—John, Minor, William, James and Richard. Three of these sons—John, William and Richard—removed to South Carolina.

John Winn obtained a royal grant to a tract of land containing 300 acres. This land is now embraced within the site of the town of Winnsboro, of which John Winn is said to have been one o fthe founders, and which is named in his honor. He was a man of character and ability, was an active Whig during the Revolution, and held a commission as colonel of South Carolina troops. He was chairman of the upstate committee of the Mount Zion society and helped to established Mount Zion academy. Several amusing, tragic and interesting stories are related about Lord Cornwallis and his dealing with Col. John Winn and his son, Lieut. Minor Winn, while the British general occupied headquarters in Winnsboro.

Col. John Winn was trice married—first to Dorothea Wright of Alexandria, Va., by whom he had seven children; and second to Penelope Kirkland, by whom he had ten children. In 1808 he removed to Rutherford county, Tennessee, where he died about 1816.

William Winn, son of Minor, and brother of John, likewise came from Virginia to South Carolina. Here he married Rosa Hampton, aunt of General Wade Hampton, and reared a large family.

Richard, the youngest of the five brothers, was born in Fauquier county, Virginia, in 1750. He settled in Fairfield county in 1768, being then 18 years of age. Despite his youth, he had already visited Georgia and had also tarried in Charleston, where he worked for a time in a counting house. "He had acquired an excellent English education. He was familiar with the dead languages, had an inquisitive mind and kept himself familiar with literature and scientific discoveries. Being a fine mathematician and a good practical surveyor, he found ready employment and his services were securied by a company of wealthy Englishmen to survey and locate lands for them. His compensation was every eighth tract of land and he thus engrossed a large quantity of land before the separation of the colonies from the mother country. He was justice of the peace under the British government and retianed the office nearly up to the breaking out of hostilities. Resigning the position, he joined the army. Many of his neighbors took British protection, but he scorned the idea of loyalty to a foreign king and his decision and boldness exasperated the British and the Tories, who would have hung him if they could have laid hold of him. At the beginning of the war he entered the regular service of South Carolina and in June, 1775, was commissioned at first lieutenant of the Rangers. In the attack on Sullivan's Island, he so distinguished himself by skill and gallantry that he was sent in command of a special expedition for the defense of Fort McIntosh on the Saltillo river. For two days he kept off a strong body of Tories and Indians, but was compelled to capitulate to heavy reinforcements of British soldiers."

During the last six months of 1775, the inhabitants of upper South Carolina were greatly excited over the battles of Lexington and Bunker Hill in Massachusetts. Sentiment was divided for and against the British. Many excellent and worthy men were found on both sides. The supporters of the king were called Loyalists, Royalists, or Tories. The advocates of resistence and independence were called Whigs. These names were derived from the two political parties in England—Tories, supporting King George III, and Whigs opposing him and his policies.

The people in the up-country of the province of South Carolina began to muster in militia companies on both sides at the very beginning of the controversy. In Fairfield county active clashes between the two parties soon occurred. Pearson in his narrative history of Fairfield says: "The Whigs and Tories met at Mobley's meeting house, and after the first crack of the rifle the Tories fled to a man. The same thing occurred at a Whig and Tory skirmish at Caldwell's Place on Lee's Creek. After the firing and rout of the Tories, their leader, Col. John Phillips, was found squatted in a briar patch, and was dragged out a prisoner." Later during the war this same Tory, Colonel Phillips, visited Lord Cornwallis and secured the pardon of some 70 of his Whig neighbors who had been captured and condemned to death at a drum head court-martial.

The regiment of Rangers in which Lieut. Richard Winn served was commanded by Col. William Thompson of Orangeburg. This regiment did yeoman service at the battle of Fort Moultrie on Sullivan's Island where the British fleet under Sir Peter Parker was so gallantly repulsed. Richard Winn's service in this campaign along the Broad river in western Fairfield in 1775 and in Charleston harbor in 1776 won him a promotion to captain. The following extract from Pearson's Narrative History of Fairfield shows the confidence and esteem in which Richard Winn was held by his comrades and commander: "The general received advices that the British and Tories were committing sad havoc in the most Southern part of Georgia. The country was totally defenceless. Fort St. Illa and Fort Barrington had both been abandoned. It was desirable that the former should be placed in good repair and thoroughly garrisoned . . . . The general promised the command in this important service to any officer of the rank of captain who could raise 80 volunteers for the purpose. Winn was now captain but he was not the first to beat up for volunteers. Several attempted to do so and failed. Captain Winn at length raised his flag and ordered out his music. In less than 25 minutes his number was made up . . . . On approaching Fort St. Illa, a considerable body of enemy were discovered. He divided his force into two equal parts; one he left to find its way to the Fort and to preserve the military stores committed to its charge. The other he put himself at the head of, and ordered a charge upon the enemy. The enemy declined returning the Whig fire, and set off with speed for the flotilla in the river 11 miles below. Winn killed 14 of them on the chase, wounded as many more, and recovered all the property they had gathering in plundering excursions into the country, with a quantity of arms and ammunition.

"Captain Winn found the fort in an utterly ruined condition, and set about constructing a new one much larger than the old one. He took the axe and spade himself, and there were no-lookers-on in camp. A strong block house, inclosed with huge palisades, soon sprang up sufficient to afford protection against any number of small arms. The fort was scarcely completed when a large body of Tories and Indians, sustained by a regular troops, made their approach. A flag was sent in to demand instant surrender of the fort. The captain knew the strength of his position and the character of the brave men under command. He declined the surrender demand, and prepared for defence. The firing commenced and was kept up for near three days. Many of the enemy climbed into the neighboring trees with a view to fire over the pickets into the body of the fort, but the block-house rendered their efforts unavailing and many never descended alive from their high nests in the tree-tops. On the evening of the third day General Prevost came up from Augusta with three pieces of cannon and a strong regular force. A flag demanding unconditional surrender arrived speedily at the fort. Winn saw his case was hopeless as he had no power to resist artillery. He, therefore, agreed to surrender but insisted on certain terms to be settled by articles of capitulation. The commissioners were appointed to draw up the terms, to which General Prevost and Captain Winn set their hands. They were liberal and favorable to the Americans. The gates of the fort were thrown open and Prevost's officers entered. It is said that when Prevost saw a captain and a few ragged militia who had inflicted such damage to his army, he groaned in spirit.

"On first arriving at the fort, the Americans turned their horses into the range, many straggled off and not a few fell into the hands of the enemy. Three-fourths of the men had to march on foot to their distant homes in middle and upper Carolina . . . .

'As soon as Captain Winn was exchanged, he was appointed colonel of the Fairfield Whig regiment, marched at its head, and joined General Sumter." He served gallantly with this Gamecock of the Revolution from 1777 to the close of the war, taking part in numerous engagements. He doubtless had a part in Sumter's battles at Fishdam, Blackstock, Rocky Mount, Granby and Hanging Rock. In this last engagement he behaved with conspicuous gallantry, exclaiming to Colonel Davie in the thick of the fight: "Isn't this glorious!" In this battle he was dangerously wounded being shot through the body, and barely escaped capture by being borne from the field just before the British retreated. His bravery and energy won him many enemies among the Tories. They exacted heaviest revenge in their power. Dr. J. L. M. Curry says: "Colonel Winn's house was looted and burned, his slaves were carried off and transported to Jamaica, his wife and children were driven away and would have suffered great hardships but for the generosity and friendship of a neighbor who had taken British portection. He carried them to a place of safety among friends who cared for them until Colonel Winn, then confined because of wounds, could make suitable provision for them."

When comparative quiet was restored, he devoted himself to his business in order to repair his wasted fortune.

When Governor Rutledge called the legislature together in 1781, Colonel Winn was chosen representative of his district. In 1788, he was appointed superintendent of Indian affairs for the Creek nation. He held several different civil offices and was elected brigadier general, and later major general by the legislature of South Carolina. Upon the adoption of the federal constitution of 1789, he took an active interest in national affairs. He was an active partisan of Thomas Jefferson and in later years was a warm personal friend of Andrew Jackson. In 1790 he ran for congress but could not win over his old commander, General Sumter. Two years later he won the election and served during the Third and Fourth congresses from 1793 to 1797. Sumter, who had again returned to congress, resigned his seat as representative to enter the United States senate. The congressional directory shows that Winn was elected to fill the vacancy caused by the resignation of Thomas Sumter. Winn was re-elected to the Eighth and to the four succeeding congresses, and served from January 24, 1803, to March 3, 1813. He was an outspoken Democrat, never dodging an issue nor straddling a question. November 5, 1811, he presented himself to take the uwsual oath and John C. Calhoun, his great colleague, appeared the next day for the first time. June 4, 1812, on Mr. Calhoun's bill declaring war against Great Britain, the vote in the house was yeas, 78, and nays, 45. Mr. Winn proudly recorded his name in favor of the Second War for Independence, the War of 1812. January 14, 1813, his name appears on the journals for the last time, in favor of an additional military force, and he expressed his regret that he could not remain longer to aid in providing ways and means for the successful prosecution of the war. In the house, the debate over the War of 1812 was acrimonious. The representatives from the New England states, particularly, held back. Winn was not an orator but he warmly supported the bill providing for the enlistment of a number of volunteer regiments. A federal member ridiculed the idea of opposing British regulars with raw recruits and untrained volunteers. Winn was stung by his remark and addressing the speaker replied that he himself had commanded volunteers and knew how they could fight and had seen them meet British veterans in open field. "I will give that gentleman a picked regiment of his favorite veterans, and will put myself in command of a regiment of volunteers, we will have a meeting, and if I don't flog his crowd (popping his hands emphatically), my head for it."

Shortly after settling in Fairfield, Richard Winn married Priscilla McKinley. They reared a family of 11 children, one of whom, Minor, read law under General Jackson in Tennessee. While pursuing his studies in Jackson's home, he died in 1799 before completing his course. The letter of sympathy written by Jackson to the distressed father was kept by the family for many years as a prized heirloom and a model for such compositions.

At least one of his sons, Samuel, the youngest, was with Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans. This son was the last surviving member of Richard Winn's family. In 1858, he was living near Paris, in Henry county, Tennessee, and was a pensioner of the War of 1812.

(1) Pearson's Narrative History of Fairfield.

(2) J. L. M. Curry.

General Winn's large farm lay along Little River in western Fairfield. For many years one of the bridges over this river was called Winn's bridge, later Bell's bridge. This farm was operated by slave labor under overseers. The general also conducted a mercantile business and lived with his family in Winnsboro. November 14, 1786, Col. John Winn deeded to his brother, Gen. Richard Winn a tract of land containing 98 acres adjoining the tract given to Mt. Zion school.

June 2, 1797, Richard Winn conveyed to his daughter, Margaret, and her husband, David R. Evans, this tract of 98 acres and the house in which he lived. Margaret Evans was buried in the orchard of this tract in March, 1806. During 15 of the 20 years between 1793 and 1813, General Winn was often away from home for long periods attending the sessions of congress in Philadelphia and in Washington. These long absences forced him to leave his store and farm to the management of others, and their management was not always profitable. In addition, he was a victim of the universal but vicious habit of standing security for his friends and ueighbors. It is said that he was called on to pay $50,000 of security debts. He gave up his home and farm, secured a grant of 5,000 acres of virgin land in Tennessee and removed with his slaves and family to Duck river, in Maury county of that state. Here he died Wecember 19, 1818, jossessed of 2,500 acres of land, 40 Negroes, and valued stock of all kind.

"General Winn was upwards of six feet in height, and indifferently well formed. His countenance was noble and majestic and beamed with the warmth of benevolence and kindness. His port was noble and his manners dignified and elegant." (1) "He was a member of the South Carolina Jockey club, the oldest club in the United States, kept race horses, and took prizes at the annual races in Charleston. In war and in peace he was methodical, punctual, accurate, with great self-control, well balanced judgment, conscientiousness and truthfulness. He was very moral and temperate in all things, modest and polite, he never used vulgar or profane language. He was not distinguished as a public speaker, but had a competent vocabulary, and expressed his opinions with clearness, conciseness, and force. Being pleasant and interesting in conversation, with a large and varied experience, a sound judgment, strength of conviction and exalted patriotism, h ehad a host of friends, who sought his advice and enjoyed his delightful companionship." (1)

(1) General Pearson's Narrative History of Fairfield.

He truly exemplified the virtues of patriot, soldier, statesman and citizen.

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Bibliography: (1) Writings of Dr. J. L. M. Curry; (2) Pearson's Narrative History of Fairfield; (3) Journal of South Carolina General Assembly; (4) Journal of Congress; (5) Files of Winnsboro Newspapers; (6) Dixon's History of the Mobley Family; (7) Landrum's History of Upper South Carolina; (8) Salley's History of Orangeburg; (9) Virginia Index: William and Mary Quarterly; (10) Scrap Book of Mrs. S. C. McBryde; (11) Howe's History of the Presbyterian Church.