

War hero left legacy of plundering

Back in 1931, Dr. Anne King Gregorie wrote a biography of Gen. Thomas "the Gamecock" Sumter.

One chapter on the Revolutionary War hero was titled, "Plunderer for the Public." It is an apt title, and certainly there was no area of South Carolina more plundered by Sumter than the Catawba River Basin.

In 1780, the ordinary militia, whose members had participated in battles and skirmishes at Rocky Mount and Hanging Rock among other locales, was not as reliable as Sumter would have liked. Whigs were volunteers in a situation where there was no state government. The Continental government in Philadelphia had no money for Sumter to pay troops.

As a result, the volunteers who risked their lives expected to be able to take whatever property they could as their "reward." Whig militiamen didn't always discriminate between property of the enemy and that of sympathizers. Gen. Nathaniel Greene of the Continental Army, who headed troops in the Southern states, said Sumter's troops followed him "more from a desire and the opportunity of plundering than from any inclination to promote the independence of the United States."

Lord Cornwallis, hardly unbiased, also referred to Sumter's troops as plunderers. Sumter admitted as much to Gen. Francis Marion when he said that plundering by his militia was "as alarming and distressing as that of having the enemy among us."

Sumter's solution to the problem of no money to pay troops was to offer officers and men future payment. He created a "war chest." When the war was over it was intended that all of the property of Loyalists would be confiscated and the land, money and slaves so captured would then be distributed among the men, according to rank, who had fought with Sumter at least 10 months.

Men who loaned wagons and teams to Sumter's men, furnished



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food for the horses and supplied his troops in any way were to be repaid at the end of the war.

On April 10, 1781, the British under Lord Rawdon, raided the Waxhaws of Lancaster County, burned some of the homes and the meeting house, killed several citizens, took the horses and plundered the settlement. In spite of its distress, a short time later some of Sumter's officers were able to get some 20 wagons of food from the Waxhaws.

When Sumter's men captured gold from the British, they divided the coins on the spot. For instance, William Bratton's men received four guineas each from one raid. Men later testified that Sumter always took his share of the booty. Officers in other regiments considered Sumter's behavior poor, and one wrote that "The thirst after plunder that seems to prevail among the soldiery, makes the command (Sumter's) almost intolerable."

Sumter's view on the plundering was that it was justified. After the war he was elected to the State Assembly. In 1784, the S.C. House passed a bill stating that Sumter had acted in an honorable manner and excused him and the officers

under his command but "not those who detached themselves upon Several Occasions and plundered the Inhabitants indiscriminately without his Knowledge or Authority."

A few days later, Sumter presented his accounts for advancing money to troops, for horses and supplies, etc. The State of South Carolina reimbursed him 2,828 pounds. But Sumter's major reward was in taking up huge areas of land previously ungranted by the state. Using his political power to the utmost between 1784 and 1787, Sumter received grants of more than 114,820 acres in Camden District. Between 1790, when he was a U.S. member of Congress, and 1821, Sumter took up grants of 28,000 acres. His son received one grant of 96,000 acres.

It is most ironic that the "Great Plunderer" died a debtor on June 1, 1832, 50 years after he ended his military service that greatly aided the Whig cause in the American Revolution.

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