

South Carolina's Story

The making of a state



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South Carolina's State flag, the "Palmetto flag," has its origins in a battle flag first hoisted on Sept. 15, 1775 — more than nine months before the signing of the Declaration of Independence — at Fort Johnson, James Island, on the south shore of Charleston Bay. William Moultrie, in command that day, wrote: "This was the first American flag which was displayed in South Carolina . . . it gave some uneasiness to our timid friends, who were looking forward to a reconciliation: They said it had the appearance of a declaration of war."

The original flag does not survive. However, it was described in detail at the time. The flag's field was blue, the color of the soldier's uniforms. A crescent, adapted from the caps of the soldiers, was placed in the upper left corner of the flag. The word "LIBERTY" was prominently displayed across the lower half of the flag.

In January of 1776, Christopher Gadsden, Charleston merchant and the voice of the local patriots, took over the task of preparing Charleston to resist the British fleet when, and if, it arrived. Gadsden ordered Moultrie to complete a fort on Sullivan's Island opposite the Fort Johnson installation.

Gadsden devised a system of signals to warn Charlestonians that the British were coming. Small pendants, some red, some blue, some white, were to signal the number and type of vessels in the British invading force. If men-of-war were sighted, Gadsden instructed, "the New Provincial Flag will be hoisted and lowered as many times as there are Men of War seen."

On June 10, 1776, the provincial flag, the same as that described by Moultrie as the first American flag, was hoisted and lowered nine times. Six of the nine warships carried 2,000 redcoats under the command of Sir Henry Clinton. Aboard another man-of-war was Lord William Campbell who hoped to regain the governorship of South Carolina.

The British commanders, tempted to strike first at the obviously unfinished fort on Sullivan's Island, moved in too close. Three ran upon shoals and became easy targets. The colonists had luckily used palmetto trees to construct the fort. The wood was very spongy and it easily absorbed the British cannon balls.

Still, the British had more men and much more ammunition than the Colonial troops. Fighting was fierce. On June 28, a young sergeant, William Jasper, distinguished himself at Fort Sullivan. The provincial flag was shot from its staff and Jasper replaced it on the wall of the fort while facing deadly fire.

For his act of heroism, Sgt. Jasper was presented with the personal sword of Gov. Rutledge who also offered Jasper a commission as an officer. Jasper who was barely literate (but highly intelligent) refused the command saying that his lack of education would be an embarrassment to him as an officer.

On July 1, the wife of Capt. Barnard Elliott made up two new flags for Moultrie's command, one of blue silk and one of red silk. In October, the blue standard was captured at Savannah after four color bearers were killed on the ramparts. One of the color bearers was Sgt. Jasper of Fort Sullivan fame.

Mrs. Elliott's blue silk flag, which is now in London, has a device in the center which looks much like the present South Carolina State seal. She included a green-topped palmetto tree trunk and a white drum with blue crescent along with other patriotic symbols.

When the Revolutionary War was over, the State of South Carolina adopted the Sullivan's Island blue flag with the crescent that had flown over the fort (now called Fort Moultrie) and added the palmetto tree in honor of Gen. Moultrie and his troops.