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WILLTOWN, BLACK MINGO: THE RISE AND FALL OF AN EARLY VILLAGE IN THE SOUTH CAROLINA LOWCOUNTRY

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ON MAY 20, 1788, PATRICK DOLLARD, A TAVERN KEEPER FROM Prince Frederick's Parish, South Carolina, rose to address an assembly gathered in the Exchange Building on the Charleston waterfront. The state legislature had summoned this convention to debate the merits of the proposed federal Constitution. Knowing himself in the minority, Dollard began his oration with "the greatest diffidence" to those aristocrats who strongly favored ratification. However their eloquent speeches may have moved him, Dollard confined his delivery to "the sense and language of [his] constituents." "They are nearly all, to a man, opposed to this new Constitution," the tavern keeper reported, and he could not, in good conscience, "betray the trust reposed in [him] by them." Perhaps an awareness of his constituents' solidarity encouraged him as he spoke, for he concluded his diatribe on threatening terms. According to Dollard, the people of Prince Frederick's Parish would never accept the Constitution, and if it passed, a "standing army" would have to "ram it down their throats with the points of bayonets." Surely the harsh words of the maverick tavern keeper surprised his fellow lowcountrymen. Indeed, the lowcountry supported ratification by a vote of 121 to 16.[1] Respectable tidewater federalists must have wondered about Dollard and the region he represented. Had they asked, they would have discovered that he resided near the center of Prince Frederick's Parish, an ecclesiastical precinct encompassed by Georgetown District. More specifically, Patrick Dollard hailed from Black Mingo Creek, and his tavern served the inhabitants of its primary village, Willtown.

Today, Black Mingo Creek snakes through the swamps of northeastern South Carolina much as it did over two centuries ago. Large cypress and

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[1] *Journal of the Convention of South Carolina which Ratified the Constitution of the United States, May 23, 1788* ([Columbia, S.C.?]: United States Constitutional Bicentennial Commission of South Carolina, 1988), inside front cover; Jonathan Elliot, ed., *The Debates in the Several State Conventions on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution* (1836; reprint, New York: Burt Franklin Reprints, 1974), 4: 336-338; Rachel Klein, *Unification of a Slave State: The Rise of the Planter Class in the South Carolina Backcountry, 1760-1808* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 167.

oak, extending their limbs from the banks, shade the water for much of its course. Occasionally, a homestead breaks the pattern where high ground permits. Black Mingo takes the first half of its name from the tint of its water which, as one local author describes it, "has a clear brown color about the shade of a weak tea." Peat produced in the swamps gives the water its distinctive look. Local historians trace the second half of the creek's name to Native American origins. Some believe that Mingo Indians inhabited the area prior to white settlement. Others suggest that "Mingo" might simply have meant "black" in a local native tongue. At any rate, Black Mingo Creek constitutes the largest tributary of Black River, which spills into Winyah Bay near the port city of Georgetown. The creek remains navigable for small craft, but during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, schooners and flatboats ventured up seventeen miles to a well-recognized, high bluff on its southern bank.[2]

To the casual present-day visitor, this unusually high bluff offers little more than a beautiful view of the creek. A careful inspector, on the other hand, might discover shards of glass, brick, or clay pipe. If particularly adventuresome, he or she might even notice a small, unkept cemetery on the edge of a wood. Nevertheless, little exists to remind the modern observer of the landing's former importance. The creek may not have changed over the last two hundred years, but the surrounding land certainly has. Although one might not know it today, the village of Black Mingo, later know as Willtown, once sat on this bluff overlooking the creek. Here, two centuries ago, a bridge spanned the water, schooners docked to load produce, and Patrick Dollard operated his tavern, Red House. From the middle of the eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century, Willtown served as a focal point for the Black Mingo community. Exploring the area in 1843, Samuel McGill, a young doctor from nearby Indiantown, recorded his romantic musings on the already-defunct village:

> In the many strolls in and around the site of old Wiltown we had, in my imaginations, the scenes transpiring long years ago, the noise of the bar room and the billiard tables in the hotels, and the activity along its streets,

[2] Jeffrey Wildes, "Rivers and Creeks of Black River in Williamsburg County," *Names in South Carolina* 28 (1981): 16, 19; William Willis Boddie, *History of Williamsburg* (1925; reprint, Spartanburg, S.C.: The Reprint Company, 1992), 71; David Kohn and Bess Glenn, eds., *Internal Improvement in South Carolina: 1817-1828* (Washington, D.C., 1938), 419. A scuba diver from the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology (SCIAA) identified the remains of a "historic 18th or 19th century" vessel on the bottom of Black Mingo Creek in 1979. The "Wiltown Wreck" has not been excavated. Keith M. Derting, SCIAA, to Nelson Chandler, Sept. 11, 1996, Letter in the hand of J. W. Nelson Chandler, Charleston, S.C.

> the dash of young men and the beauty and grace of the town as they dance on the bridge spanning the creek, or float in the little boats.[3]

While this depiction of Willtown suffers from the sentimentality of its author, it certainly sparks the curiosity of the reader. Could the history of the Black Mingo settlement prove as colorful and as intriguing as Dr. McGill fancied it? Despite the relative prominence of the village during the late eighteenth century, historians cannot say. The story of Willtown's rise and fall remains untold.[4]

The lack of critical work on the Black Mingo region may stem from its failure to fit the traditional historiographical mold. Historians of eighteenth-century South Carolina divide the province into two distinct regions, lowcountry and backcountry. Studies of the lowcountry inevitably focus on the wealthy rice planters and merchants of Charleston and its environs. Slave labor and political stability characterized this region, which included those areas within fifty miles of the coast. Beyond the reach of tidewater streams, however, a frontier atmosphere prevailed. This area, known even to contemporaries as the backcountry, embraced those settlements beyond the nineteen coastal parishes. Here, the under-represented majority of the colony's white population struggled on subsistence farms. References to Black Mingo have appeared in works on both the lowcountry and the backcountry, but the region defies a comfortable label in South Carolina's historiographical dichotomy.[5]

[3]Samuel D. McGill, *Narrative of Reminiscences of Williamsburg County* (Kingstree, S.C.: Kingstree Lithographic Company, 1952), 166. Donald R. Sutherland, an archaeologist from the University of South Carolina, inspected physical evidence on-site and confirmed the above-mentioned bluff as the location of Willtown. He found "brick debris, cobbles, fragments of porcelain, bits of clay pipe stems and rusted, square nails, all of which indicate the location of an early American settlement." Sutherland determined that "Willtown was located exactly where Sam McIntosh [president of the Williamsburg County Historical Society] said it was." Donald R. Sutherland, "Trip Report for Visit to the Proposed Site of Willtown," Feb. 27, 1976, Copy in the Collection of Samuel E. McIntosh, Bellefield Plantation, Georgetown, S.C.

[4] Willtown on Black Mingo Creek in Prince Frederick's Parish, Georgetown District (and later Williamsburg District/County), should not be confused with Willtown, or New London, on the Edisto River in lower South Carolina. For information on the history of Willtown/New London, see Henry A. M. Smith, "Willtown or New London," *South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine* 10 (1909): 20-32.

[5] The line separating lowcountry from backcountry closely follows the line drawn by John Drayton in his *A View of South-Carolina, As Respects Her Natural and Civil Concerns* (Charleston, S.C.: Printed by W. P. Young, 1802).

Willtown's geographic situation played a key role in shaping its history. Although located within the confines of the lowcountry, Black Mingo never became fully integrated into tidewater society. Indeed, Patrick Dollard's fiery rhetoric at the Constitutional Convention illustrates the degree to which residents of lower Prince Frederick's Parish could disagree with their coastal neighbors. Black Mingo's proximity to the backcountry influenced the outlook of its inhabitants. Prince Frederick's stretched farther to the northwest than any other "coastal" parish, and it bordered the frontier parishes of St. Mark's and St. David's. Trade and travel routes connected Black Mingo to nearby frontier settlements. The community, therefore, shared many political, economic, and social traits with the backcountry. Willtown was situated between the coast and the interior, and its rise and fall reflects the struggle of a region located on the fringe of lowcountry society.[6]

By the time white settlers began to creep up the rivers and creeks flowing into Georgetown, few Native Americans remained as permanent residents in the region. One early settler, who sailed up Black River in the winter of 1735, saw no Indians until spring, when they arrived in large hunting parties. He noted that they "came in great numbers like the Egyptian locusts, but were not hurtful." Local tradition has it that Indians camped on a bluff at the confluence of Black Mingo Creek and Indiantown Swamp, several miles above Willtown. According to one report, residents could distinguish "the site of the old Mingo town" as late as 1826. No record of confrontation between settlers and natives exists, and Indians disappeared completely from the area by 1755. By that time, a string of planned, frontier townships had begun to serve as a buffer zone for the colony. Just to the north of Georgetown, Welsh immigrants founded Queensborough Township on the Pee Dee River, but Black Mingo residents established closest ties with the Scots-Irish of Williamsburg Township, who settled the western expanses of Black River after 1732. As Georgetown historian George Rogers notes, settlements like Black Mingo "sprang up as communities with stores to serve these new farming areas."[7]

[6]For a brief discussion of regional division and the power of geography and the environment in shaping the history of South Carolina, see Robert M. Weir, *Colonial South Carolina: A History* (Millwood, N.Y.: KTO Press, 1983), 44-46.

[7]Robert Witherspoon left a record of Williamsburg's earliest settlement and of his impressions of Native American hunting parties in *An Early Manuscript Copy of the Witherspoon Family Chronicle and Later Notes on Related Families* (Columbia, S.C.: The State Printing Company, 1967), 10; Robert Mills, *Statistics of South Carolina* (1826; reprint, Spartanburg, S.C.: The Reprint Company, 1972), 770; Robert L. Meriwether, *The Expansion of South Carolina, 1729-1765* (Kingsport, Tenn.: Southern Publishers, 1940), 79-86, 89-98; George C. Rogers, Jr., *The History of Georgetown County, South Carolina* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1970), 10, 27.

Black Mingo began as an outpost on the edge of the lowcountry, servicing inhabitants of creek-side plantations and settlers from recently formed backcountry townships. Population expansion led to public improvements, and in 1744 the colonial assembly passed an act to build a bridge across the "north branch of Black River." Revealing an unfamiliarity with the area, the legislature amended the law a year later, having erroneously identified the creek as within "the parish of Prince George Winyaw." The bridge must have been built shortly thereafter, for a later petition reports that it was "carried away in the great Hurricane of September 1752. . . ." Undoubtedly, local residents recognized the economic potential of a crossroads by land and by water. Having secured transportation by land, inhabitants of Black Mingo took action to clear the water passage of obstructions. After investigating the headwaters of the creek with "great Care and Exactness," they petitioned the assembly to make the run "navigable for flats . . . three or four miles higher." In 1745 the legislature responded favorably to their request and appointed commissioners to carry out the project. These acts made Black Mingo a friendly location for planting and business.[8]

The presence of a navigable waterway and the benefit of a bridge must have encouraged settlers to concentrate on Black Mingo bluff. Samuel Cook's 1773 map of South Carolina illustrates the village's importance as a transportation hub (Figure 1). In order to reach Georgetown or Charleston, settlers from Pee Dee, the Welsh Tract, Lynch's Creek, and Williamsburgh Township (or King's Tree) had little choice but to pass through Black Mingo. Indeed, the settlement held something of a monopoly over transportation from the northeastern backcountry. Evan Pugh, a Baptist minister from Long Bluff on the Pee Dee, found this out the hard way when a Black Mingo innkeeper charged him his "great Koat for a night's Lodging." In 1760 a resident argued before the assembly that "Black Mingo [has] become a great Thoroughfare for Travellers and Herds of Cattle to Charles-town, from Pedee, Lynch's Creek, the Yatkin, Indian Town, and the Cheraws." The petitioner went on to claim that of the "six of Bridges in [Prince Frederick's] Parish . . . not as many People pass in a year, as over Black Mingo in a Month . . ." The village of Black Mingo served as a key link between the backcountry

[8] Thomas Cooper and David J. McCord, eds., *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina* (Columbia, S.C.: A. S. Johnston, 1841), 9: 136-138; J. H. Easterby et al., eds., *The Journal of the Commons House of Assembly, 1744-1745* (Columbia: South Carolina Archives Department, 1955-1989), 302; Commons Journal, May 2, 1760, South Carolina Department of Archives and History (hereafter cited as SCDAH), Columbia, S.C., 167.


King
Towns
Lake Swamp
Kingston
Lynches Lake
Walker
Great Bay Swamp
PRINCE FREDERICKS
Black Mingo
Black River
Whitworth
Potatoe F
Baxter
Ford
Jenkins
Moore
GEORGE
George Town
Stewart
Yahanee
New Inlet
North Inlet
Helt Hole Swamp
S. JAMES
SANTEE
Horry I

and the coastal region of the lowcountry, and for a time, it profited from that connection.[9]

Agriculture provided the chief livelihood for settlers of Black Mingo. When the assembly enacted the measure to clear the creek in 1745, it allowed commissioners to charge a toll on products coming down the waterway. Specifically, the act established rates for rice, tar, turpentine, pitch, beef, pork, butter, and grain. Of these commodities, rice proved least successful in the Black Mingo region. No doubt settlers experimented with the crop early on, as their neighbors on Waccamaw Neck had begun to enjoy great profits from its production. Despite the fact that land speculators continued to advertise Black Mingo property as suitable for growing rice, it never became a staple crop. Limited acreage and reduced tide-flow simply made rice production inefficient in comparison to the large-scale operations on the Waccamaw, Pee Dee, and lower Black Rivers.[10] Rather than struggling to compete with the tidewater rice planters, residents of Black Mingo focused their resources on products best suited for their particular environment. During the three decades preceding the Revolution, naval stores and indigo dominated local agricultural production.

Naval stores included tar, turpentine, and pitch. Colonists used pitch, a refined form of tar taken from dead trees, as a lubricant for gears and as a sealant for ship hulls. Indigo plants produced a blue dye used in British manufacturing. Although the British traditionally obtained indigo from French colonies in the Caribbean, the French and Indian War disrupted the trade. War, coupled with a protective tariff on foreign indigo, encouraged South Carolina to produce the dye. After 1754 the colony enjoyed a monopoly over the British market. During these years, Henry Laurens, a wealthy Charleston merchant, traded regularly with South Carolina's pitch and indigo producers. His surviving letters abound with references to Black Mingo planters. He shipped rum, salt, flour, sugar, gunpowder, "Negro

[9] Evan Pugh lodged at Black Mingo on November 3, 1762, and again on July 5, 1764. Horace Fraser Rudisill, ed., *The Diaries of Evan Pugh* (Florence, S.C.: The St. David's Society, 1993), 14, 36; Commons Journal, May 2, 1760, SCDAH, 167-168.

[10] Cooper and McCord, eds., *Statutes at Large*, 9: 137. In 1771 a tract of land in Indiantown, upstream from Black Mingo, was advertised as "not inferior to any in the said Parish, as to the Planting of Indigo, Rice, Corn, &c." Blake Leay White, "To be Sold by the Subscriber," *South Carolina Gazette*, July 18, 1771.

Opposite page: **Figure 1. Black Mingo (in the center, directly above and to the right of the designation for Prince Frederick's Parish) as depicted in James Cook's 1773 map of South Carolina. From the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society.**

cloth," and slaves to the prospering inhabitants in return for their products. In 1755 Laurens declared that Black River furnished "the best Indigo" in South Carolina. No doubt his assertion applied to some of the producers on Black Mingo Creek as well.[11]

William Thompson, Sr. stands out among the early planters of Black Mingo. He produced tar as late as 1756, but soon turned to the more profitable pitch. In 1768 Henry Laurens referred to Thompson as "a Man from whom I have bought Pitch for twenty years past & never had one instance of drossy or dirty Pitch...." Not the trusting sort, Laurens admitted having "cut up some hundreds of his Barrels," but each time "found it very good." In 1760 Laurens shipped sixty-five barrels of Thompson's pitch to London aboard the ship *St. Andrew*. Several years later, Laurens allowed Thompson a higher price "on Account of the Weight & goodness" of his barrels. Taking advantage of the protected British market, Thompson began to produce indigo as well. Laurens noted two casks of Thompson's indigo aboard the ship *Squirries* in 1761. Indigo brought profit and a need for labor; Thompson had Laurens charge £560 to his account for the purchase of two slaves in 1764. The Charleston merchant and the Black Mingo planter remained on good terms throughout the course of their business dealings. When Thompson failed to drop by for a visit during a trip to Charleston, Laurens noted that "there is nobody that I could have receiv'd with more pleasure than my friend Mr. Thompson."[12]

Thompson's harmonious relations with Laurens notwithstanding, the great distance between Charleston and Black Mingo proved problematic for many planters. Some, for instance, naively believed that they could deceive Laurens by reducing the quantity of produce placed in each barrel or cask. Several planters skimped on the amount of pitch per barrel, hoping that they might produce more barrels and, therefore, turn more profit. Laurens did not operate this way; he measured pitch by its weight, and as he noted in a 1765 letter to John McDowell, "I must pay as much Freight for small as for large Barrels." Thus, planters actually lost money when they produced underweight barrels. Laurens warned McDowell to "make them better

[11] Weir, *Colonial South Carolina*, 144-150; G. Terry Sharrer, "The Indigo Bonanza in South Carolina, 1740-1790," *Technology and Culture* 12 (1971): 454; Laurens to Cowles, June 30, 1755, *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, eds. Philip M. Hamer et al. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1968-1995), 1: 279.

[12] Laurens to Shubrick, March 27, 1756, *Laurens Papers*, 2: 138-139; Laurens to Gunn, May 20, 1768, *Laurens Papers*, 5: 680-681; "Invoice," July 11, 1760, *Laurens Papers*, 3: 40-41. Having assured Thompson of a higher price for his pitch, Laurens added that "this should only be to ourselves." Laurens to Thompson, April 17, 1764, *Laurens Papers*, 4: 247; "Invoice," April 25, 1761, *Laurens Papers*, 3: 65; Laurens to Thompson, June 19, 1764, *Laurens Papers*, 4: 314-315; Laurens to Thompson, Feb. 15, 1766, *Laurens Papers*, 5: 73-74.

measure otherwise my patience which you have kept a long time upon the stretch will fail me." Laurens continually reiterated his policy to Black Mingo planters. In 1764 he wrote to John Gregg that "your Barrels & Pitch were good but you [were] covetous of the quantity which shou'd not be for you will never loose by making the Barrels full size. . . ." Despite these urgings, many planters failed to understand. Alexander Davidson happened to secure a decent price for his underweight barrels, but in this rare instance, Laurens noted that his "pitch fared well [only] by coming down in good Company." After receiving one hundred light barrels from John Handlin, Laurens lamented, "You did not used to make such Barrels & I hope You will not do so again." As these examples illustrate, Black Mingo pitch producers never fully grasped the economic realities of the system.[13]

Distant lines of communication added to other problems as well. When goods failed to reach clients or when his schooner failed to reach Black Mingo, Laurens could always blame it on George Dick, his ship captain. Writing to Alexander Davidson in 1763, Laurens stated, "G. D. has promised to bring [your pitch], but he is sometimes a queer hand obliging some friends at the experience of the better." In response to further miscommunication, Laurens again faulted his chief hand: "George Dick . . . is but a Man to say the most of him, & Men are frail Creatures. . . ." The Charleston merchant even tried this line on William Thompson, writing that "[Dick] has got so many new friends to serve that the old ones must often fast." Nevertheless, he added with feigned humility, "I believe the Captain will be so kind yet as to bring [your turpentine] for me."[14] If Captain Dick was really as incompetent and untrustworthy as he sounded, surely the impatient Henry Laurens would have ceased to employ him.

Perhaps Laurens thought less of making such excuses when dealing with inland planters of the middling sort. For the most part, he never considered them his equals. Once, in 1751, he lost a bag of indigo belonging to Black Mingo planter Charles Storry. He wrote to inquire about it, not because Storry's business mattered to him, but because "he is a Loquacious body [and] will tease us enough about it." On another occasion, Laurens discovered that Alexander Davidson's nephew had become a talented cabinet maker. In writing to Davidson he felt obliged to mention, "You are going to bury [your nephew] by keeping him at Black Mingo." Apparently, Davidson did not appreciate Laurens's unsolicited advice and responded

[13] Laurens to McDowell, April 8, 1765, *Laurens Papers*, 4: 604; Laurens to Gregg, April 17, 1764, *Laurens Papers*, 4: 249; Laurens to Davidson, April 17, 1764, *Laurens Papers*, 4: 248; Laurens to Handlin, Sept. 26, 1764, *Laurens Papers*, 4: 442.

[14] Laurens to Davidson, May 28, 1763, *Laurens Papers*, 3: 465-466; Laurens to Davidson, Jan. 2, 1765, *Laurens Papers*, 4: 563-564; Laurens to Thompson, Feb. 15, 1766, *Laurens Papers*, 5: 73-74.

by selling his pitch to another merchant. Laurens, in turn, refused to accept Davidson's next shipment of indigo. While Black Mingo's environment proved optimum for producing indigo and naval stores, its distance from the heart of the lowcountry created difficulties for many planters.[15]

No one understood the tribulations of frontier life better than Charles Woodmason. Historians have immortalized Woodmason as the Anglican itinerant of St. Mark's Parish. There, in the late 1760s, he took up the cause of the backcountry and penned the most important documents of the Regulator movement. Few people realize, however, that Woodmason began his career in America on Black Mingo Creek. After arriving in South Carolina in 1752, Woodmason toured the northeastern lowcountry in search of a promising location for settlement. He eventually purchased eighteen slaves and over 2,000 acres of land in various tracts throughout the region. He established his seat on Black Mingo and opened a store there in 1757. A 1758 mortgage reveals that he lived quite comfortably: his household inventory included "a Book Case with about 100 Vol. of Books, One Chest of Drawers, Two Mahogany Tables, Six Mahogany Chairs, twelve other Chairs, two Beds with Bedsteads, Quilts, Blankets, and furniture, One Watch, one fowling Piece, a Silver milk pot and Tongs, [and] eight Silver Spoons" (commas added). He also served in the diverse public offices of constable, coroner, tax collector, and justice of the peace.[16] Apparently, Woodmason had found an area that suited him perfectly. On the one hand, Black Mingo existed safely within the lowcountry fold. It enjoyed access to the coast and did not suffer from Indian raids or the lawlessness of the backcountry. At the same time, though, the community had not yet become fully established. It still offered frontier-like opportunities to succeed in a fluid social hierarchy.

When Richard Hooker wrote his biography of Charles Woodmason in 1953, the full extent of the latter's creativity had not yet come to light. Only later in the decade did historians realize that Woodmason had been a regular contributor to *Gentlemen's Magazine* during the early 1750s. Thus, in addition to his known talents as a planter, thinker, leader, and preacher, we may now add poet and engineer. The ideals of the Enlightenment obviously influenced Woodmason. Having published a topographical poem about South Carolina rivers in 1753, he went on to compose a poetic epistle to Benjamin Franklin a year later. Praising Franklin for his use of reason to

[15] Laurens to Devonshire, Reeve & Lloyd, March 22, 1757, *Laurens Papers*, 2: 503; Laurens to Davidson, Nov. 7, 1763, *Laurens Papers*, 4: 38; Laurens to Davidson, Jan. 13, 1764, *Laurens Papers*, 4: 128-129.

[16] Richard J. Hooker, ed., *The Carolina Backcountry on the Eve of the Revolution: The Journal and Other Writings of Charles Woodmason, Anglican Itinerant* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1953), xiii, xv.

harness nature, Woodmason acknowledged, "Within thy magic circle calm I fit, Nor friends nor business in confusion quit." In 1755 Woodmason made his final contribution to the magazine, his only prose entry, in which he discussed the "culture and manufacturing" of indigo. No doubt the subject fascinated him. The article even included a schematic of the vats and pumps used to process the dye. Woodmason moved to Black Mingo around the time he published this essay. His move also corresponds to the height of indigo production in South Carolina. As an enterprising merchant and planter, Woodmason recognized Black Mingo's potential.[17]

The developing creek-side community afforded Woodmason many opportunities to employ his creative spirit. In 1760, for instance, he petitioned the assembly to place a "substantial floating bridge" across Black Mingo Creek. Determined to overcome any objection to his proposal, Woodmason planned for every eventuality. He arranged to finance and construct the bridge himself. When someone protested that it would block creek navigation, Woodmason retorted that he had designed it with "a Hatchway of 16 or 18 feet width . . . removable at pleasure for Boats." Another worried that flood waters would destroy the expensive investment. Woodmason quickly assured him that the "floating Bridge is constructed on a different principle . . . and can be let out by Ropes at any length to buoy on the flood of an Fresh. . . ." He promised to maintain the bridge and volunteered the service of "his agents who reside on the spot." Woodmason's motives for building the bridge were not purely financial. He also hoped to

[17] Woodmason, "C. W. in Carolina to E. J. at Gosport," *Gentlemen's Magazine* 23 (July 1753): 337-338; Woodmason, "To Benjamin Franklin, Esq. Of Philadelphia," *Gentlemen's Magazine* 24 (Feb. 1754): 88. In his final article in the magazine, Woodmason described indigo planting "at Winyaw (where I live)." Woodmason, "On Manufacturing Indigo into a Dye," *Gentleman's Magazine* 25 (May 1755): 201-203, (June 1755): 256-259. Woodmason signed all of these articles "C. W." In 1953 Hennig Cohen published an essay on "C. W.'s" topographical poem, but he could not identify the author. He did argue that "C. W." must have had experience as an indigo planter. See Hennig Cohen, "A Colonial Topo-graphical Poem," *Names: Journal of the American Name Society* 1 (1953): 252-258. In 1954 "C. W.'s" ode to Benjamin Franklin was reprinted. The editor argued that "C. W." is "beyond all question Charles Woodmason," but provided little evidence. See L. H. Butterfield, ed., *A Poetic Epistle* (Richmond, Va.: The William Byrd Press, 1954), i-iii. Finally, in 1958 Claude Jones offered convincing circumstantial evidence to link "C. W." with Woodmason. See Claude E. Jones, "Charles Woodmason as a Poet," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 59 (1958): 189-194. No historian, however, has yet pointed out the most concrete evidence: in 1755 and 1756, Henry Laurens, who knew Charles Woodmason, identified him as having recently published an account of indigo production under the initials "C. W." Interestingly, Laurens found Woodmason's article "prodigiously erroneous." Laurens to Patteson, Sept. 24, 1755, *Laurens Papers*, 1: 341-342; Laurens to Pattison, Sept. 16, 1756, *Laurens Papers*, 2: 318-320.

serve the public by "making an Essay how far floating Bridges may be eligible in this Country."[18] Such interest in scientific experimentation would have impressed Benjamin Franklin himself.

Residency at Black Mingo also offered Woodmason a chance to cultivate his devotion to Anglicanism. He served successively as a churchwarden and vestryman for Prince Frederick's Parish Church, located several miles to the east on Black River. When the "infamous and obnoxious" Reverend Michael Smith involuntarily vacated the pulpit, the communicants asked Woodmason to lead Sunday worship. He served in this capacity for six years, quitting only upon his abrupt return to England in 1762. Although the reasons for this departure remain unclear, Hooker suggests that Woodmason's estranged wife may have died, necessitating his presence across the Atlantic to settle her estate and care for his son. At any rate, he left his business in a "tangled state," and the provost marshal eventually sold most of his property.[19] Whatever may have happened, one thing seems clear: Woodmason's experiences at Black Mingo and Prince Frederick's Parish helped shape his later decision to become a minister and to work for the betterment of the South Carolina backcountry.

Despite Woodmason's diligent service, the majority of Black Mingo residents failed to share his commitment to the Church of England. Historians traditionally highlight the strength of the established church in the lowcountry, but this condition did not exist in Prince Frederick's. In fact, most people in Black Mingo were religious dissenters of the Calvinist persuasion. The vestry of Prince Frederick's commented on the situation in a 1756 letter to the Bishop of London: "[T]his Parish is the largest, and most populous in this Province; Yet tho' numerous in Inhabitants We of the Church are widely scatter'd, and few in number; The Parishoners being for the most part of the Communion of the Church of Scotland." A year later they complained that the "Presbyterian Missionaries from the Northern Colleges, use unwearied pains & Diligence to extend their Influence & Interest, to the hazard of this whole Parish being soon entirely in their hands." The situation eventually deteriorated to the point that the vestry doubted whether they would have "enough Church Members to form a Congregation."[20]

[18] Commons Journal, May 2, 1760, SCDAH, 167-169. Hooker points out that the assembly left no record of its response to Charles Woodmason's proposal. The minutes do state, however, that the majority of the commissioners of the High Road for Prince Frederick's Parish "assented to his Proposition."

[19] *The Register Book for the Parish Prince Frederick Winyaw* (1916; reprint, Easley, S.C.: Southern Historical Press, 1982), 127, 131; Hooker, *The Carolina Backcountry*, xv-xvi.

[20] *Register Book*, 132, 153.

"An old time song from Miss Sarah Barton 1758"

Charleston of Belles & Divinity boast
And Beaufort of Angels & Goddesses toast
Let ten thousand Charmers enliven Cumbee
But the black Mingo Girls are the Lasses for me

St. John's of the Broughtons & Christ Church of Bond[?]
And goose Creek of twenty more fair may be found
The Roberts still brighter may Shine on Santee
But the black Mingo girls are the Lasses for me

Of George Town Miss Billing & Oldfield[?] display
And Waccamaw, Shew us with Beauties more gay
Foissin and Rothmahler may Shine on Peedee
But the black Mingo girls are the Lasses for me

Thompson, & Neesmith, King Barton[?] & White
The Joys of all hearts, of all eyes the delight
A Circle more radiant, else where none can see
The Black Mingo girls are the Lasses for me

Finis

Figure 2. Typescript of an ode to the girls of Black Mingo by an anonymous poet. Manuscript in the collections of the Charleston Library Society, Charleston, S.C.

Undoubtedly, many Black Mingo residents attended Black Mingo Meeting House, located on a branch of the creek just south of the village. In 1756 the vestry of Prince Frederick's noted that parish dissenters had "two Meetings, and large Congregations." Williamsburgh Meeting House in King's Tree constituted one of these "meetings," and Black Mingo the other. Unfortunately, none of the Black Mingo records survive, which makes it difficult to connect specific individuals to the church. Local wills do shed some light, though. In 1742, for example, William Thompson, Jr. set aside four acres of land "to the use of building a Presbyterian Meeting house" and left £100 "for the assistance of the building." In the same year, William Swinton, another Black Mingo resident, bequeathed an additional £100

"towards building a new meeting house for the Dissenters of the Presbyterian Persuasion. . . ." Perhaps this new structure gave rise to the local name for the Black Mingo Meeting House, "Brick Church."[21] Considering these aspects of local religion, Black Mingo again fails to fit backcountry/lowcountry stereotypes. The Anglican tradition which dominated much of the tidewater never took hold in the area, but neither did the anarchic state of religion in the backcountry prevail. Black Mingo residents supported the establishment of a well-ordered dissenting denomination.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, Black Mingo possessed many of the institutions of a stable society. Located on a well-traveled thoroughfare, with a growing plantation economy and a commitment to religion, Black Mingo appeared well on the way to becoming one of the more prosperous villages of the lowcountry. The coming of the American Revolution, however, quickly checked this process. The devastating inland civil war strained relationships among neighbors and drove a larger wedge between Black Mingo inhabitants and their tidewater counterparts. As a result of the Revolution, residents would come to identify more readily with the struggles and interests of the South Carolina backcountry. Referring to war-torn Georgetown District (which encompassed Black Mingo after 1769), Jerome Nadelhaft asserts, "Georgetown, traditionally considered part of the low-country, had much in common with the interior." The Black Mingo area experienced some of the worst fighting in Georgetown District.[22]

In the early years of the Revolution, with much of the combat occurring in the northern colonies, South Carolina managed to avoid the deprivations of war. Having been repulsed at Charleston in 1776, the British did not return for four years. Then, in 1780, the British shifted the war to the southern front. Charleston fell to redcoats in May, and the invading army moved to establish a series of strongholds across the colony. The British expected to encounter support among the settlers of Georgetown District, who dwelt on the fringe of the social and political circles of the lowcountry. While they did find a number of loyal subjects, others remained divided in their sympathies or, at worst, outright rebellious. Like the backcountry, Georgetown District consisted of diverse inhabitants of varying backgrounds

[21] William H. Chandler, "Some Historic Churches in Williamsburg County," *Names in South Carolina* 18 (Winter 1971): 29; Harvey Toliver Cook, *Rambles in the Pee Dee Basin* (Columbia, S.C.: The State Company, 1926), 148. For the location of Black Mingo Meeting House, see Figure 4 on page 133 of this article. The map identifies it as "Old Church" in the lower left corner. Local tradition has it that British soldiers burned Black Mingo Meeting House during the War of 1812, but no hard evidence exists to support this claim.

[22] Jerome Nadelhaft, "The 'Havoc of War' and its Aftermath in Revolutionary South Carolina," *Social History* 12 (1979): 99.

and interests who were yet to experience any single, decisive event around which to rally.[23]

The events of 1780 changed the course of the war in the Black Mingo area. Unsatisfied with their lukewarm reception, the British began to punish local patriots and others who refused to cooperate. Colonel Banastre Tarleton swept through the Black River region in August in an effort to "strike terror into the inhabitants." One contemporary remarked that the British army and its Tory supporters committed "outrage & cruelty ... beyond description." Tarleton may indeed have angered many residents, but the devastation he caused paled next to the havoc reeked by Major James Wemyss, whom the British immediately dispatched "to do the work that Tarleton had left undone." Wemyss burned a path through the heart of Georgetown District, destroying plantations and Presbyterian churches alike, the latter of which he deemed "sedition shops." He hit Black Mingo Creek directly, burning Indiantown Church on its headwaters and setting fire to several homes, including that of local militia commander John James. In an effort to control the strategic water passage and highway at Black Mingo, the British posted a detachment of forty-six loyalist troops at Patrick Dollard's tavern, Red House, on the southeastern outskirts of the village. The invaders momentarily achieved the upper-hand, but in effect, they only succeeded in shoring up support for the opposition. As Nadelhaft argues, British cruelties resulted in "the existence of 'a hundred enemies' where there had been but one."[24]

Taking advantage of the unifying spirit of revenge, militia General Francis Marion, the "Swamp Fox," departed his hidden encampment in the northern reaches of the district and took the offensive. Captains John James and Henry Mouzon joined Marion as he crossed Lynch's River, and they immediately informed him of the superior loyalist force at Black Mingo. As William James, an eyewitness, recorded, "[Marion] might soon have been reinforced, but finding his men unanimous for battle, he gratified their wishes." Marion's small army reached Black Mingo around midnight on September 28, 1780. As they approached from the north, the patriots had to cross the "boggy causeway and bridge of planks" which spanned the creek.

[23] Nadelhaft, "The 'Havoc of War' and its Aftermath," 99-101.

[24] Nadelhaft, "The 'Havoc of War' and its Aftermath," 101-102, 106; Boddie, *History of Williamsburg*, 103-104. In a petition on behalf of her husband after the war, Mary Brown claimed that Archibald Brown had not been present at "the time those Houses were burnt by Major Wemyss at Black-Mingo or that neighborhood." Petition of Mary Brown, Feb. 15, 1783, SCDAH. Perhaps Dollard's tavern acquired the name "Red House" during its occupation by Tories. For the location of Indiantown Church, see Figure 4 on page 133 of this article. "M. H." stands for Meeting House on the map.

This rickety old bridge may have been the one erected by Charles Woodmason some twenty years before. If so, Woodmason, an ardent loyalist, would have appreciated the irony: noise caused by its crossing roused the sleeping Tories, who hastily drew up for battle outside the tavern. Despite this initial setback, Marion pressed on and quickly divided his troops in an effort to flank the enemy. The ensuing battle lasted less than half an hour and resulted in a clear victory for the patriots. Tory casualties included sixteen dead, wounded, or captured. The remaining force fled to the swamp, leaving valuable supplies behind. Marion suffered two dead and eight wounded, but assumed complete control of Black Mingo. This event consolidated the anti-British spirit of the community; Marion later remembered Black Mingo as inhabited "by our best citizens, my old first followers."[25]

Patrick Dollard, proprietor of the Red House Tavern, had indeed been one of Marion's "first followers." His eulogy identifies him as a "Patriot of '76." Not every resident of Black Mingo shared Dollard's devotion to the American cause, however. Although clearly in the minority, John Brockinton, who lived in a "fine structure" on the main street in Black Mingo village, remained loyal to the King. He served as a captain in the Tory militia, and on at least one occasion, commandeered the personal property of a neighbor. Additionally, and much to his disrepute, Brockinton's actions led to the execution of a Black River settler, Adam Cusack. Cusack, a patriot recently paroled by British officials, had taken a shot at one of Brokinton's slaves. Brockinton responded by having him arrested and "tried" in a British military court. Cusack's wife and children threw themselves at the mercy of Major Wemyss, but Wemyss, on horseback, "would have rode over them, had not one of his own officers prevented the foul deed." Of course, the tide of the war eventually turned decisively against the British, and circumstances soon forced Brockinton into "hiding with his Negroes with him."[26] Without

[25] During the battle, Marion captured the horse of Tory commander Colonel John Coming Ball and rode it for the remainder of the war. He renamed it "Ball." Robert D. Bass, *The Swamp Fox: The Life and Campaigns of General Francis Marion* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1959), 59-70; William Dobein James, *A Sketch of the Life of Brig. Gen. Francis Marion* (1821; reprint, Marietta, Ga.: Continental Book Company, 1948), 57-59; Rogers, *History of Georgetown County*, 154. Boddie presents an interesting, though unconvincing, argument that Marion intentionally created noise on the bridge in order to lure the Tories out from their encampment. Simms, on the other hand, states that after the Battle of Black Mingo, whenever Marion crossed a bridge with the enemy near, he would cover the planks with blankets in order to muffle the sound. Boddie, *History of Williamsburg*, 106; William Gilmore Simms, *The Life of Francis Marion* (New York: H. G. Langley, 1844), 139.

[26] *Georgetown Gazette*, March 5, 1800; John Gotea Pressley, "The Pressley Family Journal" (manuscript written in 1889), Certified copy of the original in the hand of

a doubt, the horrors of the Revolution created a sense of bitterness and unease among the people of Black Mingo.

When the South Carolina legislature convened in January 1782, it became clear that the backcountry, which enjoyed greater representation, shared Black Mingo's angry spirit. As a result, the legislature immediately passed a series of acts banishing former Tories from the state and providing for the confiscation of their property. Voicing support for these measures, the people of Prince Frederick's Parish submitted a petition to the House in 1783 asking that no amnesty be granted and that the new laws be strictly enforced. In no uncertain terms, the petition read, "[W]e Shudder at the Very thought of your giving those abandoned, Selfmurdering Wretches a Sanction of taking us by the Hand as Friends. . . ." It continued, "We do Recommend that . . . the Confiscation Bill . . . be Supported & Strengthened." Captain John Brockinton certainly fell subject to such measures. His name remained on the "confiscation and banishment lists" for the duration of the postwar years. Although he submitted a petition for relief in 1783, the House dismissed it. A petition presented the same year by the five children of Adam Cusack no doubt hurt Brockinton's cause. Bitter memories of Brockinton's role in the execution of Cusack carried over into the measures enacted against him in its aftermath.[27]

The punitive language of post-Revolutionary laws did not necessarily carry over into their enforcement, however. As Rachel Klein notes, "[I]n practice the state's policy toward former loyalists was more lenient than it appeared." In all likelihood, John Brockinton continued to live in hiding at or near his home in Black Mingo. According to one account, Brockinton did in fact lose much of his unfixed property, but not as a direct result of confiscation: his property simply got lost "in moving it from place to place to keep it out of the reach of the officers charged with the execution of the . . . law." In Brockinton's case, the old adage that time heals all wounds proved partially true. By 1786 the residents of Black Mingo had arrived at the conclusion that Brockinton had suffered long enough. In that year, two petitions were sent to the legislature. In the first, John Brockinton again appealed to the assembly for relief. He pleaded for sake of his "unhappy wife & several helpless children" who had been "reduced from Easy Circumstances to Misery & Want." He expressed "heart-felt sorrow" that they should suffer on his behalf and requested a mitigation of his sentence.

William H. Chandler, Hemingway, S.C.; James, *A Sketch of the Life of Brig. Gen. Francis Marion*, 58; Otis B. Prince, "One of Carolina's Colorful Families," *South Carolina Magazine* 32 (Sept. 1968): 12.

[27] Easterby et al., eds., *Commons Journal, 1783-1784*, 103-104, 135; Yates Snowden, ed., *History of South Carolina*, 5 vols. (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Company, 1920), 449-458; Prince, "One of Carolina's Colorful Families," 12.

In the second petition, the leading men of Black Mingo argued on behalf of Brockinton's family. The petitioners identified themselves as "willing to forget & forgive the injuries done by those who rendered themselves obnoxious to this Commonwealth." More than eighty individuals signed the petition, including Patrick Dollard, respected "Patriot of '76."[28]

Although the legislature left no record of its action, family historian Otis Prince found that Brockinton's "estate was put in trust for his children, [and] he was allowed to live with his neighbors, but he could not own any more land." Of course, some tension continued in the community. The in-laws of Captain Brockinton's son, for instance, would not allow any property to pass to their daughter until the old Tory's death. Brockinton himself never completely reformed either. His great-grandson, John Gotea Pressley, recorded one episode in the family journal: "When [two of Marion's former officers] came into town, [Brockinton] would dress his two young sons in British uniform and have them show themselves to the two old whigs that he might enjoy their anger."[29]

Postwar trauma influenced events beyond the community as well. Having bought their freedom at so dear a price, the inhabitants of Black Mingo remained suspicious of the national government proposed by the Constitution. The rest of the lowcountry could not identify with these apprehensions, for as Nadelhaft points out, "The reign of terror that prevailed in the backcountry and parts of Georgetown scarcely touched the lowcountry." He goes on to argue that this "difference was crucial in determining some post-war disagreements." Nadelhaft's reasoning holds true when measuring support for the Constitution. In respect to the Constitution, "the lowcountry was for it and the upcountry was against it." Here, again, Black Mingo identified more readily with backcountry. When the people of Prince Frederick's Parish sent Patrick Dollard to the Constitutional Convention, he had no question as to which way his constituents intended him to vote. As his previously mentioned speech clearly demonstrates, they adamantly opposed ratification. Dollard explained, "They are nearly all, to a man, opposed to this new Constitution, because, they say, they have omitted to insert a bill of rights therein, . . . establishing the unalienable rights of men, without which . . . there can be no liberty and over which it is not necessary that a good government should

[28]Klein, *Unification of a Slave State*, 121; Petition of John Brockinton, Feb. 2, 1786, SCDAH; Petition of Inhabitant of Blk. River and Part Ajacent [*sic*], Feb. 2, 1786, SCDAH.

[29]Pressley, "The Pressley Family Journal," 3-4. In an interesting aside, Prince explains the evolution of the family name from "Brockinton" to "Brockington": "To pay tribute to their progenitor, some of his descendants changed the spelling of their name to BROC-KING-TON, the descendants whose ancestor was loyal to the KING." Prince, "One of Carolina's Colorful Families,"12.

have the control." Overall, the representatives of Prince Frederick's Parish voted to support the Constitution by a narrow vote of 4-3. This vote, however, stands in contrast to that of the neighboring coastal parishes, Prince George Winyah and All Saints, both of which supported ratification unanimously. In the end, the convention approved the Constitution without much aid from the backcountry. Perhaps the ratification of the first Ten Amendments offered the inhabitants of Black Mingo some respite.[30]

Having weathered the storm of trauma caused by the Revolution, Black Mingo emerged determined to flourish in the final decades of the eighteenth century. In 1790 the state legislature appointed Captain Anthony White, James Zuill, and Patrick Dollard as commissioners to supervise the reopening of the waterway. The act required every male inhabitant between sixteen and fifty years of age who used the creek to send crops to market "to work on and clear the creek from obstructions, and to open the navigation thereof, from its confluence with Black River to Black Mingo Bridge." Evidence suggests that residents of Black Mingo took steps toward improving their village as well. Sometime in the late 1780s or early 1790s, developers drew up a plan for the village, dividing the settled area on the south side of the bridge into systematic streets and lots. One might well surmise that the village first assumed the name "Willtown" concurrently with this organized plan for development. By 1792, Willtown, or some variant spelling of the name, had become standard usage in the community. An advertisement for a sheriff's sale several years later referred to "four Lots of Land in Wilton, on Black Mingo, known in the *plan of said place* by the numbers 17, 25, 26, and 34" (emphasis added). Apparently, physical evidence of this town scheme existed until the late nineteenth century. In 1893 the Reverend J. L. Rollins, recalling his visits to Black Mingo, wrote, "There are no signs of a town to be seen there now, except that the old trees show some signs of having been systematically set out in streets." Although an extant copy of the Willtown plan has not yet surfaced, one may safely argue that residents had high hopes for their village in the years following the Revolution.[31]

Residents had good reason to be optimistic. To begin with, Black Mingo continued to serve as a focal point for transportation. Multiple travelers of note passed through Willtown during these years. Francis Asbury, a

[30] Nadelhaft, "The 'Havoc of War' and its Aftermath," 98, 103; Lawrence S. Rowland, "The South Carolina Lowcountry During the Ratification of the United States Constitution," in *With Liberty and Justice: Essays on the Ratification of the Constitution in South Carolina* (Columbia: SCDAH, 1989), 1; Elliot, *The Debates in the Several State Conventions on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution*, 4: 337, 340.

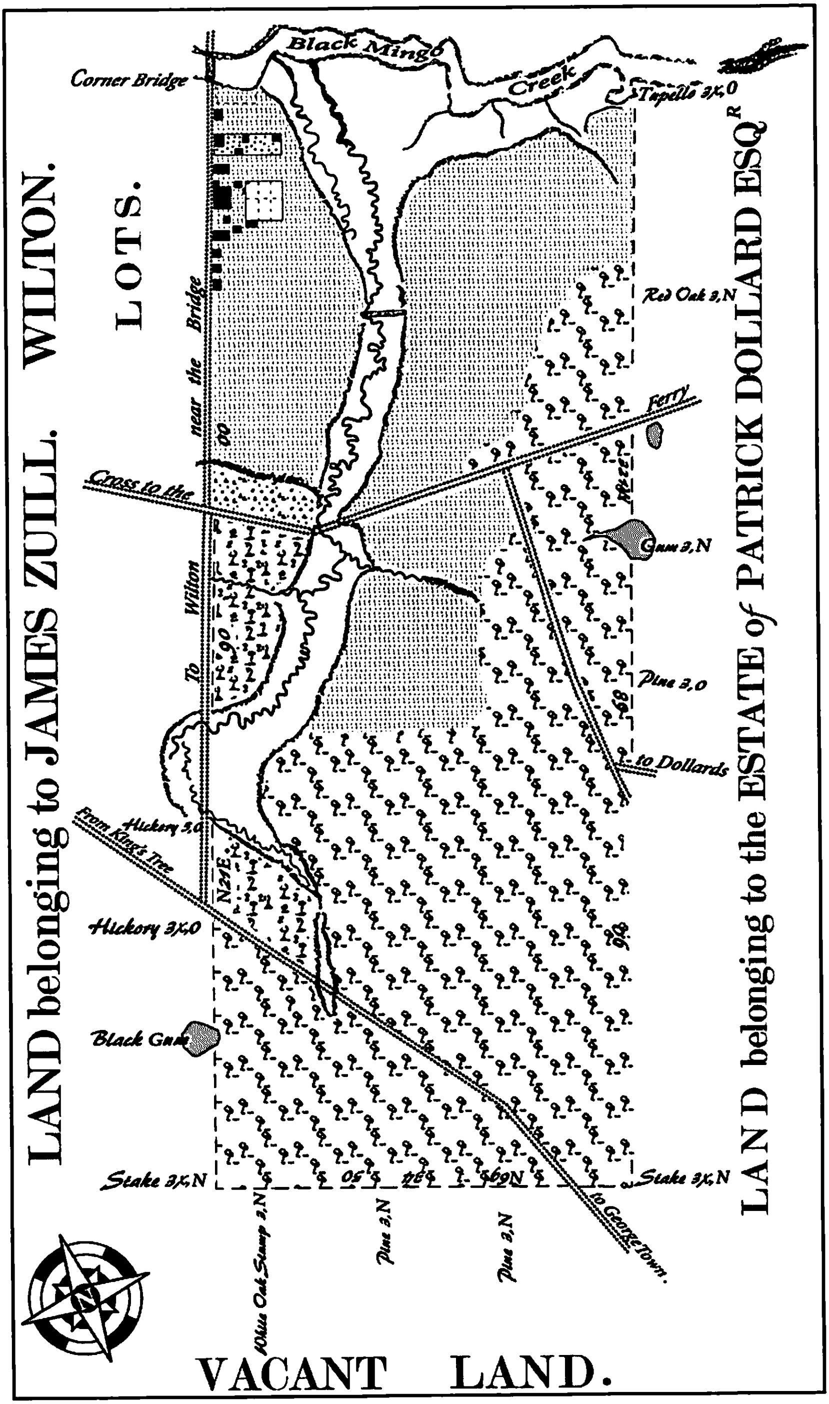
[31] Cooper and McCord, eds., *Statutes at Large*, 5: 147, 7: 560. For an early reference to Willtown, see *Georgetown Gazette*, Sept. 15, 1792. For references to the town plan, see *Georgetown Gazette*, May 13, 1801. J. L. Rollins, *Baptist Courier*, Sept. 14, 1893.

respected Methodist minister, often followed this route when riding the circuit through the southern states. In January 1786 he lodged at a Black Mingo tavern, perhaps Patrick Dollard's, where he recorded being "well used." A winter storm may have forced the minister to take shelter, for he added, "Sleeping upstairs, I was afraid the shingles, if not the roof of the house, would be taken away with the wind." Bishop Richard Whatcoat, traveling with Asbury though Black Mingo in 1790, left his impression of the Willtown-Georgetown highway: "Never Do I Remember Riding Forty miles on So fine and Levil a Rode Shaded by Statly pines a Great part of the way." In 1804 the famous architect Robert Mills stopped at Willtown for supper. Unimpressed with its buildings, he referred to the village as "a small settlement of about a dozen indifferent wooden houses built mostly on one street. . . ." Prices, however, remained high. Mills complained, "The tavern at the village gave us very indifferent fare, particularly in respect to the cooking, but they took care to make us pay as tho' we had eaten down a table spread with luxuries."[32] Whether or not its visitors always enjoyed their room and board, Willtown offered secure lodging and adequate refreshment in a region otherwise known for its dark, desolate rural landscape.

Village life offered other benefits as well. For example, Willtown may have contained one of the earliest Masonic lodges in the area. In 1861 a resident of Kingstree recorded that his mother had told him of a lodge in existence at the turn of the century "at Black Mingo, a small town in the lower part of the District, which met over a store." If so, John Brockinton had surely been a member, for his epitaph identifies him as a "member of the

[32] Elmer T. Clark, J. Manning Potts, and Jacob S. Payton, eds., *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury* (Nashville: Epworth Press, 1958), 1: 483, 493, 505, 535, 592, 624, 705, 2: 424, 627; Richard Whatcoat, "The Journal of Bishop Richard Whatcoat," chap. 5 in *The Methodists*, vol. 4 of *Religion on the American Frontier: 1783-1840*, ed. William Warren Sweet (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), 93; Robert Mills, "Letters From Robert Mills," *South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine* 39 (1938): 115. Local tradition has it that Aaron Burr often stopped at Willtown on the way to visit his daughter Theodosia Burr Alston on Waccamaw Neck, but this author can find no evidence to substantiate the claim.

Opposite page: **Figure 3. An 1805 "Plan of Three Hundred and Eight Acre^{s}, Two Roads, and Thirty Eight Perches, of Land belonging to the Estate of Cap^{t}, John Brockinton dec^{d}, and Resurveyed at the request of M^{rs}, Martha Brockinton Admt^{x}. Situate on the South side of Black Mingo Creek, in Williamsburg County, and State SOUTH CAROLINA. . . ." The village of Willtown is in the upper left corner. Adapted from an original plat in the collection of Gordon B. Jenkinson, Kingstree, S.C.**


LAND belonging to JAMES ZUILL.
WILLTON.
LOTS.
LAND belonging to the ESTATE of PATRICK DOLLARD ESQ^R
VACANT LAND.
Black Mingo
Creek
Corner Bridge
Red Oak 3,N
Ferry
Gum 3,N
Pine 3,O
to Dollards
Cross to the
To Wilton near the Bridge
From King's Tree
Hickory 3X,O
Black Gum
Stake 3X,N
Stake 3X,N
to George Town.
Pine 3,N
Pine 3,N
White Oak Stump 3,N

Ancient and Venerable Masonic Society. . . ." Additionally, the taverns of Willtown provided entertainment for locals as well as travelers. Dr. Samuel McGill recorded the story of a local school master who went into Willtown every Friday "to drink rum and play cards till Sunday evening." One night, the professor became so intoxicated that he mistakenly opened the trap door of an old well and fell down the shaft. Disturbed by muffled cries during the night, town residents searched for the source of the noise the following morning. Finding the school master "safe in limbs" at the bottom of the well, they "restored him with stimulants" and put him on his way. Relatively speaking, village life had its attractions.[33]

Black Mingo's location on the fringe of lowcountry settlement had contributed to its livelihood since its establishment. Even when the village attracted Tory troops during the Revolution, it reinforced the notion that Black Mingo occupied something of a strategic position. In the 1790s the residents of Willtown recognized yet another strength of their location: the village existed at the geographic center of Georgetown District. In order to understand the importance of this fact, one must first understand the structure of local government in South Carolina at the time. In 1769 the assembly passed a circuit court act providing for seven judicial districts, three in the lowcountry and five in the backcountry. In the backcountry, the act designated a town near the heart of each district as a seat of justice. In the lowcountry, the coastal cities of Beaufort, Charleston, and Georgetown became district seats. In an effort to address backcountry demands for more responsive local government, the state carved counties out of the existing districts in 1785. In the lowcountry, however, where parishes remained strongest, the counties failed to become viable entities.[34] In respect to the distance and difficulty of travel to the center of justice, the people of Georgetown District might arguably have been the most disadvantaged in South Carolina. Without the benefit of counties, and with the seat of justice located in the southeastern corner of the district, the inhabitants of Georgetown had good reason to demand a relocation of the district seat. Recognizing the potential for their centrally located village, the residents of Willtown took action.

[33] Albert G. Mackey, *The History of Freemasonry in South Carolina, From Its Origin in the Year 1736 to the Present Time* (1861; reprint, Walker, Evans and Cogwell, 1936), 556; *Georgetown Gazette*, Nov. 25, 1801; McGill, *Narrative of Reminiscences of Williamsburg County*, 171.

[34] The 1785 act allowed for the following counties (in name only) within Georgetown District: Liberty, Kingston, Winyaw, and Williamsburgh. Michael E. Stauffer, *The Formation of Counties in South Carolina* (Columbia: SCDAH, 1994), 2-3, 8-12.

As early as 1792 the inhabitants of Black Mingo petitioned the legislature to make Willtown the seat of justice for Georgetown District. Although this early petition does not survive, a report from the commission appointed to investigate the situation does. On October 22, 1792, the commission met at Black Mingo "for the purpose of fixing upon the most Eligible place . . . for holding the Court of Justice & Keeping the Public offices" of the district, but delegates from the Georgetown area refused to attend. Without a quorum present, the commission could come "to no conclusion relative to the business." Therefore, in 1794 the residents of Willtown petitioned the assembly a second time. Referring to Cook's 1773 map of South Carolina, the signers argued that "Blackmingo is considerably nearer to the Geographical center of the District than any other place pitch'd upon or mentioned as proper for the seat of justice." They highlighted Willtown's good roads and accessible waterway and declared: "Wiltown itself is already a considerable Village containing from twelve to fifteen houses, is in a good situation for trade, is in a thriving condition and at this moment affords plentiful accommodations at a cheap rate." Acknowledging that a site near Port's Ferry might be proposed as an alternative, the people of Willtown dismissed it as an "old field" of "nothing but Broom grass."[35]

If the residents of Port's Ferry produced any documents in rebuttal, they do not survive in the House Journal. The wealthy merchants and planters of Georgetown, on the other hand, quickly countered with a petition of their own. They humbly denied any goals of "self interest," but pointed out that it would be "extremely troublesome for Merchants and other persons to be lugging their Books so great a distance into the pine woods. . . ." Sharing Willtown's distaste for Port's Ferry, they concluded, "[Should] your honorable house think it absolutely necessary that [the Court House] be removed then we pray that it may be placed at Black Mingo." The legislature referred the matter to a committee which issued a report on May 6, 1794. In its statement, the committee recognized that "Will Town at Black Mingo is at present the most eligible & Convenient place." Nevertheless, the members worried that any decision might be "attended with Altercation and Dissension between the Inhabitants of the Different parts of the District." As a result, the committee decided to postpone the

[35] Hugh Giles served as chairman of the unsuccessful commission of 1792. Report of the Georgetown District Commissioners, October 22, 1792, SCDAH; Petition from the Inhabitants of Georgetown District, n. d. [undoubtedly 1794], SCDAH; Thompson et al., eds., *House Journal, 1792-1794*, 493-494.

question. The powerful gentry of Georgetown must have successfully wielded their influence on the House.[36]

Despite these setbacks, the boosters of Black Mingo refused to give up. In 1796 they again appealed to the legislature for redress. Using much the same argument as before, but adding that Willtown afforded "the best accommodations & Entertainment," they begged for a reconsideration of their case. The government did not respond. Several years passed. Then, in 1800, the legislature carved Marion District out of the northwestern portion of Georgetown District. The rest of the district, including Black Mingo, received no relief. Reinvigorated by this denial of justice, the people of Willtown circulated three sets of petitions among the inhabitants of western Georgetown District (or Williamsburgh County election district) in 1801. One signer revealed his impatience with the assembly by striking the words "as to your superior judgment shall think best" from two of the petitions. Later that year, the legislature complied with half of the request by creating Horry District in the northeastern corner of Georgetown, but again it left the southern portion of the district untouched. When the House Judiciary Committee met in 1801 and 1802, it maintained that a removal of the seat of justice from Georgetown to Willtown would not "afford sufficient relief . . ."[37]

While waiting on the legislature to make up its mind, the people of Black Mingo experienced difficult years. To begin with, the South Carolina indigo industry totally collapsed in the 1790s. Following the American Revolution, indigo planters no longer enjoyed the security of the protected British market. The British preferred to trade within the empire, and East Indian planters moved in to fill the gap. French and Spanish colonies had always produced a superior dye, and with rising costs and constant environmental hazards, South Carolinians could no longer compete. The planters on Black Mingo Creek must have felt the crunch of the unfavorable world market. Additionally, many of Willtown's leading figures passed away around the turn of the century. Patrick Dollard and John Brockinton, for instance, died in 1800 and 1801, respectively. Moreover, no evidence

[36] Petition of Sundry Inhabitants of Georgetown District, May 1794, SCDAH. Colonel John Baxter served as chairman of the committee that considered the issue in 1794. Other members included Colonel Horry, Mr. William James, Mr. Foxworth, Mr. John James, Jr., Mr. Falconer, Mr. Hunt, Mr. Gavin Witherspoon, and Mr. Robert Witherspoon. Thompson et al, eds., *House Journal, 1792-1794*, 494, 506, 511; Report from the Committee on Sundry Petitions from the Inhabitants of Georgetown District, May 6, 1794, SCDAH.

[37] Petition of Sundry Inhabitants of Georgetown District, Dec. 2, 1796, SCDAH; Six Petitions of the Sundry Inhabitants of Williamsburgh County, 1801, SCDAH; Report of the Judiciary Committee, Dec. 4, 1801, SCDAH; Report on the Petitions of Inhabitants of Winyaw, Allsaints, Williamsburgh, & Prince George, 1802, SCDAH.

exists that the developers of Willtown had successfully encouraged a fresh influx of town settlers. As Robert Mills's observations in 1804 illustrate, the town had grown little over the last several years. At the same time, roads had improved throughout the region. New highways connected various inland settlements to each other and to the coast, oftentimes bypassing the old Black Mingo crossing. Indeed, a second crossing, approximately one mile below Willtown, connected intersecting trails in a more direct fashion. Black Mingo Creek, often clogged by fallen trees, had become less important as a transportation route. These factors help to explain Willtown's sustained attempt to become the seat of justice for Georgetown District. Districts seats attracted people and business. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Willtown sorely needed both.[38]

When the legislature finally turned its attention to Georgetown District in 1804, it did not do so in the way that Willtown residents had hoped. Instead of moving the district seat to a more central location, the assembly decided to split Georgetown District down the middle. The two new districts followed the lines of the functionless counties created in 1785. The western half of Georgetown District became Williamsburgh District, with its seat at Kingstree, while the eastern half (which included all of old Winyaw County) remained Georgetown, with its courthouse in the city of the same name. By following the road that crossed Black Mingo Creek one mile below the village at Shepherd's Ferry, the boundary line of Williamsburgh District barely included Willtown.[39] In the end, Willtown found itself stuck in the middle between two districts, and the middle was no longer an advantageous place to be. Willtown's unsuccessful bid for the seat of justice turned out to be its last opportunity to capitalize on its location.

Without the economic boost that new district offices would have provided, Willtown continued on its path of decline. Some residents died and others departed. With the future of the little village in doubt, no one moved in or bought lots. In 1811 the Senate Committee on Roads issued a report in which it recommended bypassing the public road through Willtown

[38] Sharrar, "The Indigo Bonanza in South Carolina, 1740-1790," 455; John J. Winberry, "Reputation of Carolina Indigo," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 80 (1979): 249. Patrick Dollard's eulogy described him as a "useful citizen, a friend to liberty and good order, and steady to the trust imposed in him.... As a neighbor and friend he was famous for his hospitality, to the traveler, whether rich or poor, his door was always open, and his table covered." *Georgetown Gazette*, March 5, 1800. John Brockinton's death notice states, "The loss of this irreparable character was, with deep regret, impressed on the minds of his family and acquaintances, in general." *Georgetown Gazette*, Nov. 25, 1801. Robert Mills, "Map of Williamsburgh District, South Carolina," in Mills, *Atlas of the State of South Carolina* (N. p. 1825).

[39] Stauffer, *The Formation of Counties in South Carolina*, 13.

and establishing a better road across Black Mingo Creek below the village. The committee offered twelve reasons to support its proposal. In short, the report stressed the decay of the Willtown bridge and the problems associated with the swampy land across from the village. It also pointed out that the water level had fallen, making it impractical to preserve navigability above the new crossing. The new road also followed the district line, which allowed for funding from both Williamsburgh and Georgetown Districts. The legislature immediately complied with the committee's recommendation and discontinued the public road leading over the causeway at Willtown. It also established as public the road crossing the creek below the village. Two years later it followed up this act by discontinuing additional roads connecting Willtown to the public highway.[40]

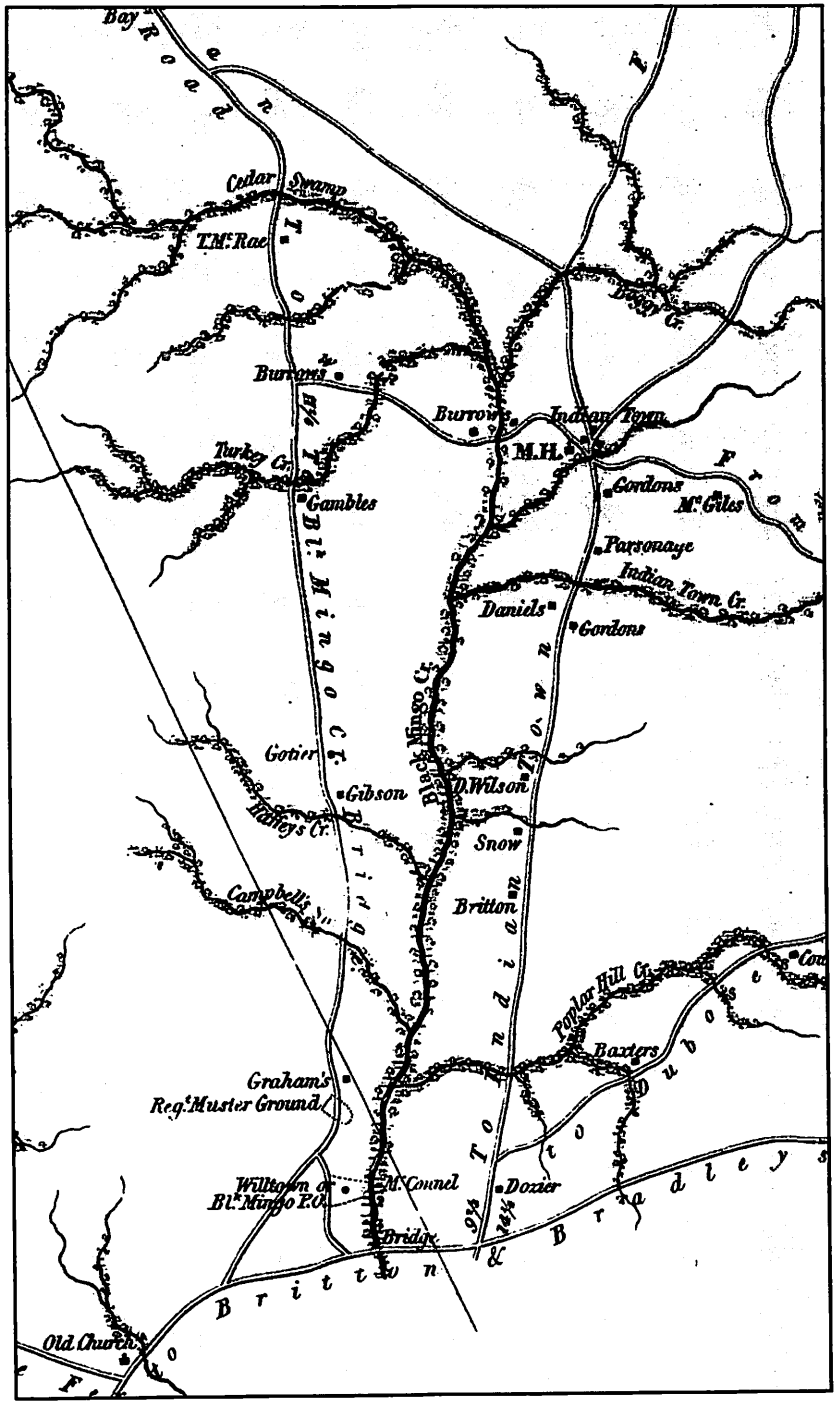
For several years after these road closures, inhabitants of the Black Mingo area littered the assembly with petitions. In general, different people expressed a variety of views over which roads to open or to close. According to William W. Boddie, disputes arose as the result of a feud between John Dozier and Thomas McConnell, both local planters with interests at stake in the road issue. Although the details of the debate remain confusing, its detrimental effect on the remnants of the village goes without question. Suffice it to say that roads leading to Willtown remained closed, while the legislature continued to support the new Black Mingo crossing. Without secure public access, the village had no chance of revitalization. A later petition noted that "in the year 1813, Mr. Thomas McConnell [was] the only resident of Willtown, Black Mingo." This petition may have exaggerated the situation, but for all practical purposes, the village of Willtown ceased to exist.[41]

From its rise in the middle of the eighteenth century to its fall in the early 1800s, Willtown reflected the changes in its geographic situation. First established as a trading post, Black Mingo reaped the benefits of its location on the fringe of lowcountry settlement. It provided a link between the coast and the frontier, often enjoying the best of both worlds. The area offered an

[40] Report of Senate Committee on Roads, July 26, 1811, SCDAH; Cooper and McCord, eds., *Statutes at Large*, 9: 461, 465.

[41] Boddie, *History of Williamsburg*, 253; Petition of Sundry Citizens of Williamsburgh and Georgetown Districts, Sept. 24, 1832, SCDAH.

Opposite page: **Figure 4. Willtown and the Black Mingo watershed from Robert Mills's map of Williamsburg District. By the time of the survey in 1820, Willtown, bypassed by the public roads, had become a ghost town. From the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society.**


Bay Road
Cedar Swamp
T.M. Rae
Burrows
Burrows
Indian Town
M.H.
Turkey Cr.
Gambles
Gordons
M. Giles
Parsonage
Indian Town Cr.
Daniels
Gordons
Gotier
Gibson
D. Wilson
Snow
Britton
Poplar Hill Cr.
Baxters
Graham's
Reg. Muster Ground
Willtown or Bl. Mingo P.O.
M. Connel
Dozier
Bridge
Britton & Bradleys
Old Church

enterprising atmosphere without frontier lawlessness, a parish structure without an established church, and respectable incomes for many without concentration in the hands of a few. Planters and merchants made their livings in the same vicinity: fertile soil and water transportation encouraged the production of indigo and naval stores, while traffic fostered business. Willtown's distance from metropolitan areas in the lowcountry had always caused some difficulty, and the Revolutionary War proved particularly trying. Like their neighbors in the backcountry, residents of the creek-side village suffered through an embittering civil conflict. Nevertheless, the people of Black Mingo pulled through, reconciled their differences, and pressed forward with a renewed civic spirit. The postwar years brought a brief period of prosperity, and villagers attempted to seize the moment. Having benefited as the link between coast and interior, Willtown sought to represent both areas as the centralized seat of justice for Georgetown District. Unfortunately for Willtown, the back settlements had come into their own, and the legislature allowed east and west to split the difference in creating the new districts. With location no longer in its favor, Black Mingo slowly dwindled away. The expansion and development of South Carolina left Willtown behind, stranded on the edge of a frontier that no longer existed.