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“The King of England’s Soldiers”: Armed blacks in Savannah and its hinterlands during  
the Revolutionary War Era, 1778-1787.

The Revolutionary War was never simply a struggle between the British on the one side and Americans on the other. Americans themselves were deeply divided about whether a war to achieve independence from Britain was a good, moral, or legal thing to do, and friends, neighbors, and even families split between those loyal to Britain and those supporting the American patriots. Neither was the war of concern only to whites. In the South especially the role of enslaved and free Africans as well as local Native American tribes was of critical importance. If the British managed to secure the support of the Creek, Cherokee and Chickasaw tribes while encouraging slaves to leave their plantations and join the British army in return for a promise of freedom then southern patriots would find themselves in an extremely bad situation. As early as mid-1775 rumors were rife among lowcountry whites that the “administration have it view to send over troops to Carolina, and at the same time to attempt to liberate the slaves & encourage them to attack their masters.”<sup>i</sup> This was a view shared by some slaves. In Colleton County slaves meeting for religious worship were told that the King “was about to alter the world, & set the negroes free” and this view clearly persisted among the enslaved despite the execution of those promulgating the idea.<sup>ii</sup> Rather than passively awaiting liberation some slaves became active participants in the early parts of the Revolutionary War. With the Royal Governor of South Carolina effectively exiled to a ship in Charleston harbor, slaves began to gather on nearby Sullivan’s island in support of him "from whence those villains made mighty sallies, and committed robberies and

depredations on the sea-coast of Christ-Church." The South Carolina "company of foot-rangers" eventually attacked these fugitive slaves "burnt the house in which the banditti were often lodged, brought off four negroes, [and] killed three or four."<sup>iii</sup>

By the end of 1776 South Carolina and Georgia were firmly in American hands, but in December 1778 a British invasion of Georgia succeeded in capturing Savannah, assisted crucially by Quamino Dolly who guided British troops through the swamps to attack the town. When a joint Franco-American force laid siege to Savannah in an attempt to recapture the city the following October their efforts were thwarted, in no small measure because reinforcements from Beaufort, led by sympathetic blacks "plunged through swamps, bogs, and creeks which had never been attempted before but by bears, wolves, and run-away negroes."<sup>iv</sup> About 400 slaves worked on the fortifications of Savannah during the siege and a further 150 were organized into two companies and "armed and equipt as infantry." Among the blacks fed by military supplies during the siege were 54 'volunteer negroes', 218 'black pioneers' and 14 'negroes employed in redoubts.' Governor James Wright later commented that the black soldiers had "contributed greatly to our defence and safety" during the joint Franco-American assault on the city.<sup>v</sup> Not all white Savannahians were so sanguine about the presence of armed blacks in their town. Within a few weeks of the siege of Savannah being lifted Grand Jurors were complaining about "the great number of negroes that are suffered to stroll about, both in town and country, many with fire arms and other offensive weapons committing robberies, and other enormities, to the great terror and annoyance of the inhabitants thereof." The Grand Jury recommended "that those employed upon public

service should wear some badge or mark of distinction whereby they may be known” but this suggestion was not taken up.<sup>vi</sup>

Black troops continued to serve with the British until the evacuation of Savannah (July) and Charleston (December) in 1782. One study of the Hessian regiments serving as part of British forces in America found evidence of more than one hundred black recruits between 1778 and 1783. Although drawn from all over British America the largest single contingent were from South Carolina. One Hessian soldier recorded that large numbers of blacks volunteered for service with the British after the fall of Charleston in 1780, hoping to secure both their freedom and regular food. Most frequently black recruits served as drummers, but a significant number were also used as general laborers and a few served as musketeers in the infantry. This particular study found little evidence of combat mortality amongst black troops, and while disease took a heavy toll it was no worse than that experienced by white troops.<sup>vii</sup> As patriot forces gradually pushed back loyalists to their urban strongholds of Charleston and Savannah in 1781 and 1782, British commanders created a cavalry unit from black volunteers. As late as December 1782 one South Carolina planter complained to the patriot Governor about the activities of upwards of a hundred mounted “Black dragoons who have been out four times within the last ten days plundering & robbing ... last night they came as high as Mrs Godins where they continued from 11 o’clock till 4 this morning, & carried off everything they could ... all her cattle, sheep, hogs, horses.”<sup>viii</sup>

A relatively small number of loyalist blacks left Charleston and Savannah with the British, but far more were left behind to face the wrath of masters. One estimate suggests that 700 black soldiers were serving with British forces in Charleston in

December 1782, leaving British commanders in a quandary about whether to abandon them to patriot forces or to evacuate them. British General Leslie eventually decided to form a portion of his black soldiers into a Carolina Corps that would be relocated to St Lucia. One British officer recalled that “several of the Negroes were returned to their masters, but many of them, which had taken an active part, had made themselves so obnoxious to their former owners, that dreading the severest punishment, they prayed for protection, and to be permitted to follow the Army. Their prayer was granted, and some of them were sent to St Lucia.” Ultimately 264 black soldiers travelled to St Lucia and then on to Grenada, where they performed valuable military service for a number of years before eventually being merged into a West India Regiment. Those evacuated from Charleston evidently took their families with them since a headcount of the Carolina Corps in September 1783 included 56 women and 20 children.<sup>ix</sup>

Black involvement during the Revolutionary war was not limited simply to military service. With planters and overseers often absent either on active service or at political meetings, and the regular patrol system in abeyance, many slaves took the chance to leave their plantations and visit relatives and loved ones. Some travelled to Savannah and Charleston to look for paid employment, while others just took off into the woods. Moreover, during the war both loyalist and patriot forces took slaves from plantations as spoils of war and these slaves trailed behind the army with the equipment and supplies. During the ebbs and flows of the conflict areas that had formerly been under patriot control were conquered by loyalist forces. Plantations owned by patriots were confiscated and their slaves redistributed to loyalists. Where patriot forces struck back and re-took a region those plantations were restored to their former owners along

with the slaves supposed to be there, but of course many slaves were absent and after the war planters expended much effort, often in vain, trying to track down the slaves whom they thought should have been on their properties. Although precise figures do not exist, one historian estimates that roughly 10,000 slaves from Georgia were dislocated during the war, and at least a similar number, if not far more, were dislocated in South Carolina.<sup>x</sup> Some slaves took advantage of the confusion caused by the war to flee into swamps and were able to create their own distinct communities completely separate from white society. One of the largest of these communities formed on islands in the Savannah River, about eighteen miles upstream from Savannah.

These islands had been home to groups of runaway slaves (termed maroons) before. In November 1765 the Georgia House of Assembly was informed “that a number of fugitive slaves belonging to inhabitants of this province have assembled themselves together in the River Swamp on the North Side of the River Savannah from whence they have of late frequently come into the plantations on the South side of the said River and Committed several robberies and depredations.”<sup>xi</sup> The maroons, numbering about forty, in particular targeted cattle, presumably for food. The Governor of Georgia, James Wright, reported to Lt. Governor William Bull of South Carolina that he had dispatched “partys of the Rangers & of the Militia to search every suspected place, where it was thought run away negroes might take Shelter here but not one Negro or Canoe could be found.”<sup>xii</sup> The location of the maroon camp was eventually betrayed by John, “a Negro fellow belonging to M<sup>r</sup> Cuthbert” who reported to his master that he had overheard one maroon plotting to burn down a plantation house and to kill “every white person on the place and also every Negro who should refuse to join him.” John’s testimony suggests

that tensions could sometimes exist between the maroons and plantation slaves. Another slave, Theron, later recounted that he had been kidnapped by a maroon leader who feared “he would inform that he had seen him which would prevent his being able to get away his wife and Children from his Mistresses Plantation.” For six weeks Theron was a member of the maroon band and according to his own testimony was “frequently compelled to go with Partys who were sent out to kill Kattle” on nearby plantations, all the while looking for “a good opportunity” to escape. Theron recalled that the same maroon leader “had sometime before shott a fellow named Cork ... for saying he wanted to go home.” Theron’s testimony, of course, was intended to exculpate himself from any willing participation in the marauding activities of the maroons but is evidence that the relationship between slaves and maroon could, at times, be antagonistic.

With John acting as a guide, a small armed party consisting of “four white Persons and a free Mulatto named William Martin” set out to attack the maroons. Hiding one evening at the “Mouth of a Creek past which the Fugitives must pass” they soon saw “three canoes paddling Softly down the River” which refused to stop when challenged. An exchange of gunfire led the maroons to “abandon their canoes & Jump into the River” using the darkness to escape. Daylight revealed the largest canoe, “smeared with blood,” containing two dead swans, clearly the fruits of a hunting expedition. The small party then “determined to attack their Town” but were barely a quarter of a mile up the creek before they encountered outlying sentries. The sentries then took off into the swamp, leading their pursuers “at least four miles” through difficult terrain that often meant wading through waist-deep water. Eventually they came to the maroon settlement, which was “a Square Consisting of four Houses seventeen feet long and fourteen feet wide”

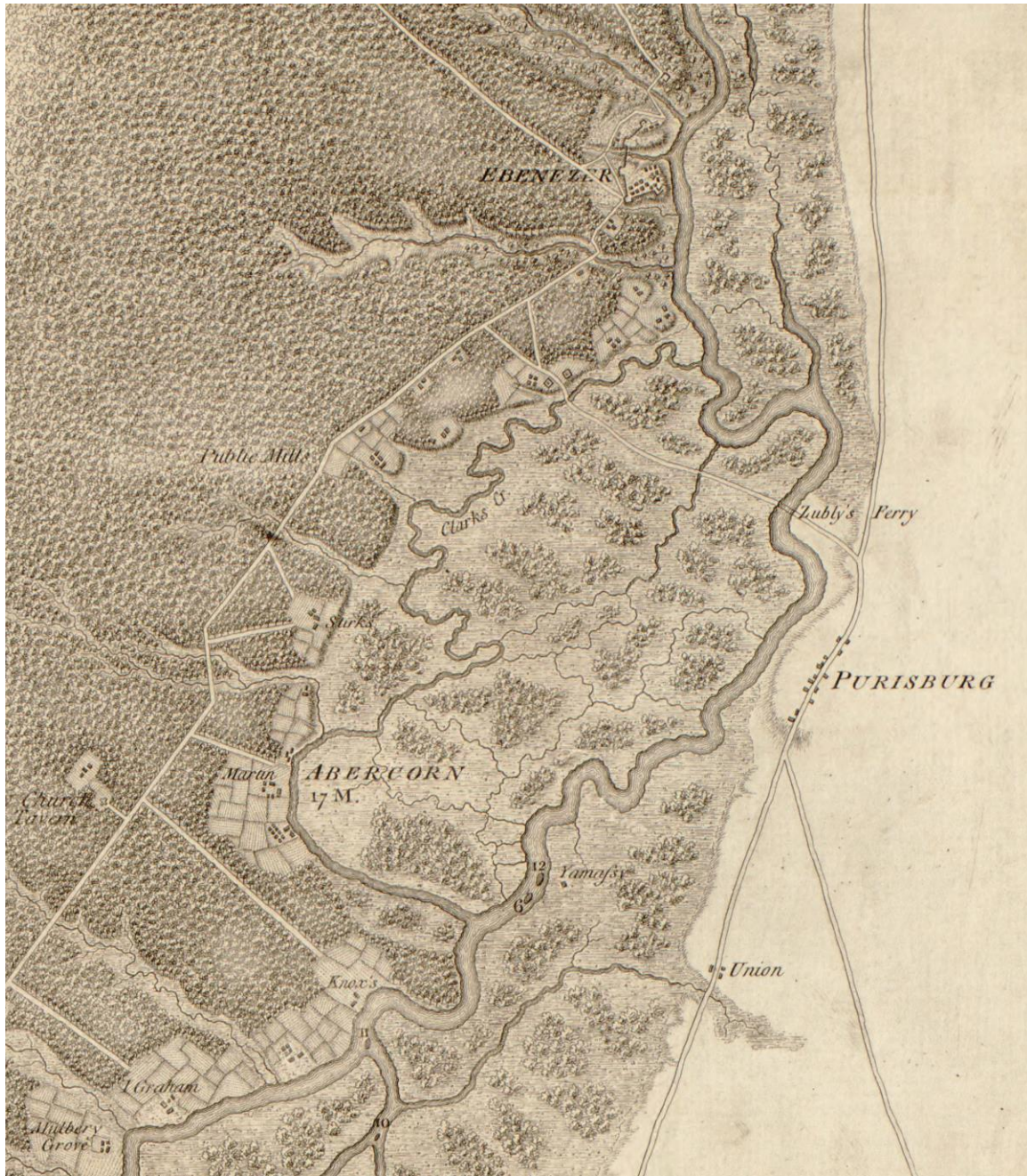
where they found “Two Negroes on a Scaffold one Beating a Drum and the other hoisting of Col<sup>rs</sup>”. On the appearance of the white men the maroons fled further into the swamp, “after discharging their Guns” leaving behind “Kettles [that] were upon the Fire boiling Rice and about fifteen Bushels of rough Rice Blankets Potts Pales Shoes Axes and many other Tools” all of which was destroyed. Among the maroons were “many Negroe men, some women and children,” and the men were well armed, having “at least thirty guns but little powder” and evidently were not afraid to fire on the militia in defence of their settlement.<sup>xiii</sup> It is not known how long these maroons had lived in the swamp, though Governor Wright believed they had been there “for some time past.”

While the expedition of 1765 had destroyed the maroon settlement and a large quantity of supplies, few actual maroons had been captured or killed. Instead they had disappeared deeper into the swamps splitting into small groups that were extremely difficult to find. By 1771 Georgia Governor James Wright was reporting to the provincial council that “a great number of fugitive Negroes had Committed many Robberies and insults between this town and Ebenezer and that their Numbers (which) were now Considerable might be expected to increase daily.”<sup>xiv</sup> Compared to 1765 the maroons were now bolder and had greater self-confidence. As well as raiding nearby plantations for food and supplies the maroons had also burned down a house, killing a white child in the process, intercepted boats on the Savannah River at gun point in order to take “several articles of Value therefrom” and fired on a white man who stumbled upon one of their new camps. The council responded by authorising “the Scout boat to goe up the river Savannah and Search the Creeks & Secret places on the River & Islands as farr as Abercorn Creek in Order to discover & take any of the said fugitive Slaves or their



boats.” It is not known if these measures were successful in locating, capturing or killing the maroons as the colonial records are silent on the matter after 1772.<sup>xv</sup>

The islands in the Savannah River that were a popular refuge are located within a large kink of the river, where it diverts from a direct north – south route to meander northeast towards Purrsburgh before gently meandering back northwest. The main channel of the river forms the eastern side of an oval shaped area of land that is roughly nine miles from north to south and six miles from west to east at its widest extent. The western boundary is formed by Abercorn Creek and Mill Creek (formerly known as Clark Creek), which eventually rejoins the main channel at the top of the oval shape. Big Collis Creek and Bear Creek split this land on a north-south axis, while Little Abercorn Creek links Abercorn Creek and Bear Creek to create three principal islands. Numerous smaller islands bounded by small shallow creeks also exist. Modern maps tend to over-emphasise the main channel of the river at the expense of the other creeks, but a 1780 map shows more clearly that Abercorn Creek was navigable by smaller boats and could be used as an alternative to the main channel of the river.



These river islands were particularly attractive to maroon groups for several reasons. Firstly, being surrounded by water, they were defensible, and all were heavily forested with cypress trees that provided natural cover. The ground was often more swamp than terra firma and in the Spring, when river levels were generally higher than normal, the islands became impassable other than by boat. Maroon settlements were most

likely located on the highest, and therefore driest, places, and dwellings might well have been raised up on stilts. The islands were also home to alligators, water moccasins and eastern diamond rattlesnakes that deterred the casual visitor.

Secondly, these particular islands were large enough to support a significant population of maroons, being roughly 30 square miles in area. Aside from the dangerous fauna mentioned above, the islands also supported a population of turtles and birds, such as geese and ducks, and the creeks offered the opportunity to catch fish. Lowcountry slaves were well accustomed to supplementing their diet by hunting in nearby swamps. Naturalist William Bartram, visiting Jonathan Byran's plantation about eight miles north of Savannah in 1770 observed that "several of his servants came home with horse loads of wild pigeons (*Columba migratoria*), which it seems they had collected in a short space of time at a neighbouring bay swamp: they take them by torch light: the birds have particular roosting places, where they associate in incredible multitudes at evening, on low trees and bushes, in hommocks or higher knolls in the interior parts of vast swamps. Many people go out together on this kind of sport, when dark: some take with them little fascines of fat pine splinters for torches; others sacks or bags; and others furnish themselves with poles or staves: thus accoutered [sic] and prepared, they approach the roosts; the sudden blaze of light confounds, blinds and affrights the birds, whereby multitudes drop off the limbs to the ground, and others are beaten off with staves, being by the sudden consternation, entirely helpless, and easily taken and put into the sacks."<sup>xvi</sup> For slaves skilled in such techniques, surviving in the swamp for longer periods of time was certainly viable. Small plots of cleared land could be planted with vegetables, corn

and rice, all of which slaves were accustomed to growing on plantations, and with a virtually frost-free climate these crops could be harvested for much of the year.

Thirdly, the maroons had found a location that was sufficiently distant from white settlement. Ebenezer was eight miles to the north, while Purrysburgh was four miles to the east on the South Carolina bank of the main channel of the Savannah River. Neither town was of any size. The 1780 map marked a road that crossed the river at Zubley's ferry, eventually meeting the Savannah-Ebenezer road on the other side of the swamp. No other contemporary map showed this road and it does not exist now, suggesting that it might have been a military road used solely during the revolutionary war. One British force had actually traversed the Savannah River very close to where maroons would later take up residence. It is entirely possible that black troops gained first hand knowledge of these islands while still in the King's service.<sup>xvii</sup> The twin roads that ran parallel to the river on either side were at least a mile, and often several miles, from the river itself while the plantations that could be accessed from the roads were few and far between. For the most part the land between the river islands and the roads, especially on the South Carolina side, was simply an extension of the same low swampy ground that characterised the islands. Furthermore, the size of the river islands meant that settlements could be constructed, land cleared and planted with crops without sacrificing secrecy. Even when whites were aware that a maroon settlement existed on the Savannah River islands, they still had to find the precise location by searching an inhospitable environment and navigating almost impassable terrain.

Fourthly the river islands were positioned on a boundary between South Carolina and Georgia where jurisdiction was unclear. The Savannah River formed the boundary

between South Carolina and Georgia and had numerous channels as it neared the sea. The exact demarcation of authority over the marsh lands and islands near the river was unclear and it was not until the Treaty of Beaufort in April 1787 that South Carolina and Georgia came to an agreement on the boundary line.<sup>xviii</sup> With any military action against the maroons involving public expense, both state governments probably hoped that the other would take the initiative and thus pay the bill. It is possible that military authorities on both sides were also cautious about violating the sovereignty of a neighbouring state by sending troops in pursuit of maroons without express permission. The maroons in the Savannah River therefore exploited the jurisdictional confusion in the same way that counterparts did in Hispaniola (between French and Spanish parts of the island) and in Surinam (between British, Dutch and French colonies).

If any further confirmation was needed that the Savannah River islands west of Purrysburgh were an ideal location for a maroon settlement, then one need only realise that these islands have never been settled or built on. Their remote and inaccessible location meant that even planters of the antebellum era never drained and divided up these islands as they did with similar islands nearer Savannah. The pristine landscape became part of the Savannah River National Wildlife Refuge in 1927 and has remained undisturbed by man ever since. Even today there are no roads that enter the swamp, and indeed there are only four bridges over the Savannah River downstream of Augusta.

For former slaves, who had fought for the British at the siege of Savannah and for the ensuing four years, but who had been left behind when the British left, finding a secure refuge where they could maintain their freedom was evidently preferable to the alternative – a return to enslavement on a rice plantation. After the war was over and with

so many slaves missing or removed by the British, planters set about re-stocking their estates with slaves, partly by direct importation from Africa, and partly by trans-shipment from the Caribbean. One estimate suggests that by 1787 the black population of the lowcountry had already reached, and most likely exceeded, pre-war levels.<sup>xix</sup> The slavery experienced by the newly imported was just as harsh, unrelenting, and soul-destroying as it had been before the war. The 1770 act that set out how slaves were to be controlled continued to be the basis of slave law after the revolution and there was little or no amelioration for slaves to come out of the revolution.<sup>xx</sup> German Johann David Schoepf, visiting the South in 1784, believed “The condition of the Carolina negro-slaves is in the general harder and more troublous than that of their northern brethren. On the rice-plantations, with wretched food, they are allotted more work; and the treatment which they experience at the hands of their overseers and owners is capricious and often tyrannical.”<sup>xxi</sup> Another visitor to the lowcountry in the early 1780s, Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, chanced upon a slave gibbeted alive for killing his overseer near Charleston. Local whites told him “that the laws of self-preservation rendered such executions necessary,” since they sent a clear message to other slaves regarding the consequences of resistance.<sup>xxii</sup> Given the regimes most lowcountry slaves endured it is not surprising that a number chose to flee their bondage.

Later sources confirm that black loyalists first took up residence on the Savannah River islands shortly after the British left in 1782, yet little is known about them until late in 1786. Some whites knew, or suspected, the existence of a maroon settlement near Savannah as early as 1783 since James Houstoun’s advertisement for two fugitive slaves, Peter and Jupiter, both coopers, mentioned that “there is great reason to believe they are

harboured by the Abercorn negroes.<sup>”xxiii</sup> In general, however, it seems likely that the settlements they created on the islands remained secret and hidden from white eyes for four years, and that maroons kept a sufficiently low profile so as not to arouse the anger or attention from neighbouring planters. In the aftermath of the British withdrawal the new governments of Georgia and South Carolina struggled to re-establish a normal society and a functioning economy, all the while having to deal with “lawless, savage and unprincipled banditti” that roamed the countryside preying on unwary travellers. General Lachlan McIntosh, on his return to Georgia after two years in British custody, wrote that “no man is safe one night in his house in any part of this state or even in the town Savannah, or travelling a mile upon the roads.”<sup>xxiv</sup> Any problems posed by the maroons in this period were small in comparison. Perhaps four years of tranquillity made the maroons over-confident, or perhaps the original group of former soldiers was augmented by new fugitives who lacked the same cautious approach, but by 1786 the maroons were committing “robberies on the neighbouring planters” and clearly causing enough trouble to be noticed.<sup>xxv</sup> On October 3, 1786 the Grand Jury of Chatham County, Georgia, brought the activities of the maroons into the spotlight by complaining about “large gangs of runaway Negroes” who were “allowed to remain quietly within a short distance of this town, without an attempt of the Militia Officers in the districts where they are ... to subjugate them.”<sup>xxvi</sup> Grand Jury presentments were made to the judges of the superior court who then passed them onto the relevant authorities. Judges took the opportunity in their “charge to the Grand Jury” to mention issues they thought the Grand Jury should take particular cognisance of and in October 1786 Judge Stith highlighted gambling, drunkenness and the condition of the roads as matters “which merit in an especial manner

your very serious consideration” but not the threat posed by maroon gangs. Thus information about the maroons must have come either from a member of the Grand Jury itself or, more probably, from someone who lived outside of the city and whose property had been affected by the actions of the maroons.

Whatever the original source of the information it seems that the Grand Jury’s complaint spurred those in charge of local military units into action since just over a week later a combined force of militia units and the Savannah Light Infantry were involved in an initial skirmish with the maroons. This encounter, which occurred on October 11, 1786, ended inconclusively with ‘three or four’ maroons reportedly killed while a similar number of the militia were wounded. Later the same day a new assault on the ‘out-guards’ posted by the maroons was repulsed after “the Negroes came down in such numbers that it was judged advisable to retire to their boats, from which the Negroes attempted to cut them off.” Only the discharge of an artillery piece from one of the militia’s boats held back the maroons long enough for the soldiers to escape. Clearly these maroons were well armed, aware of the need to post sentries, and sufficiently numerous - “supposed upwards of 100” - as well as being brave enough, to counterattack against armed white soldiers. Aware of the strength of the military forces ranged against them the maroons decided to abandon their camp and retreat further into the swamp. When General Jackson led another sortie against the maroons two days later he found their settlement empty but well-stocked. The maroons had planted several acres of the island with corn and “green rice,” giving them a steady food supply that could be augmented by fishing using the “14 or 15 boats” that Jackson captured. All these supplies, amounting to “as much rough rice as would have made 25 barrels or more if



beat out, and ... about 60 bushels of corn,” were either destroyed or taken. Jackson also “burnt a number of their houses and huts” thus rendering the site uninhabitable, though since white people had been to the camp it clearly was no longer suitable as a secret refuge.<sup>xxvii</sup>

With their settlement destroyed the maroons were forced to raid plantations “from whence they carry off whole stacks of rice at a time to compensate, as they term it, for their incredible magazine of provisions we destroyed at their camp,” and during October and November 1786 they attacked several plantations on both sides of the Savannah River and “are in fact much more troublesome to the citizens than when we routed them.”<sup>xxviii</sup> On November 29, 1786, “upwards of twenty of them armed, attacked the house of Mr Wolmar, with an intention of taking his life & robbed him of every valuable he possessed. Fortunately for himself he was not at home.” Clearly this situation could not be allowed to continue, not just because of the havoc the maroons were wreaking, but also because of the example they were setting to the enslaved population since “the freebooty they reap, and the independent state they are in, have strong charms of allurements, of course, their numbers are daily increasing.” The attacks on the maroons in October 1786 had been led by units from Georgia and therefore the maroons now based themselves in South Carolina “from whence they frequently make irruptions unto Georgia” but felt free to “range at large” on the South Carolina side, “Nigh one hundred of them armed having been seen a few days since, between Purisburgh & the Union.”<sup>xxix</sup> In early December General Jackson wrote to the Governors of South Carolina and Georgia urging concerted action against the maroons “to put a stop to their marauding, as well as to make some severe examples,” and as if to illustrate what he meant by “severe

examples” Jackson casually mentioned that the head of one maroon, killed during a plantation raid, had been “fixed on the western road.” Jackson feared that “If something cannot be shortly done, I dread the consequences - they are as daring as any & from their independent state, from the ease they enjoy in S. Carolina, forbode what I dread to express, a capital insurrection.” Jackson, who had fought in the revolutionary war also warned that the maroons should not be under-estimated since “Their leaders are the very fellows that fought, & maintained their ground against the brave lancers at the siege of Savannah, & they still call themselves the King of England's soldiers.”<sup>xxx</sup> The Governor of Georgia, no doubt alarmed that runaway slaves “have with arms opposed the Militia that have been ordered out to suppress them,” responded immediately to Jackson’s letter with an offer of a £10 reward for each maroon captured or killed but his South Carolina counterpart made no immediate response.<sup>xxxi</sup>

In March 1787 the maroons raided the home of South Carolina planter, John Lewis Bourquin, wounding him the process, and departed with one of his drivers and “ten barrels of clean rice.” Bourquin reported to his representative in the South Carolina legislature that “they have in my hearing threatened the lives of many of the citizens” and he requested that the state take immediate action. In particular he pointed out that the militia were “not willing to go after them, ... as it will require more than a few days to have them entirely extirpated they say there ought to be provisions ordered to be provided for them by the public.” Bourquin also hinted at the connections that most likely existed between maroons and those who remained enslaved. Plantation slaves often supported maroons with food, weaponry and information. Most plantations were too large to be monitored constantly and therefore slaves were able to contact maroons at night on

distant parts of the plantation, especially where there was river access. Bourquin feared that if the maroons were not suppressed then the real danger would come from “our own indoor domestics” emboldened by white inaction and maroon success.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Galvanised into action the government of South Carolina ordered that a hundred “minute men” be engaged, on pay of one shilling per day, for a full month with rations and ammunition provided by the state. For each maroon captured or killed a £10 reward would be payable, matching the proclamation made by the Governor of Georgia the previous December.<sup>xxxiii</sup> To augment the minute men, the government also recruited twenty Catawba Indians. The Catawba had been used to hunt maroons before since their “manner of hunting renders them very sagacious in finding an Enemy by their Track” and also because they were able to “hunt the Negroes in their different recesses almost impervious to White people at that season of the year.”<sup>xxxiv</sup> Once his forces were assembled the leader of the expedition, Colonel Thomas Hutson, faced an obvious problem: how was he to locate and destroy the maroons? He clearly had some intelligence on the movements of the maroons since on April 21, 1787 he was able to send three boats to “waylay” a party of maroons in Collin’s Creek and succeeded in killing several.<sup>xxxv</sup> It was not until May 6, however, that the main encampment of the maroons was located “on the lower side of Bear Creek.” The camp itself “was 700 yds in length, & about 120 in width” and contained twenty-one houses, enough to house up to 200 people though far fewer maroons are mentioned by name in the records, while “The whole of the cleared land was planted in rice and potatoes.” This camp was even larger than the one destroyed the previous October, and is evidence of the speed with which maroons could construct settlements. Surrounding the camp was “a kind of breech work

about 4 feet high” constructed out of “logs & cane that came out of the cleared ground,” while the single narrow entrance “would admit but one person to pass at a time.” One hundred and fifty yards down the creek a sentry was posted, and “about two miles below their camp they had fallen large logs across the creek in order to prevent boats passing up (small canoes might pass at high water).”<sup>xxxvi</sup> The maroons were clearly well versed in defensive tactics, as one might expect from “the King of England’s soldiers” who had successfully defended Savannah in 1779. Moreover, several historians have observed that the use of fortified camps was a common tactic in African warfare, and since the enslaved population of the lowcountry was more African than the other significant concentration of slaves in colonial North America in Virginia, it is plausible to argue that the Savannah River maroons were using traditional knowledge to defend their settlements.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Once their defences had been breached, however, the fighting spirit of the maroons quickly evaporated and most escaped “into the swamp firing a few shot at random.” Six maroons were reported killed and their camp was destroyed. A few days later the Effingham County, Georgia, militia encountered a group of eighteen maroons “on their way to the Indian nation” and captured nine of them.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Another week later saw the capture of Lewis, one of the maroon leaders, who was taken to Savannah and put on trial.<sup>xxxix</sup>

The trial record of Lewis provides a vast amount of further information about the internal organisation of the maroon camp and, uniquely, of the personalities of the maroons themselves. Lewis, for instance, stated that he only joined the maroons in 1785 after “his Masters White Overseer used him ill,” an indication that not all the maroons on the Savannah River islands had necessarily served with the British.<sup>xl</sup> The maroon community was not a static institution, rather it grew as children were born or as new

recruits arrived, and shrank as individuals sickened and died or were killed. The self-styled leader of the maroons was Sharper, who “was called Captain Cudjoe” most likely after the leader of the Jamaican maroons who successfully negotiated a treaty with British authorities on the island in 1739 that recognised maroon freedom. Sharper had been taken from a plantation in Colleton District, South Carolina, by British General Provost’s forces during a raid into South Carolina in the spring of 1779. Evidently left behind after the British evacuation Sharper had remained at large in the lowcountry, at one point he was detained in Sunbury twenty miles south of Savannah, before at some point taking up residence in the Savannah River.<sup>xli</sup> Lewis was second in command of the maroons, calling himself “Captain Lewis”, but he and Sharper clearly had an uneasy relationship with Lewis refusing to follow Sharper’s orders on more than one occasion. According to two female maroons who testified at Lewis’s trial, the two leaders “frequently quarrelled,” with one suggesting that it was because Lewis suspected “he did not get his share of plunder,” while the other thought that “Lewis wanted his own people as Sharper took all his men.” Sharper and Lewis “disagreed and Separated” after a local white man, John Casper Hirschmann, was murdered by the maroons.

Hirschmann had encountered the maroons more than once, on one occasion stopping to talk to them from a boat in the Savannah River. The day before he died, Hirschmann had met Lewis and two other maroons in the swamp and “begged” them “to carry him to the Camp... as he wanted Victuals of which he was in search.” Little is known about Hirschmann’s circumstances, but evidently he was not above trading with maroons, and if he was aware of their raids on nearby plantations it did not prevent him trying to make contact. Lewis made Hirschmann wait overnight at a camp-fire before

taking him to the main camp at first light. Sharper was outraged, saying that “Lewis had no business to bring White people to camp” and ordered Hirschmann to be killed immediately. Chicheum, a maroon with possible Native American ancestry judging by his name, shot Hirschmann and dumped his body “in to a pond.” After the murder Lewis “Separated camp with Sharper.”

Other information about maroon life can be gleaned from the trial record of Lewis. The maroons grew rice and corn on the island, but for meat they raided nearby plantations, taking sheep and cattle with apparent impunity. At least eight of the maroons had guns that they used mainly for killing livestock but which, of course, could also be used to defend the camp and to threaten adversaries. Lewis stated that he had “called on M<sup>r</sup> Thomas Pollhill and told him to take Care of the runaway Negroes, or by'e and by'e, they would Come and hurt him.” Raids on plantations not only netted food, but also were opportunities to restock with powder and ammunition, to take clothes – Lewis for example had “a great Coat which he said he got from Lowerman” – and to recruit more slaves. The first skirmish between the maroons and the militia in October 1786 had prevented “Sharper and Lewis going to fetch more of M<sup>r</sup> Guerards hands” though it is not clear if these recruits were volunteers or were to be pressed into joining the maroons.

The two women who testified against Lewis, Juliett and Peggy, had both run away from their plantations together with their husbands within the last year. Phillis, on the other hand, “a stout, strong made wench, ... about 28 years of age” had fled from James Gunn’s Cashall-Hall plantation back in 1783, taking her one-year-old son with her. When she was captured by Capt. Dasher in 1787, she still had the boy with her, now named “Sharper” suggesting that his father might have been the maroon leader.<sup>xlii</sup> Life among

the maroons was clearly gendered: “all the women Stayed in Camp” planting rice while the men conducted raids on nearby plantations and organized the defence of the settlement. None of the women had guns and when the militia attacked one of Sharper’s first orders was to send “all the women in the canes” to hide. When the battle was lost the maroons scattered and attempted to flee northeast, away from the concentration of white settlement in the lowcountry and toward land still occupied by the Creek and Cherokee. Not all made it, but of the ten maroons listed in the newspapers as being captured by the militia nearly all were female who may not have been able to travel as quickly as the men, and at least one had a child with her. The only man recorded as being captured was Lewis, but he was travelling south towards “his Master’s Mills on Ogeechee,” perhaps hoping to blend back into the slave population as an ordinary runaway and not a maroon leader. He was “taken by two negroes belonging to M<sup>r</sup> Bird” before he reached his destination, and the fact that he was captured by two slaves is further evidence that racial solidarity had its limits. Even if these two slaves were sympathetic to those resisting slavery, once the maroons had been forced to abandon their island refuge it was clear that their cause was finished. It is also possible that the increased vigilance of whites, caused by their fear of what the maroons might encourage domestic slaves to do, caused resentment among those remaining on plantations. When maroons raided plantations for food, supplies and recruits, those most likely to suffer were the slaves, either because the master suspected them of colluding with the rebels, or because there was now simply less food on the plantation.

Lewis’s trial for the murder of John Casper Hirschmann, and three counts of robbery, took place before four justices of the Chatham County Inferior Court. A jury of

seven was selected to hear the case, and so far as the trial record indicates only three people testified: Lewis himself, Peggy and Juliett. It did not take the jury long to convict Lewis of all charges, even though it seems likely that he did not actually commit the murder. Even if he had been acquitted of the murder the outcome would have been same as the robbery charges also merited a death sentence. The justices ordered that “the Negroe Lewis to be hanged on the South Common by the Neck until he shall be Dead on the Ninth day of June next at ten o'clock in the Morning; After Which his head to be Cut of and Stuck upon a pole to be sett up on the Island of Marsh opposite the Glebe land in Savannah River.” By ordering the mutilation of Lewis’s corpse, the justices were following the 1770 Act “for the better governing of Negroes” which ordered that the “manner of death” in capital cases involving slaves should be the one judged “most effectual to deter others from offending in like manner.”<sup>xliii</sup>

The 1770 act also ordered that all capital sentences had to be approved by the Governor, and therefore all relevant documents relating to the trial were sent to Augusta. The state’s executive council “approved the sentence” and issued a warrant for the execution of Lewis on the day appointed. A terse report in the local newspaper the following week stated “Last Saturday Lewis, one of the head-men of the camp of runaway negroes lately broke up, was executed pursuant to his sentence.”<sup>xliv</sup> Two years later Lewis’ owner, Oliver Bowen, was awarded £40 compensation by the state for his executed slave. Requests from other slaveholders for compensation for slaves “killed among the Runaway Negroes” were rejected as the state made a distinction between slaves executed after a trial according to the 1770 act and those killed while “in arms against this state.”<sup>xlv</sup>



The destruction of the maroon camp in the Savannah River in May 1787 and the dispersal of the maroons themselves, seems to mark an end to the use of these islands as refuges for large numbers of slaves. No doubt individuals, and perhaps small groups, fled into the swamps for as long as slavery persisted in the South. As late as 1823 newspapers were reporting that "A correspondent in Purysburg informs us, that a number of armed negroes were encamped in that neighborhood, and that several gentlemen had gone in pursuit of them."<sup>xlvi</sup> This was an isolated report however, and there are no records to suggest that the militia and the state governments had to mount large-scale expeditions against armed slaves on the Savannah River as they had done in 1787. If the maroons numbered "upwards of 100," as reports suggested, the militia actually killed very few. Just £60 was paid out by the South Carolina government, equating to six deaths, and only a small number were reported in the press as being captured.<sup>xlvii</sup> It seems likely, therefore, that the majority of the maroons succeeded in escaping to the northwards and avoided a return to slavery.

After the chaos of the revolutionary war the removal of the maroons in the Savannah River marks a completion of the process of re-establishing racial slavery in the lowcountry that had been in progress since 1782. The "general asylum" offered by the maroons to any prospective runaways was a challenge that could not be ignored. Lowcountry planters were well aware of the situation in Jamaica and in Surinam where maroon groups had "fixed and fortified the recesses... and opposed and harrassed their masters until they were obliged to treat with them; and they are now an actual independent colony." Thus "to have despised or neglected" the Savannah River maroons might have led to a situation where independent maroon communities became so strong

that even “the best stationary regiments could not subdue them.”<sup>xlviii</sup> The effort put into the destruction of the maroons -- whereby two state governments together provided more than a hundred troops and recruited a party of Catawba, all of whom had to be paid or rewarded as well as supplied with food, and drink -- was considerable. The South Carolina government alone paid out £241 for supplies, with soldier’s pay being in addition to that.<sup>xlix</sup> Such sums are evidence how seriously the threat posed by maroons was taken in societies where the entire economy was constructed around racial slavery. By eliminating the maroon threat white authorities had reasserted their control over African Americans and ensured that whatever future resistance they encountered from the enslaved, and it would be varied and widespread, it would ultimately be insufficient to challenge the institution of slavery.

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<sup>i</sup> James Wright to Earl of Dartmouth May 25, 1775, U.K. National Archives, London, C.O.5/664, 113.

<sup>ii</sup> Thomas Hutchinson to the Council of Safety, Jul. 5, 1775 in George C. Rogers Jr., David R. Chesnut, & Peggy J. Clark, et al eds., The Papers Of Henry Laurens (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1985), X: 206-8.

<sup>iii</sup> Journal of the Second Council of Safety, Collections of the South Carolina Historical Society (Charleston: South Carolina Historical Society, 1859) III, 102.

<sup>iv</sup> See Benjamin Quarles, The Negro in the American Revolution (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), 144; New England Chronicle, Nov 11, 1779.

<sup>v</sup> Sylvia Frey, Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 97-8. Frey's book remains the best account of the black experience during the revolutionary war. Abstract of the Number of Men women and children, Negroes and prisoners victualled at the commissary general’s stores at Savannah from 11<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> October 1779 in Clinton Papers, William L Clements Library University of Michigan; See also Robert Olwell, Masters, Slaves and Subjects: The Culture of the Power in the South Carolina Lowcountry, 1740-1790. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press,

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1998), 243-281. Minutes of the Governor in Council October 25, 1779, Allen D. Candler, The Colonial Records of the State of Georgia, (Unpublished typescript, Georgia Archives), v.38.2, 230.

vi Royal Georgia Gazette, December 23, 1779

vii George F. Jones, "The Black Hessians: Negroes Recruited by the Hessians in South Carolina and other Colonies" South Carolina Historical Magazine, 83 (Oct, 1982), 287-302; esp 299n25.

viii On the black dragoons see Thomas Bee to Governor John Matthews, Goose Creek, 9 Dec. 1782 in Thomas Bee Papers, South Caroliniana Library and Olwell, Masters, Slaves, and Subjects, 258-260.

ix George F. Tyson, "The Carolina Black Corps: Legacy of Revolution (1782-1798)," Revista/Review Interamericana 5.4 (Winter 1975-76), 648-664, 651 (quote).

x Frey, Water from the Rock, 174

xi Journal of the Commons House of Assembly, 1763-1768. Allen D. Candler, ed., The Colonial Records of the State of Georgia, (Atlanta, Franklin – Turner, 1907), v.14, 292-3.

xii South Carolina Council Journal CO 5/486, 43-50, UK National Archives.

xiii South Carolina Council Journal CO 5/486, 43-50, UK National Archives.

xiv Proceedings and Minutes of the Governor and Council, Dec. 4, 1771. Allen D. Candler, ed., The Colonial Records of the State of Georgia (Atlanta: Franklin-Turner Co, 1907), v. 12, 146-7.

xv Proceedings and Minutes of the Governor in Council, Jul. 7, 1772. Candler, ed., Colonial Records, v.12, 325-326.

xvi William Bartram, Travels through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida. (London: J. Johnson, 1792) 467-8

xvii Betty Ford Renfro, River to River: The History of Effingham County, Georgia (Saline, MI: McMaughton-Gunn, 2005), 10.

xviii The Treaty of Beaufort was signed on Apr. 28, 1787 and reported in the Gazette of State of Georgia, May 3, 1787. See also Louis De Vorse, The Georgia—South Carolina Boundary: A Problem in Historical Geography (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1982).

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<sup>xix</sup> Frey, Water from the Rock, 212. See for example the advertisement for 80 “prime new negroes” in the Gazette of the State of Georgia, March 4, 1784, and for 250 newly imported Africans from Angola in the South Carolina Gazette and General Advertiser April 24, 1784.

<sup>xx</sup> Robert & George Watkins, A digest of the laws of the state of Georgia. From its first establishment as a British province down to the year 1798. (Philadelphia: R. Aitken, 1800), 163-179.

<sup>xxi</sup> Johann David Schoepf, Travels in the Confederation (New York, Bergman Publishers, 1968) v.1, 220.

<sup>xxii</sup> Hector St. Jean de Crevecoeur, Letters from an American Farmer (New York: Fox, Duffield, 1904), 245.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Gazette of the State of Georgia, Dec. 18, 1783.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Frey, Water from the Rock, 208

<sup>xxv</sup> Gazette of the State of Georgia, Oct. 19, 1786. Reprinted in Charleston Morning Post, Oct. 26, 1786; and numerous other newspapers including the Georgia State Gazette, Oct. 28, 1786; Columbian Herald, October 30, 1786; New York Independent Journal, Nov. 8, 1786.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Chatham County Superior Court Minutes, Grand Jury, October Term, 1786. Printed in the Gazette of the State of Georgia, Oct. 19, 1786.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Gazette of the State of Georgia, Oct. 19, 1786.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Joseph Vallence Bevan Papers, Georgia Historical Society, Folder 10 Item 86. Slightly different copy in Telamon Cuyler Collection, Hargrett Library, University of Georgia, Box 82, Folder 1: Slave Rebellion 1786.

<sup>xxix</sup> This could refer either to Union Creek south of Purrysburgh or the Union causeway nearer to Savannah.

<sup>xxx</sup> Joseph Vallence Bevan Papers, Georgia Historical Society, Folder 10 Item 87.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Proclamation Book AAA 1782-1823, 10-11. Georgia Archives. Published in the Gazette of the State of Georgia, Jan. 4, 1787.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Governor’s Messages, 1786-8, No. 459. South Carolina Archives.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Thomas Pinckney Letterbook, 1787-1789, South Carolina Archives.

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<sup>xxxiv</sup> UK National Archives, CO 5/378, 54v/55r. South Carolina Council Journal, Apr. 4, 1769. South Carolina Archives, v.32, 145-6.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Gazette of the State of Georgia, Apr. 26, 1787. This creek is now called Big Collis Creek

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Joseph Vallence Bevan Papers, Georgia Historical Society, Folder 10, Item 84.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Frey, Water From The Rock, 52. Even in the 1780s about a third of the 100,000 slaves in South Carolina had been born in Africa. Philip D. Morgan, Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 58-61

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Gazette of the State of Georgia, May 10, 1787.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Gazette of the State of Georgia, May 24, 1787

<sup>xl</sup> Telamon Cuyler Collection, Box 71, Folder 12: Georgia Slavery Trials, Hargrett Library, University of Georgia.

<sup>xli</sup> Sharper's background comes from the advertisement of William Woodard, Gazette of the State of Georgia, July 24, 1783: "Came to my plantation new Sunbury, a Likely Negro man named Sharper, of a clear black complexion, about 5 feet 8 inches high, says he belongs to the estate of Mr Richard Ash, formerly of Toogadoo, in the state of South Carolina, where the said Negro was plundered and carried off by McGirt on Prevost's going through Carolina in April 1779. Any person claiming said Negro may, on application to the subscriber, and paying for this advertisement, have him. William Woodard, Sunbury, July 21, 1783."

<sup>xlii</sup> Gazette of the State of Georgia, April 28, 1785, Gunn stated that most of the slaves he sought "have been absent 18 months, or two years". Gazette of the State of Georgia, May 17, 1787.

<sup>xliii</sup> Watkins, A digest of the laws, 167.

<sup>xliv</sup> Georgia Executive Council Minutes, 1786-89, May 26, 1787. Georgia Archives. Gazette of the State of Georgia, Jun. 14, 1787

<sup>xlv</sup> Georgia House Journal, 1788, 285-7. Georgia Archives.

<sup>xlvi</sup> Georgian, Mar. 13, 1823.

<sup>xlvii</sup> Governor's Messages, 1788, No. 459. South Carolina Archives

<sup>xlviii</sup> Gazette of the State of Georgia, May 10, 1787.

<sup>xlix</sup> Governor's Messages, 1788, No. 459. South Carolina Archives