

Travel Tales

General Andrew Williamson: “Obnoxious Person”?

by

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Last month I described how I found out that I had an ancestor, Brigadier General Andrew Williamson of the South Carolina Militia during the American Revolution, and how he had turned traitor and joined the British. He was even officially listed as an “obnoxious person” by the South Carolina rebel legislature, and all his property was ordered confiscated. This month I will describe his convoluted and bizarre life story, and how he came to be known as the “Benedict Arnold of South Carolina.”

My research into his life began when I was looking up someone else in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. I thought of Williamson and looked him up too. I was surprised to find a short little entry for someone who seemed quite important and notorious. I started doing my own research, and this is the strange story I pieced together.

Andrew Williamson was born in Scotland, parents unknown, about 1730. He apparently came to America as a youth and settled in upstate South Carolina, as one of the first whites in an area known as the Ninety Six district, which was right on the edge of Indian territory. He started off as a lowly “cattle driver”— an Eastern cowboy – driving cattle as far north as Philadelphia! He was illiterate as a youth and all his life.

He fought the Indians and came to hate them, when an Indian band almost killed him and his family. Despite his illiteracy, he rose in his community, built and supplied several forts, acquired a major plantation and hundreds of acres of land, was elected twice to the South Carolina legislature, and was commissioned as a Major in the South Carolina militia. He was an early supporter of breaking away from British rule, probably because he realized that his isolated part of the state was never going to get any real assistance from London, thousands of miles away. He was a rebel in the kitchen also, since his few letters, apparently written by aides, showed that he was partial to rattlesnake!

When the Revolution began, Williamson was the leader in the first major battle in South Carolina. He fought off a much stronger force of Loyalists, Indians and British troops who besieged his position, known as “Williamson’s Fort.” He had made the mistake of not including a spring or stream inside the walls, but with great initiative he ordered his men to dig down

through forty feet of clay, and he states that, “we got very good Water on the third day of digging.”

In his next major action, in 1776 Williamson led a large expedition of 1500 men against the Indian villages of South and North Carolina. The Indians, at the behest of the British, had started the conflict by attacking settlements from Georgia to Virginia. Williamson was so ruthless in burning over 60 villages, that the Indians were never again a force in South Carolina. About 2000 Indian warriors were killed, compared to only about 50 Patriots. Williamson was promoted to Colonel and given the official thanks of the state legislature. Even his Indian enemies grudgingly respected him. One Indian leader, named “Mankiller,” gave Williamson the name “Warrior Beloved Man” because Williamson was so beloved by his men.



The rest of the war did not go so well for Williamson, even though he was promoted to Brigadier General. He fought in several less successful campaigns, including a disastrous invasion of Florida. By June 1780 it appeared that the British had won the war in the South. They had just captured Charleston and 3000 American troops, perhaps the greatest Patriot defeat of the war. Virtually every American leader in South Carolina threw in the towel. So did Williamson, who renounced the Patriot cause, and gave his word and solemn oath to support the British crown.

However, within a few months the tide of war changed and the Americans started winning battles, while British blunders alienated most of the population. All the Americans who had changed sides switched back. All except one, who decided to honor his oath: Andrew Williamson. For this honorable act he was reviled for the rest of his life.

Almost immediately Williamson was captured by the Americans, who tried to “cajole” him with “soothing and threatening arguments” into breaking his word. But Williamson behaved like a “man of character and honor” (according to the British) and refused. He managed to escape back to his British protectors, and moved to a safer plantation near Charleston. Incredibly, he was kidnapped again by the Americans, and this time the British sent a large force in pursuit. They re-captured Williamson. Then, in one of the most infamous episodes of the war, they hung the American officer, Col. Isaac Hayne, who had captured Williamson.

Williamson stayed in the Charleston area for the rest of the war, and was declared an “obnoxious person” by the South Carolina rebel legislature (which had thanked him profusely just a few years earlier). At the end of the war the successful Patriots were going to strip him of all his property and exile him. But surprise, surprise, Williamson spoke before the legislature and announced that for the last year of the war he had been spying for the Americans, while inside the British headquarters at Charleston! American General Nathanael Greene confirmed that “Williamson was my best agent” and “took every risque” to help the Patriot cause.

This makes Andrew Williamson the first major double agent in American history, and the highest ranking American double agent in the Revolution! Amazingly, no standard history of espionage in the Revolution mentions him.

Ironically, Williamson’s day-to-day “agent handler” was none other than Col. John Laurens, the American hero who I mistakenly thought was my ancestor.

Williamson’s methods as a spy were innovative. One of his ways of communicating with his American spymasters was to pass notes to an innocent-looking child and her mother who were visiting the city from outside the British lines. The child would later be taken to General Greene, and would reluctantly give up the little “gift” she had received. Essentially he used a child as a “dead drop”! He passed information on British intentions, the possibility that Loyalists would burn the entire city rather than let it be captured, the number of British sick and wounded, and other vital matters. When the British decided to abandon Charleston, he became an “agent of influence” and a sort of subtle negotiator between the two sides, successfully ensuring that the handover of Charleston was peaceful.

As his thanks for risking his life, the South Carolina legislature decided to “amerce” (seize) only 12 percent of his wealth, instead of the 100 percent they had been originally contemplating! So he was effectively judged to be 12 percent a traitor.

Andrew Williamson died in his Charleston townhouse shortly after the war, reviled by his many enemies but adored by his soldiers and his many friends. What an amazing ancestor to have in my family tree! Is genealogy cool or what?

I found Williamson’s life so fascinating that I wrote the first and only biography of him, and published it in *The Journal of Backcountry Studies*, a peer-reviewed historical journal. Now

others can learn about this amazing man and his bizarre life, and the incomplete history of espionage in the Revolution can be corrected.

Next month I will describe how I went on a quest to find Williamson's famous upcountry plantation, which has been lost in the mists of time.

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Photos: (all credits to Lew Toulmin, except as noted)

1. Col. John Laurens, a hero of the American Revolution, and "handler" of the spy Andrew Williamson. Unfortunately Laurens is not an ancestor of the author, as he thought.
2. Henry Laurens, father of John Laurens, President of the Continental Congress, signer of the Treaty of Paris, formerly a friend and correspondent with Williamson -- and yet another distinguished Patriot who is not an ancestor of the author.
3. The only image of Williamson, drawn many years later, supposedly showing General Williamson and Colonel Pickens pursuing Indians. You can't even tell which figure is Williamson! (Please state: "Image courtesy of the Caroliniana Library")
4. Signature of General Andrew Williamson, who though brilliant and an accomplished spy, was illiterate and could barely scrawl his own name.
5. Expedition members looking for the plantation of General Williamson carry the Flag of The Explorers Club and the logo of the Royal Geographical Society. The author is at the center; at far right is the State Archaeologist of South Carolina.

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