

19 Fighting Palm Trees

Why Did I Go?

Captain Preston, why did you go to the Concord fight, the 19th April, 1775?" Judge Mel- len Chamberlain asked old Captain Levi Preston, years after the battle.

"Why did I go?" repeated Preston.

"Yes, my histories tell me that you men of the Revolution took up arms against intolerable oppression."

"What were they? Oppressions? I didn't feel them."

"What," said the judge, "were you not oppressed by the Stamp Act?"

L.P.: I never saw one of those stamps...

M.C.: Well, what then about the tea tax?

L.P.: Tea tax! I never drank a drop of the stuff; the boys threw it all overboard...

M.C.: Well, then, what was the matter? and what did you mean in going to fight?

L.P.: Young man, what we meant in going for those redcoats was this: we had always governed ourselves, and we always meant to. They didn't mean we should.



Lord North didn't want to run a war. "On military matters," he said, "I speak ignorantly and therefore without effect."

"What is all this fuss about a little tax on tea?" said some people in England. "Those American colonists are an ungrateful bunch," said others. "Punish them! Show them Britain's power!" said still others.

Englishmen and women argued about what to do with the colonies. William Pitt said, "You cannot but respect their cause." Pitt said it was the spirit of liberty that was making the colonists protest against British taxes. It was "the same spirit which established...that no subject of England shall be taxed but by his own consent." Pitt, who had practically run the British government back during the French and Indian War, was retired and ill. But he was still a powerful speaker and a friend of America.

King George didn't much like Pitt. It was Lord North who now held power, and Lord North believed the colonies should be taught a lesson. Most English people and most members of Parliament seemed to agree with Lord North.

A Mr. Van stood up in the House of Commons (Parliament has two houses, like our Congress) and said that he was "of the opinion that the town of Boston ought to be knocked about their ears and destroyed." Then he continued, "you will never meet with that proper obedience to the laws of this country until you have destroyed that nest of hornets."

But Boston was a hornet's nest that wasn't easy to destroy. "What about Charleston?" King George's ministers asked. They had heard that some Liberty Boys in Charleston were gathering under a tree and making trouble. A few shots from British cannons and they would run, said the king's men. The mighty British navy would

scare those upstart American provincials in South Carolina, they added. And so a fleet of armed ships and seven regiments of soldiers were sent across the ocean.

An unfinished fort stood on Sullivan's Island in Charleston's harbor. It had double walls of palmetto logs placed 16 feet apart. Sand was packed between the palmetto walls. But only the front of the fort was completed, the sides were half done, and the back was open. General Charles Lee, who had been sent south by General Washington, took one look and called it a "slaughter pen." He suggested that the fort be abandoned.

South Carolina's governor, John Rutledge (whom some people were calling Dictator John because he always seemed to get his way), insisted that the fort be defended. Colonel William Moultrie, who was placed in command of the fort, believed he could do it.

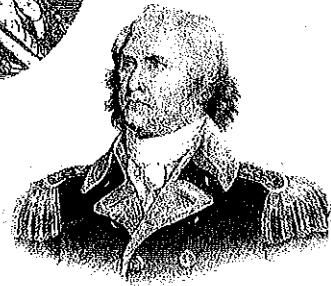
The British ships sailed grandly into the harbor—and ran aground. That means that some of them got stuck on shoals (which are sandbars). Their ships' pilots didn't know the harbor and its safe passageways. Since they were stuck anyway, they decided they might as well destroy the fort, unload their men, and take Sullivan's Island.

And so they blasted their cannons—and then something unbelievable happened. Their shells stuck in the sides of the fort. The soft palmetto wood, and the thick sand walls, absorbed the shells as a sponge might. The walls just held on to the cannonballs. The British naval experts had never seen anything like this. And the soldiers who were supposed to march onto the island? Well, the British had been misinformed about the depth of the water. It was too deep, and the men couldn't get to the island. It was "unspeakable mortification," said a British general. And what about those ships, stuck on the shoals? What kind of targets did they make? You guessed it—perfect targets.

To get on with this story—when the British finally limped out of Charleston harbor, not one of their ships was undamaged. Some were



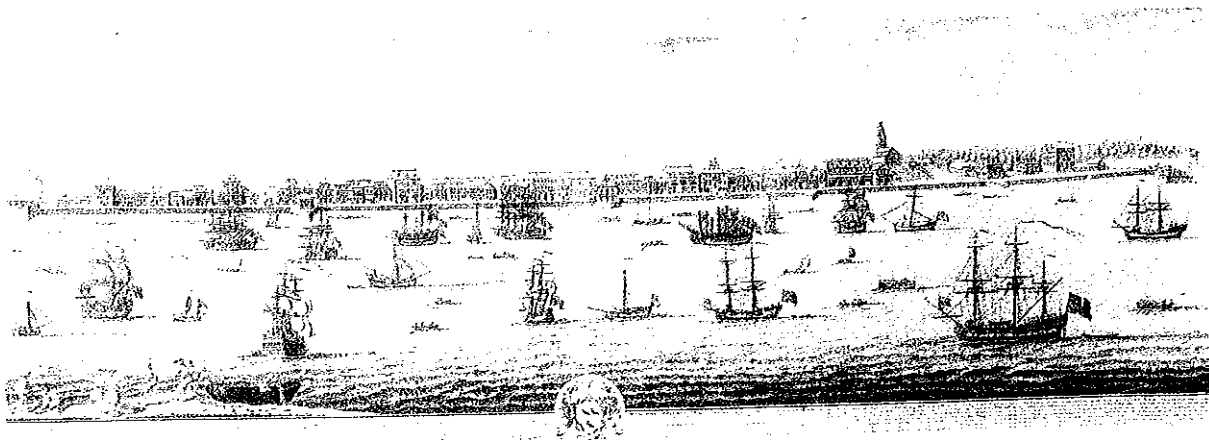
The redcoats, led by Sir Henry Clinton (left), failed to take Fort Sullivan, defended by Colonel Moultrie (below).

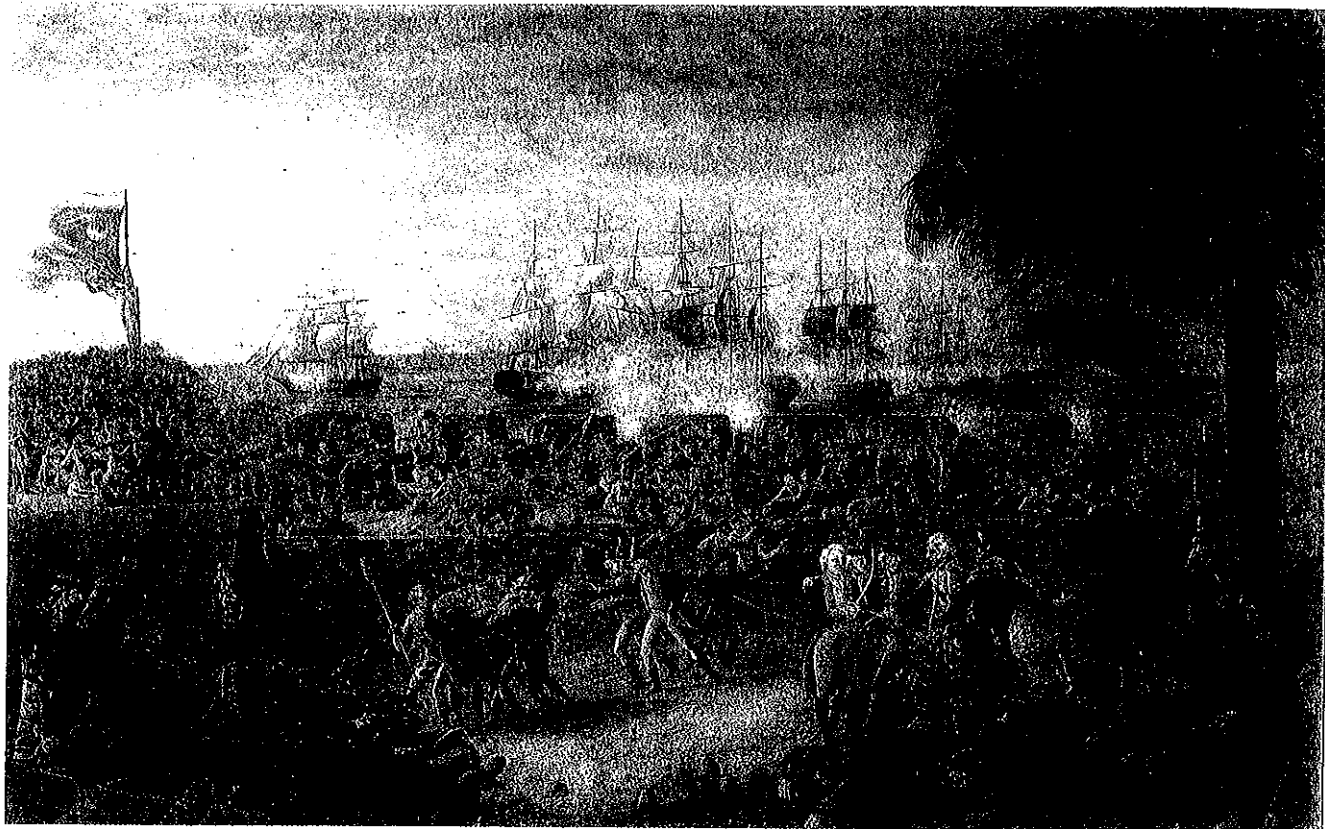


Now do you know why South Carolina's flag has a palmetto tree on it?

Mortification is distressing humiliation.

Charleston harbor (below) was full of sandbanks, which many of the British boats got stranded on when they tried to sail in.





Moultrie's guns turned the British ships into a slaughterhouse. The flagship *Bristol* was hit 70 times.

A London journal, the *Annual Register*, commented on the disaster at Sullivan's Island: "To suppose that the Generals...should have been 19 days in that small island, without ever examining until the very instant of action the nature of the only passage by which they could render service to their

destroyed. Here is a poem describing the battle, said to be written by Sir Peter Parker, who was in charge of the British fleet at Charleston. See if you think Sir Peter actually wrote it. (Before you begin, you need to know that Falstaff and Pistol were comic characters—who talked tougher than they acted—from plays by William Shakespeare. The *Bristol* was the name of one of Sir Peter's ships.)

friends and fellows, fulfill the purpose of their landing and answer the ends for which they were embarked in the expedition would seem a great defect in military prudence and circumspection."

Which was a long way of saying that the British forces in Charleston didn't have a clue about what they were doing.

*My Lords, with your leave
An account I will give
That deserves to be written in meter;
For the rebels and I
Have been pretty nigh—
Faith! almost too nigh for Sir Peter.*

With much labor and toil
 Unto Sullivan's Isle
 I came fierce as Falstaff or Pistol,
 But the Yankees (God rot 'em)—
 I could not get at 'em—
 Most terribly mauled my poor Bristol.
 Devil take 'em; their shot
 Came so swift and so hot,
 And the cowardly dogs stood so stiff, sirs,
 That I put ship about
 And was glad to get out,
 Or they would not have left me a skiff, sirs!
 But, my lords, do not fear
 For before the next year,
 (Altho' a small island could fret us),
 The Continent whole
 We shall take, by my soul,
 If the cowardly Yankee will let us.

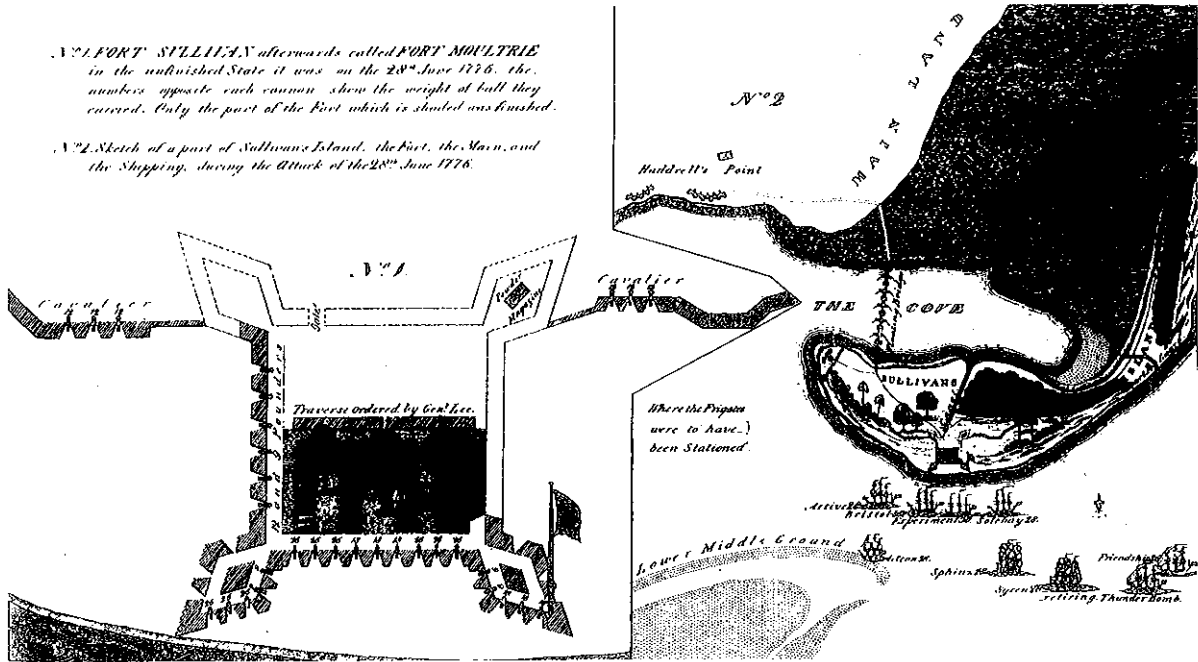
When England's forces again came south, they took their "cowardly" foe more seriously.



One of the oddest American generals (he was more interested in dogs than people), Charles Lee argued against defending Sullivan's Island (below, with detailed plans of the fort and ships' positions).

Nº1. FORT SULLIVAN afterwards called FORT MOUTRIE in the unluckied State it was on the 28th June 1776. the numbers opposite each cannon show the weight of ball they carried. Only the part of the fort which is shaded was finished.

Nº2. Sketch of a part of Sullivan's Island, the fort, the Main, and the Shipping, during the Attack of the 28th June 1776.



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