

# Francis Marion

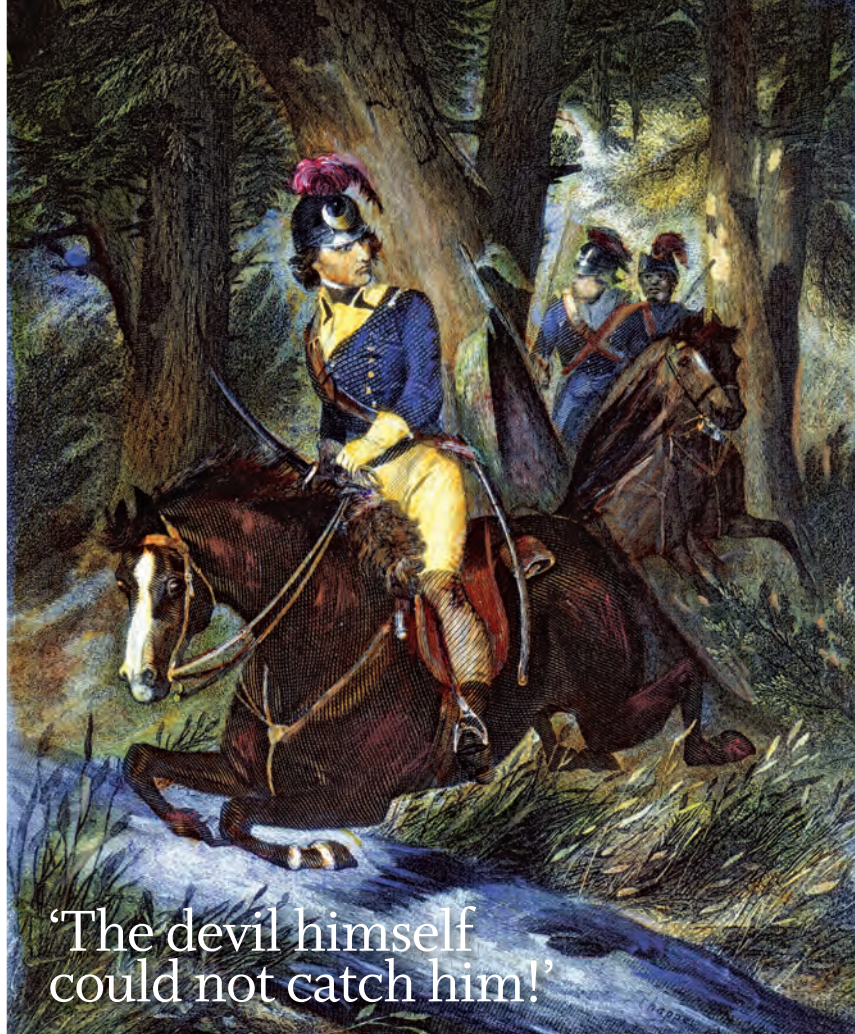
## South Carolina's Revolutionary Guerrilla Warrior

By Lena Anthony

**F**rancis Marion—or the Swamp Fox, as he was known by both enemies and admirers—used guerrilla warfare tactics and a cool confidence to drive the British out of South Carolina toward the end of the Revolution. His actions were no doubt instrumental in the fight for independence, but to most Americans, Marion is just a name—as in Marion, Ind., Marion County, Tenn., or Lake Marion, S.C. (The Francis Marion DAR Chapter, Montgomery, Ala., and Swamp Fox DAR Chapter, Marion, S.C., also bear his name.) It's believed that Marion had more places named after him than any other Revolutionary War soldier, with the exception of George Washington.

Much of what is known about Marion is not fact, but fiction—thanks in large part to M.L. “Parson” Weems, who, in 1809, published a biography on Marion based partially on firsthand accounts from General Peter Horry, who served with Marion in the Revolutionary War, and partially on the author’s imagination. (Weems was the same biographer who fabricated the story about Washington and the cherry tree.)

Further confusing Marion’s legacy is the 2000 movie “The Patriot.” Its lead character, Benjamin Martin, draws



inspiration from Marion, along with other war leaders. In the movie, the protagonist is a widowed father who joins the Continental Army to avenge his son’s death and goes on to succeed in a series of hand-to-hand battles with the British.

But Marion wasn’t a family man (he married at the age of 54 and had no children), nor is there any record that he ever killed anyone in hand-to-hand combat, according to Sean Busick, associate professor of history at Athens State University, who wrote the introduction for the 2007 edition of William Gilmore Simms’ biography of Marion, *The Life of Francis Marion*, originally published in 1844.

“We would probably be better served by remembering the man as he was,” Busick says. “His real accomplishments are certainly worth remembering, even celebrating.”

### Marion’s Early Life

Born in 1732, Marion was the youngest of seven siblings born to Gabriel

and Charlotte—descendants of French Huguenots who settled near Charleston, S.C., the century before. “[He] grew up amid the great swamp forests,” wrote Henry Lumpkin in *From Savannah to Yorktown: The American Revolution in the South* (University of South Carolina Press, 1981). “He hunted, fished and rode with his brothers and cousins, a wild, natural life that provided superb training for the guerrilla fighting in which he later was to excel.”

But as a child Marion did not look the part of a future war hero: “At birth he was puny and diminutive in a remarkable degree,” Simms wrote. “It was certainly as little supposed that he should ever live to manhood, as that he should then become a hero.”

By 1759, Marion had joined the South Carolina Militia to fight a border war against the Cherokee American Indians during the French and Indian War. In 1761 he served as a first lieutenant under Captain William Moultrie, who later

described Marion as an “active, brave and hardy soldier,” according to Simms.

His experience in this war, which taught him much about guerrilla warfare, would prove instrumental to his success in the Revolutionary War.

### Joining the Fight for Independence

When South Carolina’s First Provincial Congress established the 2nd South Carolina Line Regiment in 1775, Marion was named a captain and then a major. Later, after showing courage and leadership during the 1776 defense of the partially constructed Fort Sullivan, which guarded the entrance to Charleston’s harbor, he was promoted to lieutenant colonel.

For the majority of the Revolution, Marion and his men saw little action. Mostly, they performed garrison duty in Charleston, until the fall of 1779. At that point they were dispatched south to participate in the unsuccessful siege on Savannah, Ga., a British stronghold during much of the war.

Encounters were few and far between, but Marion used the downtime wisely, according to Simms in *The Life of Francis Marion*: “He was constantly on parade, at the drill, closely engaged in the work of training, in which business, while very gentle, he was very exact.” Interestingly enough, Marion also spent much of his regiment’s downtime working on manners. “He pelted his men with a series of general orders on topics ranging from church attendance to alcohol consumption to grooming,” writes Alan Cate in *Founding Fighters* (Praeger Security International, 2006). Always a gentleman, even in war, Marion opposed the mistreatment of British prisoners and Loyalists.

In 1780 Charleston finally fell to the British, and many Continental Army leaders of the Southern Department were taken prisoner. But Marion was not among them—he was out of town mending a badly sprained ankle when the British invaded. When Marion

heard what happened in Charleston, he mobilized his troops (numbering about 20 by this point) and offered their services to General Horatio Gates. Gates was not impressed by Marion and his ragtag group of men, but he was out of options. He accepted Marion’s proposal to lead the Patriot militia in the region between the Pee Dee and Santee rivers in South Carolina.

### Victory in South Carolina

To say that Marion was successful in keeping the British from controlling the South would be an understatement. “Marion, and the other partisan leaders in the South, played an enormously influential role in the winning of independence,” Busick says. “They took the field, against great odds, with poorly equipped and poorly trained unprofessional soldiers and successfully prevented the British from consolidating their gains in South Carolina.”

Regularly outwitting their enemy, Marion and his men often traveled undetected at night and staged surprising ambushes by day.

“Marion was a meticulous campaigner who took particular pains to never be surprised,” Cate writes. “He always posted sentinels and patrolled aggressively to retain the initiative.

He rose before sunrise and frequently moved his camp in order to avoid detention.”

He and his men (which eventually included a force co-commanded by Henry Lee) also were imaginative problem-solvers. To capture Fort Watson, described by Lumpkin as “a key British outpost guarding the line of communication from Charleston to the backcountry,” they spent five nights building a tower so they could fire shots down into the fort. Later, to drive the British from Fort Motte, formerly the hilltop mansion of Rebecca Motte, a Patriot and plantation owner, they simply lit the roof on fire.

Marion succeeded even when there wasn’t an actual encounter with the enemy. “Although he inflicted only negligible casualties . . . his adversaries came to dread him,” Cate wrote. “Achieving tangible results by intercepting supplies, killing and wounding enemy soldiers, and forcing the British to devote considerable resources to protecting their supply lines and chasing him, Marion’s greatest success was psychological.” 🍷

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*Lena Anthony wrote about Jack Jouett—another Patriot nemesis of British Lt. Col. Tarleton—for the May/June 2011 issue.*

## Becoming the Swamp Fox

### The war origins of Francis Marion’s moniker

Once Marion started tormenting the British in earnest in 1780, it didn’t take long for General Cornwallis, the commander of British forces in the South, to get fed up with his tactics. In November 1780, Cornwallis dispatched Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton to hunt down Marion, but what ensued was a “deadly game of cat and mouse,” according to Alan Cate in *Founding Fighters*.

Tarleton located Marion and set up an ambush, but Marion “chose discretion as the better part of valor and escaped,” according to Cate.

Tarleton then chased him for several hours through the swamps and woods before calling off the operation, exclaiming, “As for this damned old fox, the devil himself could not catch him!”

That episode, historians agree, is how Marion came to be known as the Swamp Fox—both by those who feared and revered him.