



# JOHN LAURENS

## *The Impetuous Patriot*

By Bill Hudgins

Had he not died in a skirmish near the end of the Revolutionary War, John Laurens would likely have played a significant post-war role in shaping the new nation. Though he was often impetuous, rash and reckless, Laurens had dedicated his short life to serving the cause of liberty, according to Gregory D. Massey, author of *John Laurens and the American Revolution* (University of South Carolina Press, 2015).

**L**aurens was born on October 28, 1754, into one of South Carolina's wealthiest families. His father, Henry Laurens, was among the Colony's biggest slave owners, though he detested the practice that underpinned his wealth, according to Massey. The younger Laurens also loathed slavery, but went further than his father by actively advocating abolition.

Laurens was tutored on the family plantation until 1771, when his father sent him and two younger brothers to London for college. In May 1772, Laurens went to Geneva for further study. While there, he abandoned his early desire to pursue medicine in favor of law. He returned to London in August 1774 to study law at the Middle Temple at the Inns of Court.

Books formed only part of his education. Geneva and London were full of intellectual ferment and political debate that consumed the young man. The growing tension between the Colonies and Great Britain made him yearn to participate in defending American rights. As he told a friend, "I hate the name of King."

When word of Lexington and Concord reached London in 1775, Laurens began asking Henry's permission to come home, but his father refused. In addition to being a student,

Laurens also served as guardian for several younger siblings who attended school in England, and his father did not want him to abandon that responsibility.

By mid-1776, however, Laurens could no longer bear to be in England. America had declared independence and was struggling to survive. But before sailing home in December, he married Martha Manning, the daughter of a friend of his father's, after fathering a child with her. It was the honorable thing to do, Massey notes, but Laurens also felt honor demanded that he put serving his country above family considerations. He never again saw his wife and never met their daughter, Frances Eleanor, who was born in January 1777.

When Laurens reached Charleston, S.C., in April 1777, he learned his father had been chosen as a delegate to the Continental Congress. Together, they traveled to Philadelphia where Laurens joined the Continental Army and became a volunteer aide to General George Washington.

At the Battle of Brandywine on September 11, 1777, Laurens first experienced combat and showed a disregard for danger that became a hallmark of his service. Describing Laurens' performance, the Marquis de Lafayette wrote, "It was not his fault that he was not killed or wounded [;] he did everything that was necessary to procure one or the other."

On October 4, Laurens again engaged in heroics at the Battle of Germantown. Two days later, Washington appointed him as an aide-de-camp and promoted him to lieutenant colonel. The general was impressed by his intelligence, education and fluency in French, which was vital in communicating with French allies.

Laurens and fellow aide Alexander Hamilton soon became fast friends. Despite vastly different backgrounds, they shared a passion for knowledge, books, military honor, revolutionary idealism and abolition.

During the Valley Forge winter of 1777–1778, Laurens and Hamilton served as interpreters for Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben and edited his famous military drill manual, *The Blue Book*. Laurens also began to advocate formation of a regiment of Georgia and South Carolina slaves who would be freed in exchange for their service.



A 1780 miniature portrait of Laurens by Charles Willson Peale

“It was not his fault that he was not killed or wounded; he did everything that was necessary to procure one or the other.”

—Marquis de Lafayette describing Laurens’ performance at the Battle of Brandywine

After fighting in the Battle of Monmouth, N.J., in June 1778, Laurens testified against Major General Charles Lee at the general’s court-martial. Lee, a rival of Washington’s, was accused of disobeying orders. After his conviction, Lee continued to criticize Washington. This provoked Laurens into challenging him to a duel in December at which Lee was slightly wounded.

After Lee’s court-martial, Washington dispatched Laurens to Rhode Island to serve as a liaison between French and American forces during the siege of Newport. Laurens also commanded light troops at the Battle of Rhode Island in early August before rejoining Washington.

By 1779, with the northern campaign largely at a stalemate, the British government shifted its strategic focus southward with attacks on Savannah, Ga., and Charleston. Laurens requested and received Washington’s reluctant permission to leave to defend his home state.

Up to this point, the Continental Congress had rebuffed Laurens’ proposed African-American regiment. But with the southern campaign heating up, it approved the idea—if the state’s assembly agreed. South Carolina flatly rejected the idea.

Laurens took part in the September 1779 defense of Charleston. Commanding a rear-guard of inexperienced troops, he ignored orders to pull back and attacked instead. Many men died, and he was wounded. The American commander, General William Moultrie, and others criticized him for his recklessness, although his daring made him a hero to the town’s citizens.

In October, Laurens fought in the failed attempt to retake Savannah, and in May 1780, he was one of 5,500 Americans who surrendered when the British captured Charleston. He was incarcerated briefly, then allowed to return to Pennsylvania on

parole until being released in November in a prisoner exchange. (At the same time, his father was a prisoner in the Tower of London. Appointed Minister to Holland in late 1779, Henry Laurens was taken prisoner in early 1780 while sailing to Europe and held until December 31, 1781, when he was exchanged for Lord Cornwallis.)

After the younger Laurens’ release, Congress sent him to France to help Benjamin Franklin obtain more supplies and money from the French. Laurens knew nothing about diplomacy, and his impetuous, brash manner made him temperamentally unsuited for the post. Franklin feared he would doom chances of further aid, but Laurens managed to sail for home in August 1781 with a huge loan secured by Franklin and two ships crammed with supplies.

Laurens arrived in time to rejoin Washington at Yorktown. Along with Hamilton, he participated in the October 14 assault on British Redoubt No. 10 that helped seal the American victory. Washington appointed him as one of two American commissioners charged with negotiating surrender terms with the British.

After Yorktown, Laurens served under General Nathanael Greene in South Carolina to expel the British from the backcountry. On August 27, 1782, while leading troops against a British foraging party on the Combahee River south of Charleston, he ran into an ambush. The first volley missed him but, typically, instead of pulling back, he ordered a charge.

The second volley hit him several times, and the 27-year-old soldier died on the field, along with several of his men. They were among the last Americans to die in battle during the war.

When he learned of Laurens’ death, Washington wrote of his former aide-de-camp, “No man possessed more of the *amor patriae* [love of country]—in a word, he had not a fault that I ever could discover, unless intrepidity bordering upon rashness could come under that denomination, and to this he was excited by the purest motives.”