

COLONEL JOHN DOOLY:
GEORGIA MARTYR OF THE REVOLUTION

by Robert S. Davis

Hugh McCall's partly autobiographical *The History of Georgia* (1816) created Georgia's first true folk hero: Colonel John Dooly. Collectively, what McCall wrote forms an heroic tale of a Patriot of the struggle for American independence who lost a brother in an Indian attack, led his forces to victory over the Tories (Loyalist Americans who supported the British cause) at the Battle of Kettle Creek and, finally, died as a martyr to the American cause in his own home.

Modern access to historical resources reveals that John Dooly had a more complicated life and that he failed to hide his dreams as well as most of his no less ambitious Revolutionary War contemporaries.. He was likely born in Ireland or Pennsylvania around 1744, the son of a Patrick Dooly who appears in frontier Frederick County, Virginia records as early as 1755 and who moved to the South Carolina frontier sometime between August 2, 1764 and July 2, 1765. Patrick had five sons and at least one daughter to live to adulthood. Both he and his wife Anne had died by December 6, 1768, when John received all of his father's property as the nearest male relative: land, a slave woman, a female slave child, books, household goods, and the remains of a small wheelwright or blacksmithing operation. Father and son would share land development in common but, as proved more common with later leaders of the Revolution than its opponents, they followed significantly different lives. By means unknown, John acquired an education and a commission as deputy surveyor. Within a few years, he became a merchant, owner of seven slaves, and a land developer far beyond anything his father had achieved. He married Dianna Mitchell, quite likely related to the many Mitchells who were South Carolina surveyors, including

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his sister Elizabeth's husband and the deputy surveyor Thomas Mitchell. John Dooly had a growing family by 1773, eventually numbering at least three sons and a daughter.

In January 1772, John Dooly mortgaged 2,050 acres of his lands to finance a major investment on the frontier in neighboring Georgia. There, he obtained a commission as a Georgia deputy surveyor and claimed five hundred acres at the mouth of Soap Creek on the Savannah River which he named "Egypt." He also obtained loans from Savannah merchants to pay for further improvements and he apparently raised still more funds by selling three of his slaves.

John Dooly also began his trip down the road that led to Revolution. In 1768, Governor James Wright had avoided the famous Regulator troubles of the South Carolina frontier by siding with his backcountry people in their successful political campaign to have the colonial assembly establish courts in Georgia's backcountry. When raiding parties of disaffected Creeks attacked frontier settlements in 1773-1774, now Sir James Wright used diplomacy to end the crisis. Georgia's frontiersmen repaid him for his past support with a delegation to present Georgia's rebel provincial congress with a letter of protest against the growing political discontent in the colony. Dooly and these other dissenters argued that Georgia had no connection with troubles over taxation, tea, or Boston but that the province depended upon the king's protection from the neighboring tribes of Indians. They were denied access to the representatives of the growing Revolutionary movement (the Whigs) and, as a result, John Dooly, Elijah Clarke, and many other later Whig leaders, joined hundreds of their neighbors in signing petitions in support of British rule that appeared in the colony's newspaper, the *Georgia Gazette*.

That same newspaper reported, however, that while British army could shoot Americans in Massachusetts, it could not be found on the frontier protecting them from the Indians. The

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Whigs also offered the frontiersmen control of their own affairs. John Dooly already served as a colonel, with Stephen Heard as lieutenant colonel, and Bernard Heard as major in a vigilante militia created by him and his neighbors. The rebels in Georgia divided the province into districts, each with a justice of the peace court, political committee, and a militia company. John Dooly, captain of his local company, also obtained the positions of justice of the peace and deputy surveyor; and he likely served on his local Chatham District's political committee. When British ships threatened Savannah in late 1775, Dooly marched his company for four days to reach the threatened town to serve on behalf of the rebellion. In the summer of 1776, he and his men, as part of an expedition under Major Samuel Jack, destroyed two Cherokee villages.

The Continental Congress did not intend to rely on just the militia for Georgia's defense but authorized the creation of five regiments of full time continental soldiers, as well as ships and artillery batteries, for the defense of the province. With such a small population, it had to find recruits for this brigade elsewhere. John Dooly, as a captain in the new Regiment of Horse and with his brothers Capt. Thomas Dooly and Second Lt. George Dooly, as well as brother in law First Lt. Thomas Mitchell, all of the Third Georgia Continental Regiment, set out to find men. In Guilford County, North Carolina, and Pittsylvania County, Virginia, he and his relations succeeded in enlisting ninety-seven men, including by illegally signing on deserters from the local military.

On July 22, 1777, while John traveled to Savannah to collect bounty money, Thomas Dooly, with twenty-one men in two companies, set out to return to their post after having recovered some horses stolen by Creek war parties. Some two miles from Skull Shoals on the Oconee River, fifty Indians launched an ambush on the Continentals. Thomas Dooly fell with a

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wound to his heel string. Unable to move, he cried out in vain to his fleeing comrades not to leave him to suffer death at the hands of the Indians. In retaliation, John Dooly later seized a Creek peace delegation to hold them as hostages until he had satisfaction for his brother's death. With great effort, the rebel authorities compelled Dooly to release the delegation and to surrender a fort where he and his supporters subsequently barricaded themselves. After various delays, Captain Dooly stood trial in Savannah and then resigned his commission.

Within a year, John Dooly made a comeback. He represented Wilkes County in the new one house state legislature. In the summer of 1778, Dooly also rose to colonel of the county's militia battalion/regiment. In this position, he led his neighbors against Creek raiders that same summer and won a victory against the Indians at Newsome's Ponds. At almost the same time, John Dooly also became the county's first sheriff and, as such, had suspected Loyalists arrested, searched, and confined in chains. In late December, the local electorate voted him as their colonel, with battle scared veteran officer Elijah Clarke as his lieutenant colonel.

That same December, however, the British captured Savannah and, within a month, the Redcoats overran Georgia, except for Wilkes County. Dooly, and whatever men would follow him, withdrew to South Carolina to seek help but there he faced a particular problem in finding allies in South Carolina. During the previous summer's Indian troubles, 546 South Carolina militiamen had come to Wilkes County's aid but the South Carolinians failed to discover any hostile Creeks, or even Georgia militiamen, only local people overcharging them for provisions. General Andrew Williamson wrote to his subordinates that Dooly could not be trusted and to avoid having any future dealings with him.

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John Dooly now made an appeal to Andrew Pickens, colonel of the Upper Ninety Six Regiment and Williamson's long time subordinate. Pickens brought two hundred men to Dooly's aid but, once in Georgia, he insisted upon and received command of all of their forces. Together they marched across Wilkes County and, on Sunday morning February 14, with only a combined force of only 340 men, they attacked some six hundred Loyalists holding a strong position on both sides of Kettle Creek. Dooly would write two days later that only the hand of Providence saved him, Clarke, and Pickens, as they exposed themselves, on horseback, during the whole fight and that their enemy seemed to fire two hundred shots in less than half a minute. Three of Dooly's riflemen, however, found themselves behind the lines and mortally wounded Colonel Boyd, the Tory leader. Elijah Clarke, despite having a horse shot out from under him, led a successful final charge against the Loyalists across the creek. By the afternoon, Pickens, Dooly, and Clarke had won an overwhelming victory. A month later, they again combined forces and this time defeated a combined force of Loyalists, Creeks, and Cherokees along the Ogechee River. Such victories by the militia as these reversed the overall military situation, Pickens and Williamson now had high praise for Dooly and specifically for the intelligence from his network of scouts.

In what remained of the state of Georgia, John Dooly subsequently would simultaneously hold the state's highest positions in the military, government, and judiciary. As the highest ranking officer left in the state militia, he became the colonel commandant and also a member of the ad hoc civil government that assembled in Augusta. As state's attorney, in August 1779, Dooly prosecuted several of his neighbors as traitors, two of whom were subsequently executed.

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In 1780, the town of Washington was laid out as the seat of Wilkes County, with Dooly as one of its original commissioners.

John Dooly also committed himself to providing a Georgia element to driving the British from Savannah and his adopted state. In March 1779, he marched his militia to the mouth of Briar Creek, the rallying point for the Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina forces that were preparing to retake Savannah. Dooly's men arrived on March 4, the day after that American camp there had been attacked by a force of British regulars. The American had been thoroughly defeated. Dooly had the dead buried. The following June, when most of the Redcoats invaded South Carolina, he gathered four hundred Georgia militiamen at Augusta for another attempt to retake Savannah. No timely cooperation came, however, and the British largely withdrew to Savannah, reducing Dooly's campaign to nothing more than a cattle rustling raid.

Finally, in September, American and French forces laid siege to Savannah. This campaign should have been a last turning point in the American Revolution but the king's forces could hardly have been in a better position. Behind extensive fortifications and batteries that the engineers and slave labor erected, the British army, with its white, black, and red allies, had ample supplies of cattle and stores. The besiegers, by contrast, suffered from hunger, disease, and exposure while engaged in grueling but ineffective trench warfare. As part of an ad hoc brigade under General Lachlan McIntosh, Dooly and his men participated in the disastrous Franco-American attack upon the British lines on October 9, 1779. They traveled half a mile across a swamp and into a barrage of musket and artillery fire as a British band serenaded them with *Come to Maypole, Merry Farmers All*. Immediately afterwards, the allies began to lift the siege and withdraw. Colonel Dooly returned home, both sick and discouraged.

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Matters took a turn for the worse, however. In May of 1780, a massively reinforced British army forced the surrender of American army of the South and Charleston. Andrew Williamson's militiamen compelled him to surrender with them. They all became prisoners of war on parole. John Dooly held a meeting at his home soon after and with the same result except that thirty men under Elijah Clarke decided to continue the war as guerrillas in South Carolina. John Dooly and the remaining 400 men of the Georgia militia surrendered on a ridge outside of the town of Washington in late June 1780.

John Dooly would not find peace, however. His creditors from before and during the war pressed him for payment. The restored colonial assembly included Dooly in its act to disqualify former rebels from ever again holding any public office. On June 3, 1780, British General Sir Henry Clinton revoked almost all of the paroles, thereby unintentionally freeing Dooly, Pickens, and others to return to the American cause without violating their oaths. Two months later, men who had not joined the restored colonial militia could have their property confiscated. Loyalist leaders such as Brown and Wright believed that Dooly, Pickens, Williamson, and other prisoners on parole only waited for just such an opportunity to return to the war. These concerns seemed justified when, in September 1780, Elijah Clarke lead Georgia and South Carolina guerrillas in attacking and nearly capturing the Loyalist and Indian garrison in Augusta. Rescued and reinforced by South Carolina Loyalist provincials, the long suffering Tories and Indians then began a campaign of retaliation. From John Dooly's home, Loyalist Lieutenant Colonel J. H. Cruger dispatched his men to destroy the forts, courthouse, and settlements of Wilkes County. At least 100 homes were burned. Families believed to have supported the Revolution went into exile with Elijah Clarke or their men became prisoners confined in Augusta.

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Complete information has not survived but John Dooly, having almost no other options, seemed to have been preparing to return to the rebellion. Before he could do so, men arrived at his house and killed him, quite likely in revenge for his actions earlier in the war. The killers have been identified as various Loyalists acting from revenge but other sources suggest he was killed for having surrendered or even for some of his questionable private actions.

Loyalist and British leaders learned too late, however, that through atrocities such as the killing of John Dooly, they created rather than suppressed a widespread uprising. The former Wilkes County militiamen who had served under John Dooly participated in the major victory at King's Mountain and played critical roles in the American success at the battle of Cowpens. In the latter part of the Revolution, George Dooly led a company that repeatedly took ample revenge for the deaths of his brothers Thomas, John, and Robert in the American cause. Reportedly John Mitchell Dooly, Colonel John's very young son, helped in the executions.

The restored state government added insult to the injury that John Dooly received from his service to the American cause. It did grant land, in recognition of his military service, to his minors but it also ordered Elijah Clarke to evict Dooly's widow and orphans from their home, the two hundred acre Leesburg plantation, in response to Thomas Lee's questionable claims to the property. Reportedly today's Elijah Clarke State Park encompasses that land, including John Dooly's burial place somewhere near the "Dooly Spring." Creditors made claims against Dooly's estate. John's last surviving son, John Mitchell Dooly, undoubtedly used the considerable influence he later gained as an important judge and politician, along with the notoriety of his father created by McCall's history, to encourage the Georgia legislature to finally create a county named for Colonel John Dooly in 1821. That honor, however, came years after having been

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bestowed upon the memories of Elijah Clarke, John Twiggs, Button Gwinnett, James Jackson, and many of his father's contemporaries. Even the honor of having a county named for John Dooly dimmed when, in 1840, a novelist portrayed a fictional Dooly family as Loyalists. Judge Dooly's widow viewed this work as an insult to the memory of the services of her father-in-law and his brothers. An old veteran was consulted on the matter and stated of John Dooly: "Why truly [sic] he was a real Liberty man I know it as well as I know anything; for he saved my father's life once . . . [but] he was the only one in his family who was not [a Loyalist] his brothers were Tories."

Sources: Robert S. Davis, "A Frontier for Pioneer Revolutionaries: John Dooly and the Beginnings of Popular Democracy in Original Wilkes County," ***Georgia Historical Quarterly*** 90 (fall 2006): 315-49, revised and expanded as "The Man Who Would Have Been: John Dooly, Ambition, and Politics on the Southern Frontier," in Robert M. Calhoun, Timothy M. Barnes, and Robert S. Davis, *Tory Insurgents: New Loyalist Perceptions and Other Essays* (Columbia, SC, 2010), 284-316.