

General Marion Inviting a British Officer to Share His Meal

(1781)

General Francis Marion, the “Swamp Fox,” was one of the most dashing figures of the American Revolution. He sabotaged the communication and supply lines of the British forces in South Carolina in a series of surprise attacks. With his small band of poorly equipped men trained in guerrilla warfare, Marion lived off the land and hid in the swamps to evade the enemy. While camped on Snow’s Island, South Carolina, about 1781, the general was said to have received a British officer who had been sent to arrange an exchange of prisoners. Their negotiations completed, Marion invited the visiting officer to stay for a meal. There are at least three differing accounts of what may have transpired, but recent scholarship has uncovered a document that may shed light on the event. This document is the application of Samuel Weaver, a militiaman in North Carolina and Virginia, for a Revolutionary War pension. Weaver’s sworn statement, as recorded by a justice of the peace, suggests that he was present at the Snow’s Island encampment:

During the time he was with Gen’l Marion, a British Officer as he was told, came to Camp but for what reason he does not know & he was roasting and baking sweet potatoes on the coles —Gen’l Marion stepped up with the British Officer and remarked he believed he would take Breakfast; he felt proud of the request, puled out his potatoes, wiped the ashes off with a dirty handkerchief, placed them on a pine log (which was all the provision they had) and Gen’l Marion and the British Officer partook of them. He had been told by some that this had been recorded in the log of the Gen’l as dinner but this was breakfast.¹

Legend says that the officer was surprised by the modest fare, as well as the simple attire and mode of existence that he found in the American camp. He was equally surprised that the American soldiers drew no wage and provided their

The oil on canvas painting, *General Marion Inviting a British Officer to Share His Meal*, by South Carolina artist John Blake White, was presented to the Senate in 1899. According to the artist’s son, Octavius A. White: “the figure of Marion is a portrait from memory, as my father, when a boy, knew him well. Marion’s farm adjoined the plantation of my grandfather.”

The Senate accepted the work by resolution on February 17, 1899. At that time, Octavius White also presented two other paintings by his father: *Sergeants Jasper and Newton Rescuing American Prisoners from the British* (p. 202) and *Mrs. Motte Directing Generals Marion and Lee to Burn Her Mansion to Dislodge the British* (p. 290). Two years later, Octavius White donated another work by his father, *The Battle of Fort Moultrie* (p. 32). In a letter accompanying the first three pictures, he wrote that the series reflects “the heroic spirit which animated our fathers in the stormy days of the Revolution.”

The artist has painted the red-coated British officer and Marion at right center, with a horse. Marion wears a plumed shako. His soldiers present an amusingly motley crew. Of special interest is the African American man behind the table, holding a small pan and, with his right hand, roasting sweet potatoes in the fire. This figure was likely meant to represent Marion’s slave or manservant, although Samuel Weaver’s pension application maintains that Weaver himself, a white soldier, was the one who cooked the meal. The makeshift table has a number of sweet potatoes on it, and Marion gestures toward them. During his lifetime, White executed several versions of the scene; similar paintings are held by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the South Caroliniana Library, Columbia, and the Chicago Historical Society.

White’s portrayal of the sweet potato meal was made into a mezzotint print by John Sartain in 1840 for the Apollo Association for the Promotion of the Fine Arts in the United States, a group that listed as one of its goals “the cultivation and diffusion of correct taste in the fine arts.”¹ The print was the first in a series of engravings made from American paintings that were distributed to the nearly one thousand association members. The image also appeared on Confederate banknotes issued in 1861 by South Carolina. The painting was exhibited at the

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John Blake White (1781-1859)

Oil on canvas, date unknown
24½ x 29½ inches (62.2 x 74.9 cm)

Unsigned

Gift of Octavius A. White (son of the artist), 1899

Accepted by the Joint Committee on the Library, 1899

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own rations. General Marion explained that he and the Americans were willing to make these sacrifices to fight for liberty. The British officer was said to be so moved by the Americans' dedication that soon thereafter he resigned his commission and switched allegiances, declaring that it was impossible to defeat soldiers who would serve "without pay, and almost without clothes, living on roots and drinking water; and all for *Liberty!*"² He reportedly served for the last six months of the war as a private under Marion, who later fought with General Nathanael Greene at the Battle of Eutaw Springs, forcing the British retreat from South Carolina.

National Academy of Design in 1837 and at the Apollo Gallery in 1838 and 1839. The exhibition catalogue described it this way:

After the business has been arranged, Marion invited the visitor to take dinner with him. The moment chosen by the Artist is when they approach the table, which was composed of pieces of bark, bearing a dinner of sweet potatoes. The expression of surprise on the countenances of the stranger and Marion's men is finely expressed. The scenery is said to be perfectly characteristic of a South Carolina swamp; and, altogether, it may safely be pronounced one of the best pictures of American history ever produced in this country.²

In a surprising piece of historical revisionism, James P. Truluck, Jr., a descendant of the alleged British officer, has raised doubts about this interpretation, as well as the officer's identity. Truluck has proposed that the roles of Marion as host and the officer as guest were actually

reversed. According to Truluck (in an 1989 article in *Carologue*, the journal of the South Carolina Historical Society), Captain John Brockington, Jr.—a landowner, slave-owner, and Tory sympathizer, who had fought against the "Swamp Fox"—was the legendary officer. Brockington was among those Tories to be banned to Nova Scotia, their properties seized after victories by the American forces in South Carolina.



Issued by South Carolina in 1861, this Confederate banknote reproduces John Blake White's painting of General Marion.
(Private Collection)

Brockington returned to South Carolina to plead his case in person before the state senate, refuting his former life as a Tory and promising to repay claims against him. He was eventually pardoned. On his way home, he and his slaves traveled through swamps for safety. It was Captain Brockington, posits Truluck, who was cooking his dinner of sweet potatoes when the "Swamp Fox" found him. In this version of the story, Brockington then invited Marion to share his meal—and Marion invited Brockington to join his army!



This 1840 engraving by John Sartain was copied from the Senate's painting of the same scene by artist John Blake White.