



Stephen Heard Chapter of the National Honor Society

Stephen Heard: A Brief History



Georgia Capitol Museum

The American Revolution (1775-83) in Georgia was characterized by some of the conflict's most brutal and violent acts. On the colony's northeastern frontier, well beyond the boundaries of "civilization" in Augusta, a partisan, guerrilla-styled civil war raged between Tories, Whigs, and each group's Indian allies. One participant in this contest was Stephen Heard, a planter, patriot, soldier, and Georgia governor (1780-81). Heard County, created in west central Georgia in 1830, was named in his honor.

Heard was born in Hanover County, Virginia, in November 1740 to Bridgett Carroll and John Heard Jr. (Heard's paternal grandfather, John Sr., had arrived in America from Ireland about 1720.) The family prospered as tobacco farmers in Virginia, where Heard attained a good elementary education. With the outbreak of the French and Indian War (1754-63), however, Heard forfeited his schooling for a chance at adventure. Consequently, he and several of his brothers joined George Washington's Virginia regiment, an experience that had a direct bearing on Heard's future. First, he became familiar with the nature of warfare in a frontier setting, knowledge that would prove useful during the Revolution. Second, his gallantry during battle brought him to the attention of Washington, who promoted him to captain. This promotion laid the foundations for a lifelong friendship between Heard and the future American general and president.

Revolutionary War

Around 1759 Heard moved with his family to St. Paul's Parish (a large portion of which would later be designated as Wilkes County). Because of his service to England during the French and Indian War, Heard obtained a land grant of 150 acres some fourteen miles from the mouth of the Little River, an area that had not yet been secured from the Creek and Cherokee Indians. To offer settlers protection from Indian attacks, Heard and his brother Barnard constructed a fort. Completed in 1774, Heard's Fort served as a refuge for local inhabitants and later became the focal point for the town of Washington, the seat of Wilkes County. For a brief period during the American Revolution, the fort served as the temporary capital of Georgia. When the Revolution began, Heard immediately cast his lot with the colonists. He thus joined a cadre of other local patriots who would leave their mark on Georgia's history, including Nancy Hart, Elijah Clarke, and John Dooly, who also resided in Wilkes County. Unfortunately for the patriots, support for the American cause was not unanimous in upper Georgia. From the onset, backcountry Tories severely challenged Whig efforts to oust the British and secure their own government. By 1778 Tory activity in Wilkes County had intensified, especially after the quick fall of Georgia's two most important cities, Savannah and Augusta, to the British. The British occupation of Georgia emboldened Tories in the northeastern section of the colony to acts of



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violence, one of which resulted in personal tragedy for Heard. In his absence a group of Tories invaded his home and forced his wife (Jane Germany) and their adopted daughter out of the house into the snow. They subsequently died of exposure to the cold. Despite the death of his wife and child, and at least one attempt by a local Tory to kill him, Heard remained diligently engaged in the colonists' cause. On February 14, 1779, Heard took part in the Battle of

Kettle Creek in Wilkes County. Whig forces, numbering around 350 men and commanded by colonels John Dooly and Andrew Pickens and Lieutenant Colonel Elijah Clarke, surprised and ambushed Colonel James Boyd's regiment of almost 600 Tories. The result was a complete rout of Loyalist forces; only 270 of them escaped the battlefield alive. Heard was involved in the most violent portion of the fight at Kettle Creek, where, according to one source, he distinguished himself by "encouraging his men and leading them to points of danger and vantage."

The Battle of Kettle Creek resulted in a severe setback for the British cause in northeast Georgia. Tories nevertheless continued to plunder the countryside, terrorizing its inhabitants. During this period Heard was captured by Tories and taken as a prisoner to British-held Augusta, where authorities intended to hang him for treason. One local legend maintains that Heard would have been executed had it not been for the courage of his female slave Mammy Kate, who with her husband, Daddy Jack, traveled on horseback to Augusta to free her master. Kate convinced British sentries to let her visit Heard and give him food and clean clothes. Once in the cell, she hid Heard in a large laundry basket, which she covered with dirty linens, hoisted onto her head, and carried out of the prison.

Political Career

Heard soon was elected by Wilkes County to Georgia's House of Assembly. In February 1780 Georgia's governor, Richard Howley, was sent by the executive council to represent the state in the Continental Congress. The council then designated George Wells as chief executive, but several days later he was killed in a duel with Major James Jackson. The council then designated Heard as governor on May 24, 1780. Heard's term continued for just over a year, ending on August 18, 1781. During his term, the British, who had overrun most of the state, were in control of its principal cities, and the backcountry was in a state of anarchy. Heard's Fort functioned temporarily as Georgia's capitol, but raids by Tories and Indians forced Heard and the council to move about continually to avoid capture by the British. As Georgia historian Kenneth Coleman has aptly noted, "Truly, state government was in default and it was every man for himself in Whig Georgia." Heard eventually fled to the Carolinas, and the governor's seat was filled by Myrick Davis in August 1780.

After the Revolution Heard received approximately 6,850 acres in land grants. On one tract of this land, about thirty miles north of Washington, he built the stately home he called



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Heardmont. In 1790 the land on which the house was built was included in the large parcel ceded from Wilkes County to form Elbert County. During the early years of the United States, Heard continued to be politically active. He was a justice of Elbert County's court for many years and was also the foreman of its first grand jury. He was one of the delegates representing Elbert County in the Georgia constitutional convention of 1795, and he served on the committee that laid out the county seat of Elberton in 1803. He also remarried; his second wife was Elizabeth Darden, from Virginia. The couple had five daughters and four sons. In educating his daughters, Heard became one of the first and leading patrons of the Moravian School (now Salem College), an educational institution for women in Salem, North Carolina.

On November 15, 1815, Heard died at Heardmont. He was buried in the family cemetery near the home. The monument above his grave bears the following inscription: "Sacred to the Memory of Col Stephen Heard. He was a soldier of the American Revolution, and fought with the Great Washington for the liberties of his country." Mammy Kate and Daddy Jack are buried in the same cemetery.

Suggested Reading

James F. Cook, *The Governors of Georgia, 1754-2004*, 3d ed. (Macon Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2005).

John Hawes McIntosh, *The Official History of Elbert County, 1790-1935* (Elberton: Stephen Heard Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution, 1940).

William J. Northen, *Men of Mark in Georgia*, 7 vols. (1907-12; reprint, Spartanburg, S.C.: Reprint Co., 1974).

Clay Ouzts, Gainesville College

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