

How Did The Spirit of '76 Find Brunswick County?

BY MARJORIE MEGIVERN

The American summer season is launched by the July 4th Independence Day that defines our national life and pride. We are reminded in this season of heroic events that led to our separation from Mother England and our subsequent identity as the United States of America.

What was life like in Brunswick County in those Revolutionary and pre-Revolutionary days and what role, if any, did it play in the conflict? Wilmington native Lawrence Lee is one able historian who has answered these questions in his book, **The History of Brunswick County North Carolina**, a panorama that spans our history from Cape Fear exploration to the post-Revolutionary War period.

Brunswick County was created in 1764 from parts of New Hanover and Bladen counties, the county seat located in Brunswick Town, which had served as the seat of government for the original New Hanover County. What limited communal and political life the county experienced in the 17th and 18th century was focused on this port community, site of the first courthouse and of considerable shipping activity before military activity replaced it.

Although Brunswick County was spared the actual conflict of the Revolution, its people lived for years in the shadow of British dominance and expectations of armed resistance to it.

The centerpiece of pre-Revolutionary activity was an episode of overt defiance of the British Stamp Tax, when residents acted with decency, but also spirit and firmness against what they perceived as tyranny. Brunswick Town was the scene of this historic rebellion and courage.

Men representing Brunswick and several adjoining counties met in Wilmington on February 18, 1766, and organized the Sons of Liberty, for the purpose of preventing implementation of the Stamp Act passed by the British Parliament.

This required colonists to pur-



THE SPIRIT OF '76 infects these patriotic youngsters participating in a neighborhood Fourth of July parade on Ocean Isle Beach last year. BEACON FILE PHOTO

chase stamps to place on legal papers, newspapers and a variety of other papers shipped out of the colonies. It was one more tax imposed to help support the empire and citizens rebelled.

The Sons of Liberty marched to Brunswick Town that February day, where vessels awaited stamped materials, put Governor William Try-

on under house arrest, then proceeded to break into the homes of William Dry, customs inspector, and William Pennington, comptroller of customs. These two gentlemen were made to swear they would not issue any more stamped paper. The Stamp Act was soon repealed.

County people again acted swiftly in July of 1775, when rumors grew that Fort Johnston, in what is now Southport, was to be strength-

ened by Governor Josiah Martin with great numbers of armed Loyalists as a means of subjugating the citizenry from within. Citizens moved decisively to seize the fort and put the torch to it.

While burning down Fort Johnston hurt the revolutionary cause more than it helped, it illustrated the zeal and courage of Brunswick County colonists.

The famous battle at Moore's Creek a few months later brought

the revolution closer to this county, and even before it took place, the fears of Brunswick Town residents prompted them to evacuate their homes in anticipation of British attack. This may have saved their lives, because there followed several incidents of British sailors looting and pillaging in the now deserted Brunswick Town.

After 1776, the war was confined to the north until 1778, when British troops landed in Georgia, facing Americans under the leadership of Maj. Gen. Robert Howe, a Brunswick County native.

Howe was soon transferred to West Point, then officiated in the court-martials of Benedict Arnold and the British spy John Andre. Mustered out of service in 1783, he returned to political activity in Brunswick County, representing the county in the North Carolina House of Commons.

By the close of the Revolution in 1783, this county still had no towns except the ghostlike Brunswick Town whose shipping was demolished. (Ironically, the county today has the largest number of municipalities of any in the state.)

Its economy depended largely on rice, grown on a sizeable number of plantations, most of them lacking the magnificence we expect today.

Orton Plantation, for example, though now a showplace, was originally an unimpressive one-and-a-half story brick structure without its modern wings and columns.

Other plantations included Russellborough, north of Brunswick Town, its name changed to Bellfont by Gov. William Tryon when he purchased it, Belvedere, home of Governor Benjamin Smith, Winnabow, Blue Banks, Thornbury and The Bluffs.

The sprawling, fragmented geography of the county, with the great Green Swamp in its center and rivers and creeks separating settlements, made it difficult for residents to acquire education, health care and even conduct corporate worship.

It was hazardous during spring floods, to travel to the courthouse in Brunswick Town for elections;

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