

**The Last Surviving General of the Revolution:
General Thomas Sumter
*(The Fighting Gamecock)***

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The man who at the time of his death at age 97 was the last surviving general of the American Revolutionary War came from a humble background.

Thomas Sumter was born on July 14, 1734 in the Preddy's Creek settlement of Louisa County, Virginia. Preddy's Creek men were farmers, woodsmen and Indian fighters.

As a youngster, Sumter is reported to have been a "wild buck, devoted to gambling, cockfighting and horse racing." His flare for the dramatic continued during his military and political career.

Sumter began with the Virginia militia, fighting against the Cherokees during the French and Indian War. He then served as a sergeant with the militia during the Cherokee War of 1760-61.

In a twist of fate, Sumter became acquainted with the Cherokees while delivering the peace treaty signed on Nov. 19, 1760. He then accompanied Chiefs Ostenaco, Conne Shote and Woose to London for their meeting with King George III. Ironically, the future Patriot general wore the garb of a British army officer during his stay in London.

Sumter returned to South Carolina in 1762 and spent that winter with the Cherokees. He then headed home to Virginia, where he was promptly thrown in jail for an unpaid debt of 60 pounds. The future general found himself in dire straits. Joe Martin

helped Sumter escape from jail by leaving behind his tomahawk and 10 guineas.

Martin's son said, "With one or both of these he escaped from prison."

Making his way back to South Carolina, Sumter tried to obtain money from both the South Carolina government and the British government for his services. He was successful with the British government, who finally paid Sumter for escorting the Cherokees to London. Sumter used the money to purchase land on the Santee River at Eutaw Springs.

His location was ideal because it captured most of the traffic between Charleston and the frontier. He built a crossroads store and prospered in his business endeavors, and was proud of the success he built from his humble beginnings.

Settling down, Sumter courted and then married widow Mary Jameson in the summer of 1767. Mary, with infirmities from a childhood disease that had left her crippled, was 11 years older than her husband.

Despite their differences, Mary and Thomas Sumter settled down to a comfortable and happy life on her plantation. Their son, Thomas Sumter, Jr. was born on Aug. 30, 1768. Mary was 45 at the time of her son's birth.

Colonel Richard Richardson recognized Sumter's leadership skills and military record and recommended he form a local company of militia, which Sumter promptly organized and served as the company's captain. Richardson further demonstrated his faith in Sumter by appointing him adjutant general during an expedition to bring in Tory leaders.

Sumter showed his strength and courage during the "Snow Campaign" as the Patriot militia marched in the snow, rain, and ice. Richardson commented in his report to

Congress, Sumter, “who on this expedition I constituted Adjutant General, who has behaved very well and has been to me and the cause, of extra service.”

The Second Provincial Congress in 1776 unanimously appointed Sumter the Lieutenant Colonel, Commandment, of the Second Regiment of Riflemen. Sumter understood the mindset of the backcountry farmers and he knew how to instill trust in his command.

Recruiting soldiers from settlers on the Wateree-Catawba, Sumter filled his quota and began marching his new recruits toward Charleston. The Second Regiment of Riflemen under his command was present during the attack on Charleston on September 20, 1776.

However, two years later, Sumter became disillusioned after seeing the glory of the infantry and artillery while his regiment stood idle. His men had never even fired their rifles in action. On Sept. 19, 1778, Sumter resigned his commission and returned home to his wife and son.

Remaining aloof, he stayed out of action until the morning of May 28, 1779. His son was out riding when a neighbor warned young Tom that “Bloody Ban” Banastre Tarleton was coming their way. Sumter donned his old uniform and left for battle only a few hours ahead of Tarleton.

Colonel Tarleton sent Captain Charles Campbell to bring in Sumter. Finding their prey gone, Captain Campbell’s men picked up the chair that Mary Sumter was sitting in and put her into the yard to witness the destruction of her house and farm.

Placing Mary Sumter into the yard to watch her house burn was reproachable even to the British soldiers. It is reported that a sympathetic British soldier put a ham under her chair as the house burned to the ground behind her.

Colonel Tarleton had aroused a sleeping giant. Sumter began organizing militia for guerilla-style, backcountry warfare against the British, and soon became known as the “Fighting Gamecock.”

Reportedly, Sumter got the name from Lord Cornwallis and Colonel Tarleton themselves because of his fierce nature. Other accounts contend that the Gillespie family, famous for their cockfights, gave Sumter the nickname when he came to recruit them for the Patriot cause.

Thomas Sumter was elected brigadier general on June 15, 1780, by members of a militia convention, which is reported to be the first organization of the militia after the fall of Charleston.

General Sumter went onto fight the British at Rocky Mount, Hanging Rock, Fishing Creek, Fish Dam Ford, Blackstock’s Plantation, Fort Granby, Thomson’s Plantation, Fort Watson, Manigault’s Ferry and Quinby’s Bridge.

Unwilling to coordinate his force with the Continental Army, General Sumter eventually disbanded his men after a devastating defeat at Quinby Bridge. He founded the town of Stateburg and owned almost 150,000 acres.

Always the politician, General Sumter was elected to the state assembly in 1782 and was elected to the First Congress in New York. He won reelection to the Second Congress but failed to win reelection in 1793. General Sumter continued to hold office,

off and on, until he resigned from office in 1810 to South Mount Plantation near Stateburg.

General Sumter can be seen as illustrating the American dream of success. He rose above his humble background, coming to South Carolina as fleeing debtor and ending up as one of the state's most notable military, political and civic leaders.

General Sumter always had to be in the thick of a political debate even after his retirement. He took a strong stand in favor of states' rights during the last years of his life. The "Fighting Gamecock" remained active up until his last days at almost 100 years old. He even went horseback riding the day before he died.

General Thomas Sumter, the last surviving general of the Revolution, died on June 1, 1832, at his South Mount Plantation.

General Sumter's gravesite, managed as a unit of Poinsett State Park, is located at two miles off of Hwy 261, in the town of Stateburg, fifteen miles from Sumter. Signage is posted on Hwy 378, 261 and 441 for directional assistance.