OLIVER BOWEN:

REVOLUTIONARY PATRIOT AND HERO


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SUMMARY

Oliver Bowen was born in Providence, Rhode Island on November 17, 1742 and was a Revolutionary War naval hero. He was the first Commodore of the Georgia navy and his capture of the gunpowder laden ship, the Phillipa, was the first capture made by any order of any congress in America. Bowen was later dismissed as Commodore because of a difference of opinion with his superior, but was vindicated of the charges against him. After the war he served as a United States Federal Marshall in Chatham County, Georgia. He died at Augusta, Georgia on July 11, 1800 at the age of 59, leaving a wife, but no children.
One of the least known heroes of the American War of Independence was a patriot named Oliver Bowen. He contributed not only to the history of the Revolutionary War, but also to the history of Georgia. His obvious fervor for liberty and freedom spurred him on to serve this Nation with honor and distinction. Oliver Bowen was truly a man of his time.

Bowen, who was not a native son of Georgia, was born in Providence, Rhode Island on November 17, 1742 and was probably the son of Dr. Ephraim and Mary Bowen of the same place. After a very full and active life, death came to him on July 11, 1800 at the age of 59. He was interred in St. Paul's churchyard in Augusta, Georgia with full military honors. A grave slab marks his resting place.

Nothing is known of the childhood or early manhood years of Bowen. His last will and testament, dated July 20, 1789 in Providence, Rhode Island, established the fact that he did have at least one brother:

I give and bequeath unto my brother the Honourable Jabez Bowen his heirs and assings for ever all...singular my Estate both real and Personal of what nature and kind so ever in the State of Georgia or elsewhere that I may die possessed of or be int... into, by any means whatsoever.

Jabez Bowen, Esq., Attorney-at-law, and Miss Carolina Dennisse (Denisse) of Augusta, Georgia were married on May 16, 1801. The date of the arrival of either brother to the Province of Georgia is unknown. The reason for the
migration of Bowen from Providence to Georgia can only be surmised. Georgia offered new opportunities in both the acquisition of land and in business. Both of these elements were of great importance to the early settlers in this country. Because Georgia was the last of the thirteen colonies to be founded, it presented new territory for expansion and exploitation.

The historical events of this period in American history were instrumental in shaping the future of Oliver Bowen. Resistance to the British Stamp Act of 1765 brought about the birth of a secret society that called themselves "The Sons of Liberty". This group consisted of men involved in small businesses throughout the provinces. In Savannah, the Sons of Liberty met at Tondee's Tavern, which was located at the corner of Whitaker and Broughton Streets. Peter Tondee, proprietor of the tavern was affected by the British Stamp Act and his establishment became a rallying place for liberty; a hotbed of political action. At this place, on the 4th of July, 1775, after the first shots of the American Revolution had been fired at Lexington, the first meeting of the Provincial Congress of Georgia was held in the long room with the purpose of forming the patriot government of Georgia. The first order of business was to appoint an executive council and among those chosen was Oliver Bowen. At the same time, five members of the
Continental Congress were elected:

Indeed, no subsequent assembly was ever more harmonious; and, if the Sons of Liberty according to Governor Wright, acted like drunken men, they were intoxicated with the Pentecostal wine of the new freedom. The die was cast. Georgias' first secession ordinance was written, and the colonial gem, which bore the name of the Brunswick prince, was transferred from King Georges' coronet to Young Libertys' Brow.7

It can be supposed that the first move of the Provincial Congress was toward immediate action. As a matter of fact, before the July 4, 1775 meeting took place at Tondee's Tavern, some "patriotic" incidents had already occurred. Records show that depositions had been taken from some citizens and were sworn to the Crown concerning a group of patriots, including Oliver Bowen, making threats against some of the Loyalists.

On June 7, 1775, an assembly of men bearing arms, headed by Oliver Bowen and Joseph Habersham, both merchants of Savannah, arrived at the lodgings of two Loyalists. In the absence of the Loyalists, notes were left for them declaring that they were to leave the Province or "abide by the consequences."8

On the very day of the first meeting of the Provincial Congress of Georgia at approximately 11:00 AM, the following event occurred:

The Deponents being duly sworn on the Holy Evangelists of Almighty God make Oath & say that on Tuesday the fourth day of July Instant, these deponents perceived Several People Marching or
parading through the streets of the Town and went into the yard of the filature, where Deponents believe the Kings Military Stores were kept, that these Deponents saw Joseph Habersham Oliver Bowen Stephen Deane Francis Arthur John McCluer and William McCluer Archibald Bulloch Joseph Rice Jonathan Cochran and Charles West, & several others Assist to load a Cart with three Horses three or four Times, with the Guns Carriages & Military Stores aforesaid, which these Deponents heard & Verily believe belonged to his Majesty the King of Great Britain, And these Deponents further say that they have heard that the Guns Carriages & other Military Stores Aforesaid were put on board of a schooner by the Aforesaid Persons & others & that they have seen on board the said Schooner Several Guns & carriages which they believe to be the same that were taken out of the store in the Filature Yard

John Minzies
Joseph Goldure

The Provincial Congress remained in session for several days. The protection of Georgia was an issue of great importance. Necessary steps had to be taken to insure this protection. "A schooner was commissioned by the Congress and put in command of two stout patriots, Oliver Bowen and Joseph Habersham, who were already in possession of information which promised to yield substantial results."10

Four days after the seizure of the British stores in the filature at Savannah, the most important single event in the military career of Bowen took place.

The Committee of Safety at Charleston, South Carolina received word of the departure of the ship Philippa, an English vessel, from England.11 The ship was captained by Richard Maitland and carried gunpowder, arms and lead,
among other goods for the colonists of the Provinces of Georgia and East Florida. The Committee selected forty men for the task of overtaking the ship. These South Carolinians, arriving on barges at Bloody Point at the mouth of the Savannah River, camped in full view of Tybee Island.

The Provincial Congress of Georgia decided to assist the men of South Carolina in their enterprise. The Georgia schooner, commanded by Oliver Bowen, waited off the sand bars ahead of the barges. On July 8, 1775, with an ensign and pennant hoisted, the schooner sighted the ship Phillipa. In the meantime, on board the Phillipa, Captain Maitland spied the schooner and put out to sea with the schooner in hot pursuit.

As the schooner drew near the Phillipa it fired "two muskets" in an effort to bring the English vessel to a halt. After an exchange of words between Bowen and Maitland concerning the identity of both vessels, "the people on board the schooner, haul'd down their pendant and hoisted at the mast head, a white flag with a red border, on the field of which flag, was stamp'd or imprinted, in large red letters the words 'American Liberty', and the people on board the schooner said the schooner's name was the 'LIBERTY'." The Phillipa was taken without a skirmish.

The Phillipa, originally bound for Savannah, was instructed to weigh anchor at Cockspur Island. A group of about three
hundred men, who had been encamped on Tybee Point and Cockspur Island, surrounded the Phillippa in small boats. Oliver Bowen, with several other persons, then boarded the English vessel and demanded the ship's documents from Captain Maitland. Maitland, being in no position to argue, quickly obliged them. From the documents, Bowen learned that the hold contained the expected bounty. Bowen informed Maitland that it would be confiscated. At this point in the drama, Joseph Habersham appeared on board with a directive from the Secretary of the Provincial Congress of Georgia, George Walton. The document contained an order to remove all ammunition and arms from the Phillippa. Maitland stated that the order meant nothing to him, and that he would not release the cargo until he had spoken to the people who had ordered it. If his customers gave their approval, then Maitland would relinquish the merchandise. Against Maitland's wishes, however, Bowen unloaded the vessel. "This was the first provincial vessel commissioned for naval purposes in the Revolution, and this was the first capture made by any order of any congress in America".

Other small, but important, events and actions, which vented the red hot anger that existed between the Savannah patriots and Royalists, took place during the preceding months. On July 22, 1775, the Provincial Congress of Georgia made a demand on the Rector of the Parish of Christ Church.
the Reverend Haddon Smith. The order was delivered by Oliver Bowen and others and read as follows:

Sir from Your late Conduct in disobeying the Orders of the Congress, You are deemed an Enemy to America, & by order of the Committee We are to inform you that you are to be Suffered no longer to Officiate in this Town. 20

After the Council of Safety began to function, John Hopkins, a young Royalist made fun of their meetings and was subsequently tarred and feathered and displayed up and down the streets of Savannah for about three hours. He claimed that Oliver Bowen was among those who assailed him. 21

A contingent of men, including Oliver Bowen, calling themselves "committee men", forced their way into the Custom House on October 25, 1775 seeking the Register of the sloop Charlotte, which had docked in the port at an earlier date. The ship had reported to His Majesty's Custom House that it was only carrying ballast whereas it was actually carrying merchandise that had been sold around the town. The ship had been seized, but continued to sell the merchandise. Demanding, but not receiving the register, the group,"proceeded with Iron Instruments to force open the Locks of the Desks and Drawers in the Office; and after Rummaging for the Space of Two hours; and got possession of the said Register which they carried off with them". 22

The name of Oliver Bowen first appears as a member of
the Council of Safety at a meeting held on Monday, December 11th, 1775. His actual date of appointment to this committee is not known. At a special meeting of the Council of Safety held on Wednesday, December 27th, 1775, "A motion was made and seconded that a committee be appointed to propose some expedients for supplying the Province with arms and ammunition". Oliver Bowen was appointed to this committee.

The military career of Bowen moved along with the many actions that the Revolutionary period provided and his advancement in rank proved his abilities as an officer held in high regard. He was obviously well educated, literate, and very capable. He was originally commissioned a captain in the Continental Battalion in February of 1776. The navy along the Georgia coast grew up as an adjunct to the army and the two were never really separated. This is probably the reason that his rank was always recorded in the army style until 1777. Bowen was elected by the assembly in January, 1777 "Commodore or Commander" of the Georgia navy, but continued to also hold army style rank of colonel in that force. Just before his title of Commodore was announced, he had been awarded the rank of major in the first Battalion in December of 1776.

During the year 1776, the Council of Safety authorized Commodore Bowen to deal with navy matters, more or less,
at his own discretion and within certain limitations. He was provided with letters of recommendation to the Governor of Cape Francois, stating that the Province of Georgia had given him the power to, "open a commercial correspondence with any capital merchants of his island, requesting the said governor protection and advice in accomplishing the same". These letters also included a promise that the Province of Georgia would protect and assist the merchants of Cape Francois and any vessels they might send to Georgia ports. At the same time, the Council further authorized Bowen to contract with merchants at Hispaniola for armed ships. In short, he was empowered to make purchases of arms, ammunition, and other goods necessary to aid him in carrying out his duties as Commodore of the navy. In addition to all of these authorities, the Council declared, "that Capt. Bowen be furnished with a copy of the Declaration of the Independent States of America, and a proclamation from our President offering the French subjects a free trade with us".

Commodore Bowen and the Georgia navy participated in three different and disastrous abortive attempts to storm and seize St. Augustine, Florida. These expeditions can be summed up in a few short sentences:

Thus ended this expedition, conceived in ambition and jealousy, planned without due caution, marred in its execution, and utterly without benefit in its results.
The Executive Council of the State of Georgia met on April 3, 1778 and considered a situation regarding the ships commanded by Commodore Bowen. Many questions apparently came up as a result of the Florida fiasco. The question was, "Upon what establishment are the said Gallies and to whose authority are they subject". After the meeting, a resolution was delivered to Commodore Bowen with instructions to disperse the information among the captains under his command. If any objections were voiced, they were to be made known to the Council.

The resolution of the Council was made up of two parts. The first part stated that the gallies were originally for the express purpose of protection of the Georgia coast, inlets, rivers, and plantations and that the status would remain exactly the same. The remainder of the resolution dealt with the problem of authority. It was made very clear, without any room for question, that because of the status of the vessels, they were under the absolute jurisdiction of the State of Georgia. There was also a reminder to all of those concerned that the State had provided the appointments, and that the State could also remove them. Despite the fact that the Continental forces has made use of the ships, no authority of command was given to any Continental officer of the land forces in the State of Georgia. The ships could still be used as part of the general cause.
but that they would remain under the orders of the State.

Sometime prior to August 25, 1778, Oliver Bowen informed the Navy Board that he intended to leave the State of Georgia. The Executive Council of Georgia met on this August date and ordered the Navy Board to require Bowen to settle with them all of the public accounts of the gallies since the institution of the Navy Board. It also seems that an advance of funds by the treasurer for the use of the ships, even before the inception of the Navy Board, had not been settled. The State was seeking proper vouchers so that they could collect their fair share of money from the Continental Government.

At this same meeting the question of the supreme command of the navy vessels was, once again, brought before the Council. Bowen had received and answered the order issued the previous April and stated that the disputes concerning final authority of command were still present. The Council was also informed that Bowen, at a recent date, had denied absolutely that the State had any authority over him. It appears that a lot of political jockeying over this issue was still in the offing. The Council, therefore, ordered all of the commanding officers or captains of the ships to appear before the Council on the following Thursday to answer all questions asked of them. This matter was also referred to the House of Assembly of the State of Georgia.
The September 11, 1778 meeting of the Executive Council of the State of Georgia was notified that, "Comodore Bowen is about leaving the State and hath refused or declined any longer to sign a ration Bill for the Gallies, so as to authorize the Continental Commissary of issues to furnish the same". This problem was resolved by assigning the duty to the ranking captain in port.

The Council, at their meeting of November 16, 1778, took up the matter of a letter written by Oliver Bowen to the Governor, dated three days previous to the meeting. It was declared that the letter from Bowen, "is a high contempt of the Executive authority of this State, and that His honor the Governor, be requested to suspend the said Oliver Bowen from a Command and employ within this State". A letter of suspension was subsequently dispatched to Bowen and all of the ship captains along with a copy of the resolution of suspension passed by the Council.

On December 2, 1778, the Executive Council of the State of Georgia stated that the State House of Assembly requested that the Governor refer Oliver Bowen, "to a proper tribunal for his trial". According to the 49th section of the Constitution, the only tribunal that could handle the trial was the House of Assembly, the body that appointed him and the body to which he was accountable.

The trial of Oliver Bowen never came to pass. At
the July 16, 1783 meeting of the House of Assembly the following resolution was proclaimed:

Resolved, that as it appears the said Commodore Bowen conceived himself subject to the orders of the Continental Officer, and not of the Governor and that any misconduct imputed to him proceeded from his having obeyed the orders of the former in preference to those of the latter, and from no other sources; and further, in consideration of the faithful service of the said Oliver Bowen upon every other occasion, and the zeal he has always manifested in favour of the liberties of his country, that any disability he may have been subjected to by the said suspension be done away and that he be fully restored to every benefit and advantage which he could have claimed had the said suspension never taken place. 48

Thus, Oliver Bowen regained his honorable stature in the eyes of the government in the State of Georgia. Because this resolution occurred, Bowen was, in later years, able to accept an appointment to the office of United States Marshall. This appointment was ratified on May 24, 1796 by the Senate of the United States of America. Bowen served in this capacity from 1796 until 1799. 49

After the fall of Savannah to the British in December of 1778, the Crown passed the Disqualifying Act on July 6, 1780. This was enacted, "to disqualify and render incapable the several persons hereinafter named, from holding or exercising any office of trust, honour, or profit in the Province of Georgia, for a certain time, and for other purposes therein mentioned". This act also required the named persons to turn in their arms within ten
days and disqualified them from jury duty and voting. Some of the names that appeared on the infamous list, including that of Oliver Bowen, were; John Houston, John Adam Treutlen, Lachlan McIntosh, George Walton, Noble Wimberly Jones, Edward Telfair, Mordecai Sheftall, Lyman Hall and Joseph Habersham. This list reads today like the "who's who" in American history. Bowen certainly kept good company.

Oliver Bowen and Mrs. Ann Dorsey, widow of Colonel Thomas Dorsey, were married in Chatham County by Reverend Monteith on March 20, 1798. Before her marriage to Colonel Dorsey on November 8, 1794, Ann Dorsey was the widow of John Orrick of Chatham County. Her maiden name is unknown.

Many land transactions took place in Georgia involving both Oliver and Ann Dorsey Bowen. Bowen owned vast property in Effingham County as early as 1786. He also bought property at #19 Washington Ward on the East side of Savannah to leave as an estate for his wife. A land sale by Ann Dorsey took place in 1798. Four negro slaves were purchased by Oliver Bowen from Nicholas Turnbull in 1797.

A certificate for bounty land from the State of Georgia was issued to Oliver Bowen on October 28, 1783 stating that he was eligible to receive 1,150 acres in the reserve. This land was finally claimed by Bowen on November 17, 1784 and was situated in Washington County.
and was bounded on the East by the Oconee River, and on
the West by vacant land.

Oliver Bowen was survived in life by his wife, Ann,
who placed a marker on his grave that sums up his life in
an appropriate manner is a fitting memorial to his life as
a patriot and hero.

This Stone
is placed by Fraternal affection
to the Memory of

COMMODORE OLIVER BOWEN

a Native of the State of Rhode Island
where he sprang from an honourable stock
He departed this Life
July the 11th AD 1800
in the 59th Year of his age

A PATRIOT OF 1775

he was among the first in this State
to step forth
in Vindication of our Rights
His life equally with his property
were often risued in the Cause
His Widow his Relations and his many Friends
will ever regret the departure
of the Benevolent
and Honest
Man
EPILOGUE

Most of the material used in this paper centered around the Revolutionary War period and the military career of Oliver Bowen. There is a possibility that there may be data recorded on his source of livelihood and business enterprises. Some possibilities for investigation are: the State Archives and Historical Societies of Rhode Island; Effingham County records in Georgia; Georgia State Archives; Richmond County, Georgia records; Washington County, Georgia records; and church records in all of the afore listed locations. Bowen was found in the Reconstructed 1790 Federal Census of Georgia, which was compiled from tax digests. No further real search of tax digests has been done. Bowen had no children of his own, but lateral descendents may exist today.
Notes


3. Will Book D, File 225, Probate Court, Chatham County Court House, Savannah, Georgia.


9. Ibid., pp.499-501


14 Ibid., p.227.

15 Ibid.


17 Ibid., p.609.

18 Ibid., pp.610-612.

19 Northern, Men of Mark, pp.15-16


24 Ibid., p.24.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 Peter Taarling Paper, Dec. 21, 1776, #784, (Savannah: Georgia Historical Society).
31 Ibid., p.192.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 193.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid., p.87.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid., p.88
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid., p.101.
Georgia Gazette, Sept. 25, 1783, p.1 c.1 (Georgia Historical Society Newspaper Microfilm Collections).

National Archives and Record Service, *Index to Names of U.S. Marshalls, Microfilm no. T577*.


Kieth Read Collections, "Lachlan McIntosh Papers", 1778-1786, Folder 373: 648, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Georgia.

Deed Book U, #8263-265, Superior Court, Chatham County Court House, Savannah, Georgia.

60 Ibid., p.286.

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Savannah, Georgia. Georgia Historical Society. Keith Read Collection. #648, Folder 373.

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