


# Carlyle House DOCENT DISPATCH

October, 2008

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

## *The Military Life of Major John Marjoribanks (1732-1781)* by Mark Hill

While we know of George William Carlyle's military service in 1781, not much is known of the British officer whose regiment was responsible for tragically ending George William's brief life. Major John Marjoribanks (pronounced "March-banks") has been considered a "hero" for his role in helping the British forces achieve an arguable victory from what appeared as a certain defeat at the Battle of Eutaw Springs in September 1781. His forthright actions at this Battle in South Carolina served as a culmination of a long military career.

### **Early Military Career**

Major John Marjoribanks was born in 1732 in Eccles, a southeastern Scottish village. His Scottish ancestry played a part in the first step of a military career spanning 32 years. On May 24, 1749, at the age of 17, John Marjoribanks joined, as an Ensign (i.e., a second lieutenant), a grenadier company within the Scots Brigade, one of the oldest British military regiments (formed in 1568) and stationed in Holland. Ensign Marjoribanks served in this Brigade for about eight years, but did not see any military action during this time. By September 1757, John Marjoribanks had returned to England and joined the 19<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot (also known as the "Green Howards") and later was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant. The 19<sup>th</sup> Regiment was formed in 1688 for the service of William of Orange during his ascent to the British throne.

### **Seven Years' War Engagement – Belleisle**

While the 19<sup>th</sup> Regiment did not enter combat during 1757-1760, in January 1761, it became part of a British strategic plan to capture French territory to use as a bargaining chip during peace negotiations between France and Britain to end the Seven Years' War. This plan involved an amphibious assault of *Belleisle*, an island off the coast of France, in the Bay of Biscay. On March 29, Lt. John Marjoribanks and the 800-man 19<sup>th</sup> Regiment embarked on sailing vessels near Portsmouth



and along with other British regiments (8,000 troops total) set sail.

On April 7, the British fleet (commanded by Admiral Keppel who brought General Braddock over to Virginia in 1755 and participated in the "Grandest Congress" held at John Carlyle's manor) anchored off Belleisle, an island full of rocky cliffs. While an unsuccessful attack by British forces (including Lt. Marjoribanks) occurred the next day, on April 22, the British attempted another attack on the island where the 60-man grenadier company of the 19<sup>th</sup> Regiment, including Lt. Marjoribanks, scrambled up the steep and craggy slopes and held its position against a 300-man French contingent

until reinforcements enabled Marjoribank's grenadier company to charge by bayonet and drive back the French forces. The grenadier company suffered casualties of 30 killed or wounded during this attack, including Lt. Marjoribanks among the wounded. The French troops would soon thereafter retreat to within the walls of their island citadel and on June 7 they surrendered. Lt. Marjoribanks' grenadier company was granted the honor of manning the French fortress gate as the French troops marched out after surrendering. Over 150 were killed or wounded from the 19<sup>th</sup> Regiment alone, the highest number of any British regiments engaged. After Belleisle, John Marjoribanks returned to the 19<sup>th</sup> Regiment in England. In June 1763, he was promoted to the rank of Captain,

### **CARLYLE HOUSE**

*Mary Ruth Coleman, Director*  
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becoming the commander of the 19<sup>th</sup> Regiment's grenadier company.

### ***Gibraltar***

In September 1763, Captain Marjoribanks and the 19<sup>th</sup> Regiment were sent to Gibraltar to serve as the garrison at this British stronghold. While they experienced no military action during the next eight years in Gibraltar, it was an important assignment due to Gibraltar's very significant strategic location for the British (at the doorstep of Spain).

### ***The British Isles Tour***

Upon returning from Gibraltar in 1771, Capt. Marjoribanks and the 19<sup>th</sup> Regiment were stationed briefly in England (Richmond, Newcastle). During 1772-1775, they were quartered in Scotland. On the eve of the American Revolution (early 1775), Capt. John Marjoribanks was sent with the 19<sup>th</sup> Regiment to Ireland. During his stint in Ireland, Marjoribanks was promoted twice; the first time to "Battalion-Major" on August 29, 1777 and then to Major on November 17, 1780.

### **Revolutionary War Engagements**

#### ***Cork, Ireland to Charles Town, South Carolina***

In January 1781, the Crown decided to send the 19<sup>th</sup> Regiment to the "colonies." On March 18, John Marjoribanks and the 19<sup>th</sup> Regiment, along with other regiments, sailed from Cork, Ireland for Charles Town, South Carolina arriving there on June 3. The commander of the British forces in the Carolinas, Lord Rawdon, was currently confronted with the impending siege of the last major British outpost in the Carolinas, the fort at Ninety-Six (so named as it was located 96 miles from a frontier fort--Prince George), and desperately needed these men to tip the balance of troop strength there. Rawdon selected the six crack light infantry and grenadier companies from the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> Regiments consisting of a total of about 450 men (the "Flink Companies"). This selection was most likely due to the ability of the men of the Flink Companies to move quickly, as well as their toughness and physical strength. The "march" to Ninety-Six would literally be a long-distance race of approximately 200 miles.

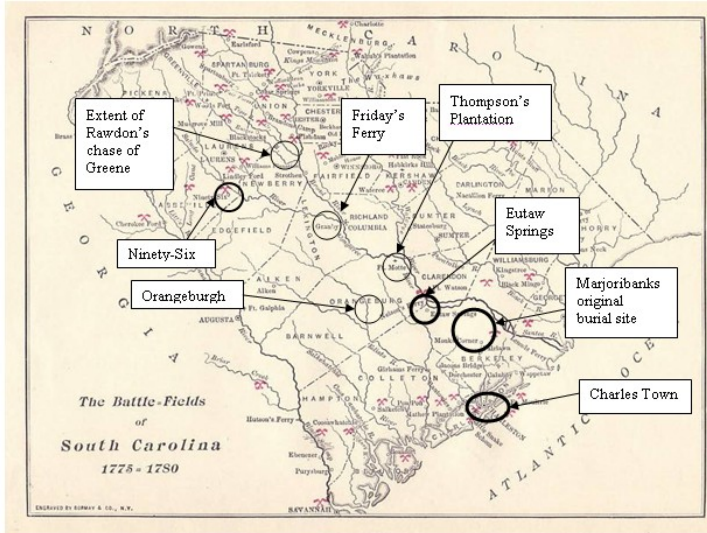
#### ***The Ninety-Six Expedition***

The Flink Companies only had a few days after landing at Charles Town before their first expedition against the enemy. On June 7, Lord Rawdon commenced the march from Charles Town to Ninety-Six taking with him the

Flink Companies and selected Major Marjoribanks, the second-highest ranking officer of the 19<sup>th</sup> Regiment, to lead the Flink Companies. Rawdon also amassed other British and Loyalist troops totaling approximately 2,000 men. On June 12, Rawdon led his troops through Orangeburgh, then headed northwest, eventually taking a path along the southside of the Congaree and Saluda Rivers. (See Map) Throughout the march to Ninety-Six, Marjoribank's Flink Companies successfully evaded confrontations with Patriot cavalry units led by William Washington, Francis Marion and Thomas Sumter. Rawdon reached Ninety-Six on June 21. Two days prior, knowing that Rawdon's troops were bearing down on Ninety-Six, General Nathanael Greene, commander of the American forces in the South, called off the month-long siege of Ninety-Six and marched his troops northeast with Rawdon chasing him briefly. On June 29, the British abandoned Ninety-Six altogether with Lord Rawdon and some 800 foot soldiers including Major Marjoribanks and 60 cavalry, marching out on a 100 mile journey southeast to Orangeburgh (through Friday's Ferry) and experienced some skirmishes with Continental Army cavalry. Rawdon's troops reached Orangeburgh on July 7.

Up to this point, Major Marjoribanks and his fellow troops endured one of the toughest expeditions during the entire Revolutionary War. They were marching continuously for a month in the scorching South Carolina heat. The heat exhaustion, coupled with the lack of sufficient food and salt, led not only to major privations of all of these men, but also caused the death of 50 of Rawdon's troops.

A few days after arriving at Orangeburgh, Lord Rawdon, citing his poor health, retired to Charles Town. The Flink Companies under Major Marjoribanks remained at Orangeburgh with Lt. Col. Stewart, the new commander of all British forces at Orangeburgh, until late July 1781. Between July 29 and August 3, prompted by a lack of provisions, the Flink Companies, with the rest of Lt. Col. Stewart's troops, moved to Thompson's Plantation located near the confluence of the Congaree and Wateree Rivers. (See Map) The Flink Companies camped at Thompson's Plantation throughout most of August and experienced a few skirmishes during foraging expeditions. But then General Greene moved toward the British forces in late August causing Lt. Col. Stewart's troops to march 35 miles southeast to Eutaw Springs, just south of the Santee River.



Map showing major points of interest related to Major Marjoribanks' South Carolina Expedition (June - October 1781) (map from "The History of South Carolina in the Revolution" by Edward McCrady, 1901)

### *Eutaw Springs*

Near Eutaw Springs on the morning of September 8, a British foraging party searching for food was surprised by General Greene's advancing forces. While most of this party were killed or captured, a few British soldiers were able to retreat and warn Lt. Col. Stewart. After the warning, Major John Marjoribanks then set up his Flank Companies on the British right adjacent to Eutaw Creek in a grove of dwarf black oak trees providing a potentially impenetrable thicket. Major Marjoribanks placed his approximately 280 men at an oblique angle to the immediate right of Stewart's 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment. The other British and Loyalist forces were positioned to the left of the Flank Companies. In total, approximately 1,400 British troops participated in this Battle.

Lined up directly across the British forces were forces from Maryland, Virginia, South Carolina and North Carolina, as well as Lt. Col. Henry Lee's famous "Lee's Legion" and artillery. In reserve, General Greene had Lt. Col. William Washington's 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment of Continental Light Dragoons, **which included a 15 year old cadet by the name of George William Carlyle**, and a Delaware Regiment. Approximately 2,000 men constituted the American forces. (For further information on George William Carlyle at the Battle of Eutaw Springs, see the July/August 2004 Docent Dispatch and Spring-Summer 2006 Carlyle Connection)

During the early portion of the Battle, there was not much action for the Flank Companies. But, as the American forces began to push back the Flank

Companies' neighboring regiments, John Marjoribanks commenced his engagement in the Battle. The South Carolina State Troops became exposed to the Flank Companies and Major Marjoribanks ordered his men to fire halting the Americans' advance. General Greene then ordered Lt. Col. William Washington's Continental army cavalry division (60-80 men) to attack the Flank Companies. Major Marjoribanks' forces held their fire until Washington wheeled his cavalry around the black oak thicket and headed for an open area next to the Flank Companies' right. As this maneuver was executed, Major Marjoribanks' men delivered a massive volley bringing down a substantial number of Washington's cavalry, including the young, brave **George William Carlyle**, as well as Washington himself, who was subsequently taken prisoner.

After William Washington's unsuccessful charge, the Americans' reserve infantry unit arrived at the Flank Companies' position and Major Marjoribanks started to move his troops from the thicket next to the palisaded (i.e., fenced in) garden of a two-story brick manor house located on the Eutaw Springs grounds. Marjoribanks held this position as other portions of the British line were being pushed back to the manor house.

As the Americans set up cannon within close range of the manor house, Major Marjoribanks (and some troops) rushed out into the American lines to capture such artillery pieces. At about the same time, the American rank and file advanced through the British camp tents and stopped to indulge in food and drink to the point that they became incapacitated for further military action. Major Marjoribanks then charged these straggling American forces in front of the manor house pushing them into retreat to a nearby wooded area. Soon thereafter, General Greene, probably recognizing the futility of prolonging the engagement, ordered the American forces to retreat from the battlefield. However, despite being the first to leave the field of battle, the Americans effectively ended major British operations in the Carolinas as the British troops retreated to Charles Town . . . for good.

Major Marjoribanks received several accolades for his efforts to reverse the American charges at Eutaw Springs. Lt. Col. Stewart in his September 9 letter to Earl Cornwallis stated - ". . . to Major Majoribanks, and the flank battalion under his command, I think the honour of the day is greatly due [emphasis added]," Col. Otho H. Williams (adjutant to General Greene) wrote -- "Marjoribanks had taken advantage of the





opening made by his fire, to perform another gallant action [i.e., seizing the cannon], which was decisive of the fortune of the day [emphasis added].”

Over the years, many sources have stated that Marjoribanks was wounded at this Battle. However, there is no such mention in Lt. Col. Stewart’s Battle report to Earl Cornwallis. This author has not found any contemporary account of Major Marjoribanks receiving a wound at Eutaw Springs.

In October 1781, on the march from Eutaw Springs to Charles Town, Major Marjoribanks, racked by fever, sought refuge at Wantoot Plantation located about 20 miles southeast of Eutaw Springs; see *Map*. He died on October 22, 1781 and was buried at this plantation.

### Epilogue

Throughout his 32 year military career, Major John Marjoribanks fought in only two battles -- both resulting in significant human loss. Belleisle cost his grenadier company approximately 50% of its men in terms of killed or wounded. At Eutaw Springs, 35% of the Flank Companies’ men were killed or wounded. These figures are substantially above the killed/wounded ratios for most other battles during the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.

Major Marjoribanks appears to have been an officer who showed exemplary leadership and indefatigable courage, especially in facing the very challenging military circumstances provided by his participation in the military actions of Belleisle, Ninety-Six and Eutaw Springs.

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Emails from Roger Marjoribanks (Marjoribanks family historian) to Author.

## STUMP THE STAFF



*How many acres of Virginia did Thomas Fairfax own? And using present day states, where did this territory exist?*

Lord Fairfax owned a little over 5 million acres of land. In today’s terms, this land would cover the Northern Neck of Virginia going up into parts of present day West Virginia.

A great visual representation of the land Fairfax owned can be seen in John Warner’s *A Survey of the Northern Neck of Virginia, 1737*, showing the *Fairfax lands*, which hangs in the study of Carlyle House. This map is made even more dramatic when it is colored in to represent Fairfax’s holdings.



The red on the map shows the land belonging to Lord Fairfax. This was of course parceled out and leased to other individuals. For example, in February 1747, William Fairfax’s land office transferred 1,074 acres in present Loudoun County to John Carlyle.