Savannah River, Georgia

CAPTURE OF THE PHILIPPA
OFF BLOODY POINT, SAVANNAH RIVER
~9 July 1775~

In early June 1775 the South Carolina Council of Safety learned of a shipment of gunpowder due to arrive in Savannah, Georgia. The information was that this was the annual present of gunpowder for the Indians. Since gunpowder and ammunition were in critically short supply in all the colonies, the Council of Safety determined to intercept the shipment.¹

Two barges were sent from South Carolina, commanded by Captains John Joyner and John Barnwell of the 1st South Carolina regiment,² with a total of about forty men each. These proceeded to Bloody Point to intercept the powder.³ Bloody Point, on Daufaskie Island, was the landfall for all vessels entering the Savannah River. From Bloody Point new arrivals were visible, as was the town of Savannah.⁴

Georgia Royal Governor Sir James Wright had anticipated trouble with the shipping in the river. Governor Wright had no military forces available in the colony and had written to General Gage and Admiral Graves for help.⁵ Help was coming, although not in response to Wright’s letter. On 27 June HM Schooner St. John (Lieutenant William Grant) sailed from St. Augustine, East Florida with dispatches for Wright, from Governor Patrick Tonyn.⁶

St. John arrived off Tybee Island lighthouse on 29 June. At 1400 she was nine to twelve miles south southeast of the lighthouse. Here she stopped a sloop from New Providence and searched her, and apparently kept her for the time being. At 1730 she anchored off the lighthouse, observing a tent on the beach and many men ashore and in boats, and the “liberty flag” flying from the top of the lighthouse. Grant sent a letter to Sir James Wright in the sloop, and went

² O’Kelley, NBBAS, 1132
³ O’Kelley, NBBAS, 1132
⁵ Hufford, 315
⁶ NDAR, “Journal of His Majesty’s Schooner St. John, Lieut. William Grant, Commanding,” 1:766-767
to quarters, where the crew stayed all night. The men ashore were the South Carolinians and, probably, some assorted Georgia “Liberty Boys.”

The next day Grant observed boats passing and re-passing to Tybee Island. He sent his master and a boat to find a conveyance for a letter to Sir James Wright at St. Augustine. In the afternoon *St. John* fired a few shots at a Carolina pilot boat, which refused to stop. *St. John* stopped another schooner from South Carolina and searched her, but she only had passengers for Georgia aboard. Grant’s men then boarded and searched a schooner from St. Vincent. Finally, Grant sent a boat and officer to town with a letter for the governor.  

On 4 July 1775 the Second Georgia Provincial Congress convened, and joined the Continental Association on 6 July. This brought the colony squarely into the rebellion. The Georgians had been aware of the presence of the South Carolinians and now blessed the enterprise by co-operating. The Georgians informed Barnwell and Joyner of the presence of the *St. John*. The schooner *Elizabeth*, owned by Samuel Price and Richard Wright of Savannah, was taken up and commissioned as the *Liberty*. Price cooperated with the Provincial Congress acting as his schooner’s pilot. The Provincial Congress authorized Captain Oliver Bowen and Captain Joseph Habersham as commanders of the newly outfitted ten gun schooner. They were ordered to assist Captains Joyner and Barnwell of South Carolina (whose troops were on Tybee Island) in the capture of the incoming powder vessel. A secondary purpose was to nullify the *St. John*. Other reports list this vessel as having eight to ten guns, swivels, and a fifty-man crew. The cannon were 6-pounders.

The merchant ship in question was the 270-ton *Phillipa* (*Philipa*, formerly the *Magna Carta*) (Richard Maitland), which had sailed from London, England on 2 May 1775 with a cargo of 13000 pounds of gunpowder, as well as small arms, and casks of musket balls. The cargo was intended for the Indian trade and for British troops and loyalists in Georgia and eastern Florida.

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7 NDAR, “Journal of His Majesty’s Schooner *St. John*, Lieutenant William Grant, Commanding,” 1:783

8 NDAR, “Journal of His Majesty’s Schooner *St. John*, Lieut. William Grant, Commanding,” 1:794

9 [http://ourgeorgiahistory.com/wars/Revolution/revolution06.html](http://ourgeorgiahistory.com/wars/Revolution/revolution06.html), 1/24/08


14 Hufford, 315
Grant was making every effort to find the powder vessel first. On 3 July he ran down a ship outside the bar, but she was from Barbados in ballast and was released. The presence of the Liberty and the two barges may have influenced Grant, and he moved further out to sea. On 9 July two more ships were stopped and searched for powder, but were released. Unknown to Grant, he had already missed his chance.

On 7 July the Phillippa anchored nine miles from Tybee Point, to await a pilot to take her up to Savannah. The Liberty was anchored out of sight from Tybee, but Bowen and Habersham were no doubt informed of the arrival of a large ship. On 8 July Liberty moved up and anchored in the ship channel about three or four miles from the Phillippa. If the powder ship moved up river it would have to pass the schooner. At 1400 a pilot went aboard the Phillippa and she got underway.

As Phillippa moved upriver, Maitland got a closer look at the schooner. “The schooner was full of armed men and had ten carriage-guns mounted.” Below her deck several boards had been

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15 NDAR, "Journal of His Majesty's Schooner St. John, Leut. William Grant, Commanding," 1:812
16 NDAR, "Journal of His Majesty's Schooner St. John, Leut. William Grant, Commanding," 1:848
17 Hufford, 317
18 Hufford, 317. Hufford cites the Affidavit of Richard Maitland, 21 September 1775, from Allen D. Candler and Lucian Lamar Knight, comps., The Colonial Records of the State of Georgia, 26 vols., vol. 2 manuscript, 38, pt. 1; 606-614
19 O'Kelley, NBBAS, 1:33. Not on 9 July, as stated, however.
Map of the entrance to the Savannah River. The action seems to be usually known as "Bloody Point" for no good reason.
removed “which were for small arms in close quarters.” At 1600 the Liberty fired two muskets at the Philippa as a signal to heave to, and ordered Maitland to identify himself. Maitland was suspicious, having had a previous experience in South Carolina, when he had violated the Continental Association and been exposed for it. Maitland made a futile effort to escape before he hove to. Maitland demanded to know who the schooner was. Bowen offered to serve as a pilot for the ship, which Maitland declined. Bowen then “hauled down their pendant and hoisted at the masthead a white flag with a red border, on the field of which flag was stamped or imprinted in large red letters the word ‘American Liberty’, and the people on board the schooner said the schooner’s name was the Liberty.”

A change in the wind and an ebb tide forced both vessels to anchor. They remained at anchor until the following morning. Then Maitland was ordered to sail up the Savannah to Cockspur Island, with Liberty following. About three hundred men were camped there. Maitland was ordered to anchor, and the two South Carolina barges came out and joined the schooner. Bowen, Joyner, and Seth Cuthbert of Savannah led a boarding party to the Philippa, Maitland was forced to hand over his papers. Next Captain Joseph Habersham came aboard. He had a written order from the Provincial Congress which authorized him to seize the arms, gunpowder, and whatever else was included in the cargo. Maitland was informed that the Americans would “take all the gunpowder, shot, lead, and Indian trading arms.” When the unloading had begun, Maitland was allowed to depart for Savannah in order to inform Governor Wright of what had happened.

The Americans were able to take off 16,000 pounds of powder and “seven hundredweight of leaden bullets.” They also “took away all the bar-lead, sheet-lead, Indian trading arms, and

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20 O’Kelley, NBBAS, 1:33. Quotations from Maitland’s affidavit.
21 O’Kelley, NBBAS, 1:33
23 O’Kelley, NBBAS, 1:33
27 O’Kelley, NBBAS, 1:33. Quotations from Maitland’s affidavit.
shot, that were on board.” The Carolinians and the Georgians divided the cargo between them.\(^9\)

All the gunpowder, along with a few kegs of musket balls, was transferred to the *Liberty*. There was no room aboard the *Liberty* for many of the kegs of powder and the small arms, so the *Phillipa*’s crew was instructed to keep her at anchor near Cockspur Island. A “prize crew” was put aboard to insure that she stayed put. On 12 July the *Phillipa* received instructions from the Georgia Committee of Safety to proceed to Savannah.\(^9\) There a second boarding party, led by William Platt, a Savannah merchant, and under the overall direction of the Committee, unloaded the rest of the cargo into boats and transported it to the city magazine for storage.\(^10\)

Maitland met his ship at Savannah and was aboard by 12 July. Governor Wright urged Maitland to file a protest or affidavit with Anthony Stokes, the chief justice of the province. This would have had no effect but to draw more attention to Maitland. The necessity of having the cargo’s bonds cancelled finally forced Maitland to file an affidavit on 21 September 1775.\(^32\)

The very real risk these early rebels ran was exemplified by the case of Ebenezer Smith Platt. Platt moved to Savannah from New York in March 1775. At Savannah, Platt was in the mercantile business.\(^33\) Platt became a member of the committee of Savannah, and was among those that boarded the *Phillipa* at Savannah.\(^34\) In January 1776 Platt was en route to Saint-Domingue to purchase arms for the Provincial Congress. The prize was taken in to Jamaica. Because the vessel was registered as English, Platt was ordered to sell his cargo, but escaped prison. On his return voyage, in another vessel, Platt was again captured.\(^35\) This time he was recognized as a leader in the *Phillipa* affair. Platt was confined aboard a ship of war from March 1776 to January 1777. He was then taken to England, where he was heavily ironed and imprisoned in Newgate, charged with high treason.\(^36\) An unofficial British committee working for relief of American prisoners

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\(^33\) Ibid.

\(^34\) Hufford, 318


petitioned, in mid-March 1778, that he be tried or admitted to bail. Platt was released by 3 April 1778 and planned to go to France to return to America.  

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Time: several hours, no casualties reported

