

The Unfortunate End to Button Gwinnett

By Jeannette Holland Austin



Button Gwinnett was born in England in 1732 of respectable parents. Before embarking for America in 1770, his first career was in the mercantile business in Bristol. He landed at Charleston, S. C., where he commenced commercial business and remained for two years. He then disposed of his merchandise and purchased a plantation upon the island of St. Catharine in Georgia, to which he removed and became an enterprising agriculturalist. He was a man of an active and penetrating mind, and a close observer of passing events. Having been in England during the formation of the visionary and impolitic plan of taxing the colonies, he understood well the frame work of the British cabinet, and from his course in the struggle that ensued, it is reasonable to infer that he had imbibed strong whig principles before his removal to this country. He became a friend of Lyman Hall, a bold and fearless advocate of equal rights. On the 2nd of February, 1776, Mr. Gwinnett was appointed a member of the Continental Congress and took his seat in that venerable body on the

20th of the ensuing May.

When the proposition of separating from England came before Congress, Mr. Gwinnett was a warm advocate of the measure, and when the trying hour arrived, he gave his approving vote and affixed his signature to the Declaration of Independence despite the consequences. In February, 1777, Mr. Gwinnett took his seat in the convention of his own state which convened for the purpose of forming a constitution and establishing a republican form of government. His activity in Congress, to which he stood re-elected, had already given him great weight, and he at once exercised a powerful influence in his new situation. He submitted the draft of a constitution which, with a few slight amendments, was immediately adopted by the convention.

Shortly after this he was elevated to the presidency of the provincial council which was at that time the highest station in the State. Also expecting to be elected to this grand position was General Lachlan MacIntosh, against whom Mr. Gwinnett had pitted himself the preceding year as a candidate for brigadier-general, and was unsuccessful. The appointment went to MacIntosh and a power struggle ensued. The civil power claimed the right to try military officers for offences that General MacIntosh conceived were to be tried only by a court-martial. Another root of bitterness between these two gentlemen took its growth from the promotion of a senior lieutenant-colonel, then under General MacIntosh, to the command of his brigade, destined for the reduction of East Florida, agreeably to a plan formed by Mr. Gwinnett, which proved a disastrous failure.

This was a source of mortification to the one, and the other publicly exulted in the misfortune. Under the new constitution a governor was to be elected on the first Monday of the ensuing May, and Mr. Gwinnett offered himself as a candidate. His competitor was a man whose talents and acquirements were far inferior to his, but succeeded in obtaining the gubernatorial chair. General MacIntosh again publicly exulted in the disappointments that were

overwhelming his antagonist. The result was that Gwinnett challenged the General to a due on the streets of Savannah. They drew their guns at the distance of four paces. Both were but Mr. Gwinnett went home where he on the 27th of May, 1777, the very time he should have been in Congress. Thus, the Last Will and Testament of Button Gwinnett was the first document to be filed for probate in Savannah (Chatham County).

A clear image is available to members of Georgia Pioneers