

The Oath

Tales from a Revolution: Georgia

Chapter I

The scratching of the court official's pen irritated James Hatch, but then, there wasn't much these days that didn't. It seemed to him that the man was taking entirely too much pleasure in shaping his elegant, proper copperplate letters across the page, in contrast to the limits of James' own untidy scrawl.

The man paused and read back to him. "Declaration of James Hatch to obtain the benefit of an Act of Congress passed June of 1832. State of Georgia, Walton County, on this Eleventh day of November, Eighteen hundred and thirty-three, personally appeared before the Superior Court of said County and State James Hatch, a resident of Walton County and the State aforesaid, aged seventy-four years, who being duly sworn according to law doth on his Oath make the following declaration in order to obtain the benefit of the provisions made by the Act of Congress passed June 7th, 1832."

The official looked up at James, the light from the window glinting off his glasses. "Right so far?"

"Aye, I reckon you've got my age and name right, and where I live. The rest, about the Congress, and the dates, I'll just have to trust that you know well enough."

It rankled him to have to come, hat in hand, to ask payment for service that took place a lifetime ago. More than that, though,

he was not looking forward to the necessity of sharing the details of that service with this dandy, whose bravest act in this life had probably been to embrace the use of a steel nib for his pen over the old-fashioned quill.

Still, James reminded himself that his need was keen, and his cause was worthy. The money promised by Congress would enable him to make a real difference. He could swallow his pride for a chance to end the injustice around him.

Oblivious to James' unhappiness, the official said, "Now, can you tell me how and when you came to enlist in the Army?"

"Naturally. I am aged, but not yet daft. I joined up early in the year '79 — February, I think it was — and I heard that Captain Tolliver was raising a company of Virginians that would come to serve under Colonel Parker..."



A cold gust blew in from the direction of the fallow tobacco fields, and James shifted uncomfortably, trying to hide the shiver that ran down his spine. The officer who stood haranguing the crowd before the tavern caught his movement, and glanced over at him with a quick flash of a smile on his face.

"You there, are you willing to serve to defend your country against the violence that the King sends hither? Will you stay here and wait in the chill of winter for the redcoats to put all to the torch and warm you thus? Or will you turn out and send them back to England whence they came?"

James did not much care for being personally singled out in this manner, but he could not dispute the appeal of the officer's call to duty. Although the past four years of warfare had little touched Virginia since independence had been declared, the newspapers and

tavern talk were full of the suffering of New-England and warnings of the risk to the local ports and cities.

The officer wasn't finished, though. "I carry word that King George's troops have taken the port of Savannah, in Georgia, and that they mean to use that foothold to drive northward — all the way to Boston if they can — right over the ground where you have been trying to survive."

He looked each man before him in the eye to ensure that he had their full attention, and then waved an arm out toward the acres of tobacco stubble. "Would you see these fields run red with the blood of your neighbors? Will you stand by while the British seize your hard-won land and hand it over to some officer in their army to reward him for returning these states to the Crown's despotism? Will you leave it to some other man to defend your wives, your mothers, and your children from the perils of war?"

James' neighbor Phineas spoke up, answering in a deep rumble, "No, sir, I will not." He was joined by a ragged chorus of shouts and James found himself adding to it, without conscious volition.

"Or will you fight for our liberty, for our sacred honor, for our very way of life?"

This time, the answer was more unified, and James felt more committed to the loud cry, "Yes!" that he shouted with the other men.

It really was only a matter of doing what he owed to these friends and neighbors, never mind to his own family.

His father was too old to serve, and his brother far too young. His sisters both had newborn children to tend, and while James didn't know whether their husbands would heed the call to

service, neither of them had turned out to hear the Virginian officer speak . . . So it was left to him to step up.

In short order, the captain was adding his name to the roster, asking briskly, “Have you a gun of your own, Private Hatch?”

James was forced to confess that he did not, and the officer dismissed his shamefaced explanations with a wave of his hand. “Never you mind, we’ll get you equipped. Go and get your affairs in order, and I’ll see you back here at sunrise. We’ll muster and march out then for training.”

He wasn’t sure what he had expected his parents to think of his decision to enlist. His mother had only gasped and retreated to her bedroom, while his father had chewed at the side of his cheek for a long time before saying only, “I must see to your mother. Mind that you give her no cause for grief, son, while do what you feel your duty is.”

James could almost see his father grow smaller as he added, “I do wish that you had come and sought my counsel before you rushed into this, James. You’re a good boy, but I wonder if you know your own mind yet.”

James did not answer, and the older man turned and left without waiting for him to do so. He wasn’t sure what he would have said, even if the man had given him the opportunity. He was, after all, a man grown, and it rubbed him raw to be treated as though he were still a boy.

James was left feeling a sense of unfinished business when he departed the following morning, seen off only by the elderly slave who tended the kitchen hearth. His mother and brother were still abed, and his father had departed even earlier than James himself was up, on some business at a neighboring plantation.

Phineas was at least a friendly face in the small crowd that gathered in the dim morning chill, and James related to him the bewildering reception he'd gotten from his parents.

Phineas shrugged. "Your pa has never been much more than half-warm in his support for independence, James. I've heard that his kinfolk are on the other side, and he may just be worried that you will come to face your own blood in this war."

James shushed his friend with an urgent motion of his hand, urging quietly, "You keep those rumors to yourself. My father has never said a single thing that could give any man reason to doubt his loyalty to these United States, and just because his cousins haven't sent word doesn't mean they're Tories. Stories like that can get a man an appointment with a vat of pitch and a sack of feathers."

Phineas nodded his acquiescence, raising his hands in a mollifying gesture. He answered just a quietly. "As you say, James. I'm just suggesting that your parents might not be so much disapproving of your choice to join up as they are about which side you've chosen."

No matter how he tried, James couldn't dismiss the thought that there might have been a kernel of truth in Phineas' comments. He chewed over the thought, hardly noticing the distance they covered marching behind Captain Tolliver, as their officer had introduced himself. James knew that the war for independence was grinding to an apparent impasse in the north, and the news of the British incursion to their south had set some pessimistic chins to wagging about the tavern.

Perhaps his father was only worried that James had joined a hopeless cause, committing himself to open disloyalty to a King who would soon enough again hold sway over this country. James

could see the disadvantages, should that come to pass.

On the other hand, the only way to keep such a thing from happening was for enough good men to step forward. When Phineas had spoken up, it had seemed only sensible to add his own voice to the cause, but now that he was shuffling through the morning mist, James couldn't help but second-guess himself.

He could have hung back when the officer was taking down men's names the day before, and faded away into the afternoon. He could have left as Tolliver was still in the process of working the crowd up into what served as a patriotic fervor, leaving the others to be enthralled by the man's words. He could even have faced the officer, when it came time to add his name to the roll, and declined.

Nobody had forced him to stick around, or answer the call, or put down his name; he needed to admit to himself that he had had some reason for doing all of these things. Was it to prove to his father that he was, in fact, a grown man, and not merely an apprentice planter on a tobacco plantation that might someday pass into his hands? Was it to prove to himself that he was capable of making a decision and standing by it?

Or had he merely allowed himself to be carried along by the moment, swept into a rushed choice to do what his friends and neighbors seemed to expect of him, without having taken the time to sufficiently consider the implications and consequences?

Regardless, he was committed now. Every step carried him further away from his home, and closer to an unknowable future. He had heard enough reports of the battles in New-England to know that the British forces were not a threat to be taken lightly. Nor were the hazards of disease and injury even without the action of the enemy to be ignored.

The enemy! What a thing to call men who included not only the British soldiers who had come across the ocean to suppress American intransigence, but those loyal subjects from the communities around James' home who now stood beside the redcoats.

He might have played childhood games with them as a boy, might even share blood with them, and now he must confront the very real possibility that a familiar face might appear at the far end of his musket.

Worse, a choice would have to be made; who would pull their trigger first?

As the recruits marched on into the morning, James thought about the boys he'd known who had become scarce as the fervor for independence had grown into an unstoppable thing. Frederick Kilburne, for one. His father had been a crown official of one sort or another, though James had never bothered himself to find out more. Once it became a matter of greater interest, the Kilburne family had already left for friendlier parts.

William Huntsman he was quite sure of, as well. James had heard him in a heated discussion at the tavern one night, defending the honor of the British army defeated at Saratoga. He was arguing that the Americans had no right to continue to hold them prisoner, when the condition of their surrender had been that they'd be shipped back to England.

This was while the captives were still up at Cambridge, in New-England. It was an irony that long after William had taken his musket and angry words to the British line, the army he had insisted ought to have been sent home was newly installed in a camp right here in Virginia. James hoped not to come within range

of his musket — William was known for his ability to load and fire as quickly as any man in all the district.

For that matter, James prayed that, when the time came for him to line up on some field of battle, there would be no man on the opposite side whose face was even slightly familiar.

He glimpsed a great truth of warfare in that moment, before his first day of training had even begun. It is easier to strive for the death and misfortune of men who are unknown to you than to consider bringing harm to someone whose humanity you knew at close range.

Of course, once his training commenced, there were far more practical truths to grapple with. James had fired a musket many times before, naturally, but it was something yet again to learn how to fire one in time with one's fellow soldiers. Speed was still of the essence — troops that could fire three times in a minute self-evidently stood a greater chance of striking their enemy than those who could barely manage one ragged round in a minute's time.

Too, there were the details of marching in a well-spaced formation, instead of stumbling along bunched up in a clump that made a handy target for an enemy artillery company. And there were many, many lessons that were not delivered formally, but through experience alone.

Choosing a dry place for a tent, so that you wouldn't wake up with a rivulet flooding over your feet, building a proper fire with a minimum of smoke to avoid alerting British scouts — or worse, their Indian allies! — to your presence, and feeding yourself on scarcely half of a legal ration were all critical lessons to learn, but which appeared in no manual of drill.

It wasn't only rations that were short, either. When James had joined up, the captain had promised that all recruits would be clothed in a stoutly-made uniform and equipped with a well-founded musket. Instead, each man had been issued some indifferent scraps of cloth that might be charitably called breeches, no shoes save what they had come with, and no better than one musket for every three men.

There were always promises that another shipment would come any day now, as promised by the distant Congress, but James remembered the advice his father had given him in a very different context. It applied well here, too.

“Spend no promise until it lies in your purse. No matter how well a man means his word, the true value of his intent cannot be properly judged until he has followed through on it.”

The circumstance that had occasioned this particular lesson had been the failure of a childhood friend to repay a loan, which had left James short of the price of a horse that he had yearned for. Another man was prepared to buy up the mare while James scrambled to get together the necessary funds, so he had gone to his father to ask for assistance.

After delivering his words of wisdom, his father had dug the money James needed out of his own purse — and hadn't even said anything when not a month later the horse had stepped into a foxhole and broken its leg. The loss of both the horse and the friend who owed him money had clearly been lesson enough for his father's purposes.

James had remembered his anger at the unpaid debt, though, and had diligently repaid his father for the loan, even though he had gotten little material benefit from it.

In any event, as dearly as he had wanted to enjoy the use of the horse, the lesson he'd learned from the incident had been of even greater value. So James wasn't left with nothing at all to eat when promised rations were delayed. He'd held back some of his biscuit and salt beef where others had eaten what they had, relying upon resupply before the next meal.

As for the guns, that promised to be a more serious issue, if the company were ordered into action before that deficiency could be remedied. As it was, the squads were training in shifts, handing off what guns they did have from one man to the next as they took turns in drill.

Even with that expedient, they were but pantomiming the loading and firing sequence, as all available powder and balls were being conserved for men facing real enemies instead of wooden forms at the far end of the drill ground.

Then came the day when a supply train arrived and suddenly, there were muskets enough for every man, along with more powder and shot than they could readily carry. The men mustered out in proper uniforms, and if they still had to wear their own shoes, it was of little import, as everything else was finally available in ample quantity.

They stood in their ranks to listen to Captain Tolliver explain the abrupt shower of the very things that they'd been so desperate to lay their hands on for so long. Listening to him, James swallowed hard and tried not to let his reaction show outwardly.

Drill was over, and it the company had its orders to march for battle.