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Patriot Slave



By Tina C. Jones
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Legend has it that Oscar and Francis Marion grew up on the same plantation in Berkeley County, S.C., and that they played together as childhood friends in the 1730s. Francis Marion's family owned the plantation. Oscar was a slave. They were probably about the same age, or at least of the same generation. In time, these childhood playmates would mature and, as adults, find fame as patriotic heroes and fierce guerrilla fighters in the Revolutionary War. Francis Marion grew up to become the wily general known to his enemies as the "Swamp Fox." Oscar Marion's place fighting alongside him has only recently come into full focus, although his role in the war has often been portrayed in art and literature over the past two centuries.

Oscar Marion served in the 2nd Continental Army Regiment of South Carolina during the struggle for American independence. His volunteer service of seven years far exceeded the average enlisted soldier's time on duty, and his combat experience was intense; he was described at the time as a "loyal (and) faithful servant" to Gen. Francis Marion. Despite the social injustices he endured during a lifetime spent as a slave and servant, Oscar was one of the most notable and best known among "Marion's Men," having served as the general's personal assistant, sous chef, bugler, oarsman and, of course, fighter. The slave-turned-soldier waged successful guerrilla warfare against British troops, and unlike other slaves owned by Francis Marion's family, who left and served with the loyalists, Oscar deliberately chose the path of patriotism.

I have a personal interest in the life and legacy of Oscar Marion. Over the past 15 years, I have engaged in genealogical research documenting my lineage and family's roots back to the Revolution and beyond. Using primary and secondary sources alike, along with the excellent memory of my mother, Mrs. Tiney R. Haynie, I have discovered fascinating information about the lives of my African-American ancestors and their extended families, as well as their contributions to U.S. history.

Members of my family have participated in every major American war. One of my uncles, John C. Marion of Atlanta, was honored in 2004 for his service during World War II. He received a special card from President and Mrs. George W. Bush, and a letter of thanks from Georgia Gov. Sonny Perdue. Tracing our line deeper into history, I found three relatives who served in South Carolina regiments during the Revolutionary War: my African forefather Quamno, his son Peter - both servants of John Marion (a close relative of Francis) - and Oscar Marion, who, as a child, played with the general and, as a man, fought alongside him.

In his analysis of William Cullen Bryant's poem "Song of Marion's Men," Rupert S. Holland provides the following context:

"The British had succeeded in defeating most of the American troops in South Carolina by 1780, and had laid waste much of that state, confiscating plantations, burning houses, and hanging such as they termed traitors without giving them any form of trial. The city of Charleston surrendered to Sir Henry Clinton, the American General Gates was defeated at the Battle of Camden, August 16, 1780, and General Sumter at Fishing Creek, August 18, 1780. After that there was only one organized American force in South Carolina, 'Marion's Brigade,' as it was called. This was a band of troopers led by General Francis Marion, a native of South Carolina, whose ancestors were French Huguenot refugees. At first his troop contained only twenty men, but more joined his band, and for three years they carried on irregular warfare, harassing the British forces more than regular soldiers could have done.

"Marion's men defeated a large body of Tories at Briton's Neck without losing a single man, and soon after beat the enemy twice by sudden attacks when the Tories were unaware of armed men being near. Marion managed to escape General Tarleton by disappearing into a swamp after a chase of twenty-five miles. Tarleton complained, 'As for this damned old fox, the Devil himself could not catch him.' This won the daring leader the name of 'Swamp Fox,' by which he was known all through the countryside."

The "Swamp Fox" was not alone while executing maneuvers that bewildered the British and gave hope to patriots in the South. Oscar Marion - described in early writings as "one of his faithful Negro servants" - was at the general's side so consistently during the war that he was captured on canvas by several of the most famous American artists of the time. John Blake White, William Ranney and Alonzo Chapel all painted various images of Revolutionary War events that included Oscar somewhere near his master, Gen. Francis Marion. As I have researched his life, I have identified my ancestor in many other historical paintings located in fine museums around the country.

A soldier by day and sous chef by night, Oscar is shown roasting sweet potatoes for a British officer in a famous oil painting by John Blake White that later was engraved and printed onto South Carolina's \$10 Confederate notes and \$5 postwar notes. In art and literature, Oscar can be found hiding in the swamps with Gen. Marion and his other men. He can be found rowing as they travel up and down the Pee Dee River. He is depicted handling Gen. Marion's horse while floating down the river. In another painting, he is seen as a soldier in full uniform, mounted on a horse and armed with a rifle. There is also a provocative painting showing both Marion men sharing a white horse. It appears that Oscar has been wounded and is being assisted by the general; they are crossing shallow water along the Pee Dee River as their horses stop for a drink, and Oscar is carrying a brass bugle around his right shoulder, revealing another of his many duties as one of Marion's Men.

Oscar fought in the siege of Savannah in 1779, the siege of Charleston in 1780, and the Battle of Eutaw Springs in 1781. His efforts alongside Gen. Francis Marion and his militia helped set up the Continental Army's eventual victory over forces led by British Gen. Charles Cornwallis at Yorktown, Va.

More than 225 years later, Oscar's exploits were portrayed by the character Occam in the 2000 movie "The Patriot," which starred Mel Gibson. This role portrays Oscar as a valiant soldier fighting and helping his fellow militia men during the war.

During my research efforts, I identified Oscar in a famous oil painting by John Blake White that has been on exhibit at the U.S. Capitol building for more than a century; his identity had been unknown. Unmasking the identity of my collateral ancestor, I presented my evidence to the U.S. Senate Curator's Office and, after verification, the U.S. Senate curator agreed to update their official records to reflect Oscar's identification. After pressing government officials, I also received permission to organize a special ceremony to honor my relative's unique contribution to America's military history. My goal and desire was to give this African-American patriot his due place in U.S. history, and reviving his little-known story.

On Dec. 15, 2006, at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, Oscar Marion was finally given post-Revolutionary War recognition for service to his country. His family received a special proclamation and certificate from President Bush and U.S. Rep. Albert Wynn, D-Md., on behalf of a grateful nation. The program included a musical prelude by the 257th Army Band, and remarks from Senate Curator Diane K. Skvarla, NBC News correspondent Tracie Potts and Smithsonian Institute historian Margaret S. Vining, a consultant for "The Patriot." Debra Newman Ham, historian and history professor at Morgan State University, served as main speaker.

In addition, the program included excerpts from "The Patriot" featuring the character Occam, played by actor Jay Arlen Jones. It was a wonderful ceremony that had media coverage, including a front-page story in The Washington Post. After the story was published, I was contacted by a distant nephew of Gen. Francis Marion: Robert Simmons, who was an extra in "The Patriot." We have since met, and I feel I have come full circle in learning my family history.

I am continuing to lead various efforts to restore the Oscar Marion story, including contacting U.S. municipalities named after Francis Marion and requesting they update their records to include Oscar's name. These municipalities began, or were named, about the same time as famous artists were painting images that included Oscar.

It is my hope that others will not only find Oscar's story interesting, but that they will be encouraged and motivated to start their own family history treasure hunts, as I did.

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