This podcast transcript was created for accessibility purposes using an automated transcription service. It has been reviewed for general accuracy but may contain minor discrepancies. It should not be considered a definitive record of the conversation. If you have any questions, please contact us at podcast@masshist.org.

Season 5, Episode 6: South Carolina in the Revolution

Daniel Hinchen 00:07

John Adams to Abigail Adams, August 19, 1777. I feel a strong affection for South Carolina for several reasons. One, I think them as staunch patriots, as any in America. Two, I think them as brave. Three, they are the only people in America who have maintained a post and defended a fort. Four, they have sent us a new delegate, whom I greatly admire, Mr. [Henry] Laurens, their lieutenant governor, a gentleman of great fortune, great abilities, modesty, and integrity, and great experience too. If all the states would send us such men, it would be a pleasure to be here.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:58

[Intro music fades in] This is Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai.

Lauren Gray 01:00

This is Lauren Gray.

Cassie Cloutier 01:01

This is Cassie Cloutier.

Lauren Gray 01:04

And this is The Object of History, the podcast of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:09

Since 1791, the MHS has sought to collect, preserve, and communicate the building blocks of history.

Lauren Gray 01:16

Each episode examines an object, document, or set of items from the society's millions of manuscript pieces and artifacts.

Cassie Cloutier 01:24

We take you on a behind the scenes tour of our stacks to explore the incredible stories held within our collections.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:31

We are dedicating the entirety of season five of The Object of History to topics related to the American Revolution. On this episode of The Object of History, we travel beyond the Northeast to examine South Carolina in the Revolutionary War. We examine the Siege of Charleston and compare the town's experience to that of Boston. Note that although American forces besieged British troops in Boston, at Charleston those roles were reversed, and American forces held the city against an ultimately victorious British Army. We also discuss the significance of Henry Laurens, a founding father from South Carolina, who was highly regarded by John Adams. We are joined by Dr. Elizabeth Chew, CEO of the South Carolina Historical Society.

Elizabeth Chew 02:14

I say South Carolina for better and for worse has been incredibly important to the story of the nation.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 02:22

and Dr. Greg Brooking, author and historian of the American Revolution in the South.

Greg Brooking 02:26

He was as patriotic as anyone.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 02:30

At the MHS, we examine several items related to the Revolution in South Carolina and are joined by a special guest. Daniel Hinch, Reference Librarian at the MHS, also reprises his role as John Adams. We began by sitting down with Elizabeth Chew, CEO of the South Carolina Historical Society, to discuss South Carolina's relationship with other colonies and how it entered the war.

Cassie Cloutier 02:58

Perhaps first we should turn to the start of the Revolution, and maybe South Carolina's reaction to the events happening in Massachusetts at the beginning of the conflict.

Elizabeth Chew 03:09

At the beginning of the Revolution, South Carolina was Charleston was the fourth largest city and the wealthiest, and there's some debate over the exact number, but I mean more than half of the wealthiest men in the colonies were South Carolinians. I mean, the wealth established here by the rice industry on the backs of enslaved people was just astonishing, the wealth created. Charleston was a British colonial capital in the Caribbean, you know. The light is the same. The colors are the same. The architecture is similar. It's super, super, it explains so much about the Low Country here. In South Carolina I say South Carolina, for better and for worse, has been incredibly important to the story of the nation. South Carolinians were involved in early disgruntlement and protest, and most people don't know this, but there was actually a tea protest in Charleston, just a, you know, several days before the Boston Tea Party, and it didn't have remotely the visual interest or drama, they just some patriot guys just seized chest of tea from ships in the harbor and locked it into the building that had been sort of the symbol of the British Empire in South Carolina, and then later sold it to buy munitions and South Carolina created its own constitution in 1775 and you know, started to govern itself independently very early. Another thing that's very important down here, but people don't know a lot about is the fact that there was a rather remarkable American victory on a barrier island in Charleston Harbor called Sullivan's Island, where two South Carolina militias from a palmetto log and sand fort fought off not just the British army, but the British Navy, and that was June 28, 1776. So really psychologically important victory but also prevented the British from gaining a foothold in very important port city in very important, really probably the most important city, or city in the South, at the beginning of the war. I think the reason that South Carolina is so organized and involved is that South Carolinians know, but it's very little known, sort of in the historiography of the war, how much went on here. You know, there were arguably more skirmishes and battles in South Carolina than in any other colony, and the division between loyalists and patriots was bitter and resulted in some really violent clashes, and you know, it was brother against brother. It was family against family, husband against wife. I mean, it was very, very divisive and ugly, and that was really what the British thought they could capitalize on in their southern strategy and they did raise large regiment of royal provincials here, but eventually the patriots, you know, were just able to

kind of overcome that, but it's because of the settlement pattern in South Carolina, you know, the what we call a low country, that the coastal area was settled beginning in 1670. So, there was already a very well-established plantation culture, planter class. The number of enslaved people equaled and surpassed a number of whites, you know, early in the colonial history, and kind of throughout. So in what's known as the Upstate, which is kind of the upper northwest part of the state, was settled by, you know, Scots-Irish and Germans coming down the Great Wagon Road into the Piedmont area, and that, so that's a very different origin story, and it was not big planners, it was small farmers doing their own thing don't really find to you know, part of the British Empire, and so when the wealthy planners in the Low Country decided that they were needed to break away, that was in no way a unified opinion, or you know, widely shared opinion entire colony. So, you know that that's what led to the preponderance of loyalists in what's called the what we call the Upstate.

Lauren Gray 08:09
We were interested in really learning more about the history of enslaved people in the American Revolution in South Carolina, and how the British tried to capitalize on that, and what the responses were in the South Carolinian population.

Elizabeth Chew 08:27
So the British army, not from a position of valuing abolitionism, but from a position of wanting to screw with their antagonists, offered freedom to enslaved people in South Carolina, who would you know, flee to the British lines and help the British, whether they worked as servants, messengers, you know, camp workers, or even carried a gun and took part in battles, and an enormous number of people did that, and we know some of the stories. One of the best documented stories is of a man named Boston King, who was enslaved in one of the counties just kind of outside of Charleston, and he was able to get to British lines. He worked; he worked for a couple of British officers. He took advantage of being able to, you know, to evacuate Charleston to go to New York, British headquarters, even before the end of the war, when a much larger group of blacks was transported to New York. And then he was in New York for a while, where he almost got re-enslaved, but then he was again evacuated by the British Army to Canada, to Nova Scotia, and he's documented in a remarkable ledger that the British kept, called the Book of Negroes, where they enumerated every single person that left, and who their enslaver was, and where they were enslaved, et cetera so an unbelievable record. And then Boston King himself, when he got to

Canada, had this religious revelation, and became a minister, and later wrote a remarkable autobiography, so we know he started off in a place where a number of loyalists were in Nova Scotia, called Birchtown, and he documents the great privations that the blacks had been promised all kind of things by the British Army that didn't come to be, and it was so difficult to be there and to support themselves that he and many others ended up immigrating to Sierra Leone, which you know was a British colony for formerly enslaved people in Africa. So, he goes to Sierra Leone from Sierra Leone he's able to go over to England to study for the Methodist ministry. So, his story is remarkably well documented, and you know, just gives you a sense of what happened to people who trusted their fates to the British, whether they ended up in staying in Canada, in or going to Africa, or elsewhere. I think it's a really interesting part of the story that most people don't really know of as an outcome of the Revolution, because people who are who were enslaved by patriots remained enslaved obviously until the 1860s.

Lauren Gray 11:40
So, shall we talk a little bit about the Siege of Charleston, and it looks quite different than the Siege of Boston.

Elizabeth Chew 11:48
Yes, so the Siege of Charleston, I think, is another part of the war. People think about the Siege in Boston, but they don't think about the siege down here. So the British finally subdue Charleston in 1780 and they're here for basically two years, and they find a city very much changed from how it had been prior to the war, where many, if not most, men are either enslaved or on a prison ship or fighting in one of the armies, and it's a really, really interesting time for women in Charleston. Elite women are clearly running plantations, running households, keeping diaries and ledgers. We have an amazing diary kept by a woman named Ann Ashby Manigault, who marries into one of the most prominent families in in the Low Country, and she records in her journal every day where the British are, and she's basically working to stay one step ahead of them by moving herself and her family to either a plantation. They're very much aware of what's going on. Loyalist women are when a husband kept a business, I mean, I think both Loyalist and Patriot women are doing their best, you know, to keep that going. The free people of color and enslaved people are sort of navigating the situation to see if they can negotiate some kind of improvement in their own status. We have there's an incredibly interesting story of a presumably

free women of color organizing a ball where British officers are partying, I mean attending a ball with women of color, and it's reported the newspapers around the colonies, which is how we know about it, and it's sort of this fascinating, you know, turning the tables on the pyramid of society that had been known here before the war. It was called the Ethiopian Ball, and the names of the women who organized it are known. I think that's a fascinating example of kind of the things that are that can go on here during this remarkable period, and you know, women are, they have to request from the British occupation permission to do things like sell all their household goods, so they can go to Florida, where their husbands are on these awful prison ships, and so women did go into Florida, to Philadelphia, where their husbands were in prison. So, I'm fascinated by time periods when, because of extreme circumstances, women gain agency, and just to see how to see how they manage how they, what they do. The occupation was certainly one of those times, and the kind of the hapless patriot General Benjamin Lincoln, who makes, makes it easy for the British, for the British to move into Charleston.

Cassie Cloutier 15:07
So, I'm wondering if you can tell us about what happens after the siege.

Elizabeth Chew 15:10
I think, in my opinion, it relates to the [Charles] Cornwallis getting after, you know, significant victories, like at the Battle of Camden, getting thoroughly defeated up in the, in what we call the Upcountry, at the battles of Kings Mountain and Cowpens, so much so that he retreats and heads, you know, heads up to Virginia, and obviously, I mean, everybody, of course, it's obvious that where Cornwallis surrenders is Yorktown, Virginia, but what South Carolinians say is that if he hadn't been handed two such major, major losses here that he might have kept moving south, that he wouldn't have gone back through North Carolina to Virginia, and where he had to surrender, but obviously I mean that you know Yorktown wasn't the end of the war. I mean, there, there were still skirmishes here. In fact, John Laurens loses his life after Yorktown, and like everyone who can claim one of the characters we love that John Laurens was, it was a character in Hamilton, because everybody, everybody knows his name, whether they really know the true story about him or not, you know, they know his name, and that's, and that's fantastic, and that he did, he did absolutely try to raise a black regimen, and his father, obviously, Henry Laurens, you know, one of the probably the most eminent of the South Carolina founders. His, we have his papers given to us by his grandson in 1855 or '56 was the founding collection

of our organization, and while they've been, they were published selections were published I'll say. We are just completing a project to digitize everything, so that that will be available on the Digital Public Library of America in short order.

Daniel Hinchen 17:29
John Adams to Abigail Adams, August 17, 1777. We have many new members of Congress, among whom are Mr. Van Dyke of Delaware, Mr. Jones of Virginia, and Mr. Laurens of South Carolina. This last gentleman is a great acquisition of the first rank in his state, Lieutenant Governor of ample fortune, of great experience, having been 20 years in their assembly, of a clear head and a firm temper, of extensive knowledge and much travel. He has hitherto appeared as good a member as any we ever had in Congress. I wish that all the states would imitate this example and send their best men.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 18:12
Greg Brooking, author and historian of the American Revolution in the South, then joined us to discuss an often-overlooked founding father, Henry Laurens and his relationship with the patriot cause.

Greg Brooking 18:24
Henry Laurens was one of South Carolina's wealthiest colonists. He was a plantation owner, an enslaver, a very well-to-do merchant who moderately supported the American Revolution in its early stages, but then by 1775 had become kind of full throated in his support for the Revolution. He served in colonial state governments as the Revolution began, and was elected president of the Continental Congress, where he served over a year in that position. He was later arrested, captured by the British, as he made his way to Holland to negotiate a financial deal. Spent over a year in the Tower of London before going to France to serve on the peace commission that ends the war.

Lauren Gray 19:21
What radicalized Henry Laurens? You said he was kind of a moderate patriot before 1775, but what led him down the path to rebellion?

Greg Brooking 19:30

First of all, I probably should have said this at the very beginning. I am deep into this book project, but my research at this point has me scattered all over his life, and so I'm still forming conclusions, but his growing distrust of colonial officials, beginning mid to late 1760s with a personal episode started pushing him slowly towards that, there was no single spark. It was just an again over maybe about a 10-year period, from 1765 to 1775 he slowly becomes I don't want to say radicalized, because I don't think he's ever radicalized in his mind. He still would probably still think of himself as something of a conservative rebel, if that makes sense, someone who has joined the party, if you will, but still very cautious in kind of how he deals with things, still wanting peace until the last moment, as many others did as well. So, I don't think he was particularly radicalized by any one thing, just a series of events over a decade.

Cassie Cloutier 20:44

Can you tell us a bit about his family, and maybe their relationship with the Revolution?

Greg Brooking 20:49

He got married in 1750 to a member of the Ball family, which is a really prestigious plantation-owning family in South Carolina. They had many children. She died in childbirth, but most notably his most famous child was John Laurens, who was in London at the time the Revolution broke out, and marrying a woman that he had already gotten pregnant while he was in law school at one of the inns in London, and said he was coming home because he wanted to be a part of the Revolutionary War, and that was his attitude. He was ultimately an abolitionist, the son was. Served on George Washington's staff, became a lieutenant colonel in the military, wanted to emancipate the slaves in South Carolina. His father kind of tried to show some support, but Henry never really was behind the idea of emancipating the slaves, and that never happened. John died then at the very, very, very end of the war in a really petulant kind of raid in the South Carolina back country, while his father was in and around, or just out of prison in London, and kind of making his way to Paris for the peace treaty, he and his father, Henry and John, were about as tight, I imagine, as father and son could be, and the loss of his son in the Revolution, coupled with over a year in the Tower of London really just kind of broke him. Henry Laurens was, for all intents and purposes, emotionally broken man by 1782 following his son's death.

Lauren Gray 22:31
Do you think any of that experience kind of played into how his relationship developed with John Adams?

Greg Brooking 22:39
John Adams and Henry met first in the Continental Congress in Philadelphia, and John Adams, who I'm sure you know, was a prickly personality. He spoke his mind, and he had very effusive praise for Henry Laurens when they were together in Congress, and that continued in, you know, through the war until something happened, 1781 early 1782. I am still kind of investigating that, but they had a very positive relationship until they didn't. That wasn't the only time that that Henry was involved in a relationship like that, and certainly not John Adams only time, most famously Thomas Jefferson, they were best of friends until they weren't, and then they were again. Henry Laurens had similar relationship with a revolutionary who he had grown up with, named Christopher Gadsden. They grew up together, and they were best of friends. And then Gadsden became a very radical patriot early, early on, and Henry was not at that point, and their friendship kind of just fell by the wayside. I think Henry and John both had a lot of Puritan in them in temperament. They were both capable of being very judgmental, both capable of believing themselves to be right and very honor bound. They kind of very much stood or fell by those codes they live by.

Cassie Cloutier 24:07
Could we talk a bit about their correspondence? Maybe some of the items related to that.

Greg Brooking 24:12
Yeah, there's not a ton of correspondence, and we know that much of it is correspondence to other people that, that in which they mention one another. The only real correspondence that we have between the two is really revolving around that time from 1781 to 1782 when Adams goes essentially to take the job that Henry Laurens was initially sent to do. They didn't know he, Henry Laurens, was captured, but they knew they hadn't heard from him, and so Adams is sent to become to negotiate with the Dutch, and their interactions when he, Adams, first gets to Europe in 1781 you know, he's got positive things to say about Henry Laurens, you know. He finds Henry Laurens says he hasn't changed a bit, and he's in good spirits, and he misread that situation entirely. By the time that Adams encountered Henry Laurens in

Holland, Laurens was already a broken man. He had suffered greatly in the Tower of London, gout ridden constantly, essentially in solitary confinement for a good bit of the time, you know, so he emerges sickly angry that the Americans didn't do more to get him out of prison. I mean, he spent well over a year in prison. It took me a deal that freed Lord Charles Cornwallis in exchange to get Henry Laurens out of jail, so he was, he was not doing well. And then shortly thereafter, Henry is upset that John doesn't think Henry should be involved in the negotiations because Henry is still on parole from his time in the Tower of London, and he tells us, you know, Henry, just, you know, stand down. I've got this for now, and the deal's almost done, so there's really nothing to be done about it anyway. While Adams is finishing that, Henry goes back to London and is trying to kind of negotiate his final release. Adams then makes his way to Paris to join [Benjamin] Franklin and such to negotiate peace. Henry takes some time off to go to Bath to recuperate his health, and then finally makes his way to Paris after visiting his brother and his daughters in France, just not too, too far from Paris, and he makes it to the negotiating table at the very end of the peace discussions, but in the interim, Henry and John really come face to face in kind of a war of words and a he said, she said situation. Word gets to Henry through a friend that Adams is maligning Henry and Benjamin Franklin, and is saying, trying to discredit them, and Henry confronts him and Adams, I don't know what you're talking about, and think we've got an idea as to who was saying what, but Henry never, never ultimately believed John Adams is calls, you know, for innocence. You know, it was.. I didn't say anything, it wasn't, you know, I wasn't the one who said this, and Henry starts to think maybe there was an English plant that was trying to split Franklin and Adams and Laurens up, but Laurens never forgave him, and would, and would die, you know, a decade after the war, still very much not friendly, and not a positive mind towards John Adams anymore, and that's something I'm still wrapping my head around, because that, that, that situation in 1782 is is really complex, and you've got Henry Laurens, you've got Adams, you've got Benjamin Franklin, and you know, Adams and Franklin didn't get along, and then there's two other men that got the name of Thomas Diggs and a governor of Edward Bridge, and who also figure in this, and so I'm still, you know, wrapping my head around it and trying to come up with, with where I, where I'm actually going to finally land on it, but that's the gist of it.

Cassie Cloutier 28:21

So, I guess I'm just wondering, what would you say is Henry Laurens' legacy? Maybe as a figure of the Revolution?

Greg Brooking 28:28

He was as patriotic as, as anyone. I don't think anyone exceeded his patriotism. He was quite friendly with Thomas Paine, who is about as radical as you could get, in fact, more radical than the rest of the so-called founders, because he was, he was kind of cast aside, and we don't think about him too much, no statues to Paine, but a true patriot who gave again about as much as someone could give outside of their own life. You know, he lost a great deal of wealth financing, you know, portions of the Revolution, financing some things in South Carolina, and then losing it when the British took over for a couple of years. You know, he gave, he lost his son in the Revolution, and again they were.. it's an admirable relationship, I mean, there was both love and respect between both of them, and as a, you know, as a father of, of two boys myself, that's, you know, it's hard not to look at that and admire that quality in him. He was a devoted husband and a devoted parent, true patriot, or if you're a Brit, then a true rebel, you know, however you want to look at that. But I think, and again, serving at leadership positions in both South Carolina and at the national level, but to me, right now, I think his strongest legacy may be as an enslaver, both on his own plantations as well as importing thousands of slaves, and that was literally his first, his first job. He navigated a way that he could import slaves from the West Coast of Africa to Charleston, as he was setting up his first shop in Charleston, and so you know there are often calls or articles, especially popular places, the Henry Laurens' son was an emancipationist, and that Henry Laurens was kind of like, yeah, you know, I really like that idea, but it's just not practical, I don't think, but everything that I've read, and I read a lot about this component of his life, nothing I've read suggests that he truly believed that emancipation was a good thing, and that he would support it in any way whatsoever. And you know, every historian looks at the world through their own eyes, through their own worldview, in their time period, and looking at the world today, it's hard not to keep that at the front of my current study of Henry Laurens, because it's something that we've, we've still not dealt with.

Cassie Cloutier 31:01

So, I'm wondering if you can talk about the memory of Henry Laurens and why he's not remembered by the general population as much as other founding fathers.

Greg Brooking 31:12

That's a good question, and it's kind of the point of my book. The only biography written of Laurens was 111 years ago, beginning of World War One, by a South Carolina historian and professor who provided us with some great information and a lot of incorrect information. Just I think mainly because of the time that he lived in and the sources that were available. I'm lucky to have so many sources at my fingertips, even without leaving the house. I think my first book was about a loyalist from Georgia who happened to be very good friends with Laurens until the Revolution broke out, and they were bitter enemies, and I'm writing about southerners, not, not so much, because I live here in Georgia, but because they're so underrepresented, both loyalists, as a minority class in and of itself, but southerners. I think all of the textbooks, like high school textbooks and middle school textbooks, growing up for me for sure, but even the ones that I've used over 32 years of teaching. You know, the war starts in Boston. You know, there's some action in New York and Pennsylvania, and it ends in Virginia, and we don't, we don't need to go beyond Virginia, but the bloodiest, second bloodiest battle of the war was fought in Savannah. There were more battles fought in South Carolina than anywhere in the US, with maybe a tiny exception for New Jersey, I think both of those states kind of battle for this skirmish or that skirmish, can't you know, but South Carolina was heavily involved in the war, but our northeastern kind of biases in the memory of the Revolution is kind of kind of answers that question, I think. So, my working title for this book is Henry Laurens: A Southern Founder because I want to kind of, I want it to be acknowledged that he is part of that group. And then, of course, he's all, he's always behind the scenes, you know. It's, it's, he's not, he's not writing the Declaration of Independence. He's not riding a horse into battle, and those things count for so much, and it's, you know, John Adams, you know, feared that he, that his memory would kind of be cast aside for those, for those martial glories. And again, I think, I think we're getting our first John Adams statue in DC here at some point next few years, and that, how is that even possible for someone as important to the Revolutionary era as him? And so, I think that's part of it too.

Cassie Cloutier 33:50

Back at the MHS, we looked at the papers of Benjamin Lincoln, a general in the Continental Army and an important figure in the Southern Campaign.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 33:59

So, we are talking about Benjamin Lincoln of Hingham, Massachusetts, a Revolutionary War officer.

Lauren Gray 34:06

Yeah, so there's so much happening in 1778, 1779, 1780 and when I came on to the podcast season this year, I was really interested in talking to our colleagues at the South Carolina Historical Society because for me, Boston and Charleston, they're real bookends for understanding the War for Independence. They were both cities under siege during the war, but with very different outcomes. And as the war reached a stalemate in the North in late 1778-1779 the British change their strategy. They decide that they are going to move the action to the southern colonies, and they do this for a few reasons. They believe that there is a strong loyalist sentiment in the south that it just needs the British military presence to invigorate it. They want to curtail the south's financial support for the Revolution. These are very wealthy colonies, and they have a lot of resources to contribute, and most importantly, they want to be in a better position to protect their economic interests in the Caribbean after the French ally with the Americans, following the Battle of Saratoga, which we discussed briefly in the last episode, and because while this is a war about liberty and the rights of men. It's also ultimately a war about money, and the South, particularly South Carolina, was the site of intense conflict between Americans and the British, and between Americans and loyalist forces. So, it becomes in the South a true civil war. So today we're looking at the Benjamin Lincoln papers, and General Lincoln was a very important actor during the outset of the Southern campaign in 1780. General Lincoln was a Massachusetts man. He was from Hingham, which is just south of Boston, and he was a pretty ardent Whig from the very outset. He served on the Committee of Safety and the Committee of Correspondence. He served on the provincial congress and was eventually president of the provincial congress. He was Muster Master for the Massachusetts militia in 1775, and he was instrumental in breaking the British naval blockade of Boston in June of 1776 following the evacuation of the town in March. In that same year, he officially joined the Continental Army and served in the action around New York that summer and fall. In January 1777 he was given command of the entire New England militia, and then served at the Battle of Saratoga, where he was pretty critically injured in his ankle, which left him with a lifelong injury. In late 1778 General Lincoln took command of the entire southern department, as the Continental Congress really recognized the need to have a more concerted scope in the application of their war efforts across the colonies. All of this to say that Benjamin Lincoln was particularly competent, as he, and very

experienced, as he moved down south to take control of the forces there. And in 1779 there are a lot of engagements, little engagements happening in South Carolina, but the British don't officially move towards Charleston until December of 1779 when they send over 8000 men, including British and Hessian troops, to lay siege to the town. It was a rough winter crossing and landing, but they finally positioned the siege lines by the first of April 1780 and the British also quickly take the harbor. So, the British begin shelling the city on April 13, and on April 14 they take control of the Cooper River, following the Battle of Monck's Corner which effectively traps the American troops in Charleston, even though they have been reinforced, they really have no means of evacuation or resupply by mid-April. We've got a copy of a petition that was, we've got a couple copies of petitions that were sent to General Lincoln, and I think one of the things we haven't talked about, and I'm perhaps not the best person to do that, is the role of the civilian government and their pressures upon Lincoln to first resist capitulation, but then in the face of heated shot being fired into Charleston made a pretty quick 180 and decided that yes, the city is it cannot be held against the British. And heated shot, for those who don't know, is the heating of cannonballs until they glow like embers and then are fired traditionally upon wooden ships to sink them at sea, but in this case firing heated shot into wooden buildings is equally as effective when it is Charleston's residential district. So that is what turned the tide, I think, personally. And this one is, let's look at it here to the Honorable Major General Lincoln, the humble petition of the country militia now in Charleston, herewith that your petitions being informed, the difficulties that arose in the negotiations of yesterday and the preceding day related wholly to the citizens to whom the British commander.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 39:17
So, these petitions from civilians to him as the commander.

Lauren Gray 39:22
During this time, the British begin shelling Charleston on April 13, 1780, following their victory at the Battle of Monck's Corner on April 14, they have basically cut off any evacuation or resupply route for the Continentals inside the city. During this time, Lincoln is holding councils of war with his officers to determine what is to be done during this increasingly desperate situation, and some of his officers advocate for evacuation. Civilian authorities, including Lieutenant Governor Christopher Gadsden, really resist surrender up until it becomes apparent that they cannot hold the city, and as we look at the

documents in the Benjamin Lincoln papers, we really see this increasing desperation. We have reports from the field, drafts of military maneuvers, notes from councils of war, copies of petitions calling for the surrender as the British inch closer, and as provisions in the city dwindle, and we see here, for example, at a council of war on May 11, the day before the May 12 surrender, General Lincoln is putting before the council an application from a large number of the citizens of Charleston and from numerous officers in the militia asking him to surrender the city, to surrender the town. They are aware that they are no longer able to hold it. It says here in the document, General Lincoln laid before the council an application from a large number of the citizens of this town and from a number of the county militia here, purporting that they agree to the terms proposed by Sir Henry Clinton, as they are related to them, and request a flag in the name of the people to inform him of their acquiescence in those terms. So, they are agreeing to surrender.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 41:13
Okay, so he's under a considerable amount of pressure, his job is to protect the town and probably its citizens, and it is the citizens who are urging him, as the commander, to surrender. These are weighty matters for Benjamin Lincoln to consider.

Lauren Gray 41:34
So, we're joined by Peter Drummey, and we're talking about Benjamin Lincoln and his role in the capitulation of American troops at Charleston in 1780 and Peter you think that General Lincoln should be held more accountable for his actions there.

Peter Drummey 41:54
Well, there's command authority in war. If you're the general in charge somewhere and your army has to surrender there may be contingent circumstances that make that necessary, or make it very difficult to think that it could come to a different conclusion, but I'm not sure the Siege of Charleston is actually one of those cases where that there was simply circumstances beyond Lincoln's control. Lincoln is a very interesting and very able officer, but commanding an army, a besieged army, or an army that became besieged while he was commanding it, and this is after all while he plays in a very significant role at the Battle of Saratoga, largely uncelebrated and unknown. He was not particularly able on the other side of the hill, so to speak, in the attempt to capture Savannah. So, I think this was simply

someone perhaps at a level of command beyond their capacities. He has no, he has good instincts, a command presence, but it's hard to know on what basis he was making decisions, and the American army was essentially put in that position. It's hard to seek for me to see how someone would think that that would not have another outcome, but the outcome is entirely his responsibility of leaving his army no route out of Charleston.

Lauren Gray 43:33
Yeah, and I think it's really difficult to look back with this kind of 20-20 hindsight, knowing what we know about how the British conduct siege warfare, how they very quickly take control of the harbor, and they take control of the Cooper River, following the Battle of Monck's Corner, and one can see how Lincoln really gets in, maybe over his head a little bit, but I think he's got such an interesting legacy that's come down to us, he's, he's very well remembered here in Massachusetts, I think.

Peter Drummey 44:07
Washington never loses faith in him after this, essentially objectively for the country a calamity, but nevertheless doesn't hold him responsible in the sense of making decisions that were within the range of what was he was trying to do the right thing, he just didn't accomplish that. Whether a more able general would have been able to, would Nathaniel Greene have found himself in that circumstance on one side of that equation? Would Washington have ended up in the same circumstances? So he's on a continuum, but the fact that Washington remained both convinced of his ability, after all, Lincoln was the second in command at the Battle of Yorktown of the American forces and when Cornwallis wouldn't come out of his tent, famously Washington said, 'Well, if the second in command of the British army, that's O'Hara, is surrendering the army, you can, O'Hara can surrender to the second command of the American army,' which I think is a wonderful, it's just sort of symbolically whatever had gone wrong in Charleston, they're overcoming that, and after the war, they remain, as the correspondence we have here at the Historical Society indicates, they remain connected, this warm, wonderful connection that's reflected in letters.

Cassie Cloutier 45:45
[Outro music fades in] To look at the items discussed in this episode, visit our show website at www.masshist.org/podcast. The Object of History is produced by the Research Department at the

Massachusetts Historical Society. We would like to thank Dr. Elizabeth Chew, CEO of the South Carolina Historical Society, Dr. Greg Brooking, author and historian of the American Revolution in the South, Daniel Hinchen, Reference Librarian at the MHS, Peter Drummey, Chief Historian emeritus at the MHS, and Sam Harwitz, podcast producer at the MHS. Music in this episode is by Ketsa Music and Podington Bear. Please see our show notes for details. Thank you for listening, and please rate, review, and subscribe to both the MHS produced shows wherever you listen to podcasts.