JOHN LAURENS – Patriot, Abolitionist

By: John Whiteside

He was a lawyer, soldier, diplomat, friend, anti-slavery advocate, husband, prisoner of war and martyr. He gave his life, literally and figuratively, for his country. His name was John Laurens, born in 1754 at Charleston, South Carolina into a wealthy, slave holding family. From an early age, Laurens experienced the scourge of slavery while growing up on the family plantation. Sent to Switzerland and later, England, by his father Henry Laurens to study law, he grew concerned about the possibilities of war with British forces in America. In 1777, he returned to his home, leaving his pregnant wife behind, with the expectation of enlisting in the Continental Army.

Using his father's political contacts, he was able to join the Continental Army during the Philadelphia campaign. He received an appointment as an Aide-de- Camp for General Washington with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. He fought with the army at Brandywine, displaying uncommon courage in battle. Several weeks later, he received a shoulder wound during a daring charge at the enemy fortification at Germantown. He wintered at Valley Forge with his new friends Alexander Hamilton and the Marquis de Lafayette, developing close personal ties with both of them. His father, Henry Laurens, was now President of the Continental Congress. John wrote several times to his father suggesting that black slaves be permitted to join the army. He hoped that following their service, they would then be allowed to be freed from bondage. While he persisted in these efforts throughout the encampment, his pleas were not heeded until a later date. Laurens left Valley Forge with the army in 1778 and fought bravely at Monmouth, New Jersey, before being sent to Rhode Island to aid with his French speaking skills and the French forces attempting to recapture Newport from the British. Following that assignment, the Congress directed him to return to South Carolina and recruit a brigade of 3,000 black soldiers to serve in the army. Unfortunately, the South Carolina and Georgia legislatures refused to accept the formation of black regiments, leaving Laurens to continue to serve in the ongoing defense of both southern states. In 1780 during the siege of Charleston, Laurens was surrendered to British forces with 5,000 other troops. He was exchanged a month later in November, perhaps as a result of his father's influence. The following February he was appointed as an envoy to France by the Congress in order to try to procure money and supplies. Working with Benjamin Franklin, they were able to convince the King to assist, and Laurens would return

to the colonies in August 1781 with money and two ships filled with military equipment and supplies.

Laurens rejoined Washington's army in September and soon found himself supporting his dear friend Alexander Hamilton at Yorktown, Virginia. After much fighting, he was appointed as a commissioner to meet with the British and agree on their terms of surrender. Following the surrender, Laurens joined up with Nathanael Greene's army in South Carolina. Almost one year later, in August 1782, Laurens was leading troops attempting to stop a British foraging party south of Charleston. On August 27th, rather than setting up a defensive perimeter as requested, he led a foolhardy charge and was ambushed by hidden British troops. Laurens was shot off of his horse, mortally wounded, and died at the scene.

His father was in England helping to negotiate the peace treaty and returned to South Carolina to retrieve his son's body and bury it at the family Mepkin plantation at Mepkin Abbey, Moncks Corner, South Carolina. The words on his headstone read: "DULCE ET DECORUM EST PRO PATRIA MORI" meaning "Sweet and fitting it is to die for one's country."

Washington wrote of Laurens, "In a word, he had not a fault that I ever could discover, unless intrepidity bordering upon rashness could come under that denomination; and to this he was excited by the purest motives."

Sources:

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Photo by Charles Willson Peale, 1780

Grave Marker of John Laurens, Moncks Corner, SC