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### Three South Carolina Sites Associated With

#### Revolutionary "Feminist" Jane Black Thomas (1720-1811)

Although the word "feminist" hadn't been created in the 1700s, Jane Black Thomas could be called South Carolina's first feminist. Had the word existed, she never would have approved of such a radical term for herself, given her conservative, strict Presbyterian upbringing and her standing as a bedrock pillar of the Fairforest Presbyterian Church. She would have been pleased, however, to discover herself described as a "sincere and spirited whig"—a Patriot—who fought for independence of the American colonies.

When Pennsylvania-born Jane Black and her husband, Welshman John Thomas, brought their children from Pennsylvania to South Carolina around 1749, they and their accompanying Scot-Irish-Welsh neighbors found themselves up to their necks in Cherokee Indian territory. Their first homestead on Fishing Creek at Catawba River and the second, in 1762 on Fairforest Creek in the Upper or Broad River District, had to be defended constantly from marauding Cherokees and allied tribes. Just when it seemed a decade of self-defense had brought some peace and stability to the Upper Piedmont, the Revolutionary War broke out in the northeast and swept southward.

Jane's husband John had been commander of the area's loyalist militia, taking part in Braddock's defeat in 1755 and in the "snow campaign" against the Cherokees in 1762. When the British-colonial hostilities began in the early 1770s, John Thomas resigned his English commission and formed the Patriots' Spartan Regiment in 1775. He was elected colonel and commander of the militia, in which the older Thomas sons—John, Jr., Abram, and Robert—and several sons-in-law served. The Thomas matriarch, her daughters, and her daughters-in-law all were as immersed in the defense of the Upper Piedmont as their men, and a number of sites serve as reminders of their valiant deeds.

In the southern section of Spartanburg County's Croft State Park, above the mouth of the junction of Kelsey and Fairforest creeks, is the site of the Thomas homestead during the Revolutionary War. Here, in the spring of 1780 (one account uses the date of late 1779), local Tories decided to confiscate the Patriots' ammunition cache, stored since 1776 at the Thomases' two-story log home, for the king's purpose. Colonel Thomas and part of the Spartan Regiment were off fighting in Charlestown, while about 25 of the Spartan regulars under command of Captain John Thomas, Jr., were guarding the ammunition and arms in and near the homestead. Tending the home-fires were Jane, three of her daughters, and her youngest child, William, too young to serve in the Spartan Regiment. As Tory Colonel Patrick Moore and 150 (one account records 300) men marched toward the home, Captain Thomas and his men gathered as much of the ammunition as they could carry and rode off to hide it from the British.

Remaining in the home to create a diversion were Jane, her daughters and son, and her son-in-law Josiah Culbertson, Martha's husband. Jane and her offspring formed a production line and started feeding bullets to Culbertson as fast as their hands could fly. Culbertson, a veteran Indian fighter and noted marksman, moved from rifle slot to rifle slot around the log house, keeping up a steady barrage of fire on the Tories. The gunfire was so fast and furious that the Tories believed the whole patriot guard remained inside. As the Tories began a final assault upon the home, Jane "advanced in front of them, with a sword in her hand, and dared them to come on. They were intimidated and retired." Recalling the incident in 1832, Captain Culbertson observed, "The destruction of this ammunition would have been a serious loss to the Americans. The same ammunition was afterwards made use of by [General Thomas] Sumter at his fight on the Rocky Mount and the Battle of Hanging Rock."

A record of this remarkable battle is found on the tombstone of Jane's daughter, Ann Thomas McJunkin, wife of Major Joseph McJunkin. The couple's graves are marked in the McJunkin Cemetery on the Sartor farm in Union County, five miles south of Union on U. S. Highway 176.

About 60 miles southeast of Spartanburg is another site associated with Jane Black Thomas' courage: The National Park Service's Ninety Six Historic Site, where Jane's husband John and two of their sons, Abram and Robert, were imprisoned in the two-story brick jail in June of 1780. When Jane went to visit her menfolk on July 11, she overheard two Tory women talking. One woman said to the other, "Tomorrow night the Loyalists intend to surprise the Rebels at Cedar Spring."

Jane's heart must have missed several beats upon hearing of the planned attack. Cedar Spring, a few miles from the Thomas home, was where her firstborn, John, had headquartered about 60 members of the reorganized Spartan Regiment. Several of her sons-in-law and various kin were at Cedar Spring with the Flying Camp--a name often applied to the Spartan Regiment because of its frequency of action and movement. The little, black-haired Irishwoman didn't wait around for confirmation of the overheard Tory gossip. She rushed to her horse and made a hasty departure from Ninety Six jail, heading northwest to warn the Spartans of the impending attack. She rode over 60 miles of rough, forbidding terrain during the night and through the following day, arriving at Cedar Spring with the timely warning. Then, as Jane rode on to her home, a plan was drawn up to entrap the Tories. The Spartans built up their campfires at dusk to burn brightly near improvised bedrolls. Then the men withdrew and hid themselves in the surrounding forest. They hadn't long to wait. Shortly after preparations were complete, 150 British and Tory soldiers cautiously advanced to surprise the "sleeping" Spartans. The soldiers suddenly found themselves attacked from the rear by the militia they had expected to surprise. "Thrown into confusion by this unexpected reception, defeat, overwhelming defeat, was the consequence to the loyalists. . .The victory thus easily achieved they owed to the spirit and courage of a woman!"

After the Revolutionary War's conclusion, Jane Black Thomas established yet another homestead in the western frontier. In 1785 she and John Thomas moved to the vicinity of Greenville, when Colonel Thomas was appointed commissioner of land locations for the new Greenville County. Here the couple resided and prospered until their deaths just six months apart in 1811.

Until the day of her death on April 16, 1811, this spunky "feminist" adamantly refused to drink tea, saying it was "the blood of the poor men who first fell in the war" (and two of her sons and two sons-in-law were among those slain in battle). Jane Black Thomas remained a "sincere and spirited whig" --a Patriot--to the very end of her 91 years.

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Sources: "Jane Thomas: Heroine or Feminist?" by Ilene J. Cornwell, *Greenville Magazine*, April 1986; obituary of Jane Black Thomas, *Carolina Gazette*, Charleston, S. C., May 25, 1811; *Women of the American Revolution*, Vol. I (1848), by Elizabeth F. Ellett; *Some Heroes of the American Revolution* (1924), by James D. Bailey; *History of Spartanburg County, South Carolina* (1900), by Dr. John B. O. Landrum; *History of the Presbyterian Church of South Carolina*, Vol. I, (1870), by Reverend George Howe; *King's Mountain and Its Heroes* (1881), by Lyman C. Draper; and *The Revolution Remembered: Eyewitness Accounts of the War for Independence* (1980), edited by John C. Dann.

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