Francis Marion—or the Swamp Fox, as he was known by both enemies and admirers—used guerrilla warfare tactics and a cool confidence to drive the British out of South Carolina toward the end of the Revolution. His actions were no doubt instrumental in the fight for independence, but to most Americans, Marion is just a name—as in Marion, Ind., Marion County, Tenn., or Lake Marion, S.C. (The Francis Marion DAR Chapter, Montgomery, Ala., and Swamp Fox DAR Chapter, Marion, S.C., also bear his name.) It’s believed that Marion had more places named after him than any other Revolutionary War soldier, with the exception of George Washington.

Much of what is known about Marion is not fact, but fiction—thanks in large part to M.L. “Parson” Weems, who, in 1809, published a biography on Marion based partially on firsthand accounts from General Peter Horry, who served with Marion in the Revolutionary War, and partially on the author’s imagination. (Weems was the same biographer who fabricated the story about Washington and the cherry tree.)

Further confusing Marion’s legacy is the 2000 movie “The Patriot.” Its lead character, Benjamin Martin, draws inspiration from Marion, along with other war leaders. In the movie, the protagonist is a widowed father who joins the Continental Army to avenge his son’s death and goes on to succeed in a series of hand-to-hand battles with the British. But Marion wasn’t a family man (he married at the age of 54 and had no children), nor is there any record that he ever killed anyone in hand-to-hand combat, according to Sean Busick, associate professor of history at Athens State University, who wrote the introduction for the 2007 edition of William Gilmore Simms’ biography of Marion, The Life of Francis Marion, originally published in 1844.

“We would probably be better served by remembering the man as he was,” Busick says. “His real accomplishments are certainly worth remembering, even celebrating.”

Marion’s Early Life

Born in 1732, Marion was the youngest of seven siblings born to Gabriel and Charlotte—descendants of French Huguenots who settled near Charleston, S.C., the century before. “[He] grew up amid the great swamp forests,” wrote Henry Lumpkin in From Savannah to Yorktown: The American Revolution In the South (University of South Carolina Press, 1981). “He hunted, fished and rode with his brothers and cousins, a wild, natural life that provided superb training for the guerrilla fighting in which he later was to excel.”

But as a child Marion did not look the part of a future war hero: “At birth he was puny and diminutive in a remarkable degree,” Simms wrote. “It was certainly as little supposed that he should ever live to manhood, as that he should then become a hero.”

By 1759, Marion had joined the South Carolina Militia to fight a border war against the Cherokee American Indians during the French and Indian War. In 1761 he served as a first lieutenant under Captain William Moultrie, who later...
Francis Marion

**Becoming the Swamp Fox**

The war origins of Francis Marion's moniker

Once Marion started tormenting the British in earnest in 1780, it didn’t take long for General Cornwallis, the commander of British forces in the South, to get fed up with his tactics. In November 1780, Cornwallis dispatched Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton to hunt down Marion, but what ensued was a “deadly game of cat and mouse,” according to Alan Cate in *Founding Fighters*.

Tarleton located Marion and set up an ambush, but Marion “chose discretion as the better part of valor and escaped,” according to Cate.

Tarleton then chased him for several hours through the swamps and woods before calling off the operation, exclaiming, “As for this damned old fox, the devil himself could not catch him!”

That episode, historians agree, is how Marion came to be known as the Swamp Fox—both by those who feared and revered him.


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Our Patriots

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