

The Battle of Fort Moultrie

(June 28, 1776)

Just days before the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, the Battle of Fort Moultrie (then known as Fort Sullivan) resulted in a significant American victory over the British. Earlier that year, a crude palmetto-log fort had been built on Sullivan's Island as a first line of defense for Charleston, South Carolina. On June 28, the formidable British fleet, under the command of Sir Peter Parker, attacked. The small American force, led by Colonel William Moultrie, held its position despite all-day shelling. Moultrie later described the scene as "one continual blaze and roar; and clouds of smoke curling over . . . for hours together."¹ Even though the British had far superior firepower at their disposal, the spongy palmetto logs and sand that comprised the American fort absorbed most of the enemy shells before they could explode. During the bombardment, the fort's flag—a distinctive silver crescent on a blue field—was shot down by the British. Ignoring heavy gunfire, Sergeant William Jasper retrieved the standard and replanted it on the fort's rampart. At nightfall, the defeated British withdrew.

The American victory ensured the safety of the port of Charleston and won many people over to the patriot cause. Before this battle, General George Washington had had little success in the North. The American triumph at Sullivan's Island showed that the South could wage a successful campaign. It stood as a symbolic declaration of independence from the British, preceding the signing of the actual document by less than a week.

Soon after the victory, the fort was renamed in honor of William Moultrie, who was later promoted to general. John Rutledge, then president of the South Carolina assembly, presented Sergeant Jasper with his dress sword for his bravery and offered him an officer's commission. Jasper, however, declined the commission as inappropriate for a man of humble origins. The blue and silver crescent flag that Jasper replanted during the battle later served as the inspiration for the South Carolina state flag.

John Blake White's *The Battle of Fort Moultrie* "portrays in a spirited manner the famous battle . . . fought and won against a formidable British fleet . . . just six days prior to the Declaration of Independence," wrote Octavius White, the artist's son. Octavius White donated this work to the U.S. Senate in 1901. He gave it to the nation, he said, "that the sons may know how their fathers fought to secure the precious boon of liberty."¹

The painting presents a view of the battle from inside the American fort, with the British fleet firing at full force in the background. The artist inserted portraits of William Moultrie and Francis Marion in the right center foreground. William Jasper is seen defending the fort's flag. At the center background, along the perimeter wall of the fort, is the artist's own father, Blake Leay White, who is thought to have participated in the battle. White based his portraits on existing likenesses in South Carolina family collections and on his memory. According to White family tradition, the artist's father and General Marion, known as the "Swamp Fox," owned adjoining plantations. The young artist, it was said, would sit on Marion's knee during visits.

In 1899 Octavius White had presented three other Revolutionary War paintings by his father to the Senate: *Sergeants Jasper and Newton Rescuing American Prisoners from the British* (p. 202), *General Marion Inviting a British Officer to Share His Meal* (p. 268), and *Mrs. Motte Directing Generals Marion and Lee to Burn Her Mansion to Dislodge the British* (p. 290). Although White drew inspiration for these works from a biography of Francis Marion as recounted by Parson Mason Locke Weems, the artist's source for the Fort Moultrie painting is less clear.

John Blake White was born in Eutaw Springs, South Carolina. He studied law in Charleston and in 1800 traveled to England to pursue an art career under the guidance of American artist Benjamin West. White returned to the United States three years later and continued to paint historical subjects, portraits, and miniatures. His work was exhibited at the Boston Athenaeum, New York's National Academy of Design, the Apollo Association for the Promotion of the Fine Arts, and the South Carolina Institute, where he received a medal for best historical painting. He was a founder of the South Carolina Academy of Fine Arts. Although White never gained the artistic recognition he desired, he painted in his leisure time until about 1840, while practicing law in Charleston. He also served in the South Carolina state legislature and wrote several plays.

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John Blake White (1781-1859)

Oil on canvas, 1826

31 ½ x 49 ½ inches (80 x 125.7 cm)

Signed and dated (lower right corner): B. White / 1826

Gift of Octavius A. White (son of the artist), 1901

Accepted by the Joint Committee on the Library, 1901

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Note to the reader: A key to the painting *The Battle of Fort Moultrie* by John Blake White can be found in the appendix of this catalogue.