

RICHARD PEARIS, BOLD PIONEER

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If Richard Pearis were here today, he would be astonished that a plaque, with his name on it, could be placed in Greenville.¹ When he left, he fled for his life, and was hurried along by the pursuing South Carolina militia. Behind him was only desolation and destruction. Whatever he had here had been burned upon orders of Major Andrew Williamson, commanding the militia gathered to protect the inhabitants from the Cherokee Indians. The Indians had shortly before that time killed approximately sixty white persons, living along the Cherokee borders, from Ninety Six to the North Carolina line. Since the Indians had been aroused to bloodshed by the British and had been aided by a number of white people who sympathized with the royal cause, feeling was running high against all Tories.

Usually, when a marker is dedicated, it honors some person who rendered a remarkable service to his country or community. This we cannot claim for Richard Pearis. He was a scamp, to put it mildly, but an attractive, persuasive and therefore powerful one. He must have had great charm. He was brave and bold. He had many friends and a good many foes, in high places, in local and regional circles.

He was, however, the first person who recognized the water-power potential of Reedy River. He began the settlement which was to be developed later by Lemuel J. Alston and Vardry McBee, and to grow into the city of which we are all proud today. And it is fitting that a marker be placed to him on the banks of the Reedy River, honoring the man who was our first resident. As we think of Richard Pearis, we must remember to judge him in the light of the times in which he lived. When we do this there grows a grudging

¹This paper was delivered before the Greenville County Historical Society and guests at the dedication of a plaque honoring Greenville's first settler, at the Citizens and Southern Bank of South Carolina, near the site of the settlement. Several sentences in the paper make references to this event.

admiration for this man, who, fearing no one, lived an adventurous life.²

This man was born in Ireland, there seems no doubt, and came to this country when he was ten years old. He was born in 1725, which date is determined by counting back from his death date, at sixty-nine years of age, in 1794. His father, George Pearis bought land in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, from a Richard Morgan, possibly from the same family as the famous hero Daniel Morgan. Richard Morgan had been assigned the land by Baron Hans Yost Heidt, the pioneer of the Shenandoah Valley, who had settled there in 1731, on a grant of 100,000 acres, upon condition that he bring in 100 families in two years.

When George died in 1752, he willed three plantations. He had already provided two plantations to his married children. So, he was a man of some wealth, a devout Presbyterian, and Richard Pearis must have grown up knowing no want, albeit the country was new and life on the borders of Virginia in those days was far from luxurious, according to the present standards. Richard's mother was named Sarah. Judging from the number of petticoats and bonnets listed in the inventory of her estate, she must have been quite a lady. She lived only one year after her husband's death.

Richard's brothers were George Pearis, Jr., and Robert Pearis, and he had a sister, Christian Neely, hence the Neely name in South Carolina, where her sons came to make their home. Robert Pearis lived near Greenville, as is shown on an old plat depicting the road from his place to Richard's plantation. During the American Revolution, Robert was a political prisoner in Charleston, but seems never to have taken an active part against the patriots. His will is filed in Charleston, and makes racy reading, in that he didn't

²It is impossible for me in a few minutes to cover the results of five years of research unto the life, loves, travels, battles, intrigues, triumphs, and defeats of this man. Anything I tell you, you can count on being true. The facts have been gathered from manuscripts and public records, and I have believed nothing I have read from books until other sources also said it was true. Someone has said "Historians are like sheep, jumping over a stile, when one makes a mistake, the others follow." I was determined not to do this.

This research has involved searching libraries, archives, historical society records, and other sources in many states, and in Nassau in the Bahamas. British Records Office materials, claims made against the British Government by Loyalists who lost property in the Revolution, and other sources, have been studied. All of our history has been written largely from the American viewpoint. I have tried to also get an idea of the British side. Since Richard Pearis was Indian Agent for both Virginia and Maryland, much Cherokee data has also been included.

like his wife too well, says in no uncertain terms, and tells why he leaves her very little of his property.

Richard Pearis, our pioneer, had a white wife, Rhoda. Don't let anyone tell you he lived here with an Indian wife. It just isn't so. He did have an Indian "side" wife, as they were known in those days, as did George Calphin, John Stuart, Alexander Cameron, and just about any prominent white man you can name, who was a trader, or an Indian agent. Children of these white men were greatly valued by the Cherokees. They almost always lived in the Indian nation with their mothers, as did George Pearis, half-Cherokee son of Richard Pearis, who was evidently named for his grandfather George Pearis.

Richard Pearis had a legitimate son, Richard, Jr. His daughters were Elizabeth and Sarah. Sarah married John Cunningham, brother of General Robert Cunningham, Patrick Cunningham, and David Cunningham, all of whom were Tories in the American Revolution. General Robert Cunningham was banished and ended his days, blind, but with wealth and position, in Nassau. Bloody Bill Cunningham was not General Robert Cunningham's brother, but probably his second cousin. There is no recorded instance of General Robert Cunningham doing anything cruel or dishonorable. Bloody Bill did have a brother, Andrew, who lived in upper Greenville County and married Margaret Cunningham, sister of General Robert Cunningham.

John Cunningham and his wife Sarah Pearis, Richard's daughter, lived on in Charleston after the war. He became a wealthy merchant and a Presbyterian leader.

Patrick Cunningham, General Robert's brother, of the famous seizure of ammunition on its way to the Cherokees in 1775, was a political prisoner in Charleston at the same time General Robert was arrested and held there by the American leaders. Patrick was banished, but after two years in East Florida, was allowed to return, and his property amerced at twelve percent. In the Census of 1790 he had forty-six slaves, being the largest slave holder in Edgefield County. He was several times elected to the South Carolina Legislature from the Edgefield District following the Revolution.

Before coming to the falls of Reedy River, Richard Pearis served in the French and Indian War, on the side of the British. He

was usually the leader of a group of Cherokees, especially against the Shawnees, who were bitter enemies of the Cherokee.

Richard and his Cherokees helped guard the Virginia and Pennsylvania frontiers, after the defeat of General Braddock, which exposed the whole border to the Indian raids. The Virginia authorities paid five pounds each for scalps the Cherokees took from the Shawnees, so Richard Pearis must have been witness, if he did not take part in many a "scalping party." He was with Colonel Andrew Lewis in the fateful 1756 expedition against the Shawnees on the Ohio. He and his Indians, saved the company from extinction when the food gave out, and the men were obliged to eat their belts, shoe strings, and shot pouches to keep from starving.

At one time Richard Pearis commanded a company at Fort Cumberland, Md., and was the only man there who could speak the Cherokee language. Of course, he continued his already established private trade with the Indians. He threw the Maryland Assembly "into a tizzy" by putting in expense accounts for the women "cooks and nurses" in camp. There were such other little things to which the Maryland Assembly objected, such as claiming pay for his men during June, when the company was not formed until July.

Pearis served under General John Forbes when that general, accompanied by George Washington, retook Fort Duquesne, where Pittsburgh is now located. Pearis bragged he was the first man to enter the fort, and that he was commended and promised reward. If so, it was a dubious honor, since the French had burned the fort and marched off the day before.

In Virginia, he had bought much land, inherited some, and had grants for more from Lord Fairfax. He had disposed of or mortgaged practically all of it before leaving. Nearly all of these transfers were made in 1763, five years before he came to South Carolina. He had also done some trading on the Holston River and had been thwarted in buying the Long Island of the Holston, from the Indians.

Pearis left his home near Winchester, Va., and came to South Carolina about 1768. This date is established by the power of attorney he gave Thomas Hite, son of old Baron Yost Heidt, the pioneer, and by the dates of the land transfers he and his wife Rhoda made in Virginia. These transfers extended up until that time. Also, Pearis himself said he migrated that year.

Arriving in South Carolina, Richard Pearis seemed to have selected the Reedy River Falls as a desirable site for his proposed trading and milling operations. Shortly after he bought land from the Indians in a round about if not tricky way.³ On December 21, 1773, Oconostotah, Willimauwah, and Ewe, three head men of the Cherokee nation, deeded to George Pearis, Indian son of Richard Pearis, 150,000 acres of Cherokee land. Within four months George Pearis became a naturalized English citizen under an English law that permitted natural sons of Englishmen to become citizens. As an English citizen George Pearis could deed the land to his father an Englishman, an act not allowed Cherokee George Pearis as an Indian. The second deed is dated April 27, 1774.⁴

In the second deed Cherokee George Pearis reserved 50,000 acres for himself and his heirs. He also stipulated that the deed should not interfere with a bargain formerly made between his father, Richard Pearis, and Jacob Hite of Virginia. The land, as surveyed, extended from the south fork of the Saluda River to the Indian path on the North Carolina line, over to the Tyger and Enoree Rivers and back to the Saluda on the south. At all points the markers showed the initials "RP," indicating that the land was intended for Richard Pearis when the survey was made. George Pearis paid the Indians 100 pounds and Richard Pearis paid George 500 pounds for two-thirds of the same land four months later.

Each of the Cherokees signing the deed used a distinctive mark for his signature. There is no doubt that the sale was authentic and that the Indians were not tricked into the sale. The deed was read to them and explained, before they signed it. It was sworn to before a Justice of the Peace, and witnessed by a group of honorable white citizens, completely disproving Alexander Cameron's

³This data is derived from two deeds located in Charleston by my sister. Until the discovery of these deeds, the greater portion of the published knowledge of Pearis came from his claims against the British. Little was known of how he obtained his land here. These deeds show he purchased the land. It was not a grant from the king, else it would be listed with other Royal Land Grants to South Carolinians. It has been claimed by some writers that he was given land by the Cherokees and later had a grant from the king. The evidence does not support this.

⁴Some years before, Alexander Cameron, Deputy Indian Agent under John Stuart, had dealings with the Indians regarding a piece of land twelve miles square in the Saluda River valley, which it was proposed would be deeded to Cameron through his Indian son. John Stuart balked the scheme. Pearis may have refined the idea concerned in this incident.

claim that Pearis got the Indians drunk and induced them to sign the deed. However, it violated a proclamation of the King that the Indians could sell no land except to the English Government.

Both deeds were filed in Charleston in the summer of 1782. That city was occupied by the British at the time, so Richard Pearis must have filed them.

The agreement between Richard Pearis and Jacob Hite, mentioned above, reserved a piece of land twelve miles square for Jacob Hite. The square had been laid out for Pearis by the Cherokees and included the Pearis trading post. There is a story that Richard Pearis and Jacob Hite were fined in the court at Ninety Six for dealing with the Indians. Records show the prosecution was authorized by the South Carolina General Assembly, upon the urging of John Stuart, but there the *Journal* ends and the records at Ninety Six were burned. In any case, Jacob Hite did not occupy the property purchased from Richard Pearis. Jacob Hite came to the Greenville area in December 1775, and lived in a house on Enoree River. Six months later he, his wife (Frances Madison Beale Hite, an aunt of President James Madison), and his son Jacob O'Bannon Hite were killed by Indians or Tories or both.⁵ His daughter Eleanor was kidnapped and taken into the Cherokee country. In his claims made after the Revolution to the British government for his losses in support of the crown, Pearis claimed that Jacob Hite still owed him 2500 pounds for the Reedy River property. He also claimed that Col. Wade Hampton owed him 135 pounds and that others owed him large sums.

However, the Pearis claims must be taken with a grain of salt, unless facts found elsewhere prove them true. Of course, it was something like the present-day person who goes into court to redress

⁵Why Jacob Hite brought his family to the wilds of the Indian country here, leaving much property behind, including a huge plantation, three gold mines, many fine horses, and other property, will never be explained. It could have been a part of the restless movement which took settlers from place to place in those days, in search of greater riches. Prospect of a trading post among the Indians may have been a factor. Seeking land which was not "worn out" often lured people to a new and uncultivated section. Whatever the reason, Jacob ended his days without the trading post, which Richard Pearis had sold him but never delivered. His South Carolina property was taken by the state, though he was a staunch patriot, as were others in his family. He brought much money here, if his sales of property in Virginia are any indication. It is unlikely that he did not pay for the property he was to have from Richard Pearis, unless the money was withheld because the property was never delivered to him.

a wrong and makes every possible claim to win a point. Richard Pearis was trying to get money from the British, and he did, a little over one-third of the 15,000 pounds he claimed. This claim was filed in England, but heard in Nova Scotia in 1786, with Richard Pearis present. No investigation could be made here by the British. The Revolution was over, and the Tories had been driven out. Jacob Hite was dead and Richard Pearis knew it because he was in Greenville after Jacob was killed.

In fact Jacob Hite's death, at least partially led to the Pearis property being destroyed here. The Indian raids took place July 1, 1776. The Pearis place was burned between July 18 and July 22, or a little over two weeks later. Richard Pearis claimed he was in jail in Charleston when the Reedy River property was burned. He made a pitiful plea to the South Carolina Assembly for reimbursement. His story is likely another myth. This is why:

Andrew Williamson was camped at Barker's Creek on July 19, 1776. From there Francis Salvadore, who wrote for him since Williamson was illiterate, sent a letter to William Henry Drayton, in Charleston, saying the night before Robert Cunningham and Pearis had come to the camp and that Robert Cunningham had offered his services against the Cherokee, which had been refused. Four days later, on July 22, Andrew Williamson sent another letter to Drayton saying that LeRoy Hammond, and the troops under him, had been dispatched to destroy the Pearis place, as it was a rendezvous for Indians and Schopolites, who were raiding the white settlements; and that on Monday Williamson's spies had reported the place was burned. LeRoy Hammond was to join Col. John Thomas and Ezekiel Polk, at the Pearis place, and they were all to march into the Indian nation from that point, while Williamson went by another route. Whether LeRoy Hammond or John Thomas reached the Reedy River Falls first and burnt the Pearis place, has not been determined. Richard Pearis claimed Col. Thomas destroyed it, beat his wife and daughters and sent them off in a wagon without food. That must be another myth, for Col. Thomas was a member of the South Carolina legislature at the time, and afterwards was Land Commissioner for Greenville District, and there is nothing in his record which would indicate a tendency toward such behavior.

As the result of Richard Pearis' plea for compensation for his losses, the South Carolina legislature voted him 700 pounds until further investigation could be made, and the Treasurer's book

shows it was paid. Only a short time later Pearis was found to be recruiting for the British, and fled for his life. After the war he did not inform the British of the payment by South Carolina of the 700 pounds, and claimed compensation for everything that he and Jacob Hite had owned in Greenville District. Several years later the South Carolina legislature passed an act making those who destroyed the Reedy River property not liable for damages, and granted 6,000 acres of land to the heirs of Jacob Hite, in repayment for seizure of the Hite property. This was after South Carolina had in 1784 granted title to Col. Thomas Brandon to the land on which Citizens and Southern Bank Building on Camperdown Way is now situated and also titles to many others, the locations being designated by the distance from Richard Pearis' place. The state had not bothered to legally seize the property of Richard Pearis, or if so, there is no record, and none of the deeds indicate that this was done.

Some have claimed that Richard Pearis sent the Indians to kill the Hites and Hamptons, and David Fanning did write about wiping out the Whigs and rendezvousing at the Pearis place. But the Hites and Hamptons were his lifelong friends from Virginia. True, Richard Pearis had been arrested in December, 1775, and held in jail in Charleston, as a political prisoner, until July, 1776, and was probably bitter toward all Whigs. True also that the Hamptons and Hites were staunch Whigs. But Pearis would have had to be a fiend to have done this, and all records point to the Hites being high in his regard.

Richard Pearis, in his claim to the British Government, a copy of which is filed in the New York Public Library, said his property in what is now Greenville included: a dwelling house, kitchen, smoke house, stables, dairy, smith's shop, tools, wagons, carts, plows and harrows, household furniture, Negro houses, a large grist mill which cost 100 pounds to build, a large Indian store with a "proper assortment of goods" just arrived from Charleston, twelve slaves, 47 English horses, 200 cattle, 250 hogs, 14 sheep and goats. He claimed to have cleared 100 acres of land on the Reedy River, where he possessed 10,000 acres. Either his arithmetic or the original deeds were a little off. The original deed was for 150,000 acres. In the second deed George Pearis reserved 50,000 for himself. Richard Pearis said he sold 30,000 acres to Jacob Hite and that he had left 17,200 on the three rivers, the Reedy, the Enoree, and the

Saluda. But Richard says George kept 100,000 for himself.⁶ There is a possibility that Richard Pearis and also Jacob Hite had other land in what is now Greenville and Pickens Counties, as reference is made to other land in some old records in the South Carolina Archives. These contain a statement from Col. George Hite, son of Jacob and a Revolutionary War hero, who lost an arm in that conflict, which indicates that his father purchased land from a John Nevill, and that Pearis made several purchases from the Cherokees.

The services of Pearis to the British had better be skipped. He says he was with Col. Thomas Browne, known as the "Butcher of Augusta"; that he served with Bloody Bill Cunningham and that he swept a clean swath, 100 miles wide, from the Savannah River to the North Carolina line, after the fall of Charleston. In Florida, in Georgia, and at Charleston, he had served under General Augustine Prevost. When Charleston fell in 1780, and the state was almost prostrate, Pearis was sent to Ninety Six to receive the surrender of General Andrew Williamson and General Andrew Pickens. Later, of course, General Pickens returned to serve with the American side. There has been wide disagreement as to whether or not General Williamson aided the British, or the Americans, while the British held Charleston. However, General Williamson continued to live on his plantation, near Charleston, after the war, and died in Charleston and his funeral was held there. The papers described him as having rendered valuable service to the state against the Indians.

At the fall of Augusta, June 5, 1781, when the Americans were again strong enough to oppose the British, Richard Pearis was captured by the Americans, together with Thomas Browne. General Pickens saved Pearis' life by putting him in a boat and sending him down the river, away from the angry soldiers who would have killed him.

The witnesses to the deeds transferring the Greenville land from the Cherokee nation to half-Cherokee George Pearis and from George to Richard Pearis reveal some of the white settlers who were

⁶Cherokee George Pearis was a scout for the British in the Revolution. Evidently his property was taken also by the state. In 1809 George Pearis gave power of attorney to Charles Goodwin, a lawyer, of Edgefield, who had married General Andrew Williamson's daughter. At the time George Pearis said he was removing from the state. Recently received information points to Cherokee George's descendants still living in Oklahoma.

in the vicinity at that time: John Prince, Thomas Prince, Henry Prince, George Salmon, Abraham Hite, William Hite, Joshua Pettit, John Leon, Samuel Bathleon, James Beale, Anthony Hampton and his sons Henry and Wade Hampton.

Anthony Hampton, founder of the well-known South Carolina family, and Richard Pearis at the time of the French and Indian War guarded the borders between Virginia and the Indian country. Evidently the two men migrated to South Carolina about the same time and the Hampton family lived near Wood's Fort between the Middle and South Tyger Rivers. Anthony and some members of his family were massacred in the Indian raids of July, 1776.

Anthony Hampton's son, Edward, married a daughter of Baylis Earle. Edward escaped the massacre, but was killed by Bloody Bill Cunningham and his band in 1781. Whether or not Richard Pearis was with Cunningham at that time is not known.

We all know the story of Wade Hampton, and his sons and grandsons and their service to South Carolina in the Revolution, the Civil War, and the Reconstruction days. Henry Hampton had a plantation on Mush Creek of Tyger River. His will is filed in Greenville County.

Henry Hampton, Anthony's son, and an attorney, witnessed the deed from George Pearis to Richard Pearis. The story is told that in arguing a case in Newberry, he stated that all Germans believed in witchcraft and had horseshoes nailed over their doors. The Germans who inhabited the Dutch Fork were so indignant that Henry Hampton could not get lodging on his way home.

The Prince family lived at what was known as Prince's Fort on the Tyger River. John Prince who witnessed both of the Pearis deeds, was a member of the South Carolina General Assembly in 1776. Prince family records are in Spartanburg, Abbeville, Union and Greenville counties, and of course in Charleston, where everything was filed before courthouses were established in this section. Frank and Thomas Prince were officers in the South Carolina militia during the Revolution. Much land was granted various members of the family for their services.

George Salmon, who witnessed the deed from George Pearis to Richard Pearis, had a wife named Elizabeth and lived in upper Greenville County. He gave land for the church at the mouth of Reedy River, and was deputy surveyor for Greenville District. He

made many of the surveys for land granted by the state in 1784, as recognition for war service, when Col. John Thomas was Commissioner of Locations below the ancient Indian boundary line, which included present Greenville County and other land. Ezekiel Salmon, executor of his estate, was bonded for \$20,000, a large sum in those days.

William Caine, another witness of the Pearis deed, married a daughter of Patrick Cunningham, General Robert Cunningham's brother. The Caine will is filed in Abbeville.

Joshua Pettit had land in Greenville and his will is recorded in Spartanburg County.

As far as I have been able to discover, all of these witnesses to the Pearis deeds were patriots. Certainly they were also brave pioneers. They came here either before Richard Pearis arrived, or some may have come with him. Progenitors of many South Carolina families migrated from the Winchester, Virginia, area. In Virginia, some were neighbors of Richard Pearis and came to South Carolina about the same time. Those who were Tories went to Nassau after the Revolution, as did Richard Pearis. From Winchester came the Bowmans, Beales (descendants of Mrs. Jacob Hite and her first husband Tavener Beale), the Neelys, the Cunninghams, the Stovers and many other families who settled in the Greenville area or lower down the state, in Abbeville and other counties. So, Richard Pearis, in addition to settling here himself, attracted others, and in so doing, rendered a service.

Richard Pearis died in Nassau in 1794, not in great poverty on the island of Abaco, as has been recorded, but in Nassau, in comparative affluence. When one walks down Bay Street in Nassau today, he passes the fifteen lots Pearis owned at the time of his death. And along the waterfront, near a fort, is the former plantation of General Robert Cunningham and the lake which until this day bears his name. General Cunningham left this plantation to his daughter, Margaret, who married Richard Pearis, Jr. General Cunningham's will is filed in Nassau and he and members of his family are buried in Western Cemetery there. Wills of both Richard Pearis and his son Richard Pearis, Jr., are indexed in the Crown Records Office in Nassau, but the originals, the pages on which they were recorded in books, and the films of both wills are missing from the files. So, let's let the bones of Richard Pearis rest in peace, recorded as the first white settler on the site of the city of Greenville.