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National Memory of Francis Marion

Steven D. Smith



Biography became a central vehicle of Americans' self-imaginings as a distinct people in the aftermath of the Revolution. Heroes of the late war were particularly appealing subjects. William Gilmore Simms capitalized on this fact by writing numerous biographies and biographical sketches, many of them about Revolutionary War heroes. Simms has been called "the most prolific, the most versatile, and the most successful Southern antebellum man of letters" (Holman vii). His vast body of work includes two biographies of South Carolina's Revolutionary War hero and guerrilla fighter Francis Marion (*Life of Marion*, "Marion- The Carolina Partisan"). Furthermore Francis Marion and his partisans were the focus of a Simms poem ("Marion"), and Marion was a character in at least two Simms novels, *Mellichampe* and *Katharine Walton* (Steven Smith xxv). Consideration of these works helps illuminate how Simms, and many of his readers, thought about military leadership and conflict as the Civil War approached.

There can be no doubt that our modern notions of Francis Marion have been largely shaped by William Gilmore Simms, along with two other biographers—the Reverend Parson Weems (with Peter Horry) and William Dobein James. In chronological order, the biographies of Horry and Weems, James, and Simms comprise a literary trilogy that has constructed a national memory (Anderson 1991) of Francis Marion, the "Swamp Fox." As part of this national narrative, a highland swamp known as Snow's Island has become the "Sherwood Forest" of America's Robin Hood (Steven Smith xi).

The huge body of literature devoted to Francis Marion testifies to the significant influence of Simms and his predecessors. A "selected" bibliography of works

on Marion published in 1999 listed twenty-one biographies (Alexander Moore, "Swamp Fox"), and there have been three since then. There are at least fourteen books of fiction with Marion as the inspiration. There are countless articles, chapters, poetry, dictionary entries, and other literature on Francis Marion and numerous discussions of Marion by military historians, who regard him as a classic guerrilla.

Yet all of this Marionology unfortunately relies to some degree or another on the first full biography published in 1809 by the Reverend Mason Locke Weems, with editions still in print (1891, 2000). The story of how Weems came to publish the first Marion biography is important to understanding the role of antebellum nineteenth-century writers and publishers—Simms among them—in constructing national memory. This story begins with Peter Horry. Horry served as a colonel under Marion during the Revolutionary War and around 1803 completed a manuscript of his service. Horry asked the Georgetown Library Society to publish the work, but they turned it down as being too costly to produce (Steven Smith xxiv). Seeking another publisher, Horry met the Reverend Mason Locke Weems in Georgetown, South Carolina (Wates 353).

Weems was a Virginia bookseller, popular author, and publisher of religious and moral tracts (Acree). Through his publications he actively sought to spread "republican and Christian principles, two concepts he equated" (Acree 2). His publications championed national unity and his desire for Americans to see themselves as "one distinctive people" (Acree 45). Horry must have been delighted that the famous publisher Mason Weems—the publisher of the first biography of George Washington—was interested in his memoir of Francis Marion. Horry handed the manuscript to Weems, cautioning Weems to edit but not alter its sense. Horry's delight was shattered when he saw the final product. Weems had rewritten Horry's manuscript into another of his "republican biograph[ies]," modeling it after the Washington biography (Acree 138). Weems had made Horry's memoir a "military romance," having "carved & mutilated it with so many erroneous statements" (Horry to Weems 4 February [ca. 1811]). Crushed, Horry lamented that it "most Certainly tis not my history, but your romance" (Horry to Weems 4 February [ca. 1811]).¹

Weems, for his part, was equally surprised at Horry's reaction. From Weems's perspective Horry's demand for accuracy was secondary to the importance of teaching virtue, religious toleration, and republicanism, as he had done in his Washington biography (Acree 243, 246). With anti-British sentiment growing in the young nation, Weems fed the national mood by turning the British into "fiends devoid of human compassion" in his Marion biography (Acree 157).

Weems's version of Marion was indeed a romance, but Horry was dead wrong about one thing. The exasperated Horry had written Weems in response to Weems's explanation of the bio-novel: "A History of Realities turned into a

Romance? The idea alone militates against the work. The one as a history would be always read with Pleasure, as real performances—The other as fictitious [*sic*] Inventions of the Brain” (Horry to Weems 4 February [ca. 1811]). Alas Horry’s Weems-tainted biography of Francis Marion was hugely successful and, unfortunately for modern scholars, widely accepted as fact by hero-seeking nineteenth-century Americans. As of 2007 some fifty editions had been published (Acree 211).

With the publication of Horry and Weems’s Marion biography, Marion was “nationalized” (Marr 2007). As westward-pushing Americans sought inspiration and justification for their migration, Weems’s biographies of George Washington and Francis Marion were made to order and were packed along with the family Bible. Marion was famous; some twenty-nine towns, seventeen counties, and uncounted children were named for him (Pogue 1). Thus, as America grew into Benedict Anderson’s imagined nation (*Imagined Communities*), it turned to an imagined Washington, Franklin, and, especially in the South, Marion as examples of what America and Americans should be.

Thus Weems’s Marion lives on in the popular mind, and all post-Weems biographers have had to deal with its romantic elements—all except, in large part, William Dobein James, another of Marion’s partisans to write a Marion biography (Steven Smith xxiv).² James’s account, the second published biography of Francis Marion, does have an air of authenticity not found in Weems and, although the historian George F. Scheer (Review of James 248) wrote “that no more accurate or valuable book on Marion exists,” it actually adds to Marion mythology. For instance James was not an eyewitness for much of Marion’s partisan warfare (August 1780 to April 1781). When Marion retreated into North Carolina in September 1780, James was ill, and he was left there when Marion returned to acquaintances (James, *A Sketch* vi). This is evident from the fact that James’s chronology during this period is often confused. Weems imagined Marion through Horry, James through his father and others—both under the guise of eyewitness accounts, which were only partially true. James admitted that he had read Horry and Weems’s biography (vi). So while James’s biography is viewed as an eyewitness account, it too must have been influenced by Weems. Examples of James’s construction of Marion will be seen in the Swamp Fox and Snow’s Island legends discussed below.

William Gilmore Simms disparaged both Weems and James, writing of Weems that he “had rather loose notions of the privileges of the biographer” and of James that, while “we are more secure” of James’s facts, his work is “quite devoid of merit as a literary performance” (Simms, *Life of Francis Marion* preface). Yet Simms’s biography of Marion is also full of Weems-like flowery speeches and James’s confusions, especially when placed in juxtaposition with Marion’s own

correspondence. The key to understanding Simms's Marion is to see Simms as he saw himself—as a deconstructionist of Weems's mythology but with a literary heart.

Simms had almost identical goals as Weems regarding nation building. Charles Watson notes, "Starting in the 1820s, he [Simms] joined wholeheartedly the efforts in progress to shape the culture, the politics, and the thought of the fledgling nation. His overriding objective was the development of a great nation, which need defer to none" (*From Nationalism 1*). Like Weems he saw this need not only as a historian but also as a man of letters. "Simms perceived that his chief duty as a man of letters lay in the articulation of a distinctively American history and literature, distinguished from that of Europe," according to Lisa Kay Miller (44). Jerome King Brown indicates that Simms saw the American Revolution as a "confrontation between the Old World, with its traditional values, its established mores, and its rigid conventions, to which the Tories and Loyalists are committed, and the New World, with its fresh values, its emerging mores, and its unstructured freedom, to which the Patriots are committed" (72). Through some eight Revolutionary War novels, Simms championed the virtues of "honor, duty, integrity, compassion, fairness, [and] patriotism" (Brown 146). In an essay on the "True Uses of History" Simms wrote that the job of the romancer was to develop "national characteristics" (*From Nationalism 2*).

For Simms, art was superior to historicity. As Lisa Miller explains, "Like [James Fenimore] Cooper, Simms believes that the creator of the American epic must be truthful, but of course not bound to mere fact. Instead, he is bound to truth in essence—the truth of human nature" (49). So while Simms appears not as indifferent to facts as Weems, he still saw that a biography could be romantic while remaining, as Sean Busick notes, "true to the letter of history as research could make it" (*A Sober Desire 7*). Thus, Busick defends Simms's work as the "highest standards of scholarship when it was written" (50). Simms's Marion thus could be described as the work of a literary Goldilocks, not too hot (romantic Weems) and not too cold (factual James) but just right (romantically factual Simms).

While Simms's biography of Marion is more grounded than Weems's version, Simms retained and built on Weems's and James's national memory of Marion, tying him to the father of their country. Simms, like Weems, pointed to the similarities between George Washington and Marion, noting their common birth years, their youthful desire for the sea, their early desire for self-improvement, their common agricultural background, and their similar, even temperaments (*A Sober Desire 46*).

Both Weems and Simms were literary giants constructing a national memory. Simms's era, however, was one of a growing national rift, which would result in

the Civil War. As the nation drew toward open conflict, Simms became a defender of the South and a secessionist, increasingly viewing the North as the nineteenth-century equivalent of Great Britain in the era of the American Revolution (*From Nationalism* 74). From Simms's perspective, his sectionalism was actually nationalism. David Moltke-Hansen asserts that Simms was not first a nationalist and then a sectionalist but both simultaneously, and indeed Simms wrote that to be national one must be sectional. According to Simms, to depict a section (that is, the South) faithfully was to illustrate the entire nation (Moltke-Hansen, "Southern" 16).

During the contentious era leading to the Civil War, the memory of Marion would be associated with a growing southern identity of independence and revolution, and his name would be invoked in the defense of the South (Meitzen 113). Virginian Nathaniel Beverley Tucker, a frequent correspondent with Simms, urged South Carolina to provide leadership in the move toward secession, writing, "Is she not the land of MARION? Let his spirit animate her" (*From Nationalism* 110). Then during the war guerrilla fighters such as General John Morgan would be likened to Francis Marion, enhancing the reputation of both (Meitzen 116). "Marion biographers repeatedly used the legendary Marion to prove the South's martial past" (Pogue 35).

Weems, James, and Simms all contributed in varying degrees to the construction of a Francis Marion who would first meet the needs of a young nation pushing westward and then would evoke the revolutionary spirit of the South. The forms in which William Gilmore Simms urged the imagined nation of antebellum America to embrace its hero can be best illustrated in two examples: Francis Marion as the Swamp Fox and his Snow's Island lair.

Marion the Swamp Fox

Francis Marion will always be designated in American memory as the Swamp Fox. The first published use of this nom de guerre appeared in Horry and Weems, where it was used symbolically. In chapter 16 Horry set an ambush along a road near Georgetown, South Carolina. Down the road came a "courting party" consisting of two young ladies in a chair accompanied by British officers: "On getting into the gloomy woods, the girls were taken with a quaking fit for their sweethearts, lest that vile 'swamp fox,' as they called Marion, should come across them" (Horry and Weems, *Life of Marion* 1891, 134).³ And that is it. No additional mention of Marion as the Swamp Fox appeared in Weems. The pejorative was used almost as an afterthought or a throwaway, not worth further exposition. It was actually William Dobein James, calling his work a "domestic history" (vii), who picked up the fox theme in his biography and ran with it. He who put the nom de guerre into the mouth of the infamous British colonel Banastre

Tarleton—again in a derogatory sense: “Tarleton found Marion’s trail [and] pursued about twenty-five miles, when arriving at Ox swamp, which was wide and miry, and without a road to pass it, he desisted, saying to his men, ‘Come my boys! let us go back, and we will soon find the game cock [Sumter], but as for this d—d *old fox*, [italics in original] the devil himself could not catch him.’ After this, the two generals were thus characterized” (62–63).

Tarleton’s own published correspondence did not mention Marion as a fox (Tarleton). Although James denominated Marion as the “old fox” and Sumter as the “game cock,” he too made no more of it afterward, never actually calling Marion the Swamp Fox. But while Weems called Marion a “vile ‘swamp fox’” and James called Marion an “old fox,” it was Simms, the third of our biographers, who used the descriptor in a positive instead of a negative sense. Simms, with his desire to be accurate yet literary, combined the Weems and James accounts: “He turned the head of his column at the very moment when his object was attainable. Popular tradition represents him as expressing himself discouraged at the sight of Ox swamp, and exclaiming, ‘Come, my boys! let us go back. We will soon find the *Game Cock* (meaning Sumter), but as for this d—d *Swamp Fox*, the devil himself could not catch him.’ From this speech of Tarleton, we are given to understand that the two popular names were derived, by which Sumter and Marion were ever after known by their followers” (italics in original, 152).

Although the anthropologist Karl Heider found no indication that the Swamp Fox was used “in a friendly sense” prior to Simms (12), there is at least one published instance. A poem appearing in the *Southern Literary Gazette* in 1829, entitled “The Swamp Fox,” begins:

Oh! the Swamp Fox is before thee on the Edisto side,
 ’T will warm thee a buffet well to go without a guide,
 For his men with muskets ready cock’d are well prepared to be
 With nerves and muscles lightly shock’d for the death of such as thee.
 (329)⁴

So while Simms did not originate the change, after Simms such usage became standard practice, and the derogatory Swamp Fox disappeared from history.⁵

Marion and Snow’s Island

As America imagined Francis Marion as the Swamp Fox, his lair, Snow’s Island, developed in symbolism as a mythological and romantic landscape. Snow’s Island’s significance grew in the telling by the three biographers, Weems (Horry), James, and Simms. Weems, prone to fictive themes according to modern historians, in

fact made less of Snow's Island than did the other two. It was not until chapter 22 of his biography that Snow's Island was even mentioned as Marion's "old place of retreat" (176). Then in chapter 24 he described the island camp: "For this purpose he always kept a snug hiding-place in reserve for us: which was Snow's Island, a most romantic spot, and admirably fitted for our use. Nature had guarded it, nearly all around, with deep waters and inaccessible marshes; and the neighboring gentlemen were all rich, and hearty whigs, who acted by us the double part of generous stewards and faithful spies, so that, while there, we lived at once in safety and plenty" (189).

James, considered more "trustworthy" (Bass 247), enhanced the construction of Snow's Island in American memory as a landscape reminiscent of the ancients. He compared Marion to King Alfred the Great (849?–899) and Snow's Island to the marshes of Athelney. These marshes were the king's hideout when he was forced to retreat to them in his battles against the Danes. "This island became henceforth the most constant place of his [Marion's] encampment; a secure retreat, a depot for his arms and ammunition; and, under similar pressures, a second Athelney, from which he might sally out upon the modern, but no less ferocious plunderers than their ancestors, the Danes. Snow's Island, not quite so marshy as was the retreat of the great Alfred" (James, *Sketch* 67). In tying Marion and Snow's Island to English legend, James also began the literary transition of the swamp from a disgraceful, unhealthy, dark place to a mysterious, secret rendezvous. In a footnote he noted: "At the time [during the American Revolution] the marshes of Black creek, and the bogs of Black river, were impassible (except to Marion,) on any direct route to Camden" (118–19).

Simms elaborated further on this transformation of the swamp's significance, being the first to associate Marion with Robin Hood and Snow's Island with Sherwood Forest. The passage is worth quoting at length:

Marion's career as a partisan, in the thickets and swamps of Carolina, is abundantly distinguished by the picturesque; but it was while he held his camp at Snow's Island, that it received its highest colors of romance. In this snug and impenetrable fortress, he reminds us very much of the ancient feudal baron of France and Germany, who, perched on castled eminence, looked down with the complacency of an eagle from his eyrie, and marked all below him for his own. . . . The love of liberty, the defence of country, the protection of the feeble, the maintenance of humanity and all its dearest interests, against its tyrant—these were the noble incentives which strengthened him in his stronghold, made it terrible in the eyes of his enemy, and sacred in those of his countrymen. Here he lay, grimly watching for the proper time and opportunity when to sally forth and

strike. His position, . . . was wonderfully like that of the knightly robber of the Middle Ages. True, his camp was without its castle—but it had its fosse and keep—its draw-bridge and portcullis. There were no towers frowning in stone and iron—but there were tall pillars of pine and cypress, from the waving tops of which the warders looked out, and gave warning of the foe or the victim. No cannon thundered from his walls; no knights, shining in armor, sallied forth to the tourney. He was fond of none of the mere pomps of war. He held no revels—“drank no wine through the helmet barred,” and, quite unlike the baronial ruffian of the Middle Ages, was strangely indifferent to the feasts of gluttony and swilled insolence. . . . Art had done little to increase the comforts or the securities of his fortress. It was one, complete to his hands, from those of nature—such a one as must have delighted the generous English outlaw of Sherwood forest—isolated by deep ravines and rivers, a dense forest of mighty trees, and interminable undergrowth. The vine and briar guarded his passes. The laurel and the shrub, the vine and sweet scented jessamine, roofed his dwelling, and clambered up between his closed eyelids and the stars. Obstructions, scarcely penetrable by any foe, crowded the pathways to his tent;—and no foot-step, not practised in the secret, and “to the manner born,” might pass unchallenged to his midnight rest. The swamp was his moat; his bulwarks were the deep ravines, which, watched by sleepless rifles, were quite as impregnable as the castles on the Rhine. (166–67)

The swamp symbolism is critical to understanding Simms’s Snow’s Island as a landscape of memory. At the time of the Revolution, swamps were considered dark places and impossible to traverse except by the most vile persons. They were places where only a “vile ‘swamp fox’” would go (Horry and Weems 134). Marion himself saw swamps as vile, dark, secretive places. He once wrote a letter to General Horatio Gates describing a skirmish at Blue Savannah, where he chased the Loyalists into the swamps “impassible to all but Tories” (State Records of North Carolina 617).

For Simms, the swamp was a symbolic landscape. In both his novels and his Marion biography he painted the swamp as a desolate place of gloom and disease but also one that was lovely and inviting (Niemi 25–26). The swamp was “historically . . . a symbol of the American resistance in South Carolina, for it was the partisans’ primary shelter” (26). “As a generous source of food, the swamp protect[ed] the partisans also from hunger” (28). According to Niemi, who analyzed Simms’s treatment of nature in his novels, the British were depicted as uncomfortable in or around swamps, while swamps were a comfortable home for Marion and his partisans (67). Thus Simms transformed American memory of the

vile landscape of Snow's Island into a landscape of resistance inhabited by the partisan community of Marion and his men, a safe haven where only the most expert woodsmen could survive.

So transformed, Snow's Island swamp became the setting for one of the most famous Marion anecdotes. This was the story of the British officer who visited Francis Marion's camp under a flag of truce to negotiate a prisoner exchange. After the meeting, the officer was ready to leave when Marion invited him to dinner. The officer glanced around and saw nothing for their fare but the sweet potatoes that Marion's servant was roasting. In a flowery exchange between Marion and the officer, the officer learned that this was the best food they had. Furthermore he learned that Marion's men were serving without pay. The officer was so taken aback by the sacrifices of Marion and his men that upon his return to Georgetown he resigned his commission, exclaiming: "Why, sir, I have seen an American general and his officers, without pay, and almost without clothes, living on roots and drinking water; and all for LIBERTY! What chance have we against such men!" (Horry and Weems 156).

This story had wings, encapsulating as it did the Marion mystique. While James made no mention of this incident, he had his own sweet potato story, reminiscent of Weems. James recorded that while he camped at White Marsh, North Carolina, Marion invited him to dinner. "The dinner was set before the company by the general's servant, Oscar, partly on a pine log, and partly on the ground; it was lean beef, without salt, and sweet potatoes" (57). James was honored to share his hominy with Marion.

As told by Weems, the setting of the incident was vague, although the story's position in his and Horry's biography implied that the episode occurred while Marion camped near Georgetown, at a Mr. Cross's home (Horry and Weems 147). Simms, however, placed the exchange squarely on Snow's Island, a more suitable landscape for the Swamp Fox and one better allowing comparison of Marion to Robin Hood (Simms, *Life of Marion*, 76). Simms's version of the anecdote flows over four pages in which he contrasted an image of "portly" British officers next to Marion's "slight" frame (1845 179). While Weems placed the sweet potato story immediately after a mutiny in Marion's camp, Simms reversed the order, relating first the sweet potato story on Snow's Island and then the story of the mutiny, which occurred at Mr. Crofts (1845 180).

In defense of Simms, it would have shown remarkable restraint not to relate the sweet potato story in his Marion biography. The anecdote was already a nineteenth-century hit. After Weems related it, Alexander Garden included it in his 1822 *Anecdotes of the Revolutionary War in America*, although again not specifically placing it on Snow's Island. The story dominated the entry on Marion in an 1831 "Military Biography" of Revolutionary War officers, the author fully

quoting Horry and Weems for four pages of the seven-page entry (an entry, incidentally, that did not refer to Marion as the Swamp Fox) (Stavely 207–13). The entry also cited the story in reference to an earlier publication, the *American Biographical Dictionary*. Post-1809 editions of Horry and Weems included an illustration of the scene, which, according to Nell Weaver Davies, began with the 1812 edition, although the South Caroliniana Library's 1814 edition is not illustrated (Horry and Weems 153; Davies 16). The anecdote received more widely recognized artistic attention in 1836 when the artist John Blake White painted the scene, further enhancing Marion's national memory, cementing his Swamp Fox image, and providing the visual link of Marion and Snow's Island.⁶ Indeed the painting became a nineteenth-century mnemonic of Marion and the Snow's Island landscape through generations of engravings and other reproductions, including a version on Confederate currency (Scheer, "Francis Marion" 260; Davies 20).

Francis Marion, Memory and Living Legend

Archaeologist Paul Shackel (Myth), and historians Benedict Anderson (Imagined Communities), and Edward Linenthal (Myth), argue that the construction of memory follows the predetermined agenda of the dominant ideology. Memory is constructed expressly to impose a set of meanings over and above other possible meanings, often for political and almost always for ideological reasons. Certainly there is no debate in regard to the memory of Francis Marion and Snow's Island, as Weems and Simms explicitly stated their desire to construct a national image and inform moral values. Yet such reasoning undervalues the foundations of memory. A more complex interplay between myth and reality is necessary to understand fully the creation of memory. Indeed Peter Horry was on to something: mythology cannot succeed unless it is linked, however loosely, to verifiable facts. These facts, though often stretched and enhanced, are the glue that fixes imagined memories in the mind. The scholars named above would take issue with this judgment. Linenthal asserts that, "ultimately, the vibrant activity at our nation's memory terrains reveals more about our own labors of shaping cultural identity than about getting the past 'just right'" (xii). Perhaps, but clearly in public discourse on history it is the argument over getting the past "just right" that is at the heart of competing interests. Facts speak to authority. To see how facts and imagination create memory, look no further than the earliest memories of Marion and Snow's Island prior to our first biographers.

In doing so, it is important first to remember that the war did not end with a flourish, nor did a nation spring forth like a phoenix from the war's ashes. Although the British evacuated Charleston in December 1782, the colonies were

in limbo until the peace treaty was signed in September 1783. For several years after the war South Carolina was in social and political flux. Heroes and hero worship would come later, after Horry and Weems, James, Simms, and others constructed a national memory. Yet the “mystic chords” of memory of Francis Marion were being played in the minds of South Carolinians long before Horry and Weems set them to music. The veteran community remembered Marion as a colleague and leader much earlier.

Indeed Marion was on the national stage immediately upon the conclusion of the war and was quickly recognized for his contributions to American victory. The Continental Congress promoted him on 30 September 1783 to full colonel in the Continental line (along with twenty-six others), a largely symbolic gesture but recognition just the same (Rankin 292). That same year officers of the Continental army formed an organization, the Society of the Cincinnati, to promote liberty and friendship among fellow officers and, eventually, their descendants. Marion was a founding member of the South Carolina chapter. Meanwhile the new state governor, with the approval of the state legislature, recognized Marion’s contribution, and as his estate had been destroyed in the war, they named him commandant of Fort Johnson in 1785. This carried a salary allowing him a respectful means to recover his lost property (Rankin 293). Furthermore he was voted back to the state senate and was part of the 1790 South Carolina convention to write a new state constitution. He remained in the state militia up to a year before his death in 1795. Marion was both a local hero and a nationally recognized figure prior to the Reverend Weems. Marion’s veterans were among those who recognized their commander long before Horry and Weems did. In 1794 Marion was honored with an address from 148 citizens of Georgetown, who wanted “to Convey [their] Grateful sentiments for your former numerous Services” (Peter Force Papers, Library of Congress).

In further support of Marion’s “real-time” celebrity status, he was immediately recognized for this contribution to the cause in the very earliest war histories. In the first history of the American Revolution in South Carolina published in 1785, only two years after the signing of the Treaty of Paris, David Ramsay included Marion as playing a respectable, if not central, role. He was mentioned in six different places in Ramsay’s *History of the Revolution in South Carolina*. As might be expected, he was not called the Swamp Fox, nor did Snow’s Island figure in this history. Ramsay, however, already recorded characteristics of Marion’s tactics and personal character that would be repeated, enhanced, and otherwise used to construct the Marion memory in the early nineteenth century:

Unfurnished with the means of defense, he was obliged to take possession of the saws of the sawmills, and to convert them into horsemen’s swords.

So much was he distressed for ammunition, that he . . . engaged when he had not three rounds to each man of his party. (176)

For several months he and his party were obliged to sleep in the open air, and to shelter themselves in the thick recesses of deep swamps. From these retreats he sallied out whenever an opportunity of harassing the enemy or of serving his country presented itself. This worthy citizen, on every occasion, paid the greatest regard to private property, and restrained his men from every species of plunder. (177–78)

General Marion, though surrounded by enemies, had defended himself with a few faithful militia in the swamps and morasses of the settlements near Charleston. (209)

Having mounted his followers, their motions were rapid, and their attacks unexpected. (209)

Ramsay's inclusion of Marion was repeated in the earliest postwar histories of the United States, for example William Gordon's 1788 history (454–57).

By the time of Weems's publication Marion's role had grown. David Ramsay's *History of South Carolina*, first published in 1809, increased Marion's role in the war, largely due to William Dobein James. As James mentioned in his biography, his first attempt to write about Marion was for Ramsay's history: "I hastily sketched out from memory a short history of Marion's brigade, for him; which he inserted in fifteen pages of his first volume" (vi). James's account in Ramsay had an interesting place in the memory of Francis Marion. It was written sometime after 1798, when Ramsay wrote a circular letter to prominent citizens in order to gather information for his *History of South Carolina*. James's short excerpt in Ramsay's 1809 history probably should be considered the very first biography of Marion. The structure of this biography followed that of James's later biography. James's narrative mentioned Snow's Island in a straightforward manner, with no flourish: "Here, by having command of the rivers, he could be abundantly supplied with provisions, and his post was inaccessible except by water" (James in Ramsay, *History of South Carolina* 233–34). There was no mention of the sweet potato story in this account, nor was Marion called the Swamp Fox.

Further indication that Marion was recognized as a hero prior to Horry and Weems's biography is that as veterans of the war began writing their memoirs, Marion was not forgotten. Both William Moultrie in 1802 and Colonel Henry Lee in 1811 wrote flatteringly of Marion and his use of swamps and woods as campgrounds and hideouts (Moultrie 233; Lee 174).

Although the theme of the Swamp Fox and Snow's Island had not really emerged fully in these early years, the memories recorded and circulated then provided the foundation for the mythic Marion who emerged as the Swamp Fox on

Snow's Island, thanks to Simms and, in some part, earlier biographers. These biographers constructed memory not out of whole cloth, but on a foundation of widely accepted, acknowledged, appreciated, and verified events in the living past as witnessed by contemporaries. These agents provided the authority for later elaborations.

Indeed Marion, at least at the state level, was already being compared to legendary heroes and guerrillas of the past. For instance on 28 June 1804 the Palmetto Society of South Carolina held its meeting on Sullivan's Island, and at dinner that evening the members saluted several Revolutionary War heroes such as William Moultrie, George Nathanael Greene, and "The memory of general Francis Marion—the Fabius of South Carolina" (*Carolina Gazette*).⁷

But was he a swamp fox then? Amazingly there is even some contemporary evidence that the British or Loyalists had indeed labeled Francis Marion the Swamp Fox during the American Revolution. As Karl Heider insightfully has noted, the Swamp Fox sobriquet might have come from "living legend" (5). The evidence is not direct, but it is worthy of consideration. In 1782 Charleston was controlled by the British. Likewise the *Royal Gazette* newspaper in Charleston was controlled by Loyalist printers. In the 13 March edition, under the headline "Intelligence Extraordinary from Philadelphia," the byline read: "The following Books are in the press, and will speedily be published" (*Royal Gazette*). There followed a list of titles. On it were "A topographical description of the northern parts of South Carolina, betwixt Peedee and Santee, illustrated with a map, wherein are accurately delineated all the thickets and swamps in that country, from an actual survey by Brigadier General Marion" and "Select maneuvers for cavalry; to which are added practical observations on the most soldier-like manner of swimming rivers in a route, by the same." These titles are sarcastic jests at Marion's expense. Philadelphia at the time was under the control of the Americans and a center for the publication of Whig propaganda. Among additional book titles in this article were, for instance, "Description of the strong brick castle at the Eutaws, by General Greene," making sport of the American army at the battle of Eutaw Springs under Greene, which was on the verge of defeating the British army until British soldiers barricaded themselves in a brick house and fired from the windows, stopping the American advance.

The jokes may seem weak in this day and age, but they clearly illustrate the fact that the British and Loyalists at the time of the Revolution were spoofing the Americans, including Francis Marion's intimate knowledge of "thickets and swamps." Further he was derided for not crossing rivers as a gentleman would—"soldier-like." Instead he was forced by the British to swim his horses in an undignified manner. Again, the swamps were undesirable places (unhealthy!), and this is contemporary evidence of Marion being derogatorily associated with swamps by British and Loyalists, just as Marion had associated the swamps with Loyalists.

This spoof does not quite call him a Swamp Fox, but the sense, to put it in William Gilmore Simms's terms, is there, and this is proof that this sense existed during the war.⁸

Interestingly in the pension applications by Marion's veterans, Marion is not called the Swamp Fox. He is always referred to as General or Colonel Marion. A keyword search for "swamp fox" in the searchable pension applications at www.footnote.com did not reveal one example. A search of 8,431 transcribed pension applications did not reveal any either (<http://southerncampaign.org/pen/>). This is indirect support of the contention that until Simms changed the term from a pejorative to a sobriquet, its use generally was seen as an insult.

This absence of the term "Swamp Fox" in the pension applications is even more curious if one considers that there is evidence that at least some of the old veterans had an acquaintance with the histories written in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, including Horry and Weems's biography. This is not to imply that they were outright lying in their pension applications, but rather it is reasonable to assume that often marching in the dead of night to places previously unknown, they had little idea where they were at the time of a particular action. Reading or having someone read them the histories of Ramsay, James, and Horry and Weems assisted them in recall of the past—"I think I was there—it sounds familiar." Thus it is reasonable to assume that the writings of Ramsay, James, and Horry and Weems assisted to reconstruct the veterans' war-time memories. This begs the question, why did no pensioner or pensioner's family call Marion the Swamp Fox? It seems reasonable to infer that during the Revolution a swamp fox was a term of derision, and it was only by the time of Simms that it became a popular sobriquet, after most pensioners were long in their graves.

Finally, in keeping with the argument that memory and historicity must combine in order for constructed memory to have authority, one can return to Horry and Weems. Even in their biography there are events that can be verified by primary documents indicating that not all was pure and total fiction. Weems did make some use of Horry's manuscript, and he must have left nuggets of authentic events within his text, thereby only adding to scholars' frustration. Here is a single example of many that serves to illustrate that there is something for Marion scholars to mine even from Horry and Weems. In Weems's account Horry condemned the commander of a detachment of riflemen who ran in the face of a British charge. The commander was sarcastically called "my brave Scott," and Horry through Weems labeled him an "Infamous poltroon" for retreating. Scott's men were recorded as "calling him a coward to his face" (480). Being called a coward in a popular book read by a young nation was not what someone would want to own up to. Yet there was a John Scott in Marion's brigade, and in his pension account he said that he was with the detachment and that being outflanked, he retreated (Scott, Pension S32508). Scott may have never known

he was singled out as a poltroon in Horry and Weems's book, but one must assume that Scott was there and that Weems, through Horry, reported the event accurately.

Summary

Acree asserted that Horry and Weems's book "rescued Marion from near obscurity" (*Sorrows* 230). Likewise Blocker D. Meitzen concluded that Marion "slipped quietly from the popular national consciousness" after the Civil War (152). If one is familiar at all with the books on Francis Marion and the continuing fascination with him, these assertions seem at odds with the facts. Marion and Marion mythology are alive and well today in such examples as the annual Francis Marion symposium in Manning, South Carolina, the South Carolina Francis Marion Trail Commission, and any of numerous biographies and articles still being written. But these modern memories have been and are largely still shaped by the Marion trilogy crafted by Horry and Weems, James, and especially Simms.

These authors, primarily Weems and Simms, were expressly and openly attempting to construct a national memory built upon religious freedom and national values of freedom and independence and using the exploits of Washington, Marion, and others to exemplify model American citizens. Weems and Simms and, to a lesser extent, James were the apostles of American memory (Anderson 1991). Furthermore Marion was reimagined by the South in the years prior to and during the Civil War to be seen as an agent of resistance standing against northern aggression. Even today memory of Marion and his Snow's Island campground fit both national and sectional narratives that are continually being renegotiated.

Yet this memory was not created *ex nihilo*. Memory is shaped by shapers such as Weems and Simms, but such molders of the past need history to make myth, and these agents must be active in the acceptance or rejection of that myth. In the imagined nation fact and fiction intertwine and support each other. Marion was real, not a Greek god. Thus memory is the creation of agents constantly negotiating the meaning of real actions and events that have been obscured by time.

William Gilmore Simms had it right. It is the duty of the shaper to fit the memory to certain facts in a literary style. It is most important to get the sense of history correct. It is important that the myth fit the facts. Importantly memory has authority only if rooted in some manner to history. That history is called tradition. In the words of G. K. Chesterton, tradition "is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about" (85).

Notes

1. Weems kept Horry's name as the author and did not add his own name until the fourth edition (Acree 153). Herein when discussing Weems's Marion, the reader is reminded that it was Horry's manuscript that formed the basis for the Weems biography.

2. Horry's original manuscript has been lost. It probably was destroyed either in the burning of Columbia during the Civil War or, having survived the war, during late nineteenth-century state house renovations (Wates 360). In writing his manuscript Horry made use of five volumes of Marion's correspondence (and that of other Revolutionary War figures), most of which has been published by Robert Gibbes as the *Documentary History of the American Revolution*. Both William Dobein James and William Gilmore Simms also made use of these volumes for their treatments of Francis Marion. In addition Horry wrote an autobiography, parts of which are missing but surviving remnants of which contain a few reminiscences of the Revolutionary War (Shillingsburg, Peter, *The Use of Sources* 5–7).

3. In the original 1809 edition, the phrase first appears as "*vile swamp fox*." Later editions change the punctuation to "vile 'swamp fox,'" perhaps to emphasize the Swamp Fox as a sobriquet rather than a term of derogation.

4. The poem was published as part of an article entitled "A Revolutionary Relic" by T.S. The author indicated that he found it among old papers that included other songs and anecdotes.

5. Simms also used the Swamp Fox sobriquet in his 1840 history (Heider 18).

6. Nell Weaver Davies dates the painting between 1810 and 1815 (16). Paul W. Partridge Jr. dates the painting to 1836 (171–72). White created four versions of the scene.

7. Fabius was a Roman dictator and military officer who defended Rome from Hannibal by harassment and attrition rather than open battle, just as Marion later did to the British.

8. The poem "The Swamp Fox," published in 1829 and discussed previously in this essay (see note 4), is also worth further consideration. As noted, the contributor T.S. related in an introductory essay that he found the poem among "old papers" that "seem to me, to contain and convey a good deal of the spirit of the time" (329). He also stated that the poem is related to "some exploit of Gen. Marion, or as he was technically termed at the time 'the Swamp Fox'" (329). These statements appear to imply that the contributor believed the poem to have been composed during the American Revolution.