

Georgia Declaration of Independence signer Button Gwinnett dies, May 19, 1777

On this day in history, May 19, 1777, Georgia Declaration of Independence signer Button Gwinnett dies from wounds received in a duel with Brigadier General Lachlan McIntosh. Gwinnett was born in England around 1735. He moved to Charleston, South Carolina in 1762 and went into business. At the age of 28, he bought a large tract of land on St. Catherine's Island, which was part of the colony of Georgia and became a prosperous planter. He was first elected to the Georgia Assembly in 1769.

As tensions with Great Britain grew, Gwinnett joined the patriots and was elected to Georgia's extra-legal Provincial Assembly. The Assembly sent him to the Continental Congress as one of Georgia's three delegates, where he voted for independence from Great Britain on July 2, 1776 and for the formal Declaration of Independence on July 4. His signature was written on the document when most of the other's signed it on August 2.

At this time, Gwinnett was hoping to be appointed the top military leader of the Georgia state militia, but since he had no military experience, the position was given to his chief political rival, Lachlan McIntosh. Gwinnett continued to serve in Congress, but returned to attend Georgia's convention to create a state constitution. Using a plan given to him by John Adams, Gwinnett wrote the first draft of Georgia's first Constitution and became the Speaker of the Georgia Assembly. When the first governor, Archibald Bulloch, died, Gwinnett was made the President and Commander-in-Chief of Georgia's militia.

Meanwhile, Lachlan McIntosh was recruited as a Brigadier General over Georgia's Continental Army battalion. This put McIntosh and Gwinnett in a confrontational position as McIntosh had the official right to command the battalion, but, as President of Georgia, Gwinnett felt that the responsibility belonged to him. Gwinnett began to undermine

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McIntosh's leadership and spread dissension amongst his top officers. When an expedition to capture St. Augustine in British East Florida failed, partly because of their squabbling, both were called back by the angry Georgia Assembly to defend themselves. During the process, McIntosh accused Gwinnett of being a "scoundrel and a rascal," which were extremely inflammatory words at the time. Gwinnett demanded an apology, which McIntosh refused, causing Gwinnett to challenge him to a duel, the common method of gaining "satisfaction" in those days.

McIntosh and Gwinnett met on May 16, 1777 with their pistols near Savannah. At a distance of 12 feet, both men fired on one another and both were shot seriously in the leg. McIntosh would eventually recover, but Gwinnett was wounded mortally and died 3 days later from gangrene.

Button Gwinnett left a lasting legacy to Georgia and to America. He signed the Declaration of Independence and served in the Continental Congress during the critical years of the nation's birth. He also wrote the foundation for Georgia's first constitution and served as one of its first chief executives. As an interesting side note, Button Gwinnett's signature is among the most valuable signatures in all of world history. Why? Only 51 copies are known to exist and many collectors have tried to put together complete collections of the signatures of the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence. Gwinnett's signature is so in demand and so rare, that a single copy sold for \$722,000 in 2010, ranking in value right up there with the signatures of Julius Caesar and William Shakespeare!