



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on October 28, 2023

## John Laurens: A Forgotten Patriot of South Carolina, Born This Day in 1754

In the pantheon of American Founding Fathers, John Laurens of South Carolina remains an unsung hero. His life, though tragically short, was marked by an unwavering commitment to liberty and a vision for a nation unshackled by the bonds of slavery. Born on October 28, 1754 to a wealthy plantation family, Laurens' journey to becoming a stalwart patriot is a testament to the transformative power of principled conviction.

Laurens' early life was steeped in privilege. His father, Henry Laurens, was a successful merchant and slave owner who would later serve as the president of the Continental Congress. Despite his affluent upbringing, though, John was not immune to the currents of change sweeping through the Colonies. He was sent to England for his education, and it was there, amid the intellectual ferment of the Enlightenment, that he began to question the moral foundations of slavery.

Upon returning to America in 1776, Laurens' convictions crystallized into action. He joined the Continental Army, eager to fight for the cause of American independence. His bravery and leadership quickly earned him a position on George Washington's staff — a cadre Washington called his "military family" — where he served with distinction. Laurens was more than just a soldier; he was a visionary, advocating for the emancipation of slaves and their enlistment in the Continental Army.

The official [Mount Vernon website](#) includes the following account of Laurens' heroism and foresight regarding slavery and republican government:

Laurens developed close relationships with the other members of Washington's military inner circle, including Alexander Hamilton and the Marquis de Lafayette. Laurens was an idealist who believed that the republican principles the Americans were fighting for were hypocritical if they continued to utilize slave labor. Strongly influenced by the growing abolitionist literature that circulated in England while he was studying, Laurens encouraged those around him, including Washington, to consider freeing their enslaved workers. The responses that Laurens received were mixed. Some, such as the Marquis de Lafayette, eventually came to the same conclusion.

Laurens' commitment to ending slavery was not mere rhetoric. He repeatedly petitioned the



Charles Willson Peale/Wikipedia  
John Laurens



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South Carolina legislature to emancipate slaves who volunteered for military service, arguing that it was hypocritical to fight for liberty while denying it to an entire class of people. Although his proposals were ultimately rejected, Laurens' advocacy marked him as a man ahead of his time, a beacon of enlightenment in an era clouded by the stain of slavery.

Laurens' military career was as distinguished as his moral compass was unwavering. He fought valiantly in the battles of Brandywine, Germantown, and Monmouth, earning the respect and admiration of his peers. His valor was not confined to the battlefield; he also served as a diplomat, entrusted with sensitive missions to secure vital support for the Revolutionary cause.

Despite his noble efforts, Laurens' life was cut short in a skirmish in 1782, just as victory in the War of Independence was within grasp. He was 27 years old. His death was mourned by his fellow patriots, including George Washington, who recognized in Laurens a kindred spirit and a true champion of liberty.

The location of Laurens' death was a mystery until 2020. Here's the story [as related by Atlas Obscura](#):

Colonel John Laurens, a soldier and statesman from South Carolina, was killed in his home state on the banks of the Combahee River. The day he died, in August 1782, he was just 27 years old. At the time, British forces were close to defeat; they had lost badly at Yorktown the previous October. But while the ramparts of Yorktown were preserved—as were other Revolutionary War sites, such as the places where Alexander Hamilton and George Washington died—the location of Laurens's last battle was lost to time. His death is memorialized in the musical *Hamilton*, but its exact location is not.

That is, until now. After two years of research, surveys, and excavations, the South Carolina Battleground Preservation Trust says it has found precisely where the fighter and friend to American Founders was shot dead: in a riverside field strewn with 250-year-old ammunition and other detritus of war.

What a great discovery regarding a man who gave his life in defense of his country's independence.

The legacy of John Laurens is a complex tapestry of courage, conviction, and a relentless pursuit of justice. He stood tall against the prevailing winds of his time, challenging the institution of slavery and fighting for a vision of America that was truly free and equal. His life serves as a poignant reminder that the fight for liberty and justice is never easy, but is always noble.

In the annals of American history, John Laurens may not occupy the same exalted status as Washington or Jefferson, but his story is no less important. He was a patriot in the truest sense of the word, willing to lay down his life for the cause of freedom. His unwavering commitment to the principles of liberty and equality stands as a testament to the power of individual conviction and the enduring spirit of the American Revolution.

As we reflect on the legacy of John Laurens, we are reminded that the quest for justice and equality is an ongoing journey. His life challenges us to confront the contradictions of our own time and to strive, as he did, for a world that reflects our highest ideals. John Laurens of South Carolina was a man of action and principle, a patriot whose light shines brightly in the tapestry of American history, reminding us of the power of unwavering commitment to the cause of liberty and justice for all.



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