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Sabal palmetto Gets Stamp of Approval

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On Monday, May 23, 1988, The South Carolina General Assembly met in Charleston's historic old Exchange building. This special joint session of both legislative chambers was convened to commemorate the state's ratification of the U.S. Constitution exactly two hundred years earlier, May 23, 1788. By this action, South Carolina became the eighth of the original thirteen states to take such a move and by this act, formally entered the union. Perhaps more noteworthy to members of The Palm Society, were the events taking place on the same day a hundred odd miles upstate in Columbia, the State Capital. There, long lines had formed on this warm May morning at the city's main, downtown post office awaiting the 7:00 A.M. opening.

Philatelists, souvenir seekers and history buffs from many parts of the country joined Columbians and other interested South Carolinians to be among the first to purchase the new South Carolina Statehood Stamp (see Cover Photo). Later in the day, this stamp was formally dedicated in ceremonies at the State Capitol building by Eastern Regional Postmaster General, Johnny Thomas, and Governor Carroll Campbell.

Designed by artist, Bob Timberlake, the stamp depicts a palmetto, the state tree, on a sand dune with sea oats bent by ocean breezes in the foreground and tops of two other palmettos in the background. The state's name and date of statehood appear at the bottom. Thousands of the stamps were sold during that first day of issue in Columbia, and the following day 160 million went on sale in all parts of the country.

The *Sabal palmetto*, often referred also as "The Cabbage Palm," has long held a revered place in the hearts of South Carolinian's as well as a prominent place in its history and its pageantry. Nicknamed proudly as The Palmetto State, South Carolina has the *Sabal palmetto* on both its state flag and state seal. It also appeared on the state's 1976 license plate as one feature of the observance of the nation's Bicentennial. South Carolina's love affair with this palm began long ago. On June 28, 1776, the palmetto played a significant role in the first American military victory against the British. Coming, providentially, just a few days before the Declaration of Independence was signed in Philadelphia, the victory was an important morale builder to South Carolina as well as the 12 other American colonies as they prepared their long struggle against Britain. The Battle (Ripley 1983, Stokely 1985) took place in Charleston harbor where a small band of South Carolina militiamen under Colonel William Moultrie had constructed a small, crude fortification of sand and palmetto logs on Sullivan's Island across from Charleston, then the largest city in the colonies, south of Philadelphia.

The palmetto is native all along the immediate South Carolina coast, and thousands of these sturdy palms were cut on Sullivan's and other nearby sea islands to erect the fort that South Carolina military leaders planned as a key to the defense of its colonial capital against a large British naval and land force. In a fierce daylong battle of almost continual bombardment, the small force of South Carolina militia,

under the 46 year old Moultrie, acquitted themselves astoundingly well. Despite being short of cannon and low on gun powder most of the torrid June day, they kept their cool and concentrated their aim and ended the day by soundly defeating the large, well equipped attacking British Naval force. By nightfall, the British had had enough, and Admiral Sir Peter Parker ordered the remnants of his battered fleet out to the open sea to lick their wounds. The extent of the momentous and almost unbelievable victory accomplished by Moultrie and his men can be grasped by the casualty report. The British suffered some 200 dead and wounded, while the Americans counted only 12 dead and 25 wounded. However, five of the wounded died later. Parker, the British admiral, was among the casualties. He was wounded in both the thigh and knee and suffered the additional humiliation of literally having his britches shot off and his backside laid bare by a colonial broadside. Meanwhile, as could be expected, Moultrie and his gallant men of the 2nd South Carolina regiment were accorded instant hero status by the jubilant South Carolinians. Along with their cool under fire and pin-point accuracy of their marksmanship, two other factors aided them in pulling off their astonishing feat. Three of the British warships, while attempting a flanking action against the Americans, grounded on sandbars in treacherous Charleston harbor putting them effectively, for the Americans, out of commission. The second favorable factor for Moultrie and his men turned out to be the strength and elasticity of the little fort's palmetto logs. Not generally used in military or nonmilitary construction in that time, the palmetto logs held in place and surprisingly, the enemy's cannoballs buried into the soft, spongy wood without throwing off a shower of splinters as most other woods used in fortifications of that day had been found to do. According to

military historians, these splinter showers were a major source of casualties during artillery bombardment of wooded structures of that period. Honors rapidly piled up for the victorious American commander. The little fort originally named "Sullivan" was renamed "Moultrie" and Moultrie, himself, was hastily promoted to General.

The previous year, 1775, the South Carolina Revolutionary Council on Safety had asked Moultrie to design a flag to be used by South Carolina troupes. The Colonel chose a deep blue to match the color of their uniforms for the background. In the upper right hand corner, he placed a small white crescent to represent the silver crescent his militiamen wore on their caps. Now, he added a large white palmetto to the center of the flag, and there it remains.

Strangely, this revered palm was not officially designated as the "state tree" until by legislative proclamation in 1939. In 1953, Florida also made it its official state tree. The only other state to so honor a Palm is Hawaii. Its state tree is the Coconut Palm, *Cocos nucifera*.

In his memoirs, General Moultrie paid one more grand tribute to the *Sabal palmetto*. The British managed to refloat two of their man of wars grounded in Charleston harbor. The third could not be recovered, however, and was set afire to prevent capture by Moultrie's men. An exultant Moultrie described the resulting inferno as "a grand pillar of smoke, which soon expanded itself at the top, and in appearance, formed the figure of a Palmetto Tree."

LITERATURE CITED

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