WILLIAM HUNTER

BY

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William Hunter's death, which resulted from his duel with David Mitchell, gained national attention. Hunter was a successful Savannah merchant and politician. He held various political positions such as Navy Agent for the Port of Savannah and he was a Savannah Alderman. Militarily, Hunter was a commissioned officer in a local cavalry unit and he considered by his comrades to be an individual with the highest personal qualities.
The early morning light broke through the trees revealing a small gathering of men standing near several tombstones. Two men separated from the group and walked into a nearby clearing. Several gunshots followed which left one of the two men dead. So ended the life of William Hunter. Who was William Hunter? How did he live and what led to his violent death? These questions will be addressed through an examination of William Hunter's personal life, his business affairs and his political activities.

William Hunter was born in Letterkenny, Ireland, on October 8, 1767. His father, John Hunter, married three times and each bore him a son. William, Isabella and Lydia Elizabeth were the children from John Hunter's marriage to Miss Cunningham. His half-brothers were James and Alexander Hunter. Genealogical records differ concerning who was older, James or William. Joseph Bulloch, in *History and Genealogy of the Families of Bulloch, etc.*, lists William as the oldest brother. James, according to Bulloch, was not born until 1781. This information was compiled in 1892. A genealogical article written for the *Savannah Morning News* in 1931 states that James was the eldest and came to America first. He then returned to Ireland to bring William to America. Nevertheless, it is plausible to conclude that William was in America by 1781. Alexander joined his brothers in America at a later date.¹
An early mention of William Hunter in the Savannah area is from a grocery tab dated 1773. The document's contents show a William Hunter who owed money for items such as brown sugar and tobacco. Given the date of the document and William's birthdate it is unlikely that this is the same person.2

Where William spent his early years in America remains a mystery. He did spend an undetermined amount of time in Baltimore at some point in his life and may have even had relatives there. However, he was definitely in the Georgia by 1781 when he was commissioned First Lieutenant of the Troop of the Light Horse, a local militia unit which fought the British during the Revolutionary War.3 He was probably residing outside of the city since this date was during the British siege of the Savannah.

William Hunter owned a considerable amount of property outside of Chatham County. Some of this property was located in Washington County, Georgia. This is corroborated by a deed of sale for a negro slave that was sold by William Hunter to Mary Harris of Savannah in 1791. He was listed as a tax defaulter for Washington County in 1794.4 Hunter also owned a lot in the Town of Hardwick known as lot no. 76 and an 1100 acre piece of property called Cabbage Bluff, which was on the Turtle River in Glynn County. When he sold the property in Glynn County in 1801, he described
the land to be excellent for growing cotton. Hunter was listed among those Savannahians who were late in payment of taxes on property outside of Chatham County in 1795. The fact William kept slaves on his property in Washington County and his alleged utilization of Cabbage Bluff suggests he had large agricultural interests outside of Savannah. Perhaps Hunter’s earlier years were spent at these locations.

The first real glimpse of William Hunter’s personal life is the contract which pertained to his marriage. William married Margaret Glen, the daughter of John and Sarah Glen, on April 2, 1795. As part of the marriage agreement, which resembles a bride dowry, a negro slave named Phyllis was transferred to Margaret’s possession along with the slave’s two sons. The slave had been given to Margaret by Noble Jones at the time of his death but was placed in John Glen’s care until Margaret’s marriage. The agreement entailed William’s pledge to provide for the care of the slaves for the term of his natural life. William was also given five shillings from John Glen for the initial care of the slaves. William’s marriage to Margaret produced three children: William P., Catherine Jones and Wymerly.

William and Margaret’s first marital residence was located at Lot 1, Tything 1, Anson’s Ward. The current address on this property is 129 E. Broughton Street. In
1790 and 1791 he was listed in the *Georgia Gazette* among those late in payment of taxes on property within Chatham County. The lot in Anson’s Ward may have been the property to which the taxes addressed. The Hunters sold this property to William Belcher for five hundred dollars on August 4, 1798.⁸

Although Hunter was Irish by the location of his birth, it is reasonable to deduct that his religious affiliation was Anglican. This deduction is based on his family’s Scottish and English descent and that his son, William P. Hunter was an active member of Christ Episcopal Church.⁹

William Hunter’s life as a merchant formally began in November 1788, with the opening of Wm. Hunter and Company. The business was a store that handled imported goods from East India and Europe. It was located somewhere along the bay in a store that was formerly owned by Mr. Donald Rofs. Although Hunter may have accepted some forms of payment other than cash when his business opened, after September 23, 1789, he no longer accepted cut money by weight. Items would be sold for cash or produce.¹⁰ William operated this business until 1792, when he left Savannah for an undetermined period of time. Unfortunately, he only gave notice of his departure and did not mention his destination in the ad he placed in the *Georgia Gazette*.¹¹ However, he returned to Savannah by 1795, when he was married.
In the mid-1790s William entered into a business partnership with Mr. Presstman of Savannah. This association was known as Hunter, Presstman and Company and was similar in nature to Hunter’s first merchant venture. The business sold goods directly from ship landings through the company store. The items sold included coffee, sugar, Jamaican rum, Madeiran wine and logwood. During 1797 the business was moved to lot no. 5, east of Bull and the property became known as Hunter’s Wharf. This property actually belonged to William’s wife, Margaret. It was given to her by her parents for William to use for his business. The Hunter/Presstman partnership lasted until February, 1798 when it was dissolved. Hunter collected all debts for the former business. The reason(s) for the break up is(are) not known, however, it is possible that Hunter bought Presstman out of the venture or Presstman may have violated an agreement.

William kept his business going strong after the partnership was finished. During the latter half of the decade his company handled several ships that utilized the Savannah port regularly. These ships included the Swift Packet, Amity, the Danish ship Diamenter, the Sea Flower, Fanny, and Triton. He also owned shares of the schooner John and one quarter of the ship Ann. His company also
shipped freight and booked passages for travellers on
departing ships.13

Hunter was also an auctioneer. He held auctions
regularly between 1800 and his death in 1802. Hunter
auctioned off a variety of items including property and on
at least two occasions, slaves.14 However, it is not clear
if he auctioned items from the ships he handled, or if the
transactions were separate from his merchant business.
Another enterprise Hunter undertook was a factorage service.
This type of service handled business accounts for clients.
In July 1799, Hunter advertised it in the *Columbian Museum
and Savannah Advertiser.*15 From the ad it appears that he
mainly handled the accounts of planters. This would
definitely substantiate his ties to his property in middle
and south Georgia and it suggests that Hunter was heavily
involved in shipping for planters as well as importing goods
and perhaps slaves.

In December 1798, William entered into a partnership
with Isaac Minis. Under this agreement, Minis located his
store in front of Hunter's Wharf and sold groceries and ship
chandlery items. Hunter marketed his imports through the
Minis store. This partnership, however, lasted less than
one and one-half years. The reasons for the ending of this
business are not known but perhaps the two had a
disagreement over the operation of the company. After it
was dissolved William's brother, James, entered into a similar partnership with Minis. However, this arrangement was defunct by the Spring of 1802. In July of that year William entered into one last business partnership, this time with his brother, James. This company was known as Wm. and James Hunter. William was killed seven weeks later.

William's merchant business was only one aspect of his life in Savannah. He was also a highly active and well respected member of Savannah's political community. He held a number of positions in local government and was a commissioned officer in a local military unit.

The first of these accomplishments came in 1781 when William Hunter was commissioned First Lieutenant in the Troop of the Light Horse. The unit had participated in the Battle of Bloody Marsh and had fought in the Revolutionary War. The unit was later known as the Georgia Hussars. The absence of his name among the rosters of Revolutionary War veterans suggests that William saw little if no combat with the unit. He would maintain his commission in the unit until his death in 1802.

The majority of William's political activity occurred between 1795 and 1802. In 1795 he served as a commissioner of a local lottery and on the April term of the Grand Jury. In 1796 William was appointed fire warden for the western district of Savannah by the City Council. This
appointment was in response to a fire that had destroyed much property in Savannah. Incidentally, some of Hunter’s personal property was damaged in the fire.19

In July 1798, William Hunter was elected alderman of Darby Ward to the Ninth Administration of the City of Savannah. During his tenure as alderman, he was appointed to a committee to research and present a plan for the location and construction of an Exchange for the city. The committee made their report which consisted of how many shares the City Council was to invest in the building. The shareholders for the Exchange met on March 16, 1799 and elected their first trustees, which included William Hunter.20 Taking depositions was among Hunter’s duties as alderman. Although the aldermen were originally elected for a one year term, William only served nine months of his. He resigned at the beginning of March 1799, and left no record for the reason of his resignation.21 Notably, Hunter’s election to trustee for the Exchange came only weeks after quitting his post as alderman. It is possible that he may have been faced with a conflict of interests between his office as alderman and the Exchange project or one of his other activities. Although William Hunter resigned his position as alderman, his political life was far from over. Hunter was appointed by City Council to determine the value of certain pieces of property in May
1799, and to superintend the alderman elections for Reynolds Ward for the years 1800-1802. 22

Another prestigious position which Hunter held was Navy Agent for the Port of Savannah. He was officially appointed to this position on June 1, 1801. Among his duties as Navy Agent, William was directed by the Secretary of the Navy to sell the Saint Mary's Galley (a warship) at a local auction. 23

Also during his tenure, Hunter joined forces with Robert Bolton to represent Georgia and South Carolina spoilage claims against the French government. These claims rose from incidents where American property had been seized during the "Quasi War" with France during the late 1790s. For reasons unknown, Hunter resigned from the office during the Spring, 1802. 24

William continued his political career until his death. In 1802 he served as a commissioner on the Board of Commissioners of Pilotage. In July 1802, Hunter was elected to the Directorate of the Office of Discount and Deposit for the city. He also served on the Grand Jury for the January term of 1802. 25 Politically, Hunter was at one point a Federalist. His political ideals may have been what put him into conflict with another Savannah politician, David B. Mitchell. 26 Although one can only speculate at the real
reasons of the Hunter/Mitchell antagonism, the conflict was strong enough to lead the two into a mortal struggle.

The bitterness between Hunter and Mitchell may never have led to a duel. However, in July 1802, Hunter had the occasion to be jury foreman in a case in which Mitchell was counsel. William made a statement to the court during the case that criticized Mitchell's handling of a witness. Several weeks after the case the two men met, probably by accident, on the bay. Mitchell asked Hunter to retract the statement he had made to the court. Hunter refused. Mitchell then attacked Hunter by striking him with a cane. Hunter withdrew momentarily in an attempt to locate an object with which to defend himself but found none. Hunter then reapproached Mitchell and challenged him to set aside his cane and fight "on equal footing." Mitchell responded by striking Hunter again with his cane, this time in the head. Before the altercation could progress any further, a crowd of bystanders separated the two opponents. Hunter, who was probably enraged as well as embarrassed, immediately challenged Mitchell to a duel. They agreed to a period of three days to settle their affairs before the duel. During this time William wrote his final will. The duel date was set for August 19, 1802.27

The duel was originally supposed to occur on the Carolina shore across the Savannah River. However, both
parties agreed instead to meet at the Jewish cemetery, which was then located outside of the city limits. This decision was made in order to keep the number of spectators to a minimum. Both men, armed with pistols, faced each other at a distance of ten paces or about thirty feet. Hunter and Mitchell exchanged shots. Although Hunter’s bullet struck Mitchell in the chest, it neither penetrated or incapacitated Mitchell. Mitchell’s bullet missed Hunter completely. According to agreement the men moved forward two paces each, which would place them about eighteen feet apart. The opponents again exchanged shots, this time decisively. Mitchell was struck by Hunter’s bullet a second time but the bullet glanced off of his hip. Mitchell’s shot, however, hit Hunter in the chest. William was killed instantly.28

William Hunter was buried with honor on August 20, 1802. His funeral was attended by the local military units and a large gathering of mourning admirers. It is highly probable that William was buried in the Colonial Cemetery where his brother James had placed a family vault. Unfortunately a grave marker bearing his name was not located there or in any of the other local cemeteries. William’s character was described by his comrades from the Light Horse as virtuous and honorable. His dearest friends
included Ebenezer Jackson, George Jones and his brother, James Hunter.  

William left most of his estate to his wife, Margaret, except for an allotment that he set aside for his two sisters. The appraisal of his personal possessions, of which many were auctioned off during the Spring of 1803, was $1982.50.  

It appears that William Hunter was successful in every known aspect of his life. Unfortunately, there are many specifics about his existence that may never be known. One of these is the order of birth in his family. Perhaps an examination of any existing records at his birthplace in Ireland is the only way to determine this information. Another part of his life that remains in question is the exact location of his residence, both in his childhood years and through much of his adulthood. A thorough examination of the property deeds at the Chatham County courthouse only revealed the Broughton street address, a Washington County residence and gave no indication of the location of his business before it was moved to Wharf lot 5, east of Bull.  

Politically, Hunter would have probably continued to gain prominence in Savannah's governmental community and perhaps beyond that if he had won the duel. It is unclear if it was actually a conflict of ideals that led to the hostility between the two. Unfortunately, there are few
records that address this. If William had survived it is very probable that he would have become one of the great figures surrounding Georgia history.
EPILOGUE

After two months of intense research, I feel the information presented about William Hunter is still inadequate. Unfortunately, I did not believe that Hunter was the same man who resided in Washington County for the majority of the time alloted for this project. It was only when I compared the locations of Baldwin County, where Hardwick is located, and Washington County that I was convinced that the Hunter listed of Washington County was the same person addressed in this project. Any records of deeds that may be located in those two counties still need to be consulted. There are also the records to which the Index to Georgia Colonial Conveyances and Confiscated Land Records and the Index to Georgia Tax Digests refer to in Atlanta. These records would need to be retrieved to further place together Hunter's life. However, I truly hope this work has provided the reader with a useful reconstruction of William Hunter and that if this project is ever continued this work will assist the researcher by providing a sound beginning.
ENDNOTES


2 Telfair Family Papers, Coll.# 793, Box 1, Folder 5, located at the Georgia Historical Society (hereafter GHS).

3 Roll of Officers and Members of the Georgia Hussars, (Savannah, Ga.: Savannah News Press), pg. 50; Columbian Museum and Savannah Advertiser (hereafter Col. Mus.), 9 July 1799, p. 2, c. 1, on microfilm at GHS, in this article Hunter mentions that he had resided in Baltimore but does not give the date.

4 Deed of sale of a negro slave from William Hunter to Mary Harris, Deedbook 1-K, pg. 139, Chatham County Courthouse; Marie DeLamar and Elisabeth Rothstein, Records of Washington County, Georgia, (Baltimore, Md.: Genealogical Publishing Co., Inc., 1985), pg. 132.

5 Col. Mus., 28 January 1803, p. 2, c. 2, in this ad Hunter lists the Hardwick property for sale; ibid., 14 April 1801, p. 3, c. 2, Hunter advertises his Glynn County property for sale; ibid., 27 February 1798, p. 2, c. 2, Hunter listed as owing taxes.


7 Deed of property transfer, Deedbook R-1, pg. 509, Chatham County Courthouse; Bulloch, Families of Bulloch, pp. 155-158.

8 Deed of property sale, Lot 1, Tything 1, Anson's Ward from William Hunter to William Belcher, Deedbook T-1, pg. 46, Chatham County Courthouse; Ward Files, "Anson's Ward," Chatham County Courthouse; Georgia Gazette (hereafter Ga. G.), 26 August 1790, p. 1, c. 1; ibid., 1 March 1792, p. 3, c. 2.

9 Roger Warlick, As Grain Once Scattered: The History of Christ Church, Savannah, Ga., 1733-1983, (Columbia: The State Printing Company, 1987); SMN, 1 November 1931; Hunter
genealogy file, located at GHS; Bulloch, *Families of Bulloch*, pp. 155-158.


11 Ibid., 3 May 1792, p. 2, c. 1.

12 *Wharf Lots East*, Ward Book, (Savannah, Ga.: Georgia Historical Society); *Col. Mus.*, 3 November 1797, p. 2, c. 4; ibid., 27 February 1798 p. 3, c. 3.


14 *Col. Mus.*, 11 August 1801, p. 3, c. 5; ibid., 1 June 1802, p. 2, c. 2.

15 Ibid., 9 July 1799, p. 1, c. 5.


17 *Roll of Georgia Hussars*, pg. 50, lists William Hunter as First Lt. from February 1781 to August 19, 1802; Gordon Smith comp., *Coastal Military Units*, (Savannah, Ga.: Georgia Historical Society), s.v. "Georgia Hussars."

18 *Ga. G.*, 16 July 1795, p. 4, c. 3, Hunter listed as a lottery commissioner; ibid., 7 May 1795, p. 1, c. 3, Hunter listed as Grand Juror for April term.

19 *Col. Mus.*, 16 December 1796, p. 3, c. 2, Hunter listed among those appointed fire warden; ibid., 6 December 1796, p. 3, c. 3, Hunter placed ad requesting return of several items that were taken after being salvaged from fire.

20 Ibid., 6 July 1798, p. 3, c. 4, announcement of Hunter's election to alderman of Darby Ward; ibid., 29 March 1799, p.


27. SMN, 26 October 1931, pg. 10; William Hunter, Last Will and Testament, (1802), Probate Court, Chatham County Courthouse.

28. SMN, 26 October 1931, pg. 10; Gamble, Duels and Duellists, pp. 111-113.
29 Ibid.: Col. Mus., 6 July 1803, p. 3, c. 3; Hunter, Last Will.

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