



Willing's Raid: The Only Significant Revolutionary War Altercation in West Florida

Mike Bunn, October 9, 2020
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Willing's Marine Raid in 1778, by Charles H. Waterhouse | USMCU

Owing to the fact that the largest and best-remembered battlefields of the Revolutionary War lie in the states of the Eastern Seaboard, it is sometimes easy to forget that the war impacted a much wider region of North America. A little-known raid by American forces along the Mississippi River in the spring of 1778 represents the war's arrival in the lower Mississippi Valley and forms a unique interlude in Gulf South history. At the time, the lower stretches of the mighty river formed the dividing line between the British colony of West Florida and the tacitly pro-American Spanish colony of Louisiana.

As early as the summer of 1777, proposals for an attack on British interests along the Mississippi River and possibly even the capture of the port towns of Mobile and Pensacola had been bandied about by American political and military leaders. Several influential people had advocated the opening of a southwestern theater of the war as a first step toward clearing the Mississippi River for potentially lucrative trade with the crucial port of New Orleans and its pro-American Spanish leadership. In September of 1777, as the Continental Congress temporarily met in York, Pennsylvania, in the wake of the occupation of the erstwhile United States capital of Philadelphia by the British army, a man named James Willing brought a scheme to the attention of officials for their consideration. He proposed a raid on West Florida via the Mississippi to obtain the neutrality of the region and secure a vital line of supply with New Orleans. Willing had the credibility that came with having previously lived in Natchez for a brief time and purportedly knew the lay of the land and the sentiments of the people in the region. In truth he had been a rather unsuccessful businessman during a short stay near Natchez, and had recently returned to his home in Philadelphia deeply in debt.

A congressional committee on commerce nonetheless approved his request on November 21, 1777, and commissioned him a naval captain for the undertaking. Ostensibly, he and a small force of a few dozen subordinates would travel down the Mississippi to deliver dispatches to Spanish authorities and take delivery of supplies stockpiled for Americans in New Orleans. What all exactly Willing's plan entailed and how much knowledge members of the Congress had of the details of his scheme remains unclear to this day.



William Dunbar, whose plantation was raided by Willing. Dunbar declared despondently of Willing's marauders that "all was fish that came into their net." | LOC

Willing and his men departed Fort Pitt on January 10, 1778, in the inauspiciously named *Rattletrap*. First stepping ashore in West Florida at Walnut Hills (modern-day Vicksburg), Willing's men surprised a small British guard and opened their campaign by plundering a nearby trader's house. They continued downriver toward Natchez, pulling up to the city on February 19, 1778. There Willing startled the residents of the small and virtually defenseless town, dramatically raising the American flag and demanding the surprised locals pledge their neutrality in the war. In return for not involving themselves in America's war for independence, Willing promised that their "persons, slaves, and other property of whatever description shall be left secure and without the least molestation."

In the days that followed, though, Willing orchestrated what can only be termed a mission of unvarnished plunder. He and his band burned plantations and stores of goods, destroyed indigo processing facilities and other agricultural machinery, stole slaves and a variety of personal property, and killed livestock as they moved. From the selective way these raids were carried out in the Natchez area, it appears Willing might have been taking revenge on former enemies from his days as a resident of the region as much as doing anything to advance the American war effort. Willing's small force grew as it advanced southward, as several opportunistic volunteers added to its numbers. He managed to wreak havoc out of all proportion to the number of raiders actually involved, and instill terror in West Florida's citizenry and government.



West Florida in 1767 | LOC

Though caught completely off guard, the British scrambled to meet the threat as best they could. Officials at the colonial capital in Pensacola organized a small infantry force of perhaps two dozen men to intercept the intruders and put a halt to their progress. They pounced on a handful of unsuspecting Americans lounging about a small fortification at Manchac on March 14. In the only engagement on land between British and American forces during the Revolution in what would become the state of Louisiana, British forces killed at least one American and wounded a number of others while taking over a dozen prisoner. The attackers suffered a single casualty themselves.

The majority of Willing's men reached New Orleans by mid-April of 1778. Gov. Bernardo de Galvez, claiming neutrality in the war between Great Britain its colonies then in rebellion, allowed them safe quarter in the town even as he simultaneously granted entry to a few of the displaced refugees from their raid. With no plans on what to do next or how to safely return, though, it was not until August that the majority of Willing's men left town. Willing himself finally left town on November 15, 1778, on a private boat to attempt the perilous journey home. He was a wanted man, and the British on a doggedly pursued him. They nabbed him off the East Coast and clapped the in irons. He would remain a prisoner for two years before being released in a prisoner exchange. With his capture ended the only significant altercation between American and British forces in West Florida to take place during the Revolutionary War.

Adapted from Mike Bunn's forthcoming book, *Fourteenth Colony: The Forgotten Story of the Gulf South During America's Revolutionary Era*



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