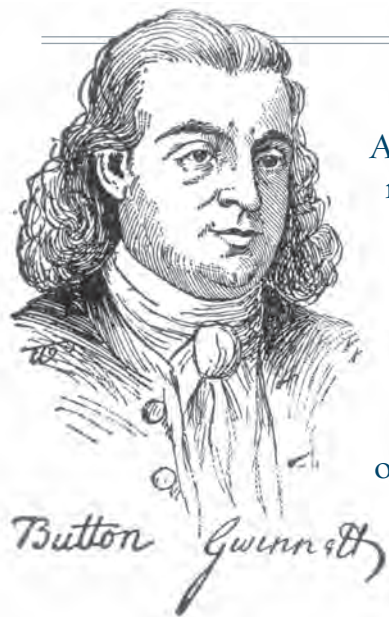


The background of the page is a solid blue color. In the center, there is a faint, light-colored map of the United States. Overlaid on the map are two antique-style pistols, one on the left and one on the right, crossed at their barrels. The pistols have ornate designs on their frames and are pointed towards the center of the map.

The Curious Case of Button Gwinnett

The quest to make political and military history drove one passionate Patriot—whose story doesn't end at his death.

By Jackie Ross



A rare and highly coveted Button recently sold for \$722,500. No, it's not a shirt fastener that fetched the large sum at a 2010 Sotheby's auction, but rather Button Gwinnett's signature on a letter dated July 12, 1776. The signature, which also appears on the left column of the Declaration of Independence, is one of only 51 known to exist from the relatively short but intriguing life of one American Patriot.

Gwinnett lived to only age 42, but his biography is far from brief, including tales of several troubled business ventures, involvement with one of America's most important historical documents, a series of controversial military acts, and a fatal duel in a Georgia pasture. Two centuries after his death, bones believed to be Gwinnett's instigated a series of lawsuits, multiple forensic investigations and a feud over a monument and Gwinnett's final resting place.

This was no ordinary Button.

Born in Gloucestershire, England, around 1735, the farmer and lumberman turned political activist was described as commanding in appearance, irritable in temper, and vain and overbearing in demeanor. Gwinnett's first name came from his mother's cousin, Barbara Button, who became his godmother. Gwinnett County, a major suburban area outside Atlanta, is named for him. Along with his famed signature, it's one of only a few remaining relics from Gwinnett's life.

Path to Philadelphia

Gwinnett first worked as a merchant in Bristol, England, exporting

goods to America and struggling to make ends meet. Sinking into debt and seeking a better life, Gwinnett and his family sailed to America in 1765, landing first in Charleston, S.C., and then in Savannah, Ga., where Gwinnett acquired a 36-square-mile island off the coast of Georgia called St. Catherine's.

Originally an ardent Whig, Gwinnett's foray into politics began in 1767 when he was appointed Savannah's justice of the peace. A year later, he became a member of the Georgia Colonial Assembly, but he remained relatively inactive in subsequent years, likely the result of financial and personal woes. During this time, three of his four daughters died young, and his farming business waned.

Gwinnett continued to struggle in business and farming, but new friendships and a passion for the future of the Colonies paved the way for a career in politics. It is believed that one such friendship, with New England physician Lyman Hall (who later migrated to Georgia), stoked Gwinnett's political fire and ultimately inspired him to join the Revolution. Initially, Gwinnett had strong doubts about the Colonies' ability to resist the mighty power

of the United Kingdom, but Hall allegedly convinced him to become a supporter of their independence.

In pursuit of the cause, and fueled by his personal desire for military leadership, Gwinnett united a coalition that elected him commander of Georgia's Continental battalion in 1776. He stepped aside shortly thereafter, accepting appointment to the Continental Congress—a move that led to a far more lasting legacy. Later that year, Gwinnett was sent to Philadelphia, where he and his friend Hall supported and signed the Declaration of Independence. While Gwinnett was not known to be an active participant in the debates, John Adams is quoted as saying, "Hall and Gwinnett are both intelligent and spirited men, who made a powerful addition to our Phalanx."

Fighting Words

His significant historical achievement in Philadelphia did not dissuade Gwinnett from his military aspirations. Upon returning to Savannah, he attempted to regain leadership of the Georgia militia. To his chagrin, he lost the appointment to a young general and longtime rival, Lachlan McIntosh.

Gwinnett was loathe to admit defeat, and the two men continued their bitter rivalry. In 1777, the first president, or governor, of the state of Georgia died suddenly, and Gwinnett was appointed by the assembly to succeed him as president and commander in chief of the army. In the interest of securing Georgia's southern border, Gwinnett led a controversial attempt to invade Florida. Among the opponents were McIntosh and his brother, who actively thwarted Gwinnett's attempt.

Fed up with his nemesis, Gwinnett had McIntosh's brother arrested for treason and relieved McIntosh of his command on the grounds that he,



**On May 16, 1777,
Gwinnett and
McIntosh met in a
pasture a few miles
east of Savannah.
With 12 feet between
them, both fired their
pistols—and both
took a hit.**

Seeking further confirmation, the femur was sent to archaeologist Marshall T. Newman at the Smithsonian Institution, whose report stated, “Neither the surface appearance of this crushed area, nor the X-rays ... show any indication of trauma during life” and instead were damaged after burial. Further, Newman found that the femur likely belonged to an adult woman rather than a man—someone of a much smaller stature than Gwinnett. “In summation,” the report states, “it is highly unlikely, if not fully impossible, for this bone to be that of Button Gwinnett.”

Outraged, Funk and his supporters demanded a second opinion. The issue reached the Savannah-Chatham County Historic Site and Monument Commission, an official arm of the city government, which ultimately issued a 34-page report stating that the femur could, in fact, be Gwinnett’s, as he may have been far shorter than previously documented. While the report did not confirm the identity of the bones, it raised sufficient questions regarding the accuracy of Newman’s findings in the minds of Funk and others.

The controversy grew even more heated in the 1960s when the city

of Augusta—home to the graves of Georgia’s other signers of the Declaration, Lyman Hall and George Walton—claimed that Gwinnett’s bones should be moved there to join his peers. Years of bickering ensued, during which time Funk won a seat in the state legislature—some say to ensure Gwinnett’s remains would stay in Savannah and that a monument would be built. Funk successfully secured a \$5,000 public appropriation for a monument in Savannah honoring Gwinnett, ending Augusta’s attempt to commandeer the Patriot’s remains.

It’s been argued that Funk had an unhealthy preoccupation with Gwinnett, which is supported by the fact that Funk actually housed Gwinnett’s bones in his home for more than five years during the controversy. In the interest of protecting the remains, Funk said, he placed them in a new, copper-lined oak coffin in his guest room. “It was talked about as a hush-hush thing,” Funk told historians. “People said, ‘He’s got the bones in his garage, and he won’t let anybody see them.’ That was ridiculous. They were in the guest room, and nobody ever asked to see them.”

The bones were returned to Colonial Cemetery, where they rest today, along with a monument installed in 1964. Gwinnett is also memorialized by the Signers Monument, a granite obelisk in front of the courthouse in Augusta that also honors Hall and Walton.

Even in death, Gwinnett keeps good company. His signature is said to be valued as highly as those of Julius Caesar and William Shakespeare—fitting for a man who embodied such historic significance and poetic defeat. 🍷

Jackie Ross, originally from Atlanta, is a freelance writer in San Francisco.

too, must be a traitor by association. A furious McIntosh called Gwinnett “a scoundrel and a lying rascal,” which proved to be fighting words. In retaliation, Gwinnett challenged McIntosh to a duel.

On May 16, 1777, Gwinnett and McIntosh met in a pasture a few miles east of Savannah. With 12 feet between them, both fired their pistols—and both took a hit. Gwinnett, wounded in the left thigh, died of a gangrenous infection three days later.

Aside from his famed signature, Gwinnett left little behind. He has no known descendants, as his one surviving daughter died in 1786 with no children. The Gwinnett History Museum holds no original artifacts, and the Georgia Historical Society in Savannah has a limited array of Gwinnett memorabilia, including the pistols used in the fatal duel. Although the DAR Americana Collection has a rare copy of his signature (see story on page 18), Gwinnett’s likeness is missing from a mural titled “The Declaration of Independence,” depicting 26 signers of the document. Even the exact location of Gwinnett’s remains is uncertain.

No Bones About It

Over the years, professional and amateur historians have attempted to recover more information about the Patriot, including the location of his remains. In 1957, *American Heritage* magazine detailed the quest of retired school principal Arthur J. Funk, who traced Gwinnett’s grave to Colonial Cemetery in Savannah. Determined to prove the authenticity of the remains, Funk requested that the Georgia Historical Commission excavate the bones and verify their identity. A damaged femur—the spot where Gwinnett was shot in the duel—was the most promising evidence to support the theory that this was, in fact, the famed Patriot.