



James Edward Oglethorpe (1696-1785)

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As visionary, social reformer, and military leader, James Oglethorpe conceived of and implemented his plan to establish the colony of Georgia in 1732. Later that year he led the colonists that landed in Savannah early in 1733. Oglethorpe spent most of the next decade in Georgia, where he directed the economic and political development of the new colony, defended it militarily, and continued to generate support and recruit settlers in England and other parts of Europe.

Oglethorpe was born on December 22, 1696, in London, England; the tenth and last child of Eleanor and Theophilus Oglethorpe. Though frequently in London, the Oglethorpes maintained the large family estate of Westbrook Manor in Godalming, a small Surrey town near London. Both Theophilus and Eleanor had long been interested in politics, and in 1698 voters of Haslemere elected Theophilus to the House of Commons. All three of his sons—including Oglethorpe—would later hold this seat. Little is known about Oglethorpe’s boyhood, but in 1714 he was admitted to Corpus Christi College at Oxford University.

Europe’s defense against the advancing Turks led him to drop out of school to enroll in a military academy in France. He subsequently traveled to Austria, where he became an aide to Prince Eugene of Savoy. After a victorious campaign against the Turks, Oglethorpe returned to England, where he reentered Corpus Christi. Although he never graduated, the college did award him a special M.A. in 1731. In 1722 he successfully ran for Parliament, occupying a seat in the House of Commons previously held by his father and two older brothers. Here Oglethorpe devoted his energies to Britain’s national and international interests.

Prison Reform

In 1728 one of Oglethorpe’s friends, Robert Castell, was jailed in London’s Fleet Prison because of his debts. At the time, inmates were forced to pay for decent room and board. Unable to pay, Castell was thrown into a cell with a prisoner who had smallpox. Castell’s death from the disease led Oglethorpe to launch a national campaign to reform England’s prisons. Named chairman of a parliamentary committee to investigate the jails, Oglethorpe saw firsthand the horrible conditions, abuses, and extortion prisoners faced.

Oglethorpe’s efforts to expose and correct prison abuses gained him national attention. Prison reform did not solve the larger plight of the great numbers of poor people in England. Oglethorpe and several colleagues, notably John Lord Viscount Percival (later the first earl of Egmont), began exploring the possibility of creating a new colony in America. They believed that England’s “worthy poor” could be transformed into farmers, merchants, and artisans. All the settlers would work their own land, with slavery and large landholdings specifically prohibited.

Georgia’s Founding

Although charity was the initial motivation for the Georgia movement, by 1732 military and economic considerations were the principal factors. King George II in 1732 granted a charter for creating Georgia and named Oglethorpe as one of a Board of Trustees to govern the new colony.

The Trustees looked for carpenters, tailors, bakers, farmers, merchants, and others with the skills necessary for the colony's success. By this time any ideas of Georgia's being a haven for debtors in English prisons had long vanished—**and not one formerly jailed debtor was among the colonists selected.**

In November 1732 a total of 114 men, women, and children gathered at Gravesend on the River Thames to set sail for the new colony of Georgia. Oglethorpe understood that Georgia's charter prohibited him from holding office, owning land, or receiving a salary in the new colony, yet he gave up the comforts of home to accompany the first boatload of Georgia settlers.

They boarded the *Anne* for a two-month journey across the Atlantic. Following a brief visit in Charleston, the colonists proceeded to Port Royal, South Carolina. While they rested, Oglethorpe and a band of Carolina Rangers went ahead to look for a place to settle. Some seventeen miles inland from the mouth of the Savannah River, they found Yamacraw Bluff. Oglethorpe immediately struck up a friendship with the Yamacraw chief, Tomochichi, beginning a long relationship between the two.

On February 12, 1733, Oglethorpe returned to Yamacraw Bluff with the Georgia colonists. Oglethorpe laid out a plan for the new town of Savannah. His distinctive pattern of streets, ten-house "tythings," and public squares soon became a reality. Identical clapboard houses built on identical lots, plus restrictions on how much land could be owned and an outright prohibition on slavery, were testimony to the Trustees' desire to produce a classless society—one in which each head of household worked his own land. The desire to have a worker (and armed defender) on each lot of land, however, led to one of Trustees' most unpopular policies—limiting land ownership to adult males.

Leadership in the New Colony

Living up to the motto of Georgia's Trustees—*Non sibi sed aliis*, "Not for self, but for others"—Oglethorpe worked tirelessly on behalf of the colony during the initial months. Sometimes violating Trustee policy, Oglethorpe permitted Jews, Lutheran Salzburgers, and other persecuted religious minorities to settle in Georgia. Oglethorpe never wavered in opposing slavery in Georgia. With Georgia's Indians, he had an enlightened policy, respecting their customs, language, and needs. Land cessions were agreed to by treaty according to proper Indian custom. Also, Oglethorpe actively sought to protect the Indians from unscrupulous white traders.

Oglethorpe had come to Georgia with no formal title other than Trustee. However Oglethorpe was clearly the leader of the colony, subject to instructions and rules promulgated by the Trustees back in London. In recognition of his role, he is almost universally regarded as Georgia's first governor.

Despite its charitable origins, Georgia was also a military buffer designed to protect Britain's southern colonies. As the Spanish military presence in St. Augustine, Florida, grew, Oglethorpe's dream that Georgia would become an ideal agrarian society began to fade. The threat of invasion heightened, and Oglethorpe focused his efforts on the defense of Georgia. Oglethorpe had mortgaged his landholdings back in England to finance the colony's needs. Although he hoped that Parliament would repay his rising debts, he realized that he could lose everything.

Military Leadership

Oglethorpe returned to London on several times to lobby the Trustees and Parliament for funding to build forts in Georgia. In 1737 Oglethorpe convinced King George II to appoint him as a colonel and give him a regiment of British soldiers to take back to Georgia. Oglethorpe was a civilian at this time, with only limited military experience (primarily as an aide to Prince Eugene).

Nevertheless, he got what he wanted: rank in the regular army and a regiment. Oglethorpe also was given the title of “General and Commander in Chief of all and singular his Majesty’s provinces of Carolina and Georgia.” This has led to confusion as to whether Oglethorpe was a colonel or a general. In terms of military rank in the British army, he was a colonel. During the pending hostilities with Spain, however, Oglethorpe also held a brevet (or temporary) field commission as general in order to command all allied forces (Carolina Rangers, Indian allies, etc.). Only in September 1743, however, was Oglethorpe actually promoted to the rank of brigadier general in the British army. After the War of Jenkins’ Ear erupted in 1739, Oglethorpe took the initiative. In 1740 he assembled an invasion force consisting of his regiment, Indian allies, Carolina Rangers, and several ships in the Royal Navy. His goal was the Spanish fortress at St. Augustine. The siege failed and the allied force fell apart, forcing a dejected Oglethorpe back to St. Simons Island to await the Spanish counterattack.

The Spanish invasion of Georgia came in July 1742. Spanish ships landed on the south end of St. Simons Island. At Fort Frederica, Oglethorpe rallied his forces. In a critical skirmish known as the Battle of Gully Hole Creek, Oglethorpe’s forces turned back a Spanish advance force. As they pursued the retreating Spaniards down the trail, Oglethorpe halted his force at the edge of a marsh. Here he positioned his men to await the main Spanish army. Oglethorpe then took leave to return to Fort Frederica. Meanwhile, Spanish troops arrived but were turned back after a brief but fierce fight. Ironically, Oglethorpe arrived back just after the conclusion of what would become known as the Battle of Bloody Marsh. This loss helped persuade Spanish commanders to withdraw from St. Simons Island. Never again would Spanish forces mount an offensive against Britain’s colonies on the East Coast of America. Oglethorpe was a national hero in England, and King George II promoted him to brigadier general in His Majesty’s Army.

Return to England

In 1743 Oglethorpe led one more unsuccessful attempt to take St. Augustine. Afterwards Oglethorpe received word that he had to return to London. An unhappy officer in his regiment had made some serious allegations against Oglethorpe, and the War Office in London wanted answers to the charges. Also, Oglethorpe needed Parliament to repay him for his loans on Georgia’s behalf.

In 1744 Oglethorpe was discharged of all allegations. Later Parliament voted to reimburse Oglethorpe—both his honor and fortune had been preserved. In London the popular hero met Elizabeth Wright, a heiress. They married in September 1744 and settled at Cranham Hall, her inherited estate in the small Essex town of Cranham, seventeen miles east of London.

Much of their social life was spent in London, where Oglethorpe became friends with Samuel Johnson, James Boswell, Oliver Goldsmith, and other well-known people of the time. In 1745 Oglethorpe resumed his military career during the Jacobite Rebellion. There was controversy about his strategy in the campaign; and again was subjected to a court martial. Once again, he was totally exonerated.

Oglethorpe continued to serve on the Board of Trustees of Georgia. Despite his opposition, the Trustees gradually relaxed their restrictions on land ownership, inheritance, rum, and slavery. As a result, the general's attendance declined. By 1750 Georgia's founder was no longer involved with the board at all. The grand experiment was over, and the few remaining Trustees voted to return their charter to the king, making Georgia a royal colony. Oglethorpe remained in Parliament until 1754. He became the senior general in the British army, but never served on active duty (though a popular legend claims during the American Revolution, Oglethorpe was asked to command a British force—an offer he declined). The general did have one final experience on the field of battle. In the 1750s he left England quietly to fight in Europe during the Seven Years' War. Because of political implications of a British general's involvement in a war against France, Oglethorpe served under fictitious names.

Later Life

Oglethorpe returned to England in 1760 to live the life of a gentleman. He and Elizabeth divided their time between their country estate and their London town house. Though they never had children, by all accounts James and Elizabeth enjoyed an active social life entertaining friends and literary and artistic figures.

After a brief illness Oglethorpe died on June 30, 1785—just six months shy of his eighty-ninth birthday. He was buried in a vault beneath the chancel floor of the Parish Church of All Saints, which stands immediately adjacent to Cranham Hall. Upon her death two years later, Elizabeth was interred in the same tomb.

Georgians still remember James Edward Oglethorpe in many ways. His name adorns a county, two cities, a university, and numerous schools, streets, parks, and businesses. In paying tribute to Oglethorpe, however, Georgians can perhaps best honor his memory by remembering him as a man who wouldn't quit and who lived by the simple but profound philosophy that life is not about self, but about others.

Suggested Reading

Rodney M. Baine, ed., *The Publications of James Edward Oglethorpe* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994).

Harvey H. Jackson and Phinzy Spalding, eds., *Forty Years of Diversity: Essays on Colonial Georgia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984).

John C. Inscoe, ed., *James Edward Oglethorpe: New Perspectives on His Life and Legacy* (Savannah: Georgia Historical Society, 1997).

Phinzy Spalding, *Oglethorpe in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

Phinzy Spalding and Edwin L. Jackson, *James Edward Oglethorpe: A New Look at Georgia's Founder* (Athens: Carl Vinson Institute of Government, University of Georgia, 1988).

Phinzy Spalding and Harvey H. Jackson, eds., *Oglethorpe in Perspective: Georgia's Founder after Two Hundred Years*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989).

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