

BEN FRANKLIN'S WORLD

Episode 421: Greg Brooking, "Loyalism and Revolution in Georgia"

[00:00:00] Announcer: You're listening to an Airwave Media podcast.

[00:00:05] Greg Brooking: And then this Stamp Act comes along and it, coupled with the Sugar Act of 1764 and the Proclamation of 1763, and as you know, Americans are starting to feel like there's this kind of movement in Parliament, as they said back then, "to enslave them." And certainly that meant just kind of taking away much of their liberties, more economic than anything else I would think.

But Georgians dealt with that, I think, in many of the same ways that everybody else did. There were tar and featherings in Georgia. James Wright's house was fired into during the Stamp Act tumult of the 1760s. It wasn't burned down. He was no Thomas Hutchinson in that regard. But it wasn't too far different in terms of how he felt.

[00:01:12] Liz Covart: Hello and welcome to episode 421 of *Ben Franklin's World*, the podcast dedicated to helping you learn more about how the people and events of our early American cast have shaped the present-day world we live in. And I'm your host, Liz Covart. What if loyalty, not rebellion was the default position in revolutionary British North America?

It's easy to forget that before 1776 most colonists identified as proud Britons. They didn't see themselves as future Americans or revolutionaries. They saw themselves as subjects of a global empire. And in the colony of Georgia, many clung to that identity far longer than we might expect.

Today we're exploring the American Revolution in Georgia, a colony often left out of our histories of the American Revolution. Yet Georgia's experiences in the revolution offers us rich insight into loyalism, imperial politics, and how personal conviction and loyal conditions shaped the course of the revolution's events.

Greg Brooking, a historian of the American Revolution in the South, and a high school history and social studies teacher joins us to explore the American Revolution in Georgia with details from his book, *From Empire to Revolution: Sir James Wright and the Price of Loyalty in Georgia*.

Now during our exploration Greg reveals, how Georgia's founding as a buffer colony and its early economy shaped its political culture; why Sir James Wright, Georgia's last royal governor, remained deeply committed to the British empire and why many Georgians did too; and what the revolution looked like on the ground in Georgia from backcountry tensions and Indigenous diplomacy to British occupation and loyalist exile.

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benfranklinsworld.com/listen. That's benfranklinsworld.com/listen. And if you need help finding a new app or setting that new app up, just email me, liz@benfranklinsworld.com because I'm happy to help. Okay, are you ready to explore the American Revolution and loyalism in Georgia? Allow me to introduce you to our guest historian.

Our guest earned his PhD in history from Georgia State University, and he teaches social studies at North Springs High School outside of Atlanta. His research expertise is in the American Revolution with a focus on Georgia, loyalism and the British imperial system. He joins us today so that we can explore those research interests with details from his book, *From Empire to Revolution: Sir James Wright and the Price of Loyalty in Georgia*.

Welcome to *Ben Franklin's World*, Greg Brooking.

[00:04:08] Greg Brooking: Thank you, Liz. It's a pleasure to be here.

[00:04:10] Liz Covart: And it's a pleasure to have you, Greg. Now in your book *From Empire to Revolution*, you explore the American Revolution in Georgia through the life and work of Georgia's last royal governor, Sir James Wright. Would you tell us who Sir James Wright was and why he chose to study the revolution in Georgia through Wright's eyes?

[00:04:29] Greg Brooking: Well, James Wright was born in England. His family moved to Charleston when he was nine, and he rose there from a young attorney to ultimately becoming Georgia's third and final colonial governor in 1761.

I came to him through reading Jim Piecuch's book, *Three Peoples, One King* [transcript corrected], which was about Natives, the enslaved, and loyalists in the South. And James Wright seemed to be someone that had been understudied and was interesting to me. He was always seeming to be fighting a losing battle. And then I wanted to know more about that, about what his battles were, and why they were always, seemingly, on the losing end.

[00:05:14] Liz Covart: Wright sounds like he had a fascinating story, and I know we're excited to dig into it. But before we dive into the American Revolution in Georgia, would you provide us with some background information on Georgia as a colony?

When and why was Georgia founded? You've mentioned that Sir James Wright was the third royal governor of Georgia, so it doesn't really sound like Georgia had been around for a long time before the revolution,

[00:05:38] Greg Brooking: Georgia was the thirteenth and final of the North American Atlantic seaboard colonies, founded in 1732. James Oglethorpe is typically considered to be the founder of Georgia, but he was just one of a number of trustees that held the proprietorship to Georgia.

Georgia was created as a buffer zone between the very valuable South Carolina, especially the Lowcountry and Spanish Florida. It was not, as we are often told in eighth grade we take Georgia history, and so we're often told incorrectly that Georgia was a penal colony or a debtor's colony. And while both of those came up as ideas, when the trustees were discussing

proprietorship, neither of those actually turned out to be true. Although Georgia did have just like the other colonies, its fair share of indentured servants make their way across the Atlantic, but it was not a penal colony or a debtor colony in practice, although it was initially in thought.

[00:06:37] Liz Covart: So who settled Georgia? Other scholars have mentioned that the Reverend George Whitfield invested in the colony because it was supposed to be a colony without slavery. So who came to settle in Georgia and what purpose did the British empire want Georgia to serve in the British empire? How did Georgia fit within the empire?

[00:06:56] Greg Brooking: The proprietors had this great, in quotes, idea to create a colony without rum and without slavery and without large land grants of any variety. They wanted to create a colony of white working men who would then be able to form militias, which would then be able to protect, certainly Georgia, but most importantly South Carolina from any attacks from the South, the Spanish especially.

Their first initial settlers were just that. People who were comfortable with that, and kind of like the egalitarian nature of Georgia. Although before the end of the first decade, by the end of the 1730s there arose in Georgia a group called the Malcontents who pushed very hard and successfully ultimately, in the early 1750s to allow slavery.

[00:07:45] Liz Covart: It seems like we should try and understand Georgia as an agricultural colony, but Greg, what did Georgia grow? We often associate tobacco with Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina, and we think of rice and indigo when it comes to South Carolina. So what was Georgia's cash crop?

[00:08:02] Greg Brooking: Well, Georgia becomes profitable, as you might imagine, with the introduction of slavery in the 1750s. James Wright will be the first governor to really fully embrace that and cultivate, if you will, that labor system.

And obviously what made Georgia profitable was the rice plantation labor. They also had naval stores and things of that nature. They tried silk, as did South Carolina, but fairly unsuccessfully.

[00:08:29] Liz Covart: I was fascinated to learn when I read your book, *From Empire to Revolution*, that Georgia was also a buffer colony. One of the big purposes of Georgia was to keep South Carolina safe from I would imagine Spanish Florida, and a handful of powerful southern Indigenous nations that lived in the area. You know, the Georgians had settled their land. So what was life like for Georgians living in this buffer colony?

[00:08:57] Greg Brooking: Difficult. There always seemed to be, at least among Georgia's elite, especially James Wright, there always seemed to be a chip on the shoulder. Kinda like maybe the middle brother, if you will, or the middle child who just doesn't quite get the respect they think they deserve.

They are, as you said, surrounded by Native Americans, really on all sides, but especially the north and the west. The Spanish are just across the St. John's River in Florida. And then South Carolinians, whom James Wright had no kind words for to their northeast.

And once slavery was introduced, South Carolinians and South Carolina tried to extend their own boundaries into what was then at the time Georgia. And there was a big to-do between Georgia's governor, James Wright, and South Carolina's governor, Thomas Boone, about their incursions into Georgia land.

[00:09:45] Liz Covart: Now, if we looked at our mental maps of Georgia, where would we find the colony's population centers? So right now I'm picturing my mental map of Georgia is a modern map of Georgia with its modern boundary lines. But I'm imagining because I'm thinking historically, that much of Georgia is a lot of rustic backcountry, but then Georgia also has a lot of coastline. So there must have been a lot of prominent port cities as well. So where are the population centers of colonial Georgia?

[00:10:15] Greg Brooking: Right. I mean, Savannah's going to be the capital, if you will. And there are a couple of other smaller towns, but organized, that have access to the sea. They will eventually, by the Revolutionary War, kind of give way to Savannah as it grows larger and larger.

I mean, then there's a small but growing by the 1770s outpost in Augusta, which is on the border of South Carolina and Georgia, in northeast Georgia.

[00:10:40] Liz Covart: So it sounds like by the time that Sir James Wright was appointed the governor of Georgia in 1760, he would've had to negotiate and maintain peaceful relations with powerful Indigenous nations. He would've had to deal with this group called the Malcontents, which you mentioned earlier, who were people seemingly unhappy about everything. And he would've had to contend with slavery and slave laws, because Georgians had introduced slavery to the colony in the 1750s.

So he would've had to deal with all of this while also trying to keep Georgia's coastal elites happy. Especially those elites who happen to live in Savannah, which is where Wright would govern from.

So with all of this in mind, Greg, what made Sir James Wright the logical choice to be appointed royal governor of Georgia? What skill sets did Wright possess that made him an ideal choice for addressing all of these very different issues that we've been discussing?

[00:11:34] Greg Brooking: Well, just to correct the Malcontents kind of disappeared once slavery was introduced, and that's 1751, 1752. James Wright comes in 1761, so he's able to avoid that, although he has his Liberty Boys that he'll deal with as the revolution approaches.

So he was an ideal candidate to become governor. We don't know exactly whose idea it was. I tried for ten years to find that answer and never could. My best guess is that his patron would've been William Henry Lyttelton, the governor of South Carolina, who was very well

connected back in England. Him or his father, the elder Lyttelton, might have played a role in having him chosen as governor.

But by the time he was chosen governor, he had spent years in South Carolina as their attorney general. He has spent three years in London as their colonial agent. He was very wealthy by the standards of the day.

His grandfather was Robert Wright, who was King James II's chief justice, who died as a result of imprisonment during the Glorious Revolution. His father was the chief justice of South Carolina, so there were connections there. He had the training as an attorney and then as a colonial agent, so he knew the inner workings of empire through those three years in London.

And so I would say that he was easily the most qualified governor of Georgia among those three royal governors. The first governor of Georgia, John Reynolds was an utter mistake who didn't want to be there. The second governor, Henry Ellis, was quite well intentioned and qualified, but he didn't want to be there much more than John [transcript corrected] Reynolds.

So Wright came to a place ready to settle down and establish himself. And he did so, serving Georgia from 1761 to 1782 when Savannah was evacuated, subtract three years during his exile back in London during the war.

[00:13:29] Liz Covart: We discussed this briefly, but what was the political situation among Georgia colonists that Wright stepped into in 1761?

[00:13:37] Greg Brooking: Well, he inherits a growing colony. Still at that time, a historian back in the seventies, Harold Davis I believe is his name, wrote a great book called *The Fledgling Province*, and Georgia by the time that Wright got there in 1761, was a fledgling province. He was able to successfully build it to a viable imperial asset.

But the problems he dealt with initially were Native Americans. Like he spent his first full two years almost dealing solely with Native American issues. Of course, it's right towards the last third of the French and Indian War.

And while Georgia kind of gets short shrift concerning their involvement in the French and Indian War—perhaps rightfully so in comparison—but Georgia was very much involved in that conflict with the Creeks and the Cherokee. So that's his big problem that he inherits.

[00:14:29] Liz Covart: Speaking of Indigenous peoples, Travis would like to know how Wright sought to develop and maintain peaceful relations with Georgia's powerful Indigenous peoples, like the Creek and the Cherokee. And he also wonders how Georgia's growth and development as a colony impacted the Creek and the Cherokee?

[00:14:46] Greg Brooking: Yeah, that's a great question. The Creek and Cherokee obviously after the Proclamation of 1763, are along with the other southern tribes, they're going to find themselves in great peril.

Wright was a traditional eighteenth century conservative. He had that traditional kind of racial understanding. But he knew that with Georgia's limited defenses and the larger number of Native Americans that could be pulled together at any time against Georgians, that he had to cultivate relations based on trust and some form of honesty.

He very much believed that treaties should be adhered to by both sides as they were written. He spent the middle decade of his time in Georgia dealing with problems created by settlers into the backcountry, disregarding treaty boundaries and such, and that was especially worrisome in 1763. He negotiated the first of two land sessions, the Treaty of Augusta in 1763, which greatly augmented Georgia's geography. And then consequently, as historian Ed Cashin a great historian of colonial Georgia wrote, this massive land session, which gave him an incredible acclaim within the empire, he did it again ten years later in 1773.

Those would lead to his ultimate downfall as the settlers in Georgia looked to expand further and further north and west. And then we had settlers coming from the northern colonies, especially Virginia. He hated the Virginians because they came down to cause trouble he believed. In part, especially after 1763, because the proclamation line forbade westward expansion. So they came south. And they always caused the British government problems because they were unmanageable.

[00:16:36] Liz Covart: Would you remind us of what the proclamation line of 1763 was, and what that boundary line meant for Georgia and its physical growth and expansion?

[00:16:45] Greg Brooking: The 1763 proclamation was an attempt by the British government to halt westward expansion so that the British population could be within a manageable territory for the British military to help protect.

Americans didn't see it that way. They thought it was a hindrance. So they thought that they had fought and defeated the French so that they could expand as far west as they wanted to expand.

It was, in some ways less of a problem for Georgia because of where Georgia is located along the proclamation line boundary. But still a problem. James Wright wrote as soon as the proclamation was passed and he got word across the Atlantic, he thought that it was a poorly conceived act that would cause real trouble in the future for Georgia. And it ultimately did.

[00:17:31] Liz Covart: In what ways did the proclamation line cause trouble for Georgians?

[00:17:35] Greg Brooking: Well, as I mentioned before, the settlers coming from the north because they couldn't go west. They came in in large enough numbers that it was very difficult for the governor and the British government to control.

As Wright said, they were "lawless bandedee" and that they themselves said that they paid no attention to any king or governor. Their only concern was trading with Native Americans. He tried to limit the number of traders because those coming in from Virginia, and North Carolina to a lesser extent, they so overpopulated the backcountry. There were too many traders, which made for things to be very dangerous.

Indians got upset with traders for their mal-intentioned and dishonest trade policies. They weren't going to follow any rules. They were often dishonest. Wright tried to get the British government to limit the number of traders in the backcountry so that only guys that could be managed by the government would have licenses to trade. But the British government had no interest in that and they allowed limitless traders, which caused limitless problems in the backcountry, and then thus for Wright.

[00:18:41] Liz Covart: Something I found interesting when I read your book *From Empire to Revolution* is that Sir James Wright seemed to have some success in trying to control the backcountry traders and keep peaceful relations with Georgians and the Creek and Cherokee.

What do you think was the secret to Wright success? How was Wright able to control these traders who didn't want to pay attention to what any government said or mandated?

[00:19:06] Greg Brooking: Yeah, that's a good question. And he was successful. Alan Gallay, a historian of the Southeast during this time period, wrote that if other colonies had managed their Native American affairs as well as Georgia a lot of problems could have been avoided.

And I think his success in large measure goes to the ways in which he tried to deal with them honestly, certainly if not completely honest by our standards today, but in as equitable way as anybody else did in the time period.

Certainly for the first couple of years he was in office he was able to, as other colonial governors were, play the Native Americans against the French. But once that was taken away from them the Native Americans A, obviously lost the ability to play one off the other. But James Wright also lost that ability.

And so his honesty and forthrightness with the Native Americans really went a long way in providing his success, especially because Georgia lacked the defenses necessary. If I had a dollar for every time Wright complaint to the ministry about the need for more money for defenses and more soldiers, I would no longer be teaching high school.

[00:20:12] Liz Covart: Well, speaking of letters from James Wright, you mentioned in *From Empire to Revolution* that you didn't have a lot of historical sources from Sir James Wright because when he was in the process of evacuating Georgia—which is a story we're going to discuss later—but while he was evacuating from Georgia, Wright's papers were lost and burned.

From the sources you do have, it really does appear that unlike other governors in other British American colonies, Wright was very forward in his writing style, in the sense that he wrote very plainly, even to his superiors. And so I can imagine that if his writing style translated into the way that he spoke, it must have been very refreshing or at least somewhat refreshing to Indigenous peoples to hear someone speak so plainly and at times, well, very bluntly.

[00:21:00] Greg Brooking: Yes, I think so. He was just very straightforward in his conversations with anyone, whether they be superior or supposed inferior. Someone who would perhaps owe him deference.

He didn't beat around the bush. He was very direct. And his relations with the Native Americans certainly would reflect that, as would his relations with his superiors. As we get to the American Revolution, some of those superiors were really put off by him. But you knew where he stood all the time.

[00:21:27] Liz Covart: Well speaking of the American Revolution, we should jump forward to that period from 1765 to the early- to mid-1770s when the passage and attempted implementation of the Stamp Act, the Townsend Duties, and the Tea Act occurred. But actually, since we are going to jump forward in time, why don't we take a brief moment to thank our episode sponsors.

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[00:23:10] Liz Covart: Well, now that we've jumped forward in time, let's talk about Georgia and the American Revolution. We know from discussions with other scholars that colonists protested the Stamp Act, the Townsend Duties and the Tea Act on places like Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Williamsburg and Charleston, South Carolina. What we don't often hear or, come to think of it, read about is these protests taking place in Georgia.

Georgia seemed to be the one colony that did not send delegates to the First Continental Congress in late 1774. And come to think of it, we don't even really fit Georgia into our narratives and histories of the American Revolution until we're talking about the middle and later stages of the War for Independence.

So Greg, when did the American Revolution start in Georgia? And where did Georgian stand politically amidst all of these taxation protests and the British empire's attempt to have a greater control over its North American colonies?

[00:24:08] Greg Brooking: Georgia was certainly very loyal. They were still receiving at the time of the Revolutionary War, an annual stipend from Parliament to help essentially lower their taxes. So they had a lot to appreciate in regards to that. They appreciated whatever troops and supplies they would get from the British government because they were small and growing, and so they were unable in their minds to provide full succor for themselves. They were teenagers, if you will, in the life of colonial America.

They were moving forward, but they weren't quite adults at the beginning of the revolution. But the revolution did start very early in Georgia, I would think compared to what we're usually told or not told.

By 1774, Georgia rebel leaders are writing to the Continental of Congress and saying that "the civil war in Georgia has begun," and that's by mid-1774. So that divide has already shown itself. The fissures are already there between what we would call the loyalists and the rebels or whigs of that time period.

[00:25:13] Liz Covart: From your book, *From Empire to Revolution*, it also seemed like Sir James Wright played a significant role in keeping the revolutionary movement in check in Georgia.

And that really seemed remarkable to me because if we think of governors Thomas Hutchinson and Thomas Gage in Massachusetts, the revolution, like they tried to keep the revolution in check, but it spirals out of control very quickly for them. Likewise with Cadwallader Colden in New York City, he also failed to keep the revolution from overrunning his colony. And I think the same can be said too of Lord Dunmore in Virginia.

So how was Wright able to succeed in checking the revolution in its movement when basically every other governor in the colonies had failed?

[00:25:55] Greg Brooking: Well, I think part of it is for the reasons I mentioned a second ago. Part of it was because he was very well liked by Georgians of all stripes.

He was pseudo successful in distributing the stamps in 1765. In fact, he complained the ministry about the repeal of the Stamp Act as "leading to a portent of doom" in that it was too lenient and conciliatory to the colonists. And that's going to be the first time in which Georgian start to realize that he is an empire man first.

He always said that he had this dual loyalty to country and colony. And he did. He very much sought the best for Georgians and they understood that and they believed that. And it was only when, in his mind, when South Carolina's, what he called Sons of Licentiousness, their version of the Sons of Liberty and in Georgia they were called the Liberty Boys, when those from South Carolina just kept coming in and kind of infiltrating Savannah and the backcountry into becoming rebels. But he was able to, like you said, to successfully hold off the torrent for a good long while.

[00:27:04] Liz Covart: Well, Jeremy is curious about loyalism in Georgia and how strong or typical loyalism was among Georgians. So Jeremy asks, why Georgians joined the Revolution?

And he points out that Georgia was not near the Northeastern hotbed of revolutionary sentiment and activities, nor was it even close to Virginia, which was also a center of revolutionary agitation. Instead, Jeremy notes that Georgia bordered West Florida, which rejected an invitation to join the Continental Congress and South Carolina, which initially seemed pretty lukewarm to the revolution.

So what pushed Georgians to support the revolution? What kept them loyal and what pushed them to support the revolution?

[00:27:46] Greg Brooking: Well, as I said, South Carolina was always causing trouble for Governor Wright in this time period. Even during the 1765-66 Stamp Act crisis, things settled down as elsewhere for a good bit from 1766 until 1774 and '75.

If I was going to point to one thing that really pushed Georgians into the rebel camp in large enough numbers to matter, would be Lexington and Concord. The news of that really changed the calculus in Georgia.

[00:28:17] Liz Covart: How did it change the calculus?

[00:28:19] Greg Brooking: Well, because Georgians, by that time, with the influence and the prodding of South Carolinians, a large enough percentage of the population came to identify themselves in common cause with those in Boston and Massachusetts. You know, "as this can happen to them, it can happen to us."

And again, a lot of that prodding is coming from South Carolina, but Georgia had a strong enough rebel presence that it might have happened without South Carolina at some point in some two or three years.

[00:28:51] Liz Covart: Yeah, I was just going to ask you if you had ever thought about what if South Carolinians had not come to Georgia to stir the pot as it were? If South Carolinians had remained in South Carolina, do you think Georgia's loyalist streak would've been extended?

[00:29:06] Greg Brooking: I think it would've extended it. And if South Carolina had remained loyal, I think Georgia would've absolutely remained loyal.

[00:29:12] Liz Covart: It just occurred to me that we're talking about loyalties. When we say revolutionary, we are talking about someone who supported the revolutionary's cause and supported, eventually, independence from Great Britain.

But what do we mean about loyalism in the context of Georgia? I think we often assume that loyalism meant being loyal to the British crown and supporting its crown officials, but there was this growing revolutionary presence in Georgia. So what did it mean to be loyal in the context of revolutionary Georgia?

[00:29:43] Greg Brooking: I think it means several things. And I think the previous question about the default position of columnists as being loyalists, I think that's a great place to start. Because as all of the literature secondary and primary says, Americans and Georgians were no different and maybe even more so were proud to be Brits, proud to be part of the British empire.

And so when things started turning south to be loyalist meant, A., to be loyal to your country. In their minds, and Wright said in a speech to the Commons house, he said, "that the loyalists were the true patriots," right? They were the one trying to maintain the current status quo, their current government and country.

As the war unfolded, even without continental troops or British troops, but as just loyalists and whig factions emerged, it could then mean multiple things. It could mean that you were loyal when the British military was in town, or when the loyalist militia was in town.

I think Georgia provides a good example of what maybe John Adams, I think Rick Atkinson said that John Adams is "mathematical heir" in suggesting that the colonies were one third loyal, one third rebel, one third neutral. Regardless of the exact percentages, I think there's a good bit of each of those three things in Georgia. And I think that the loyalties of either side were malleable, except on the extreme ends; Governor Wright, the James Habersham's, those people who would've been on the Governor's Council and their ilk would've been deeply ingrained loyalists committed to the empire and to the world they've known.

I wrote that James Wright was a true empire man, but he could never understand how people would want to rebel. Like he just couldn't wrap his mind around the fact that life was so good for the colonists and for Brits, especially in America. They were taxed far less. They had much more freedoms, daily freedoms, if you will. He just could never wrap his head around the mind of someone who would want to rebel, which ultimately would cost him his freedom when he gets arrested in early stages of the war.

[00:31:52] Liz Covart: It must have been hard for someone like Wright who made his fortune as the governor of Georgia, like he never had to worry about paying his taxes because he always had a lot of money. So I can see how he would think that life was great for Britons.

[00:32:06] Greg Brooking: Right, yeah. He's incredibly wealthy. He is either the wealthiest Georgian or the second wealthiest Georgian, with his lieutenant governor being the wealthiest. They were both large plantation owners. James Wright owned eleven plantations at the time of the revolution. He enslaved at 525 humans. So he was incredibly wealthy.

And his loyalism, if we were to use, I think, an outdated understanding of loyalist as being those who were only with the crown because they had crown jobs or appointments and that kind of wealth that that brings about, certainly that was part of his loyalism.

I mean, the economic matters can't be overlooked. But I think regardless of that, if he had just been an attorney general in Georgia, he would've still been a loyalist. He just truly believed in the British empire.

[00:32:54] Liz Covart: As you teach history every year, you know that textbooks tend to be filled with the revolutionary side of the revolution because, well, they won. And their victory founded the United States.

So can you help us see the flip side of that story, the loyalist side? From your research on Sir James Wright and Georgia what does the revolution look like from a loyalist perspective?

[00:33:18] Greg Brooking: I tried more than anything to write this book from his perspective. Not taking his side per se, but writing it from, as you said, like how he saw his world unfolding. And it was chaotic. It would've been chaotic for the rebels.

The entire thing, as we know, is happening so quickly in 1763 "we're all wonderfully happy, it's just us, right? And we've got hegemony over the Native Americans at that point, ultimately, even though certainly there are issues there. But we don't have to worry about Spanish. We don't have to worry about the French."

And then this Stamp Act comes along and it, coupled with the Sugar Act of 1764, and the Proclamation of 1763. And as you know, and many of your listeners will know, that Americans are starting to feel like there's this kind of movement in Parliament, as they said back then "to enslave them." And certainly that meant just kind of taking away much of their liberties. More economic than anything else, I would think.

But Georgians dealt with that, I think in many of the same ways that everybody else did. There were tar and featherings in Georgia. James Wright's house was fired into during the Stamp Act tumult of the 1760s. It wasn't burned down. He was no Thomas Hutchinson in that regard. But it wasn't too far different in terms of how he felt.

Reading his letters to his superiors during this time period was heart wrenching. You just saw a man who was struggling to maintain the authority that he thought was natural and appropriate. A group of aristocratic and wealthy men educated, leading everybody else, just like we would see during the Constitutional Convention and the life that that created for Americans after 1788, 1789.

[00:35:00] Liz Covart: An interesting fact about Sir James Wright is that he was the only royally appointed governor who remained in his colony throughout most of the War for Independence. And yes, Jonathan Trumbull of Connecticut also remained, but he was a revolutionary.

So Greg, would you tell us about Sir James Wright's loyalty and how he was able to maintain his post as governor until about 1781, 1782?

[00:35:24] Greg Brooking: Yeah, that's a great question. That's actually my favorite part of the research was this time period when he was actually away from Georgia. In January 1776, so several months before the Declaration of Independence, Wright is arrested by the Georgia Council of Safety. He is put under house arrest and three weeks later he escapes. And it's during that escape that all of his personal papers are destroyed in the, uh, Battle of the Rice Boats. This skirmish as they try to get to him before he gets to the safety of the man of war in the harbor.

He then goes back to England and he befriends Thomas Hutchinson, and of course the other southern governors that had also been ejected from the colonies, if you will. And they start pushing for a southern strategy, pushing Lord Germain and Lord North to move their focus from the northern colonies to the southern colonies because they say, A., loyalism in the south is greater than it is in the north, but B., the southern provinces provide much more wealth to Great Britain than the northern ones do.

And there's truth to that. South Carolina, Charleston was ultimately the wealthiest and most important cog in the mercantile machine among the thirteen seaboard colonies. South Carolina and Georgia to a growing extent, were part of the Greater Carib-American economy, which is heavily influenced by rice and sugar slave labor.

And so while he's there, he is writing letter after letter. He has several meetings with the king and with Germain and with Lord North about changing Britain's focus to the South. They will eventually adopt that southern strategy in 1778. And even though Germain was so frustrated with Wright, because Wright was just like this bird chirping in his ear constantly. Germain said that "Wright can be of no use to us right now because his ideas of the military are outrageous."

Wright may not have been a military strategist, but he certainly knew the mind and the will of Southerners, South Carolina and Georgia particularly. He knew what the imperial administration looked like. So I think he had an ideal background and understanding to give advice regarding a Southern strategy, which ultimately they adopt and were able to retake Georgia in early 1779, and then shortly, shortly thereafter, Charleston.

They never really quite conquer the backcountry of South Carolina or Georgia for that matter, ultimately. But then he comes back to take over because he volunteered, "if you need a civil governor, I'm happy to go back." And so he goes back. Germain says that "nothing but your arrival is going to further provide a civil administration in Georgia."

When Wright lands in Savannah in 1779, in that summer, he finds that to be the furthest thing from the truth. There is still a very rabid rebel hotbed in Georgia at the time.

[00:38:15] Liz Covart: Did you ever get a chance to research that claim that the southern colonies were really more loyal than the northern colonies? Because I think it's easy to see how the revolution and the war started in the northern colonies, and like you said, it took time for the war to reach the South.

So I am curious, did you find that Sir James Wright and his fellow Southern governors were correct and their assertions that the South was more loyal to the crown and empire than those in the North?

[00:38:41] Greg Brooking: Yeah, I did. I spent a lot of time on that question. I think that's the heart of the book, is determining loyalism and understanding loyalism, especially in Georgia, but the Lowcountry in general, which would include Charleston and Savannah. I think they were right. There were large numbers of loyalists.

There were many letters from other Georgians that would indicate this, but they needed protection. They needed the British military to be there. And to not leave them. And so when they retook Savannah, they then went to retake Augusta and they left very little behind in Savannah. In Augusta they left very little behind in terms of maintaining that peace.

And then in Georgia, after the siege of Savannah, when the French and the rebels tried to retake Savannah in October of 1779, once they defeated the French and the Americans the British basically left to go to South Carolina, leaving very little behind in terms of protection for Georgia. The topic was probably in every single Wright letter after that was, "we need more troops, don't leave us. If you leave us, things are going to change."

And that goes back to what I said earlier, if the British militia or the loyalist militia was in town, Georgians were very, very loyal, but easily so, there was no convincing. They felt free to be loyal. Whereas some, their loyalism wavered just based on who was in town because they didn't really care they just wanted to live their lives.

But I think Georgia had a much higher percentage of those who were just truly loyal, as did South Carolina, certainly in the Lowcountry. I think you alluded to this earlier, the further into the backcountry or the frontier that we get, the less there is of that loyalism, because there's less of a connection to that urban society, that imperial society. They're out there on their own, if you will.

[00:40:29] Liz Covart: That's a great point about how loyalists would've been free to be loyal if they had had the protection that they needed from the revolutionaries. And I found that even in my own research in revolutionary New York. People were revolutionary until John Burgoyne starts marching down the Hudson Valley. And then people did whatever they needed to do to keep their family safe and their property intact.

[00:40:51] Greg Brooking: Yeah, that's a hundred percent true. Leslie Hall wrote a great book a couple of decades ago called *Land and Allegiance*. Which is about that very thing.

You know, "we're trying to keep our property and our family and our livelihoods safe and our allegiance is kind of tied to whichever side provides that for us." And her study is in the South, so it does an excellent job of kind of bringing out that argument.

[00:41:13] Liz Covart: Now, another interesting point you raised in your book *From Empire to Revolution* is that the British captured Savannah in December 1778 and brought Augusta to heal in January 1779, but South Carolina remained this very unruly place. So the British military really had to divide its forces to wage war in South Carolina.

So they kept some forces in Georgia, but most of them would go to South Carolina. And one of the significant points that you make in your book is that the Franco-American alliance, which also brought Spain and the Netherlands into the war, well, that changed the calculus for Great Britain.

Britain now had to decide where in the world it was going to send its troops. So could you tell us more about how European involvement in the war impacted the American War for Independence in the South and specifically in Georgia?

[00:42:03] Greg Brooking: When General Henry Clinton learned of the plan to move forces southward, he was not happy. He knew that his forces were already spread too thin. Forces and money and supplies were taken away from his army to deal with the arrival of the French and as you said, the Spanish after that, because they were most concerned about protecting the Caribbean colonies, the British were, because that's where the real money was, the sugar plantations in the Caribbean. Georgia, and South Carolina were very valuable as well, but he couldn't cover everything.

And so the lack of troop strength and funds in America because of the French alliance, really, I think it spells the end. It's just a matter of how long it's going to take.

[00:42:48] Liz Covart: I spoiled this a little bit earlier, but the revolutionaries waged a siege against the British position in Savannah in September and October 1779.

Greg, would you take us through the siege of Savannah and how the siege impacted the British war effort?

[00:43:05] Greg Brooking: So they take Savannah in December of 1778, and by spring of 1779, they've taken Augusta. Wright returns to Georgia in July of 1779 and within thirty to forty days, French vessels are seen off the coast. And the rebels, led by Benjamin Lincoln and the French led by the Count of Estaing lay siege to Savannah from mid-August to October ninth when they're ultimately defeated in the final battle of that siege.

Wright is in the mix of it the entire time. This is also a really fun part of the research for me because Wright keeps a diary during this time, and there's no other diary that he kept that survived. There's no personal letters that he wrote that survived because those were lost in the Battle of the Rice Boats after he fled. But this to me felt like the closest thing to just "in the moment, I'm not trying to write to an official, I'm just writing down what I see is happening," and so it brought me closer to him and to the folks in the city.

Living in the city during the siege would've been incredibly difficult. They faced daily bombardments, not so much troop excursions. They just bombed from the men of war in the harbor. They sent incendiaries into the town. The town of Savannah was mostly made of wooden structures, so it would easily be set fire to, lead to a conflagration.

Wright was not injured during this time, but he came very close to taking a cannonball. I think it probably whizzed by him, "close enough to hear the whirr," as he said, and so he gives us kind of a day by day account of this back and forth.

The ultimate savior for the British was probably the arrival from Beaufort, South Carolina, the troop of British soldiers who come just in time to allow the British to rebuff the demand for surrender. And ultimately then on October ninth, the French and the rebels lead an assault on the city of Savannah. Wright's son is slightly injured in that battle, which was the bloodiest battle of the American Revolution, aside from Bunker Hill. So that's something that's often overlooked in fighting in Georgia.

But ultimately the British and their loyalists repel the invasion. John Adams in France and Benjamin Franklin in France at this time, and other American leaders, Hamilton from up north, all bemoan the loss of the siege of Savannah. Although, and it actually may have been Franklin that said, "well, they may have kept Savannah, right, but that's going to be a little use to them ultimately, they've got to keep the entire province, right?" Kind of highlighting the importance of the backcountry.

[00:45:40] Liz Covart: As you mentioned, the manpower shortage proved to be very challenging for the British. They had to wage war on so many fronts and hold positions all while the Franco-American forces were advancing.

So the British victory in Savannah proved fairly short-lived. So when do you think that Sir James Wright and the British government came to understand that the South and the North American War effort were really lost?

[00:46:04] Greg Brooking: Well, those are two different answers. James Wright aborted the evacuation ship from Savannah in July 1782, still thinking that if he just had five hundred more troops he could fend off, you know, mad Anthony Wayne who was approaching Savannah at that time. He constantly carped about, "just give me five hundred more troops and we'll be okay."

The British began to realize probably late 1781, early 1782. Certainly the Battle of Yorktown proved disastrous as Charles Cornwallis led those British soldiers out of South Carolina. So there's no real protection in Georgia. There's no real protection in South Carolina except in the city, the two cities of Charleston and Savannah they have some.

Then when General Nathaniel Greene pulls Charles Cornwallis out of South Carolina and makes him chasing him into North Carolina, Guilford Courthouse, the big battle there that the British won but it was a Pyrrhic victory at best. And then Cornwallis, instead of going back south into South Carolina, decides to go up north to Yorktown, as you know. And that kind of

spelled the end really for the British. And they were ready to move out of Georgia by the end of 1781.

[00:47:14] Liz Covart: When the British did move out of Georgia, what did the evacuation of Savannah look like in July 1782? I think when we picture the British evacuation, we almost always picture the evacuation of New York City where there were lots of ships that carried soldiers, loyalists, and lots of formerly enslaved Black men and women who they shipped off to Canada. So what did the loyalist evacuation look like when it came to Savannah?

[00:47:41] Greg Brooking: The exact same thing, although probably a much larger number of enslaved and free Blacks that sided with the British. The Black population, just as the Native population, saw their best opportunities in the future to lie with the British rather than the American rebels certainly in the South. I mean, that's really cogently argued by Jim Piecuch in *Three Peoples, One King*.

There was a great deal of controversy about the enslaved population; which would have to stay, which would be able to go. Many of those enslaved would ultimately end up in Nova Scotia, but also in the Caribbean.

James Wright's enslaved population that he was able to extricate from his plantations, they all ended up in the Caribbean under his son James Wright Jr's control. His son would write James Wright in London shortly after the war, "that we have nothing for these enslaved people to do because there's a glut of them coming from South Carolina and Georgia." So it was chaos at its finest in the evacuation of Charleston and Savannah.

[00:48:43] Liz Covart: And where did Georgia's evacuees go? One aspect of the revolution that you explore well in your book, *From Empire to Revolution,* is the cost of remaining a loyal British subject throughout the revolution.

So where did Georgia's loyalists go and what price did they pay for their loyalty to the British Crown and Empire?

[00:49:03] Greg Brooking: Well, the cost, if we're going to talk monetarily, I can give you James Wright as an example. He was very fastidious, ostensibly, even before Lexington Concord, let's say. He very fastidiously kept detailed records of everything he owned so that in the case of something like the Revolution, because he could see that it may be coming, he would have an idea as to exactly what he owned and what he lost.

His loyalist claim, what he sent to Parliament and to the Loyalist Claims Commission, what he had verified via affidavit from Georgians was over a hundred thousand pounds sterling, which as you know, is a tremendous amount of money at that time. Ultimately, he was awarded about a third of that, plus an annual thousand pound stipend because that was his salary as a royal governor, and so he got that for life.

For other Georgians, it would be the same thing, but on their own scale. The cost of loyalty was indeed high for loyalist Georgians, and even for those who kind of blew with the wind,

depends on which side of the wind you were at when the war ended. He was part of both 1776 and the 1782 Confiscation Acts as were his eldest son, Major James Wright Jr.

When most of them returned to London or returned to England, Wright wrote during his final years in London that he was constantly besieged by fellow Georgians of a lower class, if you will, for help. You know, "can you please gimme a shilling? Can you help with this and that," according to his notes, which he often did.

He spent his final three years dealing with that cost of loyalism. He died in 1786 at the age of sixty nine in large measure, I think, because of the fatigues of being a governor in Georgia during the war and the president of the Loyalist Claims Commission. And so he fought his last three years trying to provide relief for Georgians who had lost everything or most of everything that they had possessed prior to and during the revolution.

[00:51:03] Liz Covart: And of course, those were just the monetary costs of being loyal,

[00:51:07] Greg Brooking: Right.

[00:51:08] Liz Covart: There were also the emotional costs. Loyalists had to leave their families, their friends, their homes. And when they left their homes, they also mostly left their homeland. I mean, most loyalists had never been outside of British North America, and here they were moving to other parts of the British empire.

[00:51:23] Greg Brooking: Yes, and it's a great point. Certainly you're a stranger in a strange land, right? I mean, Georgia was home to these people. Not many of them were as traveled as James Wright, who made several voyages back and forth to the capitol. You know, from core and periphery if you will, and so they were indeed strangers to their new home in Britain and looked upon as outsiders.

So many of them were never truly welcomed into their own country as it were. His own son, Alexander Wright, helped the British during their time in control in Charleston, but his wife became a rebel, so she remained in Charleston and he was evacuated. So, as you say, the breaking up of families was indeed a very personal thing for Wright.

[00:52:08] Liz Covart: Yeah it's a sad story when you think about it, for loyalists. Well, at this point, we should move into our "1776 in Context" segment. Now that we are in the midst of the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution, Greg, how do you think using the 250th anniversary of the Revolution as a reason to look more closely at the loyalist point of view of the revolution can help us better understand this event and major period of early American history?

[00:52:37] Greg Brooking: Good question, and I'm so excited about the anniversaries that we've already started. I think as always, but I think this is a good reminder, as you said, to focus on not just the quote winning side, but focus on all of the elements.

I like to teach history—maybe a worn out phrase—from the bottom up, and I think that was part of what drew me to James Wright to begin with. As I said at the beginning, I kept seeing him as this loser. This guy who kept trying but never could quite get what he felt he needed.

And I think it's important. I think especially today, understanding multiple perspectives is really essential to understanding who we are. Especially when those multiple perspectives come from us. They are our own. Loyalists were Americans.

They were conflicted in their loyalty perhaps, because they were forced to choose between where they lived and their country. And in every way they were us demographically, they were the rebels. They just had a different political loyalty. And so I think it's always important to understand both sides or all sides, and that's why I like to incorporate the enslaved and the Native Americans into the conversation as well as the loyalists.

[00:53:43] Liz Covart: Greg, you mentioned at the start of our conversation that you teach high school history and social studies, and as my brother is also a high school history teacher, I wonder, do you have any time for another research project? Are you currently researching and writing something now?

[00:53:58] Greg Brooking: Have time? Carve time? Yes. And one of the great things about being a teacher is the scheduling. And so having a couple of months off in the summer having, you know, a two week break during Christmas and then spring break, those all give me time to work on this. Obviously it's going to be less time than a professor would have, and I wouldn't change it for the world but it does create that.

And I am working on a project and very deep into, into my next project, I'm writing a biography of a friend of James Wright, but a rebel, Henry Laurens of South Carolina, who was president of the Continental Congress. But he was very close friends with Wright until they weren't, until the revolution tore that friendship apart.

[00:54:40] Liz Covart: And if we have more questions about Sir James Wright, or the American Revolution in Georgia, where's the best place for us to get in touch with you?

[00:54:47] Greg Brooking: Well, you can find me on the various social media platforms. I've also got a website, gregbrooking.net that you can reach out and contact me if you had questions or see what I'm doing.

I've got a mini blog there that I run occasionally with Henry Laurens today. And so I'll post it on the date of that day, what he's doing at any given time in his life. Just to kind of help keep me moving forward in my own project, but to also share a little bit of it with whomever wants to see it.

[00:55:14] Liz Covart: Well, Greg Brooking, thank you so much for taking the time to introduce us to Sir James Wright and the American Revolution in Georgia.

[00:55:21] Greg Brooking: Thank you, Liz. It was a pleasure. Like I said, I've been listening since the beginning, so a long time listener, first time caller, if you will.

[00:55:27] Liz Covart: Well, I'm glad you called, and thank you so much for listening and really thank you for all you do to educate our youth in history. It's such an important part of our democracy, so thank you for doing what you do. And thank you to all teachers out there for educating our youth.

[00:55:42] Greg Brooking: Well, thank you and thank you for all you do to educate everybody. Much appreciated and makes my commute to and from work much easier.

[00:55:49] Liz Covart: The American Revolution was not a singular movement or a unified rebellion. It was a civil war. A civil war that caused deep fractures in communities and in families. Nowhere was this more evident than in Georgia, where loyalty to the British crown held on longer than in most other colonies.

As we just heard from Greg Georgia's last royal governor, Sir James Wright was not just a political figurehead. He was a deeply invested empire man, a wealthy, well-connected man who is deeply committed to the British imperial system.

As governor, Wright work to stabilize Georgia, manage its relations with Native nations, and curb revolutionary sentiment that held that colony in check longer than most other colonies. But even in Georgia, the tide turned. The pressures of military invasion, revolutionary agitation from neighboring South Carolina, and the growing appeal of independence reshaped Georgia's loyalties.

Greg's insights into loyalism as the default loyalty in British North America, helps us reframe how we understand the American Revolution. Most colonists didn't set out to build a new nation. They were forced to choose sides in a rapidly escalating crisis. For many, including Sir James Wright, loyalty came at a steep cost: exile, financial ruin, and the loss of home and community.

The stories of loyalists remind us that the American Revolution wasn't just a fight for independence, it was also a reckoning. A reckoning with identity, belonging, and what individuals were willing to sacrifice for the world they believed in. Look for more information about Greg, his book *From Empire to Revolution*, plus notes, links, and a transcript for everything we talked about today on the show notes page, benfranklinsworld.com/421.

Did you find this story of Sir James Wright intriguing? Be sure you share it with a friend. After all, friends tell friends about their favorite podcasts. Production assistance for this podcast comes from Joseph Adelman, Karin Wulf, and Morgan McCullough. Breakmaster Cylinder compose our custom theme music. This podcast is part of the Airwave Media podcast network. To discover and listen to their other podcasts, visit airwavemedia.com.

Finally, have you ever thought about what it meant to be a loyalist during the American Revolution? Did this episode help you further or change your thoughts about what it meant to be a loyalist? I'd love to know what you think, liz@benfranklinsworld.com.



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