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PETER FRANCISCO AND TARLETON'S CAVALRY.

Presented by his grandson, Peter Francisco Pescud, President Louisiana Society, Sons of American Revolution.
PETER FRANCISCO.*

THE AMERICAN SOLDIER.

History, as presented to the popular mind, is necessarily biographical and ideal. The beginnings of American colonization are embodied in the lives of Gilbert and Raleigh; the American Revolution in those of Patrick Henry and George Washington; the history of steam navigation in those of Watt and Fulton, and the development of commerce in those of Maury and Morse. Each department of human effort has its type and hero, and no one fills the picture of the AMERICAN SOLDIER more completely than Peter Francisco, the subject of this article.

The accounts as to his origin conflict, but it is agreed that he was brought a child to Virginia by a sea captain, who intended to bind him to a planter as an apprentice. His dark complexion and name suggested some southern country of Europe as the land of his nativity, and it is commonly reported that he was of Portuguese origin. He was left upon the wharf at City Point friendless and alone, and after several days he was taken in charge by the parish authorities and bound out to Anthony Winston (uncle of Patrick Henry) who then resided on an estate called Hunting Tower, in Buckingham county. His immense physical strength, even as a boy, attracted the attention of his neighbors, and his honesty and frankness won the respect and confidence of his master.

At the time of the breaking out of the American Revolution Francisco was only fourteen years of age, but in the fall of 1776, at sixteen years, he joined the Tenth Virginia Regiment of

* For sketches of Peter Francisco see Howe, Historical Collections of Virginia, 1845; Campbell, History of Virginia, and N. B. Winston, Peter Francisco, Soldier of the Revolution.
Continental troops, and took part for three years in the battles and skirmishes fought in the North. Francisco was a sturdy youth, six feet one inch in height, in weight 260 pounds, and was exceedingly muscular and active. His son is quoted as saying that "Francisco could take with his two arms two men weighing 160 pounds by their legs, and at arm's length raise them to the ceiling, and he told me that he had shouldered a cannon weighing 1,100 pounds. An ordinary sword being too short and light for him, General Washington ordered one to be made for him at a blacksmith shop—six feet from hilt to point, which he could wield as a feather."

A veritable giant, tall and massive, as brave as he was strong, a man described as above all personal prejudice or meanness of conduct, devoted passionately to the cause which he had made his own, there is no such picturesque figure in the whole Continental line as Peter Francisco.

During this service he fought in the battles of Brandywine, Germantown and Monmouth. At Stony Point he entered the fort next after Lieutenant James Gibbons of Virginia, who was the first to enter. He was afterwards in many skirmishes and minor conflicts. He was wounded several times, and killed several British soldiers. After his term was out he returned to Virginia and enlisted in a cavalry troop, and was present in many fights in the South under Gates and Green. In this service Francisco still continued to kill British soldiers, and had many hairbreadth escapes.

His most famous exploit, however, was performed after his return home after the battle of Guildford Courthouse. Francisco was visiting the house of Benjamin Ward in Amelia county when the house was suddenly surrounded by a party of nine British troopers. One of the British demanded his watch and another his silver knee buckles. Francisco pretended to acquiesce and the cavalymen dismounted, and one of them stooped to take the buckles off, placing his sword under his right arm. Francisco, who was unarmed, stepped back one pace, caught the sword by the hilt, and cut the soldier's head in two, killing him instantly. Just then Tarleton's troop, consisting of about 400 men, came in sight, and Francisco, quick-witted and cool-headed, called aloud as if ordering out his own command of men.
The British standing near him were deceived by this pretence and fleeing precipitately left their horses behind them. Thereupon Francisco dashed into the saddle of one of the deserted horses, and driving the others before him escaped down an obscure road, though Tarleton’s troopers were dispatched in all directions in search of him. With characteristic independence, Francisco sold his British horses at Prince Edward Curthouse, retaining one for himself, which he rode for many years, calling him Tarleton. This episode in the life of Francisco was made the subject of a design by James Worrell, which was engraved in 1814, and was for a long time a favorite ornament of the old-time American parlor.

At Yorktown the military career of Francisco closes, and there serving under General Lafayette, his first commander, he witnessed the surrender of Lord Cornwallis.

When war was over, Francisco settled himself down to the task of acquiring a competent estate. For some time he kept a tavern at New Store, Buckingham county, and during many years he was Sergeant-at-arms of the House of Delegates. He also applied himself to the improvement of his mind. When he entered the army he was illiterate, and could hardly write his name, but by dint of application he became a good reader, and loved to learn of great men and great deeds. While he never became a fluent writer, he learned to express himself sufficiently with his pen.

There is a story that a very strong man, named Pamphlet, came all the way from Kentucky to whip him. When Francisco learned the object of his visit, he handed him a bunch of willow switches and told him to whip away to his heart’s content. The strong man was taken aback by this demeanor and asked to feel his weight. He lifted Francisco from the ground, and remarked that he was quite heavy. “Now, Mr. Pamphlet,” said Francisco, “let me feel your weight,” and lifting the sportive visitor twice in the air, the third time threw him over a railing fence four feet high into the public road. Pamphlet was mightily surprised at this exhibition of strength, and called out as he lay in the dust that Francisco would do him a great favor if he would pitch his horse after him, as he wanted to go home. The story goes that Francisco led the horse to the fence, and with his left
arm under the horse's breast and the right one behind him, put him over as requested. The discomfited Mr. Pamphlet mounted and took his way back to Kentucky.

The native worth of Francisco introduced him into good society and his matrimonial connections were highly creditable. He married three times: first, Mary Anderson; second, Catharine Fauntleroy Brooke, and third, Mary B. West, a widow whose maiden name was Grymes, each of whom belonged to representative Virginia families. A portrait of Francisco has been preserved and hangs in the State Library.

In 1819 Francisco applied to Congress, through Hon. John W. Eppes, for a pension, but in the spirit of parsimony which then prevailed, the committee of the Senate to whom the petition was referred reported against it. After his death January 16, 1831, his widow, Mary B. Francisco, applied and was pensioned.

Among the papers filed at this time, and preserved in the Pension Department, are affidavits from Captain Hezekiah Morton, Lieutenant William Evans, Philemon Holcombe and John Woodson, who served in the army under him. Lieutenant Evans testified as follows:

This is to certify that Peter Francisco entered the Continental army as a soldier under myself in the 10th Virginia Regiment. Enlisted in the fall of 1776, joined at Headquarters in the Spring of 1777, was that summer drafted in the Light Infantry, under General Wayne, and was at the storming of Stony Point, where he received a wound, then continued three years to the North. After which he was under the command of General Greene at the battle of Guilford, with myself, and generally known to be one of the best veterans of his day, serving the whole of these campaigns, and one of the most meritorious soldiers I have been acquainted with.

Given under my hand.

William Evans,
Formerly Lieutenant in 10th Virginia Regiment.

Failing in his application to Congress, Francisco appears to have drawn up a petition to the General Assembly of Virginia. The following paper, purporting to be a copy, has been sent to me by a descendant. There can be no doubt that it is a genuine statement, but I have not been able to find the original, and it is not certain that it was ever actually presented to the Legislature:
PETER FRANCISCO.
Portrait in State Library at Richmond.