

Monthly Publication from the Zephyrhills Historical Association

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## There will be NO scheduled business meeting in July.

### Future Meetings

While we are not having a business meeting in July, we do plan to have a get-together. Our “Christmas in July” Dinner is set for Monday, July 26<sup>th</sup>, 6 p.m., at the Wedgewood Manor Community Clubhouse, 37420 Wedgewood Drive (off Geiger Road). Gail Fisher will be catering the event for us, and she’ll take care of everything. Those of you planning to attend simply need to notify me, so that we can have an accurate number of guests to report to Gail. You can email me at [jerry@pricher.net](mailto:jerry@pricher.net) or you can call my home at 813-788-2547. In all likelihood I will not answer, but you can leave a message. You’ll hear my sister’s voice rather than mine. I have not had the heart to change it. Don’t send any money. Instead have twenty dollars per person the night of the event, either cash or a check made out to ZHA. Andy will take care of paying Gail and rental on the room. Thanks to Bill and Maryhelen for coming through for us once again.



### Scholarship

The Scholarship Committee informs me that our only applicant this year was Robyn Thomas. She continues to do an excellent job in school, so we were happy to continue our support for her in the amount of one thousand dollars. We have invited her to our dinner in July. We hope she will join us.

## We may get back to our fundraisers in August at Sergio’s.



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**Jeff Miller**

**Pasco County Historian**

For a walk down memory lane visit

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Please consider contributing old photos  
for the website.

My email address is on the opening page

### ZHA Mission Statement

The mission of the Zephyrhills Historical Association is to research, gather, and share local historical information with all generations, through our literature, programs, and scholarships, and to volunteer assistance to the Zephyrhills Depot Museum and WWII Barracks Museum.

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**Emily Geiger***by Erica Freeman*

Major General Nathanael Greene was optimistic. He had been unsuccessful in the Siege of Ninety-Six, having to retreat from the Star Fort and its surrounding town, Ninety-Six. However, the victor, Colonel Lord Rawdon, had to give up pursuit of Greene's men. Most of Lord Rawdon's men were replacements from Ireland, with little training and wearing thick wool for the bitter British cold. They sweltered in South Carolina. At least 50 died from heat exhaustion. The Continentals had also battered Fort Granby's defenses, tearing down protective walls, and filling in ditches. Now, Greene's newest information revealed the British force meant to aid Lord Rawdon had gone to the wrong town. The Patriots could have an advantage.

Lieutenant Colonels Henry "Light Horse Harry" Lee and William Washington were close by. With a combined effort, the Continental Army could secure the Carolinas and bring the fight back to General Washington for victory. To act on the information about Lord Rawdon, Greene needed to get the word out to General Thomas Sumter, for whom Sumter County, Florida would later be named. They needed Sumter's men.

The Continental Army was better clothed for the southern front, but there was still a morale issue. Supplies were almost non-existent. Their main food source was frogs although gator was looking more and more appealing. Sumter tried to keep recruits by offering them free slaves for long-term enlistments. No one wanted to deliver Greene's message for Sumter through enemy lines and harsh swamps. With not a single soldier volunteering, the moment seemed lost.

As word spread among the Patriots about Greene's plight, a seventeen-year-old female offered to make the trip. Teenage girls had been used by the Revolution before, like Sybil Ludington. There were advantages to the underestimated sex. Soon, she had Greene's written message and was on her way. If stopped, Emily Geiger would say she was visiting her uncle. She was the granddaughter of Hans Jacob Geiger who had immigrated from Switzerland. Emily had a lot of biological aunts and uncles as well as honorary ones. Her uncle, John Murff, had died at the Battle of Cowpens in January 1781. Billy Mink was an honorary one, a good friend of the family. She stayed the night at his house during her journey. Unbeknownst to Emily and her parents, Billy was a spy for the British and suspected Emily was carrying a message.

Billy told the British that Emily was working for the Patriots. Soldiers caught up with her. They didn't believe she just wanted to visit her uncle. Instead, they took her to Fort Granby where Lord Rawdon was guarding Friday's Ferry and transportation across the Congaree River. Even he couldn't break Emily into revealing her secrets. Convinced she must be carrying a message, they sent for the wife of Jacob Haughabok to search her person.

Emily didn't know how long it would take to fetch the older woman. She memorized the contents of the message, tore the message up and ate the physical evidence before the door could open again. Mrs. Haughabok found nothing. Lord Rawdon was forced to let Emily go with an apology and Emily was forced to go to her uncle's house spending the night to sell her lie. In the morning after leaving Herman Geiger's property, she went south, but had to be careful to elude the British soldiers.

Sumter was supposed to be close by. Instead, he was up in North Carolina. On the day Emily was captured by Lord Rawdon, Greene found this out. Sumter suffered a wound in the spring. His behavior was changed forever, less cooperative and more cautious, but at times, more impulsive. A modern doctor might have called it PTSD.

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On July 6<sup>th</sup>, Sumter planned to stay and await further orders. However, he soon changed his mind and joined with Colonels Lee and Washington on July 9<sup>th</sup>. The difficulty in trying to avoid British and Loyalist patrols as well as tracking down Sumter meant it took Emily two weeks before she returned to her father's house.

Together, the Patriots decided against an attack. They found Fort Granby abandoned by the British, scared by the information that the Continental army seemed poised for a battle. The last soldier, Lieutenant Colonel John Harris Cruger, made sure all Loyalists willing to leave packed up for Charleston. Lord Rawdon, weakened by malaria, planned to return to England. There was no need to put all those Continental soldiers at risk in their current condition with the British on the run. Sumter continued small attacks while the others moved to more hospitable land. In September, the Battle of Eutaw Springs caused the British forces to abandon the Carolinas for Virginia and eventual surrender.

The United States has a proud tradition of tall tales about legendary figures historical or fictional like Johnny Appleseed or Paul Bunyan. Emily Geiger falls under this category with some versions having even more embellished details like her father being too disabled to fight or Emily wishing to enlist herself. Some stories have her traveling with a companion, Rebecca Starke. There have even been some historians who doubted her very existence due to the lack of physical evidence. She's not found on any surviving censuses or legal documents. There are no proved descendants or even a verifiable gravestone.

Who would gain from the tale, especially when it wasn't made public until the early 1800s? And if it was public in the early 1800s, why didn't Emily herself come forth? Her absence seems to confirm her fictional status. Wikipedia has her death as 1825. However, more recent scholars, like John Howell, believe this is incorrect. Emily isn't found on legal documents or censuses because she died at just 27 years old from complications of childbirth. Her child died before the next census. It was said they were buried next to each other. No family members came forth to sell their first-hand account for money.



What about her parents? Why isn't anything found about them? This concerns her father. John Heinrich Geiger was part of a sordid religious cult, the Weberites. After multiple murders, the cult was shut down and its leader, Jacob Weber, hanged. John was also due to hang, but a last-minute pardon from the Lieutenant Governor William Bull saved him. During Emily's ride, that event would have been nearly twenty years before, but memories run deep, especially in the south. Other former cult members had moved away or changed their names to hide their involvement. It's possible her eagerness was due to bringing back honor to her family's name after her father's troubles. Just as plausible is a fear that Emily's celebrity could reopen the old wounds of her father's cult, so it was kept secret until there was no one left living.



In trying to find more proof, Howell came across a first-hand account in a 1916 newspaper of a man describing Emily's grave. The newspaper's account described a different location than the grave that turned out to be Josephine Threewits or Geiger Cemetery where a memorial was placed without a body. On the former Threewits land were abnormalities where the 1916 newspaper said to find the grave. Ground penetrating radar revealed the grave of an adult beside the grave of a child just as the family lore said. A new grave marker and dedication for Emily will happen later this summer. Further research will provide more clarity for the timeline of her journey and how it shaped the Revolutionary War.

Emily's cousin was Hans Ulrich Geiger. His grandson was John Adam Geiger who moved and settled onto the land we now know as Zephyrhills, Florida.

Thank you to John Howell, Elizabeth Matic, Tomas Matic, the Lexington County Museum, Dr. Frank O. Clark, J. D. Lewis, the Journal of the American Revolution and David L. Brown for their contributions to this article!