

Mallett, Peter, Jr. ^[1]

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Peter Mallett ^[2], Jr., merchant and Revolutionary ^[3] commissary officer, was born in Connecticut of French Huguenot ^[4] ancestry. His father, Peter Mallett, Sr., the youngest of five children of David Mallett II and his second wife, Johannah Lyon, served as a commissary officer for the British forces in America during the French and Indian War ^[5]. Peter Mallett, Jr., assisted his father in the purchase of cattle, horses, and provisions. After his father's death in 1761, he continued to supply the British forces on his own account. As executor of his father's estate he was unable to collect debts owed his father, and when the estate proved insolvent, he became liable for the debts, having failed to take proper legal precautions.

Because of his strained financial condition, in 1765 Mallett assumed command of a merchant ship in which he owned part interest. In an autobiographical sketch prepared for his children, he recounted his adventures as a merchant captain. Mallett visited the major European ports; he also purchased enslaved people on the Guinea coast and sold them in the West Indies. After his first ship was lost in the treacherous waters off Cape Hatteras ^[6], he found his way to New Bern and then to Charles Town, S.C., where he assumed command of a second vessel. His adventures were not over. While trading illegally at Campeche, Mexico, his ship was attacked by the Spanish *guarda costa*. Despite damages incurred in the ensuing battle, he sailed to New Orleans, where he received permission to sell his trade goods to French settlers on the Mississippi.

When Mallett finally returned to the English colonies, he retired from the sea. With the profits of his last voyage and the insurance claims from the ship lost at Hatteras, he secured credit and established himself as a commission merchant at Edenton ^[7]. There he met Maurice Moore ^[8], who encouraged him to move to Wilmington ^[9]. In 1769 he settled in Wilmington and within five years his mercantile and shipping business was among the most successful in the Cape Fear area.

In January 1775 the Wilmington Committee of Safety ^[10] ordered Mallett to reship enslaved black people imported in violation of the Continental Association, but he apparently cooperated with the trade boycott. He was elected to the Committee of Safety in July and appointed to the seven-member "Committee of Secrecy and Correspondence ^[11]" in October. His participation in the Revolutionary movement is elsewhere evident by his appointment the following May as commissioner to inventory Tory estates and by his election in 1778 to the House of Commons ^[12].

Mallett's service in the French and Indian War ^[13] and his business experience made him a logical choice to supply the state's military forces. On 23 Apr. 1776 the Provincial Congress ^[14] appointed him commissary to the Fifth North Carolina Regiment. As the war continued, Mallett was given increased responsibilities for provisioning state militia and Continental troops. He supplied General Francis Nash ^[15]'s Continentals who were on their way to join George Washington ^[16] in the spring of 1777, and in December 1778 he was appointed to supply the North Carolina troops sent to join General Benjamin Lincoln at Charles Town ^[17].

Mallett often complained of slow payment and fussed over draft exemption for his employees, but the inflation of state and Continental currency and the failure of public credit posed the greatest threat to his business. Commissaries received a 5 or 6 percent commission on all purchases and expenses. Slow payment and depreciation wiped out profits and created staggering losses. Mallett claimed to have lost over \$80,000 in the three months following the British victory at Camden. Unable to purchase goods on public credit, he had assumed personal liability for purchases that were taken by the state forces for worthless paper currency. His personal losses forced his resignation from the army in September 1780, but he agreed to continue purchasing goods with public funds. Suspected of being a Tory because of his resignation from the army, Mallett established a guard at his plantation, Council Hill, near Campbellton (present-day Fayetteville). It was attacked by both Whig mobs and Tory ^[18] partisans.

Following Lord Charles Cornwallis's invasion of the state in early 1781, the British confiscated large quantities of supplies that Mallett had gathered for the Whig forces. When he applied to the state for payment for these captured stores, he was refused because the supplies had not been formally turned over to the army. Some persons even accused him of gathering the provisions in the line of British advance. With documented evidence from the state declaring the goods private property, Mallett applied to the British forces for compensation. Cornwallis paid Mallett for the provisions. Many of the British officers were old acquaintances with whom Mallett had served in the French and Indian War, and he moved freely behind British lines. He claimed that Cornwallis had offered him an appointment as commissary officer to the British forces but that he refused because of his sympathy for the American cause.

In January 1782 Mallett returned to North Carolina from Charles Town under a British flag of truce and voluntarily

surrendered to state officials. In May the [General Assembly](#) ^[12] ordered that he be prosecuted for treason. When the legislators passed the [Act of Pardon and Oblivion](#) ^[19] the following April, they specifically excluded Mallett from pardon, along with the notorious Tory partisans [David Fanning](#) ^[20] and [Samuel Andrews](#) ^[21]. Tried and acquitted in June 1783, Mallett returned to his plantation and resumed his Wilmington mercantile business. Soon he was outfitting ships for London and was involved in trade with [John Gray Blount](#) ^[22] of Edenton. Public resentment of his action during the British occupation did not die easily, however. Nor was he ever satisfied with the settlement of his public accounts. In 1797 he petitioned the state treasurer to reexamine his Revolutionary accounts, claiming that he had suffered heavy financial losses due to depreciation and British confiscation of goods for which he had not been paid following Horatio Gates's defeat at Camden.

Mallett was married twice: first to Eunice Curtis, who died in 1776, and afterwards to Sarah Mumford. By his first wife he had two children, one of whom died in infancy; by his second wife he had fifteen children, three of whom died in infancy. Mallett died at Fayetteville and was buried in the family cemetery near Mallett's Pond. The land is now owned by the state and is used as the district highway headquarters.

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Authors:

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