

Mountfloreance, James Cole ^[1]

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by George Troxler, 1991

ca. 1745–post-5 July 1817

James Cole Mountfloreance, Patriot, lawyer, and land agent, was a native of France. He was educated at the University of Paris, where he "studied for two years Philosophy and for eight years Mathematicks," and served as an officer in the French army "for more than nine years." By the summer of 1778 he was in North Carolina and had been appointed captain of what was to be a regiment of French volunteers in the North Carolina Continental Line. But by the end of August the state had abandoned plans for the French regiment, since only a few straggling French sailors had been recruited.

In September 1778 Mountfloreance obtained letters of introduction from Governor Richard Caswell ^[2] to General George Washington and President Henry Laurens, recommending him for an appointment in the Continental army. The governor found it necessary to allow Mountfloreance and two other French officers £100 each "to enable them to proceed to General Washington's camp." In December Mountfloreance informed Caswell that he had abandoned "all thoughts of prosecuting my Military designs" because of a long illness and concern for the support of his wife. He was teaching a school at New Bern and seeking an appointment as "french interpreter" to the state.

On 4 Sept. 1780 Mountfloreance joined the staff of Brigadier General Jethro Sumner ^[3], who was commanding North Carolina militia near Charlotte. When Sumner resigned in October, offended by the legislature's appointment of General William Smallwood of Maryland to command the state militia, Mountfloreance continued in service as a brigade major to General William R. Davie ^[4], who soon became commissary general responsible for the supply of General Nathanael Greene's army. Mountfloreance proved to be an energetic and capable supply officer, serving both as assistant commissary general and assistant quartermaster general to the state until the two departments were abolished in May 1782. Growing discontent in the state with deputy commissary officers and quartermasters who made unreasonable requisitions and impressments led the legislature to abolish the offices. No doubt Mountfloreance shared some of the responsibility. Governor Thomas Burke ^[5], writing to Mountfloreance in March 1782, had commended his "diligence and activity," yet refusing to support his plans for seizing the property of suspected Tories. Loyalists- Part 1: Introduction ^[6]S.

While a supply officer, Mountfloreance traveled from the coast to the western portion of the state gathering provisions from the county commissioners appointed to collect the specific tax payable in grain, pork, and other commodities. In 1781 and 1782 he was quartermaster general for the Salisbury district. Like other officers, he suffered from irregular pay and inflation. In February 1782 the state quartermaster general, Robert Burton, told the governor that Mountfloreance was an "active and useful officer" in the Quartermaster Department but that he was "very bare of cloathing." Burton asked permission for Mountfloreance to draw shirting, stockings, and cloth for a coat from the state stores at Halifax.

In the short sketch of his public life that Mountfloreance prepared some years later, he noted that he was an officer throughout the American war. Soon afterwards he was licensed to practice law in the inferior courts of North Carolina and then in the superior courts of law and equity of the U.S. government in the Territory South of the Ohio. For a time he also was military deputy surveyor in the Cumberland settlements, and among other duties he located western lands to be issued to officers and soldiers of the Continental line in reward for their service.

Mountfloreance's experience in the region beyond the mountains led him to believe that the Spanish were exerting a strong influence among the Indians in that region, and he went to Charleston, S.C., to discuss the matter with authorities there. During his stay he contributed articles on this subject, under the pseudonym ^[7] FABIUS, to the *South Carolina Gazette*, and these were reprinted widely throughout the nation. The *Columbian Magazine* either reprinted some of them or published original contributions from Mountfloreance regarding the Spanish. As a lawyer with special knowledge of the area, he also discussed the right of the United States to navigate the Mississippi River.

Moving to Nashville (afterwards in Tennessee), he speculated in town lots, engaged in the river trade, and practiced law. Mountfloreance "circulated extensively, and flourished grandly" in Nashville society and was long remembered for his lavish dinner parties. In November 1789 he represented Davidson County (Tenn.) in the Fayetteville convention ^[8] that ratified the federal Constitution. Mountfloreance voted against making ratification conditional on the approval of five proposed amendments and for unqualified ratification of the Constitution. He also helped to write the act by which North Carolina ceded its western territory to the federal government, and in 1791 he was sent to Philadelphia to describe the region to Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson. According to Mountfloreance, he was nominated as a candidate for Congress, but the popularity of one of his opponents was too great to overcome.

In 1791 Mountfloreance contracted with some members of the Blount family to go to France, where he would assist them in trade and the sale of their western lands. He left for France in January 1792 and returned to America early the following year, bringing some purchasers of his own land. In 1793 he went back to France and continued his efforts to sell western

lands and to find markets for American goods. In 1796 Mountflorencia reported that he had never made the first sale of Blount lands. Although he wrote of proposed contracts with the French government and promised markets for flour and indigo, his ventures never materialized.

By 1796 Mountflorencia was an assistant to Fulwar Skipwith, the U.S. consul general in Paris. He remained in Paris as a contact for Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, the American minister to France, following Pinckney's expulsion in June 1797. When Pinckney returned to Paris along with John Marshall and Elbridge Gerry, Mountflorencia was Pinckney's private secretary and an intermediary in the negotiations that culminated in the XYZ affair. Ordered out of France along with the American ministers, Mountflorencia was obliged to sell his furniture and other property in great haste and at a loss. He then went to The Hague, where he became private secretary to William Vans Murray, U.S. minister to the Batavian Republic. He returned again to Paris as Murray's private secretary when Murray, along with Mountflorencia's old friend William R. Davie and Chief Justice [Oliver Ellsworth](#) ^[9], negotiated the convention of 1800. On one occasion in Paris, Davie was invited to accompany Mrs. Mountflorencia to a concert.

Although he was residing in France (except for the time he sought refuge in The Hague), Mountflorencia described himself as an American citizen. He was concerned that a number of American citizens were privateers, attacking other U.S. shipping while flying the flag of France, and he publicized the names of those who were known to him.

Mountflorencia was the author of at least four short published pieces, two in English and two in French, which suggest something of his interests and his involvement in disputes. The earliest was *American Vessels captured and carried into the ports of France since July, 1796*, printed in Paris in 1798. In 1805 there were two, both published in Paris, pertaining to Fulwar Skipwith: *Mémoire pour James C. Mountflorencia, citoyen des Etats-Unis, résident en France depuis plus de douze ans, demandeur: Contre Fulwar Skipwith, citoyen des mêmes états, leur agent commercial à Paris, y demeurant depuis et avant l'année 1794, défendeur* and *Précis pour m. Mountflorencia, citoyen des Etats-Unis: Contre m. Skipwith, agent commercial des Etats-Unis*. Finally, there was a four-page piece headed *His excellency, the Hon. James Monroe, Esq., President of the United States of America*. It was dated in manuscript from Paris, 5 July 1817, and took the form of a letter to the president seeking punishment of Isaac Cox Barnet, U.S. consul at Paris, for his conduct towards Mountflorencia.

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