In December, 1780, British soldiers ran into the "Giant of Virginia" when they clashed with colonists in the swamps of Virginia and South Carolina. The "giant" was Portuguese-born Peter Francisco, a six-foot, six-inch Southern Irregular, who wielded a sword almost as big as himself. This adopted son of the American Revolution was one of the fiercest fighters in the rebellion.

That Francisco was a hero of many battles, history notes. But where he came from is a mystery.

About 1768 a British ship dropped sail at City Point, now Hopewell, Va., and cast ashore a dark complexioned, dark haired lad of six, who spoke a potpourri of foreign languages, principally Portuguese. From his own lips he gave his name as Peter Francisco. Accounts are that the initials P.F. were engraved on his pewter shoe buckles.

Whether the young Portuguese lad was captured from a ship taken by the British as a prize, can only be guessed at. But at least he was taken care of and deposited ashore safely.

Luckily, the boy was not sold into slavery as was the custom. Sailors on the

Primitive painting shows Peter Francisco brandishing his long sword and putting to rout nine British troopers of Tarleton's legion singlehanded. The action reportedly occurred within sight of 400 of the enemy seen in the background. Painting is by C. Pierson of the Rockefeller Folk Art Collection, Colonial Williamsburg.
waterfront gave him food
until young Peter was
turned over to Virginia
authorities and put into a
jail. When Anthony Henry
found him and seeing the likeable
qualities of the boy, took
him home as a servant.

On the way to his
planter, kind to the boy.

The Windsor home at
Hunting Tower, by Prince George County, Va.,
soon became home, as
Judge Windsor adopted
Peter. And it was there
that he received the nickname
of Peter Francisco, because
he was to make a true hero
of the American Revolution
be born. For Judge Windsor
himself was a commander
other than Patrick Henry.

It is said that Peter Francisco
heard Henry deliver the
famous "Give me liberty or
die a death" speech in
Richmond.

In 1776, at age 15, Peter
was a tower of strength.
He was tall, weighing some 260 pounds.
His build was not out of
proportion.

He was known in the "Giant of Virginia," as Peter
was later known, tell of his great
strength of his being able
easily to lift a man in each
arm.

In the same year
he enlisted in the 10th Virginia
Regiment. The state forces
were made up of farmers,
odd and ends uniform.

Those who
under Captain
Clarke were blue coats with
red breeches and
white linen overalls or
the civilian breeches.

The 2nd Virginia
Regiment followed. Feber
at Chesterfield, Va.,
were blue coats with
red facings and red
vests provided by France.

The taste of
courage was to be
at Brandywine, Pa., in the fall of 1777.
Under Washington, at the battle of Brandywine,
Lafayette, he served at
Germania and Fort
Mifflin in Pennsylvania.

Center at Valley Forge, the young
soldier was taught to
sight, march and fight hand-to
hand by the Prussian
officer von Steuben.

Francisco, like the others,
didn't know that von
Steuben was only a
fancy drillmaster.

But Benjamin Franklin
did put him in a general's
uniform hoping to give him the
prestige and confidence.
It worked.

The towering
figure of Francisco was
General of Washington,
who ordered a blacksmith
to make a long, straight
and cut for the
bicorn.

On the night of July 15,
1779, Francisco was one of
a picked force of 1,300 men
that made a secret, hard
march over dark mountains
and swept into the heavily
occupied Stony Point.
that made a secret, hard
march over dark mountains
and swept into the heavily-
fortified British troops
occupying Stony Point,
about 35 miles above New
York. The capture was
made by bayonet alone,
in one of the perfect set
pieces of the war.

The battle was so intense
that Francisco, among the
first of the unit to enter the
fort, saw 17 of the 20 men
around him killed or
wounded. It is reported
that Francisco cut down the
British officer bearing the
unit colors before being
wounded himself by
bayonet.

Later recovered, the now
veteran soldier saw action
in New York, Philadelphia
and Camden.

But it was at Guilford
Court House in North
Carolina on March 15, 1781,
that young Francisco
engaged in one of the war’s
fiercest and most bloody
battles.

Just a few months earlier,
Gen. Nathaniel Greene
from Rhode Island was
named commander of the
southern army. His oppo-
tent was Colonel
Tarleton, a skilled, mer-
ciless cavalryman whom
the colonials called “But-
cher.” His slaughter of Col.
Abraham Buford’s men, after they surrendered gave rise to the term “Tarleton’s quarter.”

Tarleton set out to head off Greene, and Tarleton’s 1,100 men were wiped out by the Americans. But a larger army reassembled, and Tarleton, under the great Cornwallis, met with Greene’s troops, including Francisco, who was now a member of a cavalry unit at the courthouse.

The Southern Paul Bunyon is said to have fought singlehanded nine British troopers off and routed them. Other reports say he slew 11 British regulars, hardened veterans.

The action supposedly occurred in sight of a troop of 400 of the British troops.

Francisco was twice wounded during the encounter. A serious thigh wound felled him that day. But he was back the following fall at Yorktown, where he heard the Redcoats fife and drum field music ironically play the tune “World Turned Upside Down” as the lobsterbacks stacked weapons in surrender.

Exploits of the giant are the subjects of several books. His daring prompted Washington to offer him a commission as an officer. But Francisco could neither read nor write and turned it down.

His size and a trick once gained him several horses of British troops who fled from him. He sold all but one, which he named after Tarleton.

After Camden, he unexpectedly felled a British officer who thought him meek enough to talk into surrender. He gave the officer’s horse to retreating Col. William Mayo, who later expressed gratitude by willing 1,000 acres of land in Kentucky. The Mayo heirs objected, and Francisco never pressed the issue.

After the war Francisco returned to Richmond, and became a tavern owner, storekeeper, blacksmith and gentleman farmer. He married three times, all into well-known Virginia families.

His first wife, Susannah Anderson, died after five years, leaving him a son. Catherine Fauntleroy Brooks lived 27 years and bore him four children. In 1823 he married a widow, Mary Beverly Grymes West.

When Peter Francisco died in January 1831, he was buried, according to his wishes, with military honors. The Virginia House of Delegates, where he had been sergeant-at-arms for many years, adjourned in tribute and attended his funeral.

The ashes of the Virginia Giant rest in Shockoe Hill Cemetery in Richmond. The Portuguese-born American hero is memorialized with a monument at the site of the Guilford Courthouse battle.

It reads: “To Peter Francisco, a giant in stature, might and courage—who slew in this engagement eleven of the enemy with his own broad sword—rendering himself thereby perhaps the most famous private soldier of the Revolutionary War.”