

## American Revolution

The War of Independence was a particularly rich historical period for Little Egg Harbor. Long-held beliefs that historical Little Egg Harbor was active at the time General George Washington and the Continental Congress are shown to be not only true, but understated---the story is bigger than thought, according to recent research. For a period of several years Little Egg Harbor was a crucial minor maritime port in the war effort. Exploring this story offers an absorbing view of lost history in a larger backdrop of the early war years when the 'United Colonies', transformed into "the United States in Congress assembled", sought to keep its army in the field and find allies abroad. Part of this chronicle includes the successive plans for the 'Defense of Little Egg Harbor' deliberated by the Continental Board of War in Philadelphia and the colonial leadership in Trenton. Archival resources present a clear picture that historical Little Egg Harbor spanned from the tip of Long Beach Island to 'Batsto at the Forks', and that all regional events were part of the same story. The following describes part of that history, the final British attack at the port of Little Egg Harbor in 1778.

### Defense of Little Egg Harbor, 1778

Due to its importance starting in 1776, the port came under ever-closer scrutiny by the occupying British in New York City. In October 1778 they launched a major naval-amphibious expedition to destroy it, including both the Chestnut Neck and the docks and warehouses at 'The Forks' of the Mullica River some 12 miles distant. This enemy threat triggered a last-minute response from Continental Congress (on October 5, 1778) to defend the port. The ensuing operation, lasting from October 7 to October 20, was the largest military engagement in the region during the war. It involved some 500 British and loyalist troops and hundreds of sailors of the Royal Navy, opposed by Continental Army General Casimir Pulaski with over 60 light dragoon cavalry and more than 120 light infantry of the Pulaski Legion. Some patriot militia also mobilized, as was an artillery unit, but these small units refused to engage the enemy due to its strength.

The British landed on October 6 on the lower Mullica River, at Chestnut Neck, and launched a full scale raid that reduced the dock/dwelling complex to ashes, burned captured ships at anchor, and leveled farms on the Bass River. According to an official report received by Gen. Washington, the attack commenced when '500 men and some Ships of force entered Egg Harbor this week, and burnt every vessel or house for fifteen miles up the River, and very Valuable Cargo of a large prize lately bro'ght in was destroyed. The Vessels which draw less water went higher up the River [to 'The Forks'], and (Gen. C. Pulaski) Polaski's Horse arriving, put a stop to their pillaging and the Enemy thought proper to re-embark & go down the River." In short, the arrival of the Pulaski Legion prevented the British from reaching the heart of the port at 'The Forks' of the Mullica River (Batsto).

A second attack, with the same objective, was launched by the invaders the following week in the early hours of October 15. This time however the British would commit only half of their force (250 infantry and some marines) in a cautious hours-long maneuver to land on Osborn-Falkenburg Island (then 2 islands; today's Mystic Isle area). It would be still another 2-3 hours, after landing, before they were ready to attack as a 200- strong infantry contingent carefully crept along the wooden causeway leading from the island to the Upland. At near daybreak, the British would overrun a lightly defended outpost picket guard of the Pulaski Legion just on the Upland (site of Pulaski Monument-Radio Road). No muskets were used, as secrecy was essential to the British plan to catch the Pulaski Legion cavalry dismounted in their camp. Instead, in fact, the British had attacked only the legion outpost, nonetheless brutally bayoneting some 19 American

infantry men and officers, according to original documents. A small number of Americans may have been taken captive.

The following is an account of what happened next, contained in the original Papers of Continental Congress and related archive records:

The counterattack by the Pulaski Legion at Little Egg Harbor in the early daylight of October 15 included an incident when a lieutenant of the Legion's dragoons came up against a British infantry picket during the cavalry charge. The encounter resulted in the stabbing of the officer's horse and scattering of the invading enemy which demonstrated not only the intrepid efforts by

The Pulaski Legion's Counterattack during the Defense of Little Egg Harbor,  
October 15, 1778



that officer to engage the enemy-- having ridden ahead of his troop and right into the midst of the enemy-- but also 'a moment of pathos' for it marked the end of the bloody British and Tory night raid. Some 4 months later the Continental Congress commended a French-born officer in American service, Gerard St. Elme for the deed, thereby creating a record of the counter-attack. This episode occurred on or near the grounds of today's Little Egg Harbor Township Municipal hall on Radio Road.

The American cavalry charge, most likely involving virtually the entire Legion's 60+ cavalry arm, caught the enemy by surprise while in the process of withdrawing back to a narrow causeway whence they emerged. Earlier in the same hour, the 200+ strong amphibious-borne British, along with their Loyalist allies, had overrun the nearby outpost of Legion, bayoneting virtually all of the American infantrymen stationed there in an attempt to maintain the secrecy of their arrival on the Upland (beyond the salt marsh). The enemy's immediate target was, in fact, not the lightly defended outpost at the southwest corner of the old Ridgway farm (Pulaski Monument) but the whole of the Legion itself, which actually was encamped about three-quarters of a mile away (Hollybrook Drive) from the scene of the initial heinous assault. The purpose of the outpost at that location was exactly to detect any attempt to land by the round-about route of Osborn-Falkenburg's islands; the enemy intended to flank the legion's main encampment, in order to catch it by surprise and destroy Count (Brig. General) Casimir Pulaski's command.

Following the outpost carnage, the counter-attack by Pulaski's horse cavalry against British light infantry meant the clash would now become either a one-sided fight with infantry caught in

skirmish formation by lance-wielding dragoons, or result in a very rapid retreat. Wisely, the British chose the latter option but not before having the rear of their column (not yet back on the causeway) thrown into utter confusion in the haste and panic of flight. For the second time in two weeks, the British retreat in the face of Pulaski's troops marked a failure to be able to reach their military objective to destroy the heart of the port at 'The Forks' of the Mullica River.

So many British troopers were scattered by American cavalry and pursuing infantry that the ship-based enemy force waited for another 5 days before departing in order to pick up the lost soldiers by nightly ferrying from nearby shores. It was reported by General Pulaski that the unhappy British soldiers who found themselves separated from the main force were concealed by certain local farmers until their rescue could be accomplished. This granting of 'aid and comfort' to the enemy enraged Pulaski who, however, after consideration thought it the better part of valor to have locals sign an oath of loyalty to the Continental Congress. The alternative for Pulaski, which would have more closely conformed with General George Washington's standing orders to deal harshly with 'disaffected Americans' (or Loyalists), would have been to indiscriminately make an example of traitorous behavior by ornamenting the trees with the hangman's noose. That did not happen, but the loyalty oaths survive together with other records in the archives in Washington D.C. constituting the record of the battle.