

Fall River Patriots

Main Street Fall River exploded with musket fire and the smell of black powder hung in the air as 19 local patriots fought off 150 British Redcoats on the Sunday morning of May 31, 1778.

When the battle was over, two British regulars lay dead, houses and sawmills on the waterfront were in flames, but the village was free from the retreating soldiers. It was the village of Fall River, the town of Freetown's greatest hour of the Revolutionary War.

The fact that the British forces thought Fall River was important enough to dispatch six ships and some 100 men here points up the situation surrounding the engagement that began near what is now the state pier and carried onto South

Main Street at the corner of Pocasset Street.

Boston, Providence, and Newport were the heart of population areas, heavily-trafficked seaports, ship building firms, and centers of government. They were the center of the infant America, the defiant colonies which Great Britain's King George III had ordered: "are not to be emancipated from their dependence on the supremacy of England."

For the greater part of 10 years, until the September 1783 signing of the Peace of Paris between the United States and Great Britain, the Revolutionary War was fought throughout now peaceful communities.

From the seacoast of Maine, Boston, Taunton, Rehoboth, Seekonk, along

the Taunton River here, Tiverton, Portsmouth, Newport, Narragansett Bay, Bristol, Portsmouth, Providence, Warwick, British troops raided and pillaged.

Naval battles along our harbors were frequent. Ships built in Dartmouth and Swansea took part.

The war was fought by men from all area communities; usually divided in sentiment and now and then badly discouraged about the possible outcome of the tremendous task they had undertaken.

On the morning of May 31, 1778, most of Fall River was asleep. But not the militia. Since April of 1775 the British had occupied Boston. The Battle at Lexington-Concord was history.

Great battles had been fought and the Declaration of Independence signed. The British were still on Aquidneck Island, yet battles were being fought in Pennsylvania and New York as well. To maintain supplies, the British Navy had been sending ships and men to ravage villages.

Since Fall River was a ship building port, and had its own sawmill functioning, it was thought to be a target at some state for the Redcoats' visit. The British fleet was safe in Newport. But there were also 4,000 Redcoats there. The only plan for Fall Riverites was a good defense, and they took it.

Also, William Ellery Channing, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, and Ezra Stiles, former president of Yale University, and a leader in the colonial cause, were hiding in Dighton. The Taunton River was the roadway for British troops travel.

The village of Fall River had some 200 residents, part of the larger town of Freetown. But as the village slept, the local militia company, some 19 men, had posted a sentry, Samuel Reed.

On that Sunday morning in the pre-dawn blackness, Reed saw activity in the Taunton River at the mouth of the Quequechan River, near what is now Battleship Cove.

Reed was one of the men under the command of Col. Joseph Durfee, a brave patriot who had proved his value as an officer in the American Continental Army and had obtained permission to raise a guard to protect the small community here.

Durfee as a veteran soldier had given the 24-hour-watch simple orders. "If a boat was seen approaching in the night, the sentry was to hail them three times and if no answer was received, to fire upon them."

Reed, according to Durfee's memoirs, carried out the order exactly. As long as boats carrying the "lobsterbacks" edged towards the shore, Reed hailed, then fired the first shot of what was to be Fall River's historic encounter with His Majesty's forces.

The whole community was soon in arms. Durfee posted his men behind a stone wall. As they fired and reloaded their flintlock weapons, using the powder horns filled with black powder, the lead balls made at home by candlelight, they saw their adversaries.



Muskets depicting one Carolina to C

Battle of Fall River Will Rage Anew This Weekend

British Redcoats will again land from longboats on the Fall River shore, burn buildings and engage the local militiamen as the 1778 Battle of Fall River is reenacted June 14, one of several major events marking the Fall River Bicentennial Commission's heritage weekend.

A colonial ball to kickoff the celebrations on Friday night June 13, and the massive parade of the Patriots on Sunday, June 15, are two of the highlights.

The Central Control of the endeavor is the Fall River Bicentennial Commission. But the project has involved a great number of people throughout the community and a number of working groups.

At the helm of the entire operation is Bicentennial Commission Chairman Edward J. Ward of Somerset. A veteran at directing the Battle Weekend, Ward was the organizer and originator of the weekend that began back in 1966.

That year and in subsequent years, the group was known as The Battle of Fall River Celebrations Committee. Besides Ward it included as a working committee, Wilson Curtis, Noel Giard Jr., Frank Hadley, Philip Hudner, Atty. Harold Hudner,

In the months prior to the celebrations, lectures to various groups, contests for schoolchildren, all pointing up the battle theme, were launched. Sidewalk bargain sales in Fall River stores were publicized. A contest to design the souvenir booklet and another to create a ballad depicting the battle were sponsored. Historical books, papers and stories of the battle were presented to the public.

Women created costumes of the colonial period for the ball in the Venus de Milo that first year. Lee Castle and his famous Jimmy Dorsey Orchestra brought back the big band sound.

Meanwhile, students assisted in the building of the mock buildings the British would burn at the shoreline.

All came off spectacularly. Over 50,000 viewed the Parade of the Patriots. Another 35,000 viewed the reenactment. The ball was declared a historical, social triumph.

For its tremendous and successful project, the Battle of Fall River Celebrations Committee was named recipient of the George Washington Honor Medal by the Freedom Foundation at Valley Forge, Pa.

Considine of the Musicians Union here. The naval militia and the local are jointly sponsoring the ball. Colonial gowns and costumes and uniforms by the militia units are expected to make for a colorful evening.

Providing music will be two "big band sounds" with Al Rainone and his Orchestra, and Buddy Braga and his Orchestra entertaining. Hundreds of tickets have been sold, but are still available.

For Saturday's Battle Reenactment, to begin at dusk at Battleship Cove, some 40,000 are expected to attend. Atty. Robert Bogle is chairman of that event, and the script again is by Angus Bailey.

Charles Mendes, a teacher at B.M.C. Durfee High School is in charge of props and students are assisting in building the "village" that will be burned by the British regulars.

Bleachers from Alumni Field, that will seat 3,000, will be transported and erected in the parking lot at the Memorial location.

Portraying the Redcoats in the historic reenactment will be the 4th Old Dartmouth Militia from Fort Phoenix, Fairhaven, and the 64th Regiment of Foot, from White Plains, N.Y.

Redcoats advancing hill.

The battle was fought as patriots held their

Sounds of the cannon echoed the banks of the Quequechan River and were wafted across the Somerset and Swansea.

But so fierce was the battle that the British hasty retreat was a river. Left dead were British Army Charles Burnham and William Danks.

wounded were a they returned to the village that the British hasty retreat was a river. Left dead were British Army Charles Burnham and William Danks.

Durfee was roughly were the handled by our life Spartans that beat a retreat behind them one another bleeding besides the wound they carried away.

Data furnished by historian - says there were nine boats at the waterfront were set afire at house recently sawmill, and a gr owned by Thomas As the British they took an Richard Borden and burned his Durfee was follo

ts Repel British



Muskets explode and lead balls fly in this scene depicting one of the many battles fought from South Carolina to Quebec by an infant nation whose un-

trained, tattered army scurried across 13 colonies to fight the British Empire.

The whole community was soon in arms. Durfee posted his men behind a stone wall. As they fired and reloaded their flintlock weapons, using the powder horns filled with black powder, the lead balls made at home by candlelight, they saw their adversaries.

The British soldiers streamed ashore from the longboats launched from larger ships offshore. There were some 150 British regulars, veterans of the war. They made the usual massed front, and with officers shouting orders behind them and their drummers beating the call to attack, began advancing pouring volleys into the areas of the colonials.

From behind the stone walls, a method of attack the Redcoats had not yet changed their ancient massed defense maneuver against, the long muskets of Durfee and his men poured their slow fusillade.

By that time the British had brought ashore cannon and poured grapeshot, like heavy buckshot, into the small group of defenders. Durfee couldn't answer that firepower and ordered a planned retreat. He sent two men to remove the planks used to cross the Quequechan, thus barring the British from crossing southerly. He and his men then retreated to near Main Street where there was a larger bridge. Positioned there, they awaited as the

at the waterfront were set afire a house recently sawmill, and a owned by Thom

As the British they took an Richard Borden and burned his Durfee was for his troops harassment fire Redcoats into boats.

Hoping to Americans' Redcoats order stand in the b refused and th in the bottom o soldier in the l and killed by t fire.

Borden was terrogated by but refused to any answers. days he was rel

The two dea were buried in Cemetery on



Redcoats advanced up the hill.

The battle was fierce. The patriots held their ground.

Sounds of the muskets and cannon echoed along the banks of the Quequechan to the Watuppa. The booms wafted across the Taunton River and were heard in Somerset and Swansea.

But so fiercely did the Fall Riverites defend their village that the British beat a hasty retreat back to the river. Left dead or dying were British Army Privates Charles Burnham and William Danks. Several wounded were assisted as they returned to their ships.

Durfee wrote: "So roughly were the enemy handled by our little band of Spartans that they soon beat a retreat, leaving behind them one dead, and another bleeding to death, besides the wounded whom they carried away."

Data furnished by historian says that there were nine boats being built at the waterfront. They were set afire along with a house recently built, a sawmill, and a grist mill, all owned by Thomas Borden.

As the British retreated, they took an old man, Richard Borden, prisoner and burned his home. But Durfee was following with his troops and his harassment fire forced the Redcoats into their long boats.

Hoping to stop the Americans' fire, the Redcoats ordered Borden to stand in the boat. But he refused and threw himself in the bottom of the boat. A soldier in the boat was hit and killed by the patriot's fire.

Borden was later interrogated by the British, but refused to give them any answers. After a few days he was released.

The two dead Redcoats were buried in the Pocasset Cemetery on Pocasset

Street. But later they were apparently moved to North Burial Ground where the old cemetery area was moved to make way for a downtown center. The graves have never been located.

In uncovering the facts of the two British casualties, a report of the battle by a British officer to his commanding officer was uncovered.

The report was from Major Gen. R. Pigot to Gen. Sir Henry Clinton, British commander-in-chief of North America. It records the presence of a British gunboat never reported by Durfee in his history of the battle.

Pigot wrote that: "finding a greater number of men in arms than expected, and being apprehensive the opposition would increase, it was thought more prudent to retreat than advance further."

Pigot later reported: "I have the great pleasure in acquainting you that on this expedition, the navy and the army behaved with their usual spirit and firmness."

Another detailed account of the battle comes from the diary of Lt. Frederick Mackenzie, an officer in the Royal Fusiliers. A veteran soldier, he spent from 1775 to 1781 in the areas of Massachusetts, Rhode Island and New York.

According to Mackenzie, the battle day was cloudy, with a cold, south, southeast wind. The purpose of the attack was to destroy the saw mills and a quantity of planking for building boats.

"The Pigot Galley," a gunboat, some flat boats and the boats of the Flora, Juno, Venus, Orpheus and Kingsfisher, under the direction of Capt. Christian of the Kingsfisher; with 100 men of the 54th Regiment under the command of Mayor Eyre were ordered into service," the lieutenant wrote.

The flotilla tried to sneak through Bristol Ferry in that town. But the Pigot ran aground and militia units on duty there opened fire. The other boats waited a while then continued on to this village.

He wrote: "On approaching the shore near Fall River, they (the British ships) were fired on by a guard of 40 men; but pushing directly in, the troops landed and dispersed the enemy. They then proceeded to the First Mills, where one sawmill, a corn mill, nine large boats and about 15,000 planks were burnt."

Commenting on the battle itself, Mackenzie reported: "On advancing a small distance towards the other mills, they found a considerable number of enemy posted at, and above them, from which they received a heavy fire by which two men were killed and an officer and four men wounded."

He ended his report saying: "It being judged imprudent to attempt forcing the post, or to continue longer on shore, the troops returned to the boats and reembarked without further molestation." He made no comment about Richard Borden, or another soldier killed in the retreat.

But later, returning to aid the grounded Pigot, during cannon fire from the battery at Bristol, a lieutenant aboard the Flora lost an arm; three seamen were killed; the galley received shots in the hull; the ship's boom was cut in two and its rigging nearly destroyed.

The British fired 160 shots from their ship's guns at the Bristol battery.

From newspapers printed in Providence on June 6, 1778 came more reports on the Battle of Fall River. It mentions the fleet with Major Eyre running into 25 militiamen in Fall River.

Speaking of the spirit of Durfee and his band, the accounts noted: "Apprized of the enemy's intention, they took up the bridge and posted themselves behind a wall that commanded it, from whence they kept up so brisk a fire on the enemy, that after the engagement of near an hour and a half, they were compelled to retire, leaving behind them one killed and another mortally wounded."

Five British Brown Bess muskets, and five, black, felt-fur cocked hats with the British cockade in it were left behind as the British retreated.

Also describing the Bristol battle with the ships, the report stated that, "We had not a man either killed or wounded." The Pigot Galley crew was forced to leave her and the Bristol Train of Artillery took her as a prize.

From the National Archives in Washington, D.C., came a roster of Col. Durfee's Company as of April, 1778. Whether they were the 17 who fought the British is unknown.

They are: Aaron Turner, Parker Earle, George Reed, James Denesten, George Carter, Charles Durfee, John Luther, William Elsbree, John Boomer.

David Brayton, Burden Brayton, Daniel Borden, Peleg Brayton, Peter Thatcher, Thomas Borden, Matthew Cooke, and Seth Church.

Other data on record showed that Durfee later was given permission to take two of the Continental Army's whaleboats and outfit them with his guard to reconnoitre the Taunton River.

An officer at either Tiverton or Bristol was ordered to turn the boats over for Durfee's use and from the Bristol Commissary to provide provisions for Durfee and his men.



Capturing Fort Ticonderoga

A descendant of Col. Ethan Allen stands on the steps, center, and demands the surrender of Fort Ticonderoga in a re-enactment of the first American

victory in the Revolution. Half dressed British soldiers are marched down the steps at left. AP Photo