

Fall River was once a war zone

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FALL RIVER — It's hard to imagine that Fall River was once a city in a war zone. It's also hard to imagine that in May 1776 the local militia could muster but 17 men.

Still, the militia was a very serious business in those days, just as the National Guard, its descendant, is now.

In December 1776, British troops captured Newport, R.I., and began a running battle with the "Aquidneck Island Invaders," a Colonial force dedicated to harassing the occupying soldiers.

The British decided to cripple the Invaders by striking at Fall River, where they believed their tormentors were obtaining boats. On May 25, 1778, early in the morning, 150 British soldiers boarded boats in Newport and set sail for Fall River. The British intended to burn lumber mills along the Quequechan River.

Stationed on Fall River's

waterfront, lone sentry Cpl. Samuel Read hailed the boats in the early morning hours. Failing to receive a reply, he fired on the boats.

The boats approached the shore near where the Tillotson Rubber Co. now stands on Ferry Street. Hearing the shots, the city's remaining 16 militia men took up their guns and went to meet the British.

The militia crouched behind a stone wall, firing at the British until the Redcoats opened up with a cannon. The cannon fire drove the defenders back. On the way, the militia destroyed one of the two bridges over the Quequechan, leaving one bridge over the river near the corner of what is now Bedford and North Main streets. Taking cover behind another stone wall, the militia

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men primed their muskets and waited for the British.

The high ground occupied by the militia let them fire down into the Redcoat ranks, while the stone wall

provided cover. Firing from a concealed position was frequent tactic of Americans during the Revolution, with New England's many stone walls providing cover.

The British, advancing in neat ranks, were driven back by the fire of the small but well-situated force. The Redcoats took most of their wounded with them, leaving behind one dead soldier and another who was rapidly bleeding to death. The Americans were unscathed and buried the two dead British soldiers at the northwest corner of Pocasset and Main streets.

History records the British dead as two privates of the British Army's 54th Regiment, Charles Burnham and William Banks. Eventually, the two bodies were reburied in the North Burial Ground off North Main Street. No one now knows where they are buried.

The British may have been driven off, but not before setting fire to a house, sawmill and gristmill belonging to Thomas Borden. The fire destroyed roughly 15,000 feet of wooden planks used to build boats.

The British also burned the home of Richard Borden, located near what is now Anawan Street. They took Borden hostage. Passing back down the bay to Newport, the British were sniped at from shore, and they stood Borden up in one of the boats, hoping the American would not fire on one of their own.

Borden, not willing to be used as a human shield, wrestled himself free and dove to the bottom of the boat. While he lay there, a shot fired from shore killed a British soldier who had been standing next to him. A few days later, the British released Borden.

The Battle of Fall River was finished in two hours and, while the British had achieved part of their objectives in burning lumber used to build boats, the Americans had resisted and had driven the British back into the bay.

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