

Joseph Durfee Was a

Fall River's only skirmish of the Revolutionary War, or at least the history books tell us no more than that, apparently had no central hero. But the man we know most about, and who in his personal memoirs recounted the battle scene for us, is Col. Joseph Durfee.

The name Durfee has long played a central part in the history of Fall River.

In 1660, just 40 years after the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth, Thomas Durfee came from England to settle in Portsmouth, bringing the Durfee name and a subsequent long line of Durfee men and women to the Southern New England scene.

Of the lineage came Joseph Durfee, born in this city, then known as Freetown, on April 27, 1750. He was the son of Judge Thomas Durfee, who served as a counselor, a lawyer.

That Durfee was a veteran military man was discovered in a 50-page file of the Old Military Record Division National Archives in Washington, D.C.

Much is known about Durfee because on Aug. 30, 1832, just nine years before his death, the colonel submitted an application for a Revolutionary War pension. The file contains a dozen or more legally notarized depositions from friends and fellow citizen soldiers. Each letter is dated from the year 1832.

The letters give specific details about Durfee's life and military career. Such names as Richard and Benjamin Durfee, Dr. Aaron Turner of Warren, appear on the statement attesting to the quality of Durfee's military service and his moral character in general.

Among the application papers is a four-page personal and detailed deposition of his military service.

This served as a basic outline for Durfee's own literary "Reminiscences of Colonel Joseph Durfee Relating to the Early History of Fall River, and Revolutionary Sciences."

It was written in 1834. From that the Fall River Historical Society in 1967 edited and published the document on the occasion of the Battle of Fall River. Mrs. William E. Fuller, a director of the Historical Society researched and footnoted the text.

The Durfee document now stands as the best eyewitness account of the battle of Fall River in 1778. But it also points to a natural leader, a military man, who saw much service.

Writing in the first person, Durfee amalgamated the city's history, his military service and the battle of Fall River into one. And he didn't leave out

other areas of the War for Independence.

"Our country has been involved in three wars since my recollection," Durfee wrote. "The first was with the French and Indians, 1775-1762, when we fought for our lives. The French offered a bounty for every scalp which the Indians would bring them. It was therefore certain death to all who fell into their hands."

"I saw many men enlist into that service, and among them Joseph Valentine, father of William Valentine of Providence. I was then about 10 years of age."

Joseph Valentine, records tell us, was the son of Samuel and Abigail Durfee Valentine, born at a farm near the Freetown-Fall River line in 1735.

"The second war was with Great Britain, during the greatest part of which I was actively engaged in the service of my country. We then fought for Liberty," Durfee emphatically pointed out.

The Colony of Massachusetts was filled with the two parties, Whigs or Tories. Conventions were held in the colony to transact business. At one of the conventions, Durfee said, he received a captain's commission signed by Walter Spooner, Esq., and took the command of a company of "Minute Men."

Spooner, born in Dartmouth in 1720, served 17 years on the Council of the Colony. In 1781 he was made chief justice of the Court of Common Pleas for Bristol County.

Continuing on, Durfee said that "British ships commanded by Wallace, and Asque, and Howe, early in the Revolution were off our coast in the Taunton River and Mount Hope and Narragansett Bays, harrassing and distressing the towns of Newport, Bristol and other towns on the River."

Probably from orders received from the battery at Bristol Ferry, "I was called upon with my company and such others as could be mustered to guard the shores and prevent the British from landing until the Colony could raise a force sufficient to protect the inhabitants from their depredations."

Apparently the Fall River patriots militia at that time had no real encounter with British regulars, except perhaps to fire on passing ships, or scare off singular advances by foraging parties that approached shore.

Durfee's reminiscences "jumped" then to 1776 after the Aug. 27 battle on Long Island. He recalled that reinforcement was called for to cover the retreat of American troops. He was ordered to take command of

a company of 60 men and march to New York.

He recounted that he participated at the Oct. 28, 1776 battle at White Plains. Returning from that battle, Durfee said the British took possession of Newport on Dec. 7, 1776. He then assisted in covering the retreat of forces from the Battle of Rhode Island.

By spring of 1777 Durfee had been promoted to the rank of major and was stationed in Little Compton under the command of Col. John Hathaway of Berkley. After several months he returned to Fall River, and saw the community constantly harassed by British foraging units.

With help "of the leading and influential men of this place," (Fall River) and with the permission of General John Sullivan, commander-in-chief of all the forces hereabout, Durfee was authorized to

raise a guard of 20 men and rations would be provided for them from the garrison at Bristol. He also was given two whale boats in which to patrol the coast.

Whether Durfee followed the custom at that time of mounting a small carriage gun in the bow of the whaleboat, is unknown. There are no records of any sea encounters by the crews.

"I soon raised a guard, procured the store now standing at the end of the Iron Works Company's Wharf (the Firestone Rubber Co. property) for a guard house, where we met every day, called the roll and stationed Sentinels for the night to watch the movements of the enemy and give the alarm when approached."

Durfee recalled that Samuel Reed, a corporal, was on duty on the night of the attack. Oddly enough,

Durfee, using his reports, was fought morning on May, 1778." Sullivan MacKenzie diarist at N date was Ma

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"Much of village, wh elegant bu dense popul a wilderne goats lodge seasons. Th the Durfees principal pr Pocasset l (Tiverton)



The statue of Marquis de Lafayette and his n Lafayette Park here since 1916 when it was pr people of French descent. The bronze statue wa Zocchi of Rome. It rests on a base of Fall River gra

a Freedom Fighter

Durfee, usually precise in his reports, said the battle was fought "on a Sabbath morning on the 25th day of May, 1778." But Gen. John Sullivan, and Lt. MacKenzie, a British diarist at Newport, say the date was May 31, 1778.

On that year, the 25th was not a Sunday. But the 31st was.

Durfee then goes on to describe the village of Fall River the day of the battle. "At that time and until within a few years the Fall River Stream (the Quequechan River) was owned by the Bordenes."

"Much of what now is the village, where there are elegant buildings and a dense population, was then a wilderness where the goats lodged in the winter seasons. The Bordenes and the Durfees were then the principal proprietors of the Pocasset Purchase and (Tiverton) and owners of

the land along what is now South Main Street for more than a mile in length. Thomas and Joseph Borden owned the South side of the stream and Stephen Borden the North side. Thomas Borden owned a sawmill and grist mill at the time, standing where the old saw and grist mills now stand near the Iron Works establishment."

This latter site is the old Firestone property, east of Canal Street and north of Anawan Street.

"The stream was very small, but the falls were so great that there was little occasion for dams to raise a pond sufficient to carry the wheels then in operation. A small footbridge, which stood near where the main street now crosses the stream, afforded the only means of passing from one side to the other of the stream, except by fording it. There was formerly a

small dam near where the Troy Factory now stands "(site of the old Troy Mill)."

"When the water failed, those who owned the mills near the mouth of the river hoisted the gates at the upper dam and drew the water down. It was no uncommon thing 25 or 30 years ago for the water to be so low and the river so narrow at the head of the stream, that a person might step across without difficulty. It was frequently not more than six inches deep. Since my remembrance there was a footbridge of stepping stones only across the Narrows between the North and South Ponds (Watuppa)."

Durfee's first person report of the battle against the Redcoats was precise. It tells of Reed's hailing of the ships in the pre-dawn darkness, his warning shots, the mustering of the 19-member militia, with Henry Brightman, a sergeant, as second in command. All in all, it was 20 men and no more, according to Durfee, who fought the British.

He noted that: "The two British soldiers killed in this engagement were buried at twelve o'clock the same day as the battle, near where the South end of the Massasoit Factory now stands." Historians say this is the northwest corner of Pocasset and Main Streets.

"During the month of August of that summer, the Fall River militia was busy procuring arms, ammunition, and in building flat-bottomed boats, and scows for the troops to cross over the river to Rhode Island . . . to dislodge the British Army."

Apparently Durfee is referring to the transport of some 10,000 troops that had been waiting at Tiverton's Fort Barton to fight the Redcoats on Aquidneck Island. The "River" referred to is the Sakonnet Passage.

"A barn now standing near the Stone Bridge (Tiverton) was occupied for a commissary store of which I had charge until things were in readiness, and the troops prepared to cross over to the island when I left the store in charge of my friend and relative, Walter Chaloner."

Chaloner was the husband of Durfee's sister, Hope Durfee.

As a major in Colonel Josiah Whitney's 1st Bristol County Regiment, Durfee was sent to Butts Hill, west of East Main Road in Portsmouth. He recalls watching the naval battle between the French and the British.

" . . . Broadships were exchanged and a bloody battle ensued. A tremendous storm came on, long remembered as the August storm, in which the two

fleets were separated, and many who had escaped the cannon's mouth found a watery grave. The French fleet, or as much of it as survived the storm, went into Boston for repairs, and the remnant of the British Fleet went into New York."

Following the storm, Durfee and his troops, along with three divisions marched to Newport spread over East and West Roads. Durfee was sent with a detachment to take possession on Honeyman's Hill, which was near Green End Avenue.

On a foggy morning, Durfee and his men met the British, fell back under cover of night, and again advanced in the darkness to set up a small fort, mounting a 24 pound gun and an 18 pound gun. The following day a battle ensued.

But the French fleet at Boston was still undergoing repairs and could not come to aid the Americans. The British has greatly strengthened their forts and Lafayette, Greene, and Sullivan ordered a retreat to the north end of the Island. It was Aug. 29, 1778.

Recalling the retreat that day, Durfee wrote: "The British followed and soon came up with our rear-guard and commenced firing upon them. The shots were briskly returned and continued at intervals, until our troops were joined by a part of our army a short distance to the South of Quaker Hill, (East Main Road, Portsmouth) so called, when a general engagement ensued in which many lives were lost on both sides. At night we retreated from the Island to Tiverton. On the following day we left Tiverton, crossed over Slade's Ferry (in Somerset) and marched through Pawtucket and Providence to Pawtuxet, where we remained until our term of service expired."

But Durfee also wrote that sometime after this he received a lieutenant colonel's commission, took command of a regiment to protect the seashores, and marched to Tiverton. On Oct. 29, 1779, the British troops left Newport.

Durfee was later a pioneer in the cotton manufacturing industry of this city and its vicinity. He introduced the very first cotton mill into this city in 1810. The mill, now destroyed, was located in the Globe section of the city.

At one time Durfee owned and lived in the house on Water Street in Assonet Village which is now the home of Stephen Briggs. Durfee died in Freetown on Dec. 10, 1841, at the grand age of 91.



ette and his noble steed has adorned when it was presented to city by the onze statue was designed by Arnaldo of Fall River granite.

Herald News Photo