

From the breastwork, the Patriots poured heavy fire into the British soldiers, who marched relentlessly forward, wavered and then came on again. Reinforcements joined Patriots in the breastwork and were ordered to withhold their fire until the British were within 50 yards. When they finally fired, they killed Fordyce only 15 feet from the breastwork. Two lieutenants also fell, and another British lieutenant was wounded, along with dozens of soldiers.

The British fell back. Colonel Edward Stephen's unit poured fire from a flank position into the retreating force. Lieutenant Edward Travis led the Culpeper Minutemen across the little bridge and chased the British into their own fort.

The battle lasted about a half an hour. Only one Patriot was wounded, Lieutenant Thomas Nash, of Norfolk County. The British reported 60 killed, but Woodford's estimate was that casualties were far greater. Later, the figure was given as 102 British killed or wounded.

During the battle, the Patriots crawled from their breastwork to retrieve wounded British to help care for them. When the battle was over, Captain Leslie came out of the fort to bow his thanks for the humanity of the Patriots. His nephew, a lieutenant, had been killed in the battle. That night, Leslie led the British troops back to Norfolk. With no supplies from the Great Road available to him, Dunmore's force retreated to British ships in the harbor.

### *The Consequences*

The turn of events threw the loyalists into a panic, changed the sentiments of those who were undecided and raised the spirit of the patriots. News reached Williamsburg. On December 13, four days later, the Fourth Virginia Convention,

for the first time in a public declaration, strongly condemned Dunmore and the British parliament, and expressed a spirit of independence by calling for force "to maintain our rights and privileges." On the same day, Woodford began his march to Norfolk.

On January 1, 1776, unable to get provisions, the British opened fire on Norfolk from the huge guns of the fleet in the harbor, initiating Norfolk's utter and complete destruction. On February 6, the Patriots abandoned the city after setting fire to the buildings that were left. The only surviving structure was Old St. Paul's Church, which was built in 1739. A British cannonball from the 1776 bombardment lodged in its southeast corner is visible to this day. Dunmore retreated to Portsmouth and then up the Chesapeake Bay, to Gwynne's Island, near the mouth of the Rappahannock River. He ultimately abandoned Virginia in July. British rule over the colony ended forever.

Five long, often discouraging years of war were ahead, but the Battle of Great Bridge rendered Virginia free of major military conflict for a period of three years following the destruction of Norfolk. The newly created Commonwealth raised troops, furnished military supplies and food and established a troop and supply line from northeastern North Carolina up the Chesapeake Bay to Washington's army in the north. It later supported the Southern Campaign of General Greene with troops and supplies. Virginia was a key to the British surrender at Yorktown in 1781.

The success at Great Bridge was compared to the problems the Patriots had faced in Boston a few months earlier. Recalled Woodford: "It was a second Bunker's Hill affair, in miniature, with this difference: that we kept our post and had only one man wounded in the hand."



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## *The Battle of Great Bridge*

By Elizabeth Hanbury and Jim Hodges

*The* Battle of Great Bridge, the first major Revolutionary War armed conflict in Virginia, led to the end of British rule over the largest colony in America. Patriots and British soldiers faced each other for eleven days and skirmished amid constant cannon fire before the climatic battle that lasted but a half-hour. But in that short time, patriotic volunteers, still eight months from declaring their independence from Great Britain, showed that they could stand up to cannon fire and rout a unit of the best professional soldiers in the world.

In winning the battle on December 9, 1775, the Patriots effectively denied to the British Norfolk, the finest sea port between New York and Charleston. It also deprived them of the rich agricultural resources of the counties of Norfolk, Princess Anne and northeastern North Carolina, described as being sufficient to supply an entire army.

### *Tensions Mount*

In the decade that preceded the battle, Great Britain levied special taxes on her American colonies, in part for the revenue that they yielded, and in part to remind her subjects that the Mother Country had the right to exact revenue from them.

For a decade and more, many in the colonies were repulsed by the idea that taxes could be levied unilaterally, with no Colonial input into their creation. Most grievous among the taxes were the Stamp Act and the Townshend Revenue Act. The Stamp Act required a stamp be purchased from the crown for all legal documents, permits, contracts, newspapers, wills, pamphlets and playing cards in the colonies. The Townshend Revenue Act imposed duties on glass, lead, paint and tea.

The cry "taxation without representation is tyranny" was heard throughout the colonies, and groups to protest the levies sprang up. Among them was the "Sons of Liberty," 57 patriots who assembled at the Norfolk County Courthouse on March 31, 1766.

Their message was "that, if necessary, they would sacrifice their lives and fortunes" to the cause of repeal of the Stamp Act.

As the rumblings grew stronger, sides were drawn sharply. Some supported the Patriots' cause, others the Crown. Patrick Henry, speaking to the Virginia House of Burgesses in St. John's Church in Richmond on March 23, 1775, made his preference known: "Give me liberty or give me death."

Four weeks later, during the night of April 20-21, John Murray, fourth Earl of Dunmore and the Royal Governor of Virginia, ordered his men to enter the Public Magazine at Williamsburg to seize the 20 kegs of gunpowder stored there. That was two days after Governor Thomas Gage had dispatched a British detail to destroy Patriot munitions at Concord, Massachusetts, an act that led to the skirmishes there and at Lexington.

When the Virginia Gazette learned of Lexington and Concord, it carried this message: "The sword is now drawn and God knows when it will be sheathed."

### *Dunmore In Hampton Roads*

Though his control of citizenry on land was tenuous, Dunmore could call upon British Naval power in Hampton Roads for protection. Fearing for his life, he left Williamsburg





on June 8, boarded the *HMS Fowey* and found refuge at the Gosport Shipyard in Portsmouth. The owner there, Andrew Sprowle, like Dunmore a Scotsman, welcomed the governor and furnished barracks for his men.

In August 1775, delegates to the Third

Virginia Convention meeting in Williamsburg resolved to raise an army for "the Defense and protection of this Colony." They appointed Patrick Henry Colonel of the First Virginia Regiment and commander in chief of the entire regular army. William Woodford of Caroline County was appointed Colonel of the Second Virginia Regiment.

A Committee of Safety was created to "execute the Rules and Regulations established by this Convention for the protection of this Colony." It was first convened in Hanover Town, a village on the Pamunkey River, on September 18, 1775.

Stores were inadequate, and it seemed that there was little that the committee could do about the British in Hampton Roads. But the Patriots were prodded by a prominent Virginian, George Washington, who was of the opinion that the "arch traitor to the rights of humanity, Lord Dunmore, should be instantly crushed" and that "the fate of America [depends] on his being obliged to evacuate Norfolk this winter. . ."

On September 30, a party of 17 British soldiers and sailors rowed to a wharf in Norfolk and silenced Norfolk's first newspaper by seizing the printing press from the office of John Holt, a loyal patriot. Residents appealed to the Committee of Safety for protection from the governor's "illegal and riotous" acts, but before the committee could answer, Dunmore threatened to burn Hampton.

A company from the 2nd Virginia Regiment under Captain Nicholas and a company of minutemen were sent to relieve citizen volunteers. More raids followed in the counties of Norfolk and Princess Anne. The committee ordered the 2nd Virginia Regiment and five companies from the Culpeper Minute Battalion to advance to the "Neighborhood of Norfolk or Portsmouth," but before Colonel Woodford could proceed, men from the British sloop *Otter* landed east of Hampton and looted a number of houses.

Six small ships entered Hampton Creek and further threatened the town, but no parties were sent ashore after an exchange of cannon and musket fire from the shore. The Committee of Safety ordered Woodford to take Captain Buford and his mounted Culpeper Minutemen, known for their marksmanship, to the threatened town.

When Woodford arrived on the morning of October 26, the British ships returned, entered the small harbor and began a bombardment of the town. Woodford positioned the company of Culpeper Minutemen behind fences, trees, rocks and houses and greeted the British by picking off every sailor who was exposed on the ships. The expert riflemen forced a British withdrawal.

Many of the Scottish merchantmen who had lived there and whose livelihoods depended on their ties with the Mother Country were gone. They had been ordered from the city by the Committee of Safety. On November 7, Dunmore ordered martial law and ordered freed any slaves who would leave their masters and take up arms for the king. He used many of those slaves to entrench Norfolk.

### *An Essential Pass*

Woodford began moving his men toward Great Bridge, but lacking the ability to go up against British sea power in Hampton Roads, the movement was a circuitous one, up the James River, across where it narrowed and back down the south shore. Located 12 miles south of Norfolk, the village of Great Bridge was the key to holding the Great Road, which was the primary supply line to the south and Dunmore's Achilles heel.

The Great Road came up from North Carolina into Tidewater Virginia as the chief route for transporting the pitch, tar and turpentine necessary to maintain British ships. Overland from the fields and forests south of the Chesapeake Bay came cargo to transport to New York, Boston and Charleston, and to the West Indies and Britain herself, as well as the corn, wheat, livestock and other farm products necessary to sustain Norfolk.

Those products were loaded onto rafts and barges in North Carolina and offloaded at the southern end of the Great Road, where ox-drawn wagons took them to the Southern Branch of the Elizabeth River at Great Bridge. There they could be transferred to warehouses or to vessels bound for Norfolk.

Originally, the Great Road was little more than a dirt trail, sandy in some places, muddy in others. In low areas, logs were felled across the road, providing a more substantial corduroy. In the 1690s, bridges and causeways were built to continue the Great Road to the north. Chief among the bridges was the one across the Southern Branch of the Elizabeth River. It came to be called the Great Bridge. Causeways were built through tidal marshes north and south of the bridge. The system provided the only landward passage into Norfolk.

A village sprang up on the south side of the river called Bridgetown. Soon, that name morphed into Great Bridge. The town and the bridge were Woodford's preliminary destination. Breaking the British supply line and forcing Dunmore out of Norfolk were his goals.

Dunmore answered the plea of the region's Tories to defend

the Great Bridge. During the night of November 13, having received information that rebels from North Carolina had posted themselves at Great Bridge, Dunmore, accompanied by volunteers and 130 regulars of the 14th Regiment of Foot under the command of Captain Samuel Leslie, struck out for the bridge. On arrival the following morning they found no signs of an encampment and believed the Carolinians had fled. Realizing that Great Bridge was an essential pass, he ordered the erection of a stockade fort on an island at the north end of the bridge. Former slaves served as the primary workmen. It was garrisoned with an officer and 25 men. They called it Fort Murray, after the governor.

The battle lines were drawn.

Upon receiving intelligence that a rebel force was gathered at Kemp's Landing, Dunmore and his party marched some ten miles distant from Great Bridge before encountering the Princess Anne militia that included minutemen and volunteers from Norfolk. They numbered about 170 men and were on their way to meet Woodford at Great Bridge. The British, then 350 strong, routed the militia with a single volley, sending them retreating in disorder into nearby swamps. Dunmore entered Kemp's Landing as a triumphant victor with colors flying.

### *The Battle For The Pass*

Woodford received news of the event en route to Great Bridge. He immediately dispatched an advance force under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Charles Scott and Major Thomas Marshall. Woodford slackened his pace in order to gather munitions and more provisions for his troops. Meanwhile, Patriots in Norfolk County had assembled a militia under the command of Colonel John Wilson. Another unit came up from Pasquotank County, N.C., led by Colonel Peter Dauge. Skirmishes broke out almost immediately when Scott and Marshall reached Great Bridge on November 28.

Woodford arrived at Great Bridge on December 2. His 2d Regiment consisted of regulars from the counties of Albemarle, Amherst, Buckingham, Caroline, King George, Spotsylvania, Stafford, Charles City, Elizabeth City, James City, New Kent, Warwick, York, Fairfax, Loudoun, Prince William, Brunswick, Dinwiddie, Prince George, Southampton, Surry, Sussex, Lancaster, Northumberland, Richmond, Westmoreland and Williamsburg. The Culpeper Minutemen, whose banner carried the coiled rattlesnake and the words "Don't Tread on Me - Liberty or Death," also included men from the counties of Fauquier and Orange, many of them with "Liberty or Death" on their hunting shirts.

The Patriots constructed a breastwork on the south side of the causeway, and skirmishes continued between their forces and the British. Shots were fired daily, often during the early morning. Woodford wrote that "cannon fire was incessant."

On December 8, the eve of the battle, Captain Leslie and his 14th Regiment of Foot, which included Captain Charles Fordyce, who commanded the 14th Regiment's grenadier unit, and a crew of sailors from Captain Squire's *Otter*, left Norfolk and arrived at the stockade fort at 3:00 A.M. The group also included a unit of volunteer loyalists called "The Queen's Own Loyal Virginia Regiment" and a unit consisting of runaway slaves named "Dunmore's Royal Ethiopian Regiment." British forces numbered around 670. Patriot forces now numbered around 900.

Among Woodward's cadre was John Marshall, son of Major Thomas Marshall, who had helped organize the Culpeper Minutemen. Marshall's son, John, was a lieutenant in one of the companies. John Marshall later became the first chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.

A Marshall slave went to the British side under the ruse of being a "deserter." He informed Dunmore's forces that only 300 "shirtmen" were in the village of Great Bridge. At dawn on the ninth, British troops moved out of the fort, began replacing planks previously taken up from the bridge, set fire to the remaining buildings and began shooting at the advance sentinels.

The crew from the *Otter* rolled cannon across the bridge and positioned them at the edge of the island. Cannon balls began to hammer the Patriots' breastwork on the other side of the causeway. Through the smoke, the Patriots could see the British regulars forming to march across the causeway. The bridge and causeway were only wide enough to march six soldiers abreast.

Patriot sentinels stationed on the island fired back at the red-clad British soldiers, then began retreating. Last among those to retreat was a brave freed black man by the name of Billy Flora. Before retreating to the protection of the breastwork, he ran back amid a shower of bullets to take up a plank of a small bridge to make it more difficult for the British to cross the causeway.



The Battle of Great Bridge reenactment is held annually every 1st weekend in December near the original site of the battle.