

## **History of The Battle of Groton Heights and The Burning of New London**

The port of New London was an important commercial and privateering center for Connecticut as well as the Colonies. Because of its deep natural harbor, New London became the State port for wartime Naval activities. It was therefore necessary to keep the channel of armed commerce open during the war. In 1775, after Britain's King George III issued the "Instructions at the Court of St. James" to all commanders of private ships to attack and seize every colonial vessel, Continental Congress ordered every able bodied sailorman to do the same; oppose, annoy, attack, seize and subdue the British.

Connecticut was authorized by Congress to grant a letter of marque. This document permitted a private citizen to equip a ship with arms in order to attack an enemy ship. Privateering, as it was known, became the leading weapon against Britain's large sea power as well a way to supply a large part of the stores needed for the cause. Nathaniel Shaw, Jun., an upstanding citizen/merchant of New London, was appointed Naval Agent for Congress and the Colony. He was also an astute and successful privateer as well. Rallying fellow sea captains, his fleet of thirteen vessels made repeated runs up and down the Eastern seaboard and to the West Indies for arms, ammunition, and naval supplies while in danger of British attack or capture. Supplies were stored in his warehouses on Water Street and distributed as needed. It was no surprise that New London Harbor was an inviting target for a British attack.

Because of New London's significance and close proximity to Long Island Sound, it was repeatedly threatened but received no direct attack. Acts of aggression and retaliation occurred throughout the war. The British and her spies maintained a constant watch over the harbor. It is estimated that New London privateers had taken five hundred British vessels over the duration of the war. The accumulation of captured "prizes", namely military and other stores, were immense and valuable. On June 24, 1781, Captain Dudley Saltonstall aboard the *Minerva* captured the British privateer *Arbuthnot* with a valuable cargo of tobacco and sent her into New London. Five weeks later, Saltonstall captured the most valuable prize of all, the *Hannah*. Bound from London to New York, she was laden with a cargo worth upwards of L 80,000 British sterling. Captured south of Long Island, the vessel was brought into the port of New London. No doubt the British were incensed.

Retaliation was their intent. This supports one theory for the raid on New London. Equally interesting, and another theory for the attack, in early September 1781, intelligence reports received by British commander Sir Henry Clinton indicated that French-American naval and land forces were heading for the Chesapeake. Clinton had to abandon his plans to attack Newport (RI). He held his army in New York, and unwilling that preparations for attack be wholly lost, he felt that an "annoyance" on enemy coasts be made. Gen. Benedict Arnold, at the same time, was actively pursuing an independent command since his defection to the British cause a year earlier. He was waiting for an opportunity to prove his military skills. What better assignment for this former Norwich resident who knew this area well to command a successful raid! Clinton's change of plans was to cut and destroy the *Hannah* and other prize vessels, destroy the large naval store, supply depot and the "rebel fleet" of privateers as well as the release of British

naval prisoners. This assignment was given to Arnold via signed orders on September 2, 1871.

General Benedict Arnold commanded the expedition that arrived near the shore of Long Island Sound the night of September 5, 1781. As they approached New London, the wind suddenly shifted from south to north and kept the fleet from entering the harbor. Thirty-two ships, brigs, schooners, and sloops sat motionless. Within this number, twenty-four transports carried the troops to both shores of the Thames River.

At early dawn on September 6, 1781, the fleet was spotted and an alarm was fired from Fort Griswold. It consisted of two regular guns at fixed intervals. This alarm was the signal that the Fort was under imminent attack. After the second gun fired, a “third” gun was fired from one of the large British ships in the fleet. Three guns signaled the notice of a victory or a prize ship arriving after capture by a privateer, so it was evident that the enemy knew of the signal. As a result, the militia was slower to arrive.

One division of approximately 850 men landed on the Groton side. Under the command of Lieut. Colonel Eyre, Major Montgomery formed the 40<sup>th</sup> regiment in the rear of a hillock while Eyre led the 54<sup>th</sup> regiment behind a ledge of rocks approximately one-half mile away from the fort. They proceeded ahead of their artillery consisting of the third battalion of New Jersey volunteers and a detachment of Yagers and artillery under the supervision of Lieut. Colonel Abraham Van Buskirk.

The approximately 900 men in Arnold’s division on the New London side consisted of Sir Robert Pigot’s 38<sup>th</sup> regiment commanded by Capt. Millett, Col. Beverly Robinson’s loyal Americans, the American Legion, refugee regiments which included one hundred-twenty New Jersey Loyalists commanded by Lieut. Col. Upham and led by Capt. Frink, and a detachment of sixty Yagers comprising the Hessian light infantry.

### **Burning of New London**

Troops landed near New London Lighthouse and marched in a northerly direction. When they arrived at the crossroad, Gen. Arnold ordered four companies commanded by Captain Millett to detach from the division. They were met by Captain Frink and his company of refugees and Yagers. All marched to attack Fort Trumbull.

A shower of grapeshot greeted the Company. Documented ordnance in 1774 states there was nine guns built and supported at the Colony’s (of Connecticut) expense with an additional four eighteen-pound cannons and two twelve-pound cannons issued in April 1775.

Fort Trumbull’s Captain Adam Shapley commanded twenty- three men. His orders were in case of a direct attack to retreat to Fort Griswold. His gunners shot off one volley, the guns were spiked and all retreated to the shore. Shapley and his men rowed in three boats across the Thames River.

Arnold continued marching in a northerly direction with his troops and arrived at the redoubt at Fort Nonsense. A brisk fire greeted the troops, but was evacuated as the troops approached. Six pieces of cannon were found mounted with two pieces dismounted. Arnold carefully surveyed the scene across the river. The flight of some of the American ships up the river displeased Arnold as he had hoped that artillery fire would have crippled them thus enabling his troops to reach and destroy them. The wind once again disrupted the plans as it came up, the tide changed and local vessels escaped up the river.

Once the town was secure, Gen. Arnold directed his efforts to destroy all property of military value. He organized several torch parties and ensured there were several that were familiar with the area. Many Connecticut Loyalists were in the expedition. The party worked their way from the north end of town towards the Towne Mill and Winthrop's Cove and as they proceeded to Winthrop's Neck, they continued their burning while moving in a southerly direction. When the party arrived at Water Street, Arnold personally supervised the destruction. Gunpowder, not known to be stored there, exploded and the change of the wind spread the flame to all parts of town. Destruction by mid afternoon was extensive.

Arnold, after taking possession of Fort Trumbull, dispatched an Officer to Lieut. Col. Eyre on the Groton side. In addition to intelligence provided, Arnold ordered the attack on Fort Griswold as soon as possible. Casualties reported equaled about the same on both sides. Approximately six died and six were wounded. The Americans took prisoner a Yager officer and seven men. A number of New London citizens were captured by the British and taken aboard the prisoner ship to join the Groton Prisoners of War.

Sixty- five dwellings were burned occupied by ninety-seven families. Thirty-one stores and warehouses were destroyed along with eighteen mechanic's shops. Twenty barns were left in smoldering ruins. Nine public buildings were destroyed including the Episcopal Church, courthouse, jail, market, and customhouse. All wharves and shipping save those vessels that escaped up the river were torched. Ten or twelve armed vessels loaded with stores were burned. Upward of fifty pieces ordnance was destroyed in the different works.

### **Battle of Groton Heights**

Eight hundred British soldiers marched northwestward towards Fort Griswold consisting of the 54<sup>th</sup> regiment commanded by Lieut. Col. Eyre, and the 40<sup>th</sup> Regiment commanded by Major Montgomery and a battalion of New Jersey Loyalists responsible for moving the artillery and a detachment of Yagers commanded by Lieut. Col. Buskirk. Rough terrain accompanied them on their march. Ravines, ledges, thickets and the swamp slowed them down. As a result, the artillery did not reach the Fort until after the battle had ended.

The British regiments were spotted about one-half mile away as they came out of a forested area, running towards the Fort and taking cover. A flag ordered by Lieut. Col. Eyre and delivered by Captain George Beckwith was sent to the fort demanding immediate surrender. Col. William Ledyard refused. A summons demanding surrender

was again sent. The response of Col Ledyard as delivered by Captain Shapley was “we shall not surrender, let the consequences be what they may.”

Both British divisions advanced towards the southwest bastion and the south and west sides of the Fort. Col. Eyre was killed as well as Major Montgomery and three other officers. This seems to have enraged and motivated British soldiers to overpower the garrison, open the fort gate, and rush in. Col. Ledyard ordered the fighting to stop and weapons thrown down. Unaware of what had occurred on the other side of the Fort, fighting continued on the southwest bastion. Eventually all retreated to the fort and surrendered their arms.

At this point the circumstances become unclear. Traditional reports state that once the British had opened the gates and took possession, the garrison was ordered to cease firing. Col. Ledyard apparently walked into the Parade, confirmed the orders, then turned and walked towards the North gate to meet ranking officer Major Bromfield. “Who commands this fort? Ledyard’s response “I did Sir, but you do now.” Ledyard apparently raised then lowered his sword, presented the sword hilt in surrender to Bromfield, who immediately plunged it into Ledyard. A massacre immediately took place and accounts state that Bromfield, fearing for his own safety, ordered the slaughter to cease.

The battle lasted approximately forty minutes. Eighty-five defenders were dead with thirty-five wounded, and several who died later. In addition to their two ranking officers, the British lost fifty-one men and one hundred and twenty seven were wounded. About two o’clock that afternoon, a drumbeat announced the cease-fire. The ranking captain entered the fort. Preparations got underway for departure. The prisoners were ordered under bayonet to assemble at the corner of the barracks near the gate. Those who could not move themselves were helped by those that could. They were made to march down the bank to the river to embark on the prisoner ship.

About thirty-five of the defenders were ordered to sit down by the sentries. Buildings were set afire while plunder was brought down. British soldiers loaded the large heavy ammunition wagon with eight severely wounded men. About twenty soldiers pulled it to the brow of the hill, and began to move it down the steep bank. The weight was too much for them to hold the wagon. Fearing of being run over, they jumped out of the way. The wagon barreled down the hill and ran into an old apple stump. Both shafts of the wagon struck very hard. One man was thrown from the impact. The wounded were then retrieved by the enemy and brought to the nearest house, that of Ensign Ebenezer Avery, one of the wounded. Additional structures, including the Avery house were set afire as the looting continued. The fire was extinguished and a sentry was ordered to stand guard by Groton commissary Ebenezer Ledyard, brother to the Colonel. Ledyard was also able to arrange the release of several severely wounded on the beach. They, too, were brought to the Avery house. The prisoners boarded the ship bound for New York.

Captain Lemoine, of the Royal Artillery, had orders from Gen. Arnold to destroy the magazine. He and his men laid a trail of gunpowder from the barracks to the magazine, kindled a fire in the barracks, and retreated to the ships. As they sailed down the river,

they expected the fatal explosion, but nothing happened. At dusk, after watching the rear guard retreat, Major Peters of Gen. Tyler's brigade approached the fort gate. Entering the gate, he rushed to the well pump for water to extinguish the fire.

Later, Groton townspeople came looking for their fallen. Forty women were made widows that day with two hundred children fatherless. The schoolhouse was destroyed along with four barns, two shops, two stores and twelve houses.

In 1793, Connecticut General Assembly compensated the victims of the Battle of Groton Heights and the burning of New London by grants of land owned by Connecticut on the western reservation on Lake Erie. This property was known as the Firelands.