

The greatest battle of the Culpeper Minutemen at Great Bridge: Dec. 9, 1775







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The settlement of Great Bridge was situated along the Elizabeth River in what is now Chesapeake, Virginia. It lay along the main road connecting Norfolk (12 miles to the north) and North Carolina to the south.

According to contemporary accounts, the original landscape of Great Bridge was difficult terrain. The land on each side was marshy for a considerable distance from the river, except at the two extremities of the bridge itself, where there are two pieces of firm land being surrounded entirely by water and marsh and joined by causeways.

Eager to maintain the position as a supply route and finding no Patriots onsite, Royal Gov. Lord Dunmore left a contingent of men to fortify a position on the north side of the bridge. The fortified structure they built was called Fort Murray—after Lord Dunmore’s family name in England.

On Nov. 15, 1775, Dunmore moved east to Kemp’s landing, where he thwarted an ambush by the Princess Anne County Militia. Dunmore then marched north to Norfolk and easily took the city, which was already a loyalist stronghold.

Hearing rumors that Dunmore planned to advance west to Suffolk, Nov. 25, Colonel William Woodford of Caroline County sent a detachment of 200 men. They arrived on Nov. 28 and were immediately met with shots from Fort Murray. The Patriots were determined to remove the British and trenched in along the opposite causeway.

Woodford himself finally arrived with the 2nd Va. Regiment and Culpeper Minutemen on Dec. 2, 1775. Unaware of how many troops Fort Murray secured, and with a shortage of munitions, including much needed cannon, Woodford was reluctant to try a direct assault.

Instead, he set pickets to defend the Patriots position while waiting for reinforcements and supplies. For one week, the two sides played cat and mouse, taunting each other with small skirmishes within half a dozen miles from their positions along the causeway.

On Dec. 7, an additional patriot force arrived, bringing the total number of able bodied patriots close to 900. The Virginians expertly threw up parapets within musket range of the fort. Ninety marksmen were left to hold the end of the causeway, while the rest camped several hundred yards away in the rear.

On Dec. 8, Dunmore decided to break the tension. He ordered Capt. Samuel Leslie's 14th Regiment to march south from Norfolk to attack the Patriot position at Great Bridge.

Historians (as well as his contemporaries) debate Dunmore's reasoning for breaking the stalemate. It is unclear whether he was tipped off that Patriot reinforcements were fast approaching with devastating cannon, or whether he underestimated the number and fortitude of Woodford's men.

Leslie arrived around 3 a.m. and planned a dawn attack. In actuality, Dunmore's forces numbered about half that of Woodford's. However, Dunmore's outnumbered command was armed with several field pieces and protected by a palisade. The Va. and N.C. Militia men had nothing more than small arms and determination.

Shortly after the Virginians awoke on Dec. 9, 1775, two or three great guns and some musketry were discharged and garnered no notice from Woodford after a week of skirmishing. Captain Fordyce led the advance of the 14th across the causeway towards the Patriots breastwork.

Once the Patriots became aware of the escalating situation, sentries fired three rounds to slow the British advance. Famously, one of these sentries was a free African-American named Billy Flora who kept firing to allow the Patriots time to ready themselves for battle and after firing eight times into the advancing British, finally made way to safety after pulling a couple of the boards from the bridge.

Once the sentries fell back Fordyce rallied his men to advance. The Patriots in the breastwork were ordered to hold their fire until the British came within 50 yards. Then the bullets whistled on every side.

Fordyce was hit in the knee, but regaining his composure waved his hat widely above his head, believing the engagement to be a swift British victory. But it was not to be.

As riflemen under Woodford poured to the breastwork defense, carnage ensued at close range. The British attack faltered as shattered bodies collapsed upon one another. Captain Fordyce fell riddled with musket balls a few yards from the enemy lines. The survivors stumbled back across the causeway in shock.

When the British artillery ceased firing, the American militia counterattacked.

Led by Gen. Edward Stevens, the Culpeper Minutemen forced the British between the causeway and the fort into a shrinking conclave, capturing the cannons in the process. The Virginians fought the enemy Indian style firing individually as they maneuvered closer.

The unconventional tactics worked well against the British, who were unaccustomed and ill prepared for such unorthodox warfare. The Patriots did not continue their assault as they retreated back to their breastwork.

Lord Dunmore men sent out a white flag to recover the wounded which totaled over 100 wounded or killed. The Patriots sustained only one minor injury out of the 90 men engaged in the short battle.

Of the Battle, Woodford wrote that it was a second Bunker's Hill, in miniature, with this difference—that we kept our post and had one man wounded in the hand. The Battle of Great Bridge lasted no longer than 30 minutes and proved that Patriots were indeed a formidable foe against the regulars.

The next day, the rumored reinforcements arrived from N.C.—regulars and militia under the command of Col. Robert Howe. More troops continued to pour to Woodford's aid, finally amounting to over 1,200 with which Woodford marched to take Norfolk.

Finding that Dunmore had abandoned the city in favor of his floating fleet, Patriots fired on the British warships, refusing them aid, supplies, or freshwater. Dunmore's ships returned fire, eventually destroying the city.

With Norfolk destroyed—the patriots burned anything left standing so they could never again aid the British)—Dunmore moved his operations north to Gwynn's Island, but by then disease drastically reduced his able bodied fighting force (including the Queen's own and Ethiopian regiments) to about 200 men. Realizing he had no hope left to regain control of the colony, Dunmore left Virginia and returned to Britain in July 1776.

Dunmore's retreat after the Battle of Great Bridge ended the first British threat in Virginia. Though the colony would not be again challenged directly until 1779, the Battle of Great Bridge and the slow burning fuse of the gunpowder incident, firmly placed the colony in open, revolutionary rebellion against Great Britain. The war had come to Virginia.

This Patriot victory at Great Bridge had an impact on the course of the American Revolution that was out of all proportion. It made the British position in Virginia untenable.

It resulted in Virginia being free of any organized British presence for five critical years—free to provide massive amounts of men and supplies to the Continental Army with virtually no enemy interference.

The historic battle is still remembered today.

The Great Bridge Chapter of the Virginia Society, Sons of the American Revolution held its 122nd Annual Observance and 69th Wreath Laying ceremony commemorating the Battle of Great Bridge on Nov. 27 near the battle site. It was also 12th Annual Observance of the battle by the National Society Sons of the American Revolution. It is considered one of the most significant battles of the Revolutionary War.

The Culpeper Minutemen chapter of the Virginia Society, Sons of the American Revolution will celebrate the 247th Anniversary of the Battle at Great Bridge today, Dec. 9 in Yowell Meadow Park very close to where the citizen fighting crew mustered in 1775.

Today's commemoration will take place at the Culpeper Minute Battalion Monument and the Charters of Freedom Exhibit and is scheduled to start as the Battle did in 1775 at daybreak, around 7 a.m.

Jameson, a member and past president of the Virginia Society, Sons of the American Revolution Culpeper Minutemen Chapter, is a descendant of Col. John Jameson, who fought at Great Bridge with the Culpeper Minutemen.