

# The Battle of Red Bank

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*A Battle Whose Deeds Match the  
Bravery of Romance*

**T**HE historic and bloody battlefields of the Revolution are haunted by the memories and spirits of heroes. And of all these fine and deathless chronicles, among the bravest is the story of the Battle of Red Bank. Four hundred soldiers of the Rhode Island line held an unfinished earthwork on the bank of the Delaware against an assault from the rear by 2000 Hessian troops, disciplined, well equipped veterans, under a brilliant leader.

This little band of citizen-soldiery, worn out from toiling night and day in their trenches and on the ramparts, met the odds of five to one in numbers and far greater odds in other ways, and with only their earthwork protection to favor them, drove back in signal rout the enemy, who left 400 dead and wounded on the field, a man for every defender in tattered buff and blue. And this battle lasted only for the space of a little more than half an hour.

## DEFENDING THE DELAWARE

In September of 1777, Sir William Howe and his victorious British army entered Philadelphia after the defeat of the patriot army under Washington on the hills of the Brandywine, where Lafayette was wounded. The army of occupation was dependent upon the co-operating navy under command of Richard Earl Howe, brother of the General.

The British fleet was in the Chesapeake, where the army had disembarked for the march overland to Philadelphia. It was all-important for the cause of the American arms that the Delaware should be defended against the invading fleet. Hastily the plan of operations was begun, and a point just below League Island chosen for a blockade of the river approach.

On a low and marshy island at the mouth of the Schuylkill, Fort Mifflin was thrown up for the purpose of covering with batteries the river obstructions.

On the opposite New Jersey shore, at Red Bank, a strong redoubt called Fort Mercer, was built on a high bank, commanding the open stretch of the Delaware below. In the river, between the two forts, under cover of their guns, ranges of strong frames, from which projected upward iron-pointed spikes, were sunk as chevaux-de-fries to rake the wooden bottoms of England's ships of war, and blockade the narrow channel.

These efforts, great in those days, seem peurile in this age of floating steel fortresses, torpedoes and 12-inch rifles. But you shall see how bravely they served.

Three miles below, at Billingsport, a redoubt and extensive earthworks were thrown up, and stockades sunk to block the channel, with armed galleys, improvised sloops of war, and floating batteries mounted on scows to support these defenses.

This system of protection was to be the last stand, the only stand, in fact, at the very gates of the city, as it was, and to give battle to a powerful fleet of men-of-war and frigates, which was reinforced by the army of Lord Howe in the city itself. Billingsport, the advance post of this desperate plan of defense, fell at the first attack.

Earl Howe, sailing with his towering fleet for the Delaware, sent word to his brother that if the redoubts were captured he would force the passage

of the river. Two regiments under Colonel Stirling were sent from Chester to Billingsport. They crossed the river, marched on the unfinished works and made a furious assault upon the small garrison, working like beavers to finish the defenses. The Americans, unprepared and dismayed at the unexpected attack, spiked their guns and fled. The English demolished the works, burned the barracks, and this post was lost.

Captain Hammond, with six vessels of the British fleet, forced a way through the channel obstructions, and undisturbed, came to the last defense of the patriots, the line of Fort Mercer and Fort Mifflin. Then began one of the most glorious stands ever made by patriots of any land. General Howe determined upon a general annihilation of the land works of the Delaware. The fort at Red Bank was garrisoned by two regiments from Rhode Island belonging to Varnum's Brigade, under Lieutenant-Colonel Christopher Greene; only 400 men all told.

Count Dunop, a brave young officer, was sent out from the city with four battalions of picked Hessian veterans, chosen from the powerful army of occupation. There were 2000 troops in the command. They crossed the Delaware and landed at Cooper's Point on October 21 and marched that night to Haddonfield. As they approached Timber Creek a party of Americans held the bridge, and held it so well that the Hessians marched four miles out of their way, until a fording place was found.

In the morning they came to the edge of the woods at Fort Mercer, within cannon shot. Line of battle was formed. The little garrison was not expecting a land attack, and their sentry lines did not extend beyond the fortification. They must be in readiness for the movement of that fleet of huge war vessels, the 64 ships of the line, whose spars stood black in a forest against the green shore as they swung grimly at anchor. The bugle calls on board ship echoed faint and silvery in the sleeping morning.

Suddenly the sentries landward saw the glittering sweep of the Hessian line of battle among the distant trees. A scouting party dashed in the fort and said that the enemy numbered 2500. Colonel Greene believed the report. He had a feeble earth fort, fourteen cannon mounted and 400 men. But he was not in the least dismayed. He ordered preparations for the defense made at once. The guns were double-shotted and re-primed. Within was a roll of drums calling to quarters, the rattle of snapping flints, the hurrying footfall of men forming line along the parapets, the confused shouting of orders, the clash of steel and tattoo of ramrods. Without, the roll of the Hessian drums. Then came a little time of silence, when men say prayers and tighten their belts.

#### NO QUARTER ASKED OR GIVEN

The last preparations were making within; when a Hessian officer rode out from the woods across the field, bearing a flag of truce, and followed by a drummer. He halted close to the ramparts. The drum sticks flourished jauntily. Colonel Greene leaped upon the earthworks.

The envoy shouted: "The King of England orders his rebellious subjects to lay down their arms, and they are warned that if they stand the battle no quarter will be given."

Colonel Greene flung back: "We ask no quarter, nor will we give any."

The Hessian officer and his drummer rode back to their lines. The attack began immediately. A field battery was dragged up and placed "half a shot away" says an old chronicler, "and within the fort all were eager and busy." The outworks were unfinished. The Americans relied upon the strength of the inner redoubt. They drew in from the outer works, leaving them abandoned. It was four o'clock in the afternoon, a cannonading was opened from the Hessian battery with the intent to make a breach in the walls.

Three-quarters of an hour later the cannons ceased firing and a battalion of tall-helmeted Hessians swept to the attack on the north side near the morass that covered this wing of the fort. The rest of the assaulting force simultaneously charged the south side. The 400 Americans must divide to meet the different assaults. The column on the north side was led by Count Donop. He found the first advance post and out-works abandoned and believed that the Americans had become frightened, and had fled their defenses, escaping by boat. Thus thought also his men. They raised a shout, and with drums beating rushed toward the redoubt where not a man or bayonet was visible.

The storming party had reached the face of the bank; they were about

to clamber up the rampart and place their colors there, when from the embrasures in front and from a half-masked battery in the left flank, formed by the angle of an old embankment, there poured an awful storm of grape-shot and musket balls. The Americans had held their fire until the wadding of their musket charges was driven into the breasts and faces of the Hessians, who were swept and blown back as chaff before the wind. They were driven back to the outer line of works almost in a moment, leaving dead and bleeding literally in heaps.

At the same time the other division attacking the south side, passed the abattis and ditch, many leaped over the picket obstructions, and were mounting the parapet, when a hurricane of fire burst from the fort, and in one volley the column was shattered into fragments. The defenders had waited under admirable discipline. Not a shot was wasted, firing point-blank into the struggling, headlong mass. The broken columns reformed and made another half-hearted assault. But they must charge over 400 of their dead and wounded, one-third of their whole number. Bullet-swept again, they retreated to the shelter of the woods and turned back to Haddonfield—on a road known today as the Hessian Road—leaving their stricken comrades. As they strayed back, Hazlewood's galleys in the river galled them severely with a cannonade. The retreat became a rout for shelter.

At the first fire Count Donop had fallen mortally wounded, and Mingerode, second in command, was also left on the field. M. de Mauduit, a French officer who had acted both as chief of artillery and engineer in the fort, going out with a detachment to repair the palisades, picking his way among the rows of slain, heard a feeble cry: "Whoever you are, draw me hence."

It was Count Donop, who was carried into the fort, and the next day removed to the Whitall farm, where he died three days later. As he was dying he said to one who was caring for him:

"It is finishing a noble career early, but I die a victim of my ambition and the avarice of my sovereign."

A rough slab was placed above the grave of Count Donop, but cannot be found today.

#### A QUAKER DAME

There were two Whitall houses near the battlefield. The one in which Count Donop died has been destroyed; the other, which served as a hospital, is splendidly solid and well preserved today, although built in 1748. On the north gable is the inscription: "I. A. W. (James and Ann Whitall), 1748." The Whitalls were Quakers who settled on these lands in 1700. It was Ann Cooper Whitall who scorned to fear a cannonade.

She was urged to flee with the rest of the family at the attack of the British, but refused.

"God's arm is strong and will protect me. I may do good by staying."

So she was left alone in the house and while balls were driving like sleet round the gables, she calmly plied her spinning wheel in an upper chamber, nor even deigned to look from the window. Finally, a twelve-pound shot from a British ship passed over the fort, and with a splendid crash through the heavy brick wall on the north gable, lodged in another wall near which the old lady was sitting in her high-backed chair.

Then only did she move and, picking up her spinning-wheel, retreated to the cellar, where she resumed her interrupted occupation, until she was summoned to attend the wounded who were brought into her house at the close of the battle.

Truly, she "did good by staying," for, as an angel of mercy, Ann Whitall went among the suffering friend and foe. She scolded Hessians for coming to America to butcher the people while she was binding up their wounds tenderly and giving them food and water.

#### THE NAVAL BATTLE

While the Hessians were assaulting Fort Mercer the first gun from their battery was the signal for the British fleet to attack Fort Mifflin across the river. The ships were beaten back, and the Augusta, sixty-four guns, and the Merlin, forty-four guns, blown up.

In Colonel Bradford's (the American official) report we read:

"The Augusta, the Roebuck, the Liverpool, the Pearl, the Merlin and the Cornwallis Galley came up, but were kept at bay by the American galleys

and floating batteries. These galleys did good execution not only upon the British vessels, but upon the Hessians at Red Bank. The British fleet deferred its attack on Fort Mifflin until the next morning, and dropped down the river.

The next day, the 23rd, the Augusta, 64 guns; the Roebuck, 44 guns; two frigates and the Merlin of 18 guns, came up as near as they dare to the upper chevaux-de-frise, when a most furious engagement ensued between the Galleys and Floating Batteries, with the Enemy's ships; the fire was so incessant that by all accounts the Elements seemed to be in flames. About 12 o'clock the Augusta blew up, whether by accident or from a shot is unknown, having taken Fire some Time before. Here presented a glorious sight before she blew up, she laying broadside too aground, and the flames coming through every port she had. The action still continued with the other ships, and at Three o'clock the Merlin took fire and blew up also being aground and then the Fire soon ceased. Thus ended two glorious days."

Of the brave defense of Fort Mifflin for six days against fleets to right and left, and a powerful land force, until the works were battered into heaps of ruins, and all the commanding officers and most of the little force disabled, there is not space to tell in this article.

It is a splendid tale to thrill the blood. Of a garrison of 400, there were killed and wounded 250, and this force held the river gates for a week against a thousand cannon shot a day from the heaviest guns then in use—against fourteen strong shore redoubts, four sixty-four gun men-of-war, two forty-gun ships, and a fleet of thirty armed boats and powerful floating batteries.

After Fort Mifflin had been evacuated, the remnant of the garrison escaping to Red Bank by night, Fort Mercer was attacked by 2000 men under Cornwallis, and reinforcements from New York. Washington sent troops under Major General Greene to relieve the doughty garrison at Red Bank and this force was expected to be increased by the addition of Glover's Brigade. But Generals Greene and Lafayette, crossing into New Jersey failed to connect with the additional brigade, and learning the strength of Cornwallis' army went off to Haddonfield. So Colonel Greene was ordered to evacuate Fort Mercer, as the British fleet had gone by and up to Philadelphia. Cornwallis dismantled the empty fort and demolished the works. This ended the glorious history of the holding of the gateway of the Delaware.

As a recognition of his valorous defense of the Fort, Congress voted to present a sword to Colonel Greene, also one to Commodore Hazlewood for his defense of the Delaware river, as well as for his valuable assistance at Red Bank in the battle of Red Bank.

A marble shaft was erected in 1829 by members of the New Jersey and Pennsylvania Volunteers, to commemorate the battle. It bears the inscription:

This Monument was  
erected on the 22 Oct. 1829  
to transmit to posterity  
a grateful remembrance  
of the patriotism and gallantry  
of Lieut. Colonel  
Christopher Greene,  
who with 100 men conquered  
the Hessian army of 2000  
troops then in the British  
Service at Red Bank  
on the 22nd Oct. 1777.  
Among the wounded was  
found their commander,  
Count Donop, who died of  
his wound and whose body  
is interred near the spot  
where he fell.

In 1906, another monument was erected within the lines of the main fort by the State of New Jersey.