

A Very Large British Military Investment for Very Little Practical Profit

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The story of the 1778 Battle of Chestnut Neck really began one hundred years earlier with the first inhabitants of Eastern Gloucester County (Atlantic County since 1837 and hereafter referred to as Atlantic County), particularly in the area of today's Mullica and Great Egg Harbor Rivers. The people who colonized Atlantic County in the late 1600s had all left England to avoid a political situation in which they had very little to say over their future. The Quakers who moved to Somers Point and Leeds Point came for religious freedom, having been heavily persecuted and even imprisoned in England. They moved to Atlantic County from Burlington, Philadelphia, Salem and Cape May Counties. The Presbyterians who moved to Atlantic County in the early 1700's were the offspring of the Puritans who were also suffering from religious persecution in England. They came from Cumberland County, North Jersey and Long Island. Those who immigrated solely for financial reasons came because there was no opportunity for enhancement in England, as the aristocratic led society did its best to keep them down. This group came primarily from North Jersey and New York City. In all three groups, most were formerly successful farmers and small businessmen in England who were used to surviving by their ingenuity and hard work. Interestingly, most came to Atlantic County with the financial ability to buy land immediately. All in all, it was a group who had had their fill of heavy-handed, authoritarian government and had no interest in reliving the same conditions in Atlantic County. They were going to do things their way, without undue British interference. They were going to protect their family, their faith, and their finances no matter what the cost.

William Clark and his family moved to the Little Egg Harbor River area (today's Mullica River), just below what is now called Lower Bank on the Atlantic County side, and founded the village of Clark Town. Like the people who immigrated to Somers Point, Mays Landing, Absecon, and Leeds Point, they were involved in the occupations of operating general stores and taverns, cedar logging, farming, shipping, fishing, and harvesting mollusks. Because there was a strong need for these type products both in New York and in the Caribbean, they immediately became exporters and some became ship owners as well. In the days of limited hard currency availability, bartering was the rule of the day. In New York, these early Atlantic County residents bartered for the things that would make their lives easier, such as household goods. In the Caribbean, however they bartered for molasses, sugar and rum. Rum was the drink of choice in America in the 1700's. The concept of complete abstinence from alcohol was foreign to the highly religious people of this era, although drunkenness was considered to be very wrong by all these groups. Additionally, while some of the Quakers were against producing rum, others like Col. Richard Somers had no problem selling it in his general store in Somers Point. Moderation was their watchword. It was this need for sugar and molasses, and the rum they would produce that planted the initial seeds of the privateer shipping movement.

The British politicians of the early 1700s were very much like many contemporary politicians around the world today. They had a propensity for increasing taxes on the lower and middle classes and a seeming obsession for wasting the money on big government and, of course, on themselves. In 1733 Parliament passed the Molasses Act which taxed the importation of this product and, consequently, indirectly taxed the importation of rum, too. The local merchants, such as the Clarks, the Somers, the Steelmans and the Leeds, responded by simply bringing back the sugar, molasses and rum from the Caribbean in a more surreptitious manner, thus eliminating the ports with customs houses on their return trips from the

Caribbean. We would call this smuggling or black marketing today, but they saw it very differently. They saw these parliamentary restrictions as the beginning of a rerun of the financial oppression they experienced in England. Since the New Jersey coast was sparsely inhabited in those days, they were able to be involved in this activity without fear of liability or capture. The British became annoyed at the loss in tax revenue and enacted the Sugar Act in 1764. The British government's secret motto seems to have been, "If one poor decision doesn't work out, try more of the same and hope things will change." Instead of increasing tax revenue, this Act increased smuggling all the more which in turn actually reduced British revenue. The early Eastern Atlantic County ship-owners became so skilled in slipping in and out of sandbar and mud flat protected harbors that they were rarely seen, much less caught. When the time came in the 1770s for them to become privateers, it was a natural and highly profitable transition. By this time a commercial village had sprung up next to a narrow point on the Mullica River where Chestnut trees abounded. The village became known as Chestnut Neck; and it was a small collection of three warehouses, a tavern and the homes of some of the local business owners and ship captains. There was even said to be housing for the sailors aboard the privateer ships when they were in port. The pilfered goods were brought in to these warehouses and transshipped to other areas in southern New Jersey and Eastern Pennsylvania. By the time of the American Revolution, Chestnut Neck had become one of the largest smuggling centers on the East Coast. Geographically and financially speaking, Chestnut Neck was a well-known business port in the early 1770s.

The American Revolution really began long before the battles of Lexington and Concord. As Ray Raphael so clearly describes in *The 1st American Revolution: Before Lexington and Concord*, a series of British tax acts and the increased suppression of the colonists' rights in Massachusetts and Connecticut after the French and Indian War (1753-63) set the stage for the political wildfire that was to begin in 1773 in the event known to us as the Boston Tea Party. This was followed by the Intolerable Acts closing the Boston Port, the Battles of Lexington and Concord, the American volunteer militia's fierce blockade of the City of Boston in the fall of 1775, and the very bloody battles of Bunker and Breed's Hills. The British retreated to Canada to regroup. The war for independence had begun!

The 1832 NJ Archives Pension Application (hereafter called a PA) of 3rd Battalion Private John Jeffries tells us that as soon as word of Lexington and Concord reached Southern New Jersey, Col. Richard Somers formed the Egg Harbor Guard to protect the herds of cattle grazing on the barrier islands, as well as the fishing and shipping village warehouses from British Army and British Loyalist "provision stealing teams". Later known as the 3rd Battalion of the Gloucester County Militia, this group maintained a 30-man company of militia men marching guard duty on the beaches of Brigantine, Absecon Island, and Ocean City for the 8-year duration of the Revolutionary War. They even built a small cabin like structure called Fort Clark for protection from the weather on Clam Creek in Atlantic City, right across from the present Coast Guard station. Nothing remains of Fort Clark today but an Atlantic City Press article from the 1960s showed a picture of a historical marker that was on the site up until at least the beginning of World War II.

The patriots of Atlantic County were good defenders of their "homeland." This would include both the militiamen and the privateers. The militia, the Egg Harbor Guard that was stationed on the barrier islands, not only did well in its defense of the local farmers from British and Loyalist marauders, but it did well also in its offensive activities too. Beginning in 1775, the militia began capturing British supply ships and smaller warships that would get blown off-course and then temporarily snagged on the sandbars just off the island beaches. The captured crew would be taken as prisoners to Philadelphia; and the ship and its contents would be sold at auction at places like Somers Point, Mays Landing, The Forks, and Chestnut Neck. The cannons and other military equipment would be sent to General

Washington for use in his army. The privateers were experienced, previous ship-owners who would retrofit their small sloops for war after they received a Letter of Marque (authorization to be a privateer) from the American Congress. The previously unlicensed smugglers thereby became nationally licensed, legal pirates called privateers (America learned this strategy from the British government who had been doing it against the French as far back as Sir Walter Raleigh's era). The American privateers would sail up and down the coast looking for unaccompanied British transport ships, which they would capture, bring into Chestnut Neck (or other ports), and auction them off in the local or Philadelphia marketplace. According to the PA of Private David Denike, in order to protect this lucrative privateering business at Chestnut Neck, a small mud fort was built there called the Mud Fort. The NJ Archives tells us that the fort was built at the expense of Elijah Clark and Richard Westcott, later to be reimbursed by the NJ Legislature. Another small enclosure was built on Fox Burrow Island, across from Old Inlet, according to five pension applications, and it was called Fox Burrows or Fort Tucker. This appears not to have been either a defense or offensive fort, but rather an enclosure where harbor pilots and inlet observation were done. Keeping an eye out for British war ships invading the harbor was a means of protecting the Iron Works at The Forks.

It didn't take long for the 3rd Battalion's activities in conjunction with the privateers of Chestnut Neck to come to the attention of the British military and financial leaders who had returned from Canada to New York City in July 1776. The PA of Private Zadok Bowen says that in July 1776 "some of the British *Cruzers* (sic) came in and drove us all off...before the Fort was completed and we had any guns; we were ordered back to the same place afterwards." Nothing seemed to deter these avid patriots, especially when patriotism was also profitable. Not only did the regular British military work to disrupt the militia activities in Atlantic County, but groups of British Loyalists (also called Tories or Refugees) from what is now Ocean and Monmouth Counties did the same in a sometimes very cruel manner. It should be noted that the 3rd Battalion treated their prisoners kindly; while the British Loyalists were known to bayonet their prisoners after they were captured and secured. The PA of Private Isaac Hickman tells us that the Chestnut Neck fort men were ordered to march to Absecon to capture 16 Tories who were burning houses and stealing supplies. The PA of Private Levi Price adds that the 3rd Battalion captured 3 more cargo ships on the beaches of Brigantine and Absecon Island in September 1776. Since the general rule of thumb was that the men who captured a ship received a percentage of what the ship and its cargo brought at auction, this activity grew and became more sophisticated. Consequently, the British continued to try to stop it. In June 1777 the PA of Private John Ingersoll says "we marched to Leeds Point...in order to attack 3 of the enemy ships laying in the bay (Great Bay)...we succeeded in setting one of the ships on fire...she sank." Both the British regulars and the British Loyalists continued to fight back. The PA of Privates James Steelman and David Somers tell us that in March 1778 "we marched...to Clam Town (now Tuckerton), a place much infested by Tories...we found them too strong for us." In June of 1778 the PAs of Privates Zephaniah Steelman and John Jeffries tell us "we had a long chase after a company of Refugees...we took 20-30 prisoners and their Captains Turner and Howlings." The PA of Private James Giberson tells us that the British had sent ships to Chestnut Neck three times to recover stolen transport vessels before mid-1778. From the British perspective, what would it take to stop these Atlantic County patriots? The British would soon learn that nothing could stop them!

So, exactly what was it that drove the British to mount a large naval and land force to attack Chestnut Neck in October 1778? Using an obvious tongue-in-cheek phrase, one might say that there were "18 final straws that broke the proverbial camel's back." These straws were the 18 transport ships that were captured by the privateers of Chestnut Neck in the months of July, August and September of 1778. The activities of the privateers had already caused maritime shipping insurance rates to double and almost triple in Great Britain by the summer of that year. These final 18 "straws," the 18 captured supply ships,

pushed the British into action – maybe even too much action. Finances drove British politics, and politics drove the military decisions. Lord George Germain, the Secretary of State for the Colonies in London wrote to General Henry Clinton, the commanding general of the British Army in America and said “Embark the body of troops to attack the ports and destroy all ships and other property alongshore, so as to incapacitate the rebels from continuing their depredations.” General Henry Clinton made his plans and wrote to Lord Germain and said "I propose taking a forward position with the Army in Northern New Jersey in order to favor an expedition to Egg Harbor, at which place the enemy has a number of privateers and prizes and considerable salt works....Accordingly, I requested Lord Cornwallis to take a position in Jersey." As far as we know there were only 11 homes, one tavern and 3 warehouses in Chestnut Neck – a very small village. But this was to be no small military maneuver for the British. The British were at their wits end. Lord Germain’s back was up against the wall in London. General Clinton dared not fail his superiors. Lord Cornwallis took about 4000 troops from New York City into northern New Jersey to provide a distraction to stop George Washington's Continental Army from marching and helping the militia and privateers at Chestnut Neck. Clinton then sent 13 ships filled with 1690 soldiers to attack Chestnut Neck firmly, as he had been ordered. Enough was enough with the American Rebels on the Mullica River!

Everything about the coming attack was planned carefully and secretly, but as with almost all things in the British military in America, nothing was truly secret. George Washington’s spies were everywhere. By early October, word of the impending attack had reached Philadelphia and the Continental Congress. The Congress ordered Count Casimir Pulaski's Legion "to proceed immediately to assist in the defense of Egg Harbor against the attack of the enemy on that port". Maj. Gen. William Alexander, Lord Sterling, wrote to Gen. George Washington and advised him "an expedition has taken place against Egg Harbor." New Jersey Brig. Gen. William Maxwell added "a fleet of warships and 8 brigs and sloops sailed southward, designed for Egg Harbor." Lord Sterling further updated George Washington saying "Pulaski has gone down to Egg Harbor." Still a loyal American general at the time, Maj. Gen. Benedict Arnold wrote to George Washington and said "I was informed that the enemy meditated an attack on Little Egg Harbor....Col. Proctor's regiment (artillery) was ordered to march immediately for the defense of the place and the next day I sent one hundred militiamen (Philadelphia) to reinforce him. Col. Proctor reached the neighborhood of Egg Harbor Oct. 7th where he was joined by only 50 militia (from Philadelphia), although they had been ordered out four days before."

Col. Richard Somers called out the 3rd Battalion, and as far as we can tell, at least 7 companies with a total of over 200 men responded. There were only a maximum of about 250 men in the 3rd Battalion. Considering that other 3rd Battalion companies were then serving at Red Bank in Gloucester County, Haddonfield, and Perth Amboy, it appears that virtually 100% of the remaining men of Somers’ Battalion responded to the call and were present at Chestnut Neck. They left their homes, farms and businesses and marched quickly to Chestnut Neck, from Somers Point, Mays Landing, Weymouth, Absecon, The Forks and Wrangleboro. Known to be present through the actual soldiers’ written Pension Applications were:

Col. Richard Somers

Col. Robert Taylor

Capt. Joseph Conover

Capt. George Payne

Capt. Richard Higbee

Capt. Zephaniah Steelman

Capt. William Price

Capt. Joseph Estell

Pvt. Levi Price

Pvt. Zadok Bowen

Pvt. Robert Leeds

Pvt. Abraham Albertson

Pvt. John Giberson

Pvt. Jesse Conover

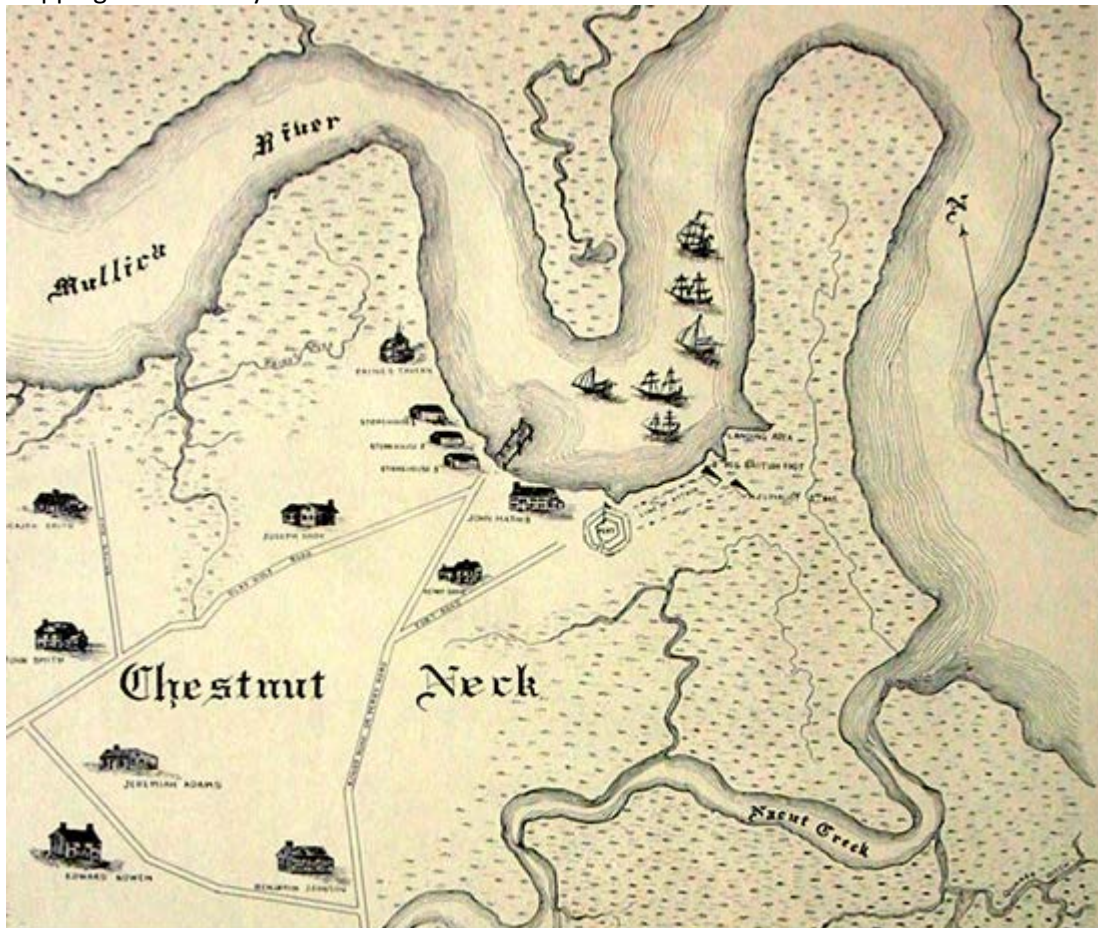
Pvt. David Denike

Pvt. John Thomas

Capt. Samuel Snell
1st Lt. Jeremiah Leeds
Lt. Simon Lucas

Pvt. David Somers
Pvt. Enoch Gandy
Pvt. Zephaniah Steelman
Pvt. James Giberson
Pvt. John Jeffries

Everyone was deadly serious about the affair at Egg Harbor. The privateers were destroying British shipping and supplying the American Army with much needed weapons and supplies. The sale of the captured ships provided much-needed cash to many. The British were not only losing much needed supplies, uniforms and guns, but increasing insurance rates were driving up the costs of transatlantic shipping substantially. Both sides needed to win at Chestnut Neck.



The battle itself proceeded as follows. After a delay several days up North due to bad weather, the British fleet arrived at Little Egg Harbor Bay on October 5. Their arrival was most likely announced by the observation team at Fox Burrows and relayed by the observers to the militia at Chestnut Neck. The British entered through the now closed inlet at Holgate (Long Beach Island). This older inlet [called Old Inlet] was closed by a storm in the late 1800's and a new one [called New Inlet] was also opened by the same storm at the site of the present Coast Guard station.) British Loyalists living in Ocean County quickly warned the British troops that the 3rd Militia Battalion was already at the Mud Fort at Chestnut Neck. The British could not get their larger ships through the shoals in Little Egg Harbor Bay and Great Bay, so they rowed the troops the "20 mile" distance from Little Egg Harbor Bay, up the serpentine Mullica River, and on to Chestnut Neck in their smaller boats that were equipped with cannons. The 3rd Battalion was waiting at the fort, but their supply of cannons had not yet been delivered. Col. Proctor

with his artillery and reinforcements was still a day away. Pulaski had not yet arrived either. The British flotilla arrived at Chestnut Neck in the late afternoon and found two forts, both armed with cannons (the cannons were fake – they were painted logs). The British proceeded to cannonade the village and two forts. The militia companies could do nothing but watch. The Redcoats then sailed up-river past the forts, landed to the West (where the Garden State Parkway bridge is today), and swept through the tiny town easily with sixteen hundred soldiers. The 3rd Battalion militia fired at the British from the higher ground behind the village and then, following Gen. George Washington's acclaimed "Fabian Policy", retreated through Wrangleboro to Leeds Point without any injuries or deaths. The British did not follow them. One British soldier was shot in the leg by the militia. The British then burned all the buildings in the village as well as burned and sank the captured British transport ships in the little harbor (small portions of the hulls are still there). Later that same afternoon, some British troops traveled north into what is now New Gretna to destroy three salt works and several patriots' homes. The British goal was accomplished, or was it? If their main goal was to destroy the iron works at The Forks, then they failed to reach at least 50% of their target.

The next morning, the British received word that Col. Proctor and Count Pulaski were almost upon them with their respective contingents of soldiers and artillery. They wisely re-boarded their ships and returned to the area near Little Egg Harbor Bay. The American militia went back into Chestnut Neck a few days later. The fort was rebuilt and defensive patrols were commenced. (As an aside, during one of these patrols, the PA of Private David Denike reports that "the British succeeded in burning the village of Chestnut Neck and the surrounding property, and in about 2 weeks after the battle he (Denike) was taken prisoner by the British and sent to New York and put aboard the British prison ship *Old Jersey*. He remained aboard the prison ship not less than 7 months before he was exchanged. His health was much impaired by having been aboard ship the length of time, and he had scurvy when he was exchanged.") Getting back to the British, it was at this time, a few days after Chestnut Neck that they attacked Count Pulaski's forces on Osborne Island near Mystic Islands today and brutally killed 30 to 50 American soldiers as they slept. They also took five prisoners (It is not the purpose of this article to focus on this part of the story). The British won bragging rights in the short term.

The British spent the modern equivalent of tens of millions of dollars on their Chestnut Neck attack. They lost several ships (one brand new one), recovered none of the ships or cargoes that the Americans had captured, and had one man wounded. It was an expensive foray and probably increased some officers' bragging rights, but was anything permanent accomplished? The answer is emphatically "No!". Looking at the American side, they lost 30 to 50 men, and the contents and auction value of a few British supply ships anchored at Chestnut Neck. Within a month, however, the warehouses were rebuilt and the privateers had all returned to full action. Chestnut Neck was again filled with captured British ships. The residents built new homes in Wrangleboro (now Port Republic) and Leeds Point. The Chestnut Neck privateers continued to attack and commandeer British transports for the rest of the war (until the peace was signed in 1783) to the great profit of the American cause. The Egg Harbor Guard continued to capture British ships on the beaches. The rest of the 3rd Militia Battalion continued to capture Loyalists in Atlantic County, as well as serve in the rest of the state to help keep the British northern forces penned up on New York City. Not too shabby for a group of untrained fishermen and farmers who soldiered every other month. So who accomplished more? Hands down, Col. Richard Somers and the 3rd Gloucester Militia Battalion, the privateers at Chestnut Neck, and the American war effort were clearly the winners in this action. We lost the battle at Chestnut Neck but we won the war. The long-term bragging rights went to the American militia and privateers. We who live and prosper in Atlantic County today are living testimonies of our progenitors' patriotism, bravery and tenacity.

Epilogue

There were about 250 men from present day Atlantic County who served in the Gloucester Militia's 3rd Battalion under Col. Richard Somers. While there were some Quaker conscientious objectors in the county who refused to serve on religious grounds, there were only two known men who stood against American independence by becoming Tories; these men were a very small part of the otherwise highly patriotic English family. During the 9 years in which the Somers' Battalion served its country, at a minimum, 8 were killed, 11 were wounded and 10 became prisoners-of-war. The following list represents our present knowledge of those who paid this high price for helping earn our present freedom. A monument is planned at Chestnut Neck in 2013 in their memory honor. The bog iron base has already been provided by Mayor Gary Giberson of Port Republic, NJ; and this will be the only monument of its type in our county. If you would like to partner with the Col. Richard Somers Chapter of the New Jersey Society – Sons of the American Revolution in giving a tax-deductible gift to help reach the \$3000.00 anticipated cost for the plaque, please contact Rev. Norman Goos at 609-652-2238 or normangoos@comcast.net. All donations will be greatly appreciated.

Killed in Action

Pvt. Forrest Bellangy (killed at Trenton #2)
Lt. John Lucas (killed in post-Red Bank fight)
Pvt. John Cain (murdered while POW in Tuckerton)
Capt. Andrew Steelman (murdered while POW at Long Beach Is)
Capt. Henry Snell (killed by friendly fire at Long Beach Is)
3 other unnamed men killed at Petticoat Bridge/Mt. Holly

Wounded in Action

Lt. John Tilton (wounded in post-Red Bank fight)
Pvt. Hugh Jones (wounded in post-Red Bank fight)
Maj. Elijah Clark (wounded at Trenton #2)
Lt. John Lucas (wounded at Petticoat Bridge)
Pvt. John Thomas (wounded at Tuckerton)
Pvt. Stephen Ford (wounded at Petticoat Bridge)
Lt. David Scull (wounded at Long Beach Is)
Pvt. John Steelman (wounded on Cumberland County patrol)
3 other unnamed men wounded at raid at John Steelman's house in Absecon

Prisoners of War

Pvt. David Denike (taken in post-Chestnut Neck period) - exchanged
Pvt. Benjamin Endicott (taken in skirmish near Camden) - exchanged
Pvt. James Leeds (taken in Absecon raid) - escaped
Pvt. John Ingersoll (taken in post-Chestnut Neck period) - escaped
Pvt. Patrick McCollum (taken in skirmish near Camden) - exchanged
Capt. Enoch Willits (taken in Cape May raid) - died in NY prison ship
4 other unnamed men taken, 2 post-Chestnut Neck and 2 at Camden - exchanged

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