The Battle Of Chatham Harbor

by Spencer Grey

It is common knowledge that the British invaded the United States during the War of 1812 and briefly took over the White House, but 30 years before that event, they made a less well-known invasion on June 20, 1782, in what is known as "The Battle of Chatham Harbor."

One of the many vessels moored in Chatham Harbor at that time was the brigantine Joseph, Peter and Wells under the command of Peter Wells. In the early evening of June 19, Captain Wells decided that conditions were peaceful enough for the crew to spend the night ashore. As the sun rose the following morning, people living along the shore saw to their surprise that the Continental flag atop that ship had been replaced by the British flag. They soon discovered that the crew from a British privateer outside the harbor had entered during the night and seized the Joseph, as well as a schooner and a sloop also in the harbor, and were about to make off with the two vessels.

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

When those on the shore saw what was happening, they fired an alarm gun and raised a warning flag on Watch Hill to notify the citizens of the actions of the British. At that point members of the militia assembled on the hill under the leadership of Colonel Benjamin Godfrey, Joseph Doane, and Richard Sears. They quickly noticed that the crew on board the brigantine were hoisting out casks and putting them on the small sloop alongside to make her light enough to cross the bar and sail out of the harbor.

As the lightened brigantine got underway, this group of about 50 men moved down to the beach and began to fire on her, and the crew on the brigantine returned fire as they attempted to sail out of the harbor. With its crew distracted by the constant fire from Godfrey and his men, the brigantine ran aground. Godfrey ordered the brigantine to surrender, but the crew quickly took to their boats and fled from the harbor to a British privateer that was just outside of it.

Godfrey's men rowed their boats to the abandoned brigantine, and upon boarding it immediately lowered the British ensign and hoisted the Continental flag. After the British privateer sailed away, Godfrey and Doane noticed two other ships approaching the harbor, but they turned out to be Connecticut coasters three miles off the coast. The local boats went out to meet them and led them to safety in the harbor.

Although there were no other direct encounters during the Revolution between the British forces and the people of Chatham, the townspeople became involved in the war when many Chatham men went to Boston to join the Colonial Army, nearly all of them being only 16 or 17 years old. Closer to home, however, the effects of the war on Chatham people and their occupations was extremely serious, if not disastrous. Because of the constant threat from British privateers, the fishing and coastal trading businesses were severely affected. When the war began, Chatham had 30 vessels and 200 men operating fishing vessels. Many of these fishing boats were captured and their crews were taken and thrown into prison ships, where most of them eventually died, leaving grieving wives and fatherless children. By the end of the war the fleet had been reduced to only four or five vessels. The effect of the Revolution was felt more widely, however, because with the town's broad exposure to the oceans, Chatham residents lived in fear of attacks by the ever-present British warships, a threat that had disastrous consequences on their businesses and their lives.