

The Battle at Chestnut Neck and The Affair at Little Egg Harbor

October 6, 1778 – October 22, 1778



2008



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By

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Marshallville, New Jersey

**The Battle at Chestnut Neck
and
The Affair at Little Egg Harbor**

October 6, 1778 – October 22, 1778

**with
The 225th Anniversary Ceremonies
October 6, 2003**

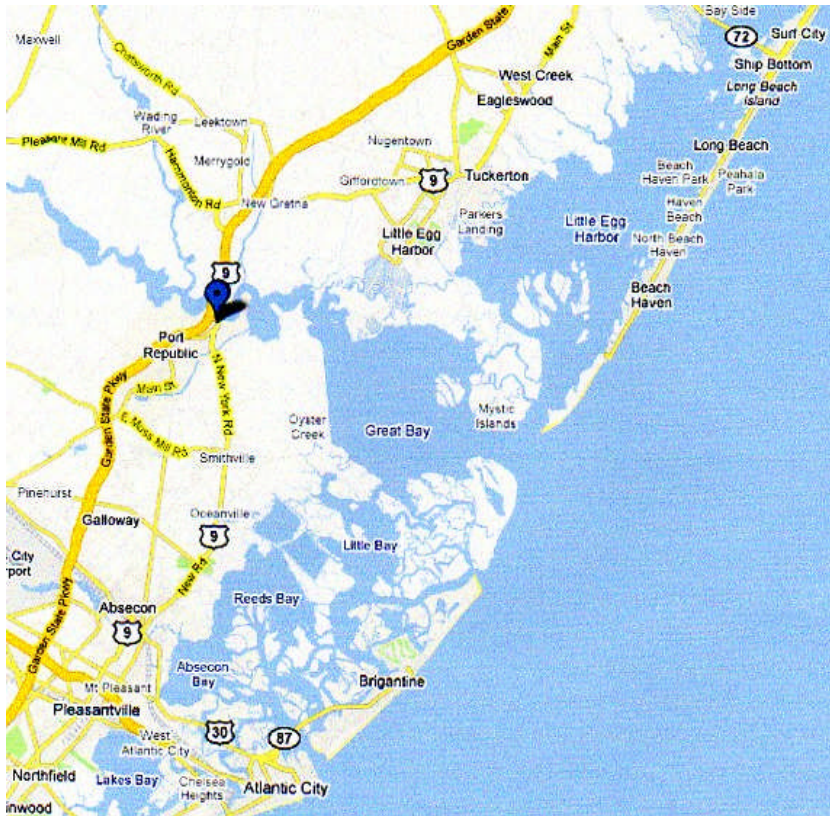
by

**Harry P. Folger, 3rd
Vice President, Col. Richard Somers Chapter SAR**

In honor of

**Franklin W. Kemp
Member of the Col. Richard Somers Chapter, SAR
Author of *A Nest of Rebel Pirates*
and
Dr. Ralph K. Turp
Who reactivated this chapter**

2008



**Map of Little Egg Harbor Bay
Showing
The entrance to the Great Bay
The location of Chestnut Neck
And
The encampment of the Pulaski Legion
South of Tuckerton**

Prologue

At a time when Atlantic City was only a barrier island off the main land of New Jersey and only populated by an occasional fisherman and some livestock; at a time when the people who lived near there, struggled to survive in a dense forest among a variety of waterways; at a time when many of those people desired to live independently from a distant intolerant government, a conflict occurred which destroyed a village and had an everlasting effect on the people of the area. Over two hundred and twenty five years ago in 1778 during the war for American Independence, a conflict occurred in the Little Egg Harbor area of New Jersey that involved a number of well known people, a number of unknown people, and a number of long forgotten heroes, who risked everything they owned including their lives to secure a place for themselves and their families where they could live in peace under a government of their own choosing and worship their God as they wished.

Long Beach Island is located a few miles off the mainland of New Jersey north of present day Atlantic City and today contains the cities of (from south to north) Beach Haven, Long Beach, Ship Bottom, and others. South of Long Beach Island is marsh and the island of Brigantine. Between these islands is the Little Egg Harbor Inlet that is the entrance to the Great Bay section of the body of water known as Little Egg Harbor Bay. South of Brigantine Island is the island that contains Atlantic City and south of that island is the island of Ocean City. Between these islands is the Great Egg Harbor Inlet that is the northern entrance to the body of water known as Great Egg Harbor Bay. Both areas are named for the same reason. The first Europeans to enter these waters were impressed by the abundance of bird eggs they found which were left by the thousands of migratory and local birds who enjoyed the marshes and grassy islands and warm beaches of the area (and still do).

The Little Egg Harbor River, now known as the Mullica River, is fed by a number of other rivers and creeks and provides much of the water for the Little Egg Harbor Bay. Near the mouth of this river, where it empties into the bay, there is a neck of land that gives good access to the safe anchorage in the bay. A fishing community containing a few houses, warehouses, and a wharf was built there known as the Village of Chestnut Neck. Its location and safe harbor caused it to grow to one of the major colonial ports along the New Jersey coast and during the American Revolution it was a hot bed of privateers.

The Continental Congress issued “letters of marque” authorizing 1,697 privateers during the American Revolution. These private war ships, their owners, captains, officers, and crews were strictly regulated by law and were authorized to capture or destroy British shipping. The privateers from Little Egg Harbor were in a good position to attack ships traveling along its coast between Boston or New York and Philadelphia or Charleston or Savannah. The privateers were necessary to interrupt the supplies of food, clothing, and ammunition, etc. needed by the British armed forces. A “Court of Admiralty” adjudicated the laws regulating these activities. When a vessel was captured it had to be taken to an authorized port where the cargo was inventoried and sometimes removed from the ship. The vessel and the cargo that was not needed by the Continental Army were stored pending the orders of the Admiralty Court. When the judge determined that this was a legal capture of a British ship he would order its disposition. The vessel (called the “prize”) and its cargo were usually advertised for sale by auction. The sales in this area took place in Chestnut Neck and at a location a few miles inland up the river at a place known as “The Forks” where the Batsto River emptied into the Mullica River. (An iron foundry important to the Continental Army was located up the Batsto River.)

The Conflict

The privateers operating out of Little Egg Harbor wrecked havoc on British shipping. It was particularly irritating to the new Commander-in-Chief of the British forces in North America, Sir Henry Clinton who had replaced Sir William Howe on May 8, 1778. Clinton was forced to evacuate the occupation of Philadelphia in June 1778 and during the march of his troops to New York across New Jersey he had failed to defeat Washington at the Battle of Monmouth on June 28. He was in no mood to be further humiliated by a nest of privateers in his backyard. Between June and September 1778 the privateers had brought into Little Egg Harbor no less than 18 prize vessels with cargoes of cloth, silks, shoes, books, medicine, hardware, meat, butter, cheese, wine, salt, tobacco, sugar, molasses, coffee, ironware, nails, cooking utensils, military supplies, etc. With pressure from Great Britain, where the interruption in trade had caused a rise in marine insurance as well as the shortage of supplies to the British forces in North America and the personal failure of his troops to defeat or control the rebels, Clinton was determined to at least put an end to the privateers nearby.

In September 1778 Clinton ordered units of the British fleet to form at Staten Island and prepare for an attack on Little Egg Harbor. Rear Admiral James Lord Gambier ordered the formation of 15 vessels with 152 guns and 1,690 men. Commander Henry Colins of the *HMS Zebra* was placed in command of the Expedition and Captain Patrick Ferguson of the 5th Regiment of Foot was placed in command of the invasion troops. (Captain Ferguson had made a name for himself in 1776 by inventing a breech-loading rifle that could fire six shots in one minute. The “Ferguson Rifle” was far superior to the standard issue “Brown Bess” but was little used during this war.) Captain Furgeson commanded 300 men in the 5th Regiment of Foot and was joined by 100 men of the 3rd Battalion of New Jersey Volunteers loyal to Britain under the command of Captain Peter Campbell. With orders to “clean out that nest of rebel pirates” the Expedition set sail from Staten Island in New York

Harbor at midnight September 30, 1778 and after being delayed by a storm and heavy seas, sailed into Little Egg Harbor Bay at noon on October 5, 1778.

The preparations and departure of the expeditionary forces did not go unnoticed by the patriots in the area. New Jersey Governor William Livingston sent warnings to the coastal communities and to General Washington. They didn't know where the British would strike, so troops were moved to various places to protect key areas. General Washington sent Brigadier General Count Casimir Pulaski and his newly formed Legion to Little Egg Harbor. Major General Benedict Arnold, the military commander at Philadelphia sent Colonel Thomas Procter's Regiment of Pennsylvania Artillery to join General Pulaski in defending that area. The local defenders were the 3rd Brigade of the Gloucester County, New Jersey Militia under the command of Colonel Richard Somers. A small fort had been erected on the highest land at Chestnut Neck under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Elijah Clark and First Major Richard Westcoat but it had not yet been outfitted with cannon. When the news of a possible invasion reached the village, the warehouses were emptied and the citizens evacuated with much of their possessions to a safer place inland.

As the British forces sailed into the harbor it received word from local loyalists that the area had been warned of their coming and the Militia had gathered at Chestnut Neck. Believing that the fort had artillery, Commander Colins, at about 4:00 pm on October 6, 1778, ordered the bombardment of the fort before Captain Ferguson landed his men. Faced against a strong enemy force and no cannon for defense the patriots moved into the woods and the British occupied Chestnut Neck. They soon set about burning the village and the ten prize vessels anchored off shore that had been too large for the patriots to navigate up the river and which the British were not prepared to sail home. This took until noon the next day October 7. In the morning of October 7, 1778 Commander Colins prepared to advance up the Mullica River and destroy the prize vessels and

warehouses at “The Forks” and then on up the Batsto River to destroy the ironworks. However, after receiving information from Loyalists that patriot forces were nearing the area from the north and that Colonel Procter’s Pennsylvania Artillery Regiment would soon arrive, he determined it was too risky.

The weather was not helpful for the British fleet to depart from the bay. The wind did not allow them to leave the Harbor and more than one vessel ran aground. As the seamen were working to float the vessels Captain Ferguson conducted two raids on the north shore of the river and went several miles inland. He destroyed three salt works and ten buildings belonging to the patriots. So far the casualties, other than property, consisted of one wounded British soldier, but that would soon change. On October 8, 1778 the Pulaski Legion arrived at Tuckerton, a Quaker settlement inland off the north shore of Little Egg Harbor Bay. General Pulaski passed south of the village to position his forces and established his headquarters at James Willets farm where he had a good view of the Little Egg Harbor Bay and the British fleet anchored there. Here he waited to see what would develop.

On October 12, 1778 a former Hessian officer, who had deserted to join the patriots and was assigned to the Legion, had become disillusioned with his decision and with a few others rowed a small boat out to the *HMS Nautilus* and was allowed on board. Acting Sub-Lieutenant Carl Wilhelm Joseph Juliat informed Captain Ferguson of the position of General Pulaski’s forces and falsely stated that the General had issued orders that “no quarter” should be given to the enemy. Armed with the position of the patriot forces and angered by the order of “no quarter,” Captain Ferguson requested and received permission to launch a surprise attack on the Pulaski Legion. At about 3:00 am on the morning of October 15, 1778 the attacking force of 250 men landed with Juliat as a guide. They proceeded inland under the cover of darkness, surrounded and killed the Legionnaires at a picket post and surprised the forces under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Charles Baron Bose. The shouts of the attackers awoke the

soldiers and they prepared to make a stand. Colonel Bose led a charge in an attempt to break the enemy line and was killed for his efforts. Second Lieutenant Joseph de le Borderie was also killed as Captain Ferguson's men cut down the outnumbered and confused Americans. All of the patriots in the encampment were killed except five who were taken prisoner. His mission completed, Captain Ferguson ordered a withdrawal of his troops to the harbor and the safety of the British ships.

The sounds of battle were heard further inland at the headquarters of General Pulaski and his cavalry. But, by the time they arrived at the scene of the battle the British forces had withdrawn. Captain Ferguson and his men escaped to Osborn Island and destroyed the access bridge behind them. General Pulaski's men were unable to cross to the island. About 10:00 am in the morning of October 15th Captain Ferguson's men began their hasty withdrawal and by the middle of the afternoon they had rejoined the British fleet. Their withdrawal was hasty because a Loyalist had informed them that Colonel Procter's artillery was not far away and would arrive shortly. Captain Ferguson did not wish to risk his troops under such a defense without his own artillery. The surprise attack resulted in few British casualties – 3 wounded and 3 missing. The American casualties however were much different – upwards of 50 men were killed or wounded including the two officers previously mentioned. All in all this was considered a decisive British victory although they occupied no land and failed to reach "The Forks" or destroy the Batsto ironworks and failed to stop the privateering. This was the first battle involving the Pulaski Legion and the only major attack on the coast of New Jersey during the war.

On October 20, 1778, spurred on by new orders from Sir Henry Clinton and improved weather, Commander Colins made an attempt to get his ships over the sand bar and out the inlet. The *Nautilus* was the first to try the exit and successfully crossed the bar although it struck bottom several times. The flagship *Zebra* was next, but it ran aground. All attempts to free it were in vane and after

trying all through the day and night the men were transferred to the *Nautilus* and the *Vigilant* and at 9:00 am on October 21, 1778 the ship was set on fire. It continued to burn until the next day when its magazines exploded and the ship was no more. The rest of the vessels joined the fleet and they sailed for New York arriving there on October 23, 1778, ending the Expedition to Little Egg Harbor.

Not many historians mention the Battle at Chestnut Neck or the Affair at Little Egg Harbor but some of the participants are well known in history. After the Expedition: Captain Ferguson was transferred to the South and the command of Lord Cornwallis. He was assigned to pursue small bands of rebels in the Carolinas and eventually made a stand at King's Mountain where he was killed on October 7, 1780. Count Casimir Pulaski was sent to support General Lincoln in South Carolina. He was with General Lincoln when he attacked Savannah Georgia with the assistance of the French Fleet. During the subsequent siege of Savannah, Count Pulaski led a cavalry charge against the enemy on October 9, 1779 and was mortally wounded with grapeshot in his loins. He died on board the ship *Wasp* a few days later.

The people of Chestnut Neck never rebuilt the village and most of them resettled further inland at the village of Port Republic. The area was left basically undisturbed for over 200 years. A shipyard and a couple of houses is all that remains in Chestnut Neck today. The rest of the former village is protected as federal land for a wildlife refuge and as a public area with a tall monument to the heroes of the battle that was erected by the DAR in 1911. In 1988 the Colonel Richard Somers Chapter NJS SAR, which was instrumental in achieving the federal land protection, erected a monument to the privateers of the area, and, each year, near the anniversary date of October 6, the Colonel Richard Somers SAR Chapter remembers the heroic privateers and their patriot defenders with a special memorial service at the monument in Chestnut Neck.

The 225th Anniversary

At 10:00 am on Saturday October 4, 2003, members and friends of the Colonel Richard Somers Chapter NJS SAR gathered at the monument at Chestnut Neck to remember the patriots who defended their right to self-government 225 years ago. The Chapter members were joined by members of the American Legion who formed a small parade led by 10-year-old drummer Patrick Dods. They marched the short distance to the SAR monument where residents and local dignitaries waited for the ceremonies to begin. Marching with her brother was 6-year-old Margaret Dods who carried an American Flag twice her size. She held the flag through the entire service without letting it touch the ground and would not release it for anything.

The Chapter President Rev. Norman H. Thomas directed the ceremonies. He is a veteran of World War II and a recipient of the Purple Heart Medal. Since his return from the war he has dedicated his life to the service of his God and Country. He is an active member of many veterans' organizations and is the Methodist pastor of two churches. Although of an age when most men are retired, he continues his work in the community with his wife Dorothy by his side and with a vision unrelenting in his dedication to service. (Dorothy passed away in 2007)

Following the Pledge of Allegiance led by SAR member Mark C. Denovchik, and the National Anthem beautifully sung by Bitsy Sachs, Rev. Thomas introduced special guests and reflected on the activities of the Chapter on this site. After many years of planning and fundraising, a monument to the brave privateers of Chestnut Neck was dedicated on October 8, 1988. They had raised money with small donations and the help of many local people, and obtained a large piece of bog iron sandstone from the Mullica River for the monument. The bronze plaque that was placed on the stone contains the names of 35 New Jersey privateering captains who were issued *Letters of Marque* by the Continental Congress with the names of their vessels.

In 1990 a flagpole was dedicated to go with the concrete walk that leads to the monument and circles it. Many people have been involved in preserving this site.

The Honorable Frank A. LoBiondo, local member of the US House of Representatives, praised the heroes of the American Revolution and noted that there are many heroes present this day as he recognized the veterans, many of whom were wearing the purple coat of a recipient of the Purple Heart. Congressman LoBiondo had an obvious knowledge of what happened in the Battle at Chestnut Neck and reminded all Americans to reflect on the sacrifices made by our servicemen and women, and how fortunate we are to be living in this country. He commended Rev. Thomas and the SAR for their efforts here.

Kirk W. Conover, member of the New Jersey Assembly and Chairman of the Atlantic County Freeholders, expressed his belief that our forefathers were guided by the hand of God in the creation of this nation. He was joined by Atlantic County Freeholder John W. Risley, Jr. in stating a desire that more people should be involved in the preservation of our history and in the participation in ceremonies of remembrance.

Josephine DiStefano Kapus, former president of the Atlantic County Historical Society, author and historian gave a brief history of the battle. George L. Czurlanis, founder and president of The Affair at Little Egg Harbor Historical Society spoke in uniform of the massacre of the men of General Pulaski's Legion.

William F. Schmitz, Awards Chairman of the Colonel Richard Somers Chapter SAR, introduced chapter member Franklin W. Kemp, U.S. Coast Guard (Lieutenant Commander retired), author, historian and former Chief of the Atlantic City Fire Department. He was presented the SAR Meritorious Service Medal in recognition of his distinguished service to the preservation of American History. Franklin Kemp is the author of *A Nest of Rebel Pirates*, the meticulously researched and documented account of the British

expedition to Little Egg Harbor. The statements made in this article can be verified in this book that can be found in a few libraries including the SAR Library in New Jersey and at the SAR National Headquarters in Louisville. First published by the author in 1966, a second edition was published in 1993 by the Batsto Citizens Committee in the public interest after many requests.

A wreath was placed at the privateer's monument by members of the SAR and a poem "The Silent Fields" was read by the author Dee Scerni who wrote it as a tribute to the participants in the battle at Chestnut Neck.

After a moment of silence, 13-year-old Jason Dods played "Taps" on his trumpet and the moving ceremony of remembrance came to a conclusion.

The Silent Fields

The cannons and the battle cries have long ceased their sounds, the fields are all now growing, where once were battle grounds.

The marching drums a memory that history books speak of, the wind is but a whisper, as our flag flies high above.

Where once the battle roared and brave men fought and fell, the air is still and silent with spring's sweet earthly smell.

Gone are foes and battles, only memories here today, of brave men who gave us freedom, before they passed away.

It is here we come to honor as we stand all side by side, for they left us with a heritage rich with hope and pride.

The monument stands tall as we look upon its face, the battle ground stands silent as freedom takes its place.

Dee Scerni, May 23, 1992

Comments and The Future

It is interesting to note that the three children who took part in the ceremonies are descended from Colonel Francis Faulkner of Acton, Massachusetts an officer in the American Revolution and they are also related to the Marquis deLafayette. The two Freeholders who were present are each descended from citizens who lived in the area during the Battle at Chestnut Neck. Chapter President Rev. Norman H. Thomas was awarded the Meritorious Service Medal by the New Jersey Society in recognition of his long and inspiring leadership of the Colonel Richard Somers Chapter.

Members of the Chapter who are descended from members of Col. Richard Somers 3rd Battalion of Gloucester County New Jersey Militia, that participated in the battles of Trenton, Princeton and Monmouth and were at Chestnut Neck, include Chapter Vice President Harry P. Folger, 3rd a descendant of 2nd Major Jeremiah Smith and Past Chapter President Monty Holt a descendant of Captain William Smith (brother of Jeremiah Smith) and Secretary Robert M Townsend, Sr. and his sons Ronald S Townsend and Roger J. Townsend who are descendants of 2nd Lieutenant Elijah Townsend Sr.

When the area was threatened by a possible housing development, the leaders of the Col. Richard Somers Chapter sought political assistance to preserve the area. Our then Congressman the Honorable William J. Hughes, who was a long time friend of the SAR efforts to remember the patriots at Chestnut Neck, was instrumental in preserving the pristine nature of the site through the purchase of the available land by the Federal Government as a fish and wildlife preservation area.

The Colonel Richard Somers Chapter continues its patriotic activities and hopes to be able to erect a monument to the members of the Admiralty Court who adjudicated the activities of those private ships of war “the Privateers” during the American Revolution. There are also plans to erect an “open air” museum for the education and enjoyment of visitors.

(Donations are encouraged for both of these projects.)

The Colonel Richard Somers Chapter will celebrate the 230th Anniversary of the Battle at Chestnut Neck with special ceremonies at 11:00am on Saturday October 11, 2008 at the monument to the patriots of the American Revolution on Rte 9 at Chestnut Neck near Port Republic, Galloway Township, Atlantic County, NJ. (To raise money for the chapter projects, ads are being sold for the Program Ad Book -- Patrons at \$10ea)

Colonel Richard Somers Chapter
New Jersey Society
Sons of the American Revolution

Rev. Norman H. Thomas, *President – Treasurer*
Harry P. Folger 3rd, *Vice President*
William F. Schmitz, *Vice President – Programs*
Earl Cain, *Secretary – Historian*
Somers Corson, *Chaplain*
Joseph T. Kelly, *Chancellor*
Franklin W. Kemp, *Secretary Emeritus*
Almonte Holt, *Past Chapter President*

John J. Baglio	Donald Marple
Russell F. Collins	Richard L. Phillips
Gary J. Denovchik	Charles Rentschler
James E. Gale	Brian F. Schmitz
David A. Gingras	Gregory J. Shively
Rev. Norman R. Goos	Dennis A. Steelman
Joseph W. Hartman	James F. Steelman
Donald Higbee	Roger J. Townsend
Thomas D. Keywood	Ronald S. Townsend
Joseph A. Korba	Richard Vance
Steven E. Long	John H. Yates

Meetings are held at 7:00pm
on the 2nd Thursday of each month
at the Point Diner
Somers Point Circle at Mays Landing Rd (Rte 52)
Somers Point, NJ.
All are Welcome

Privateer Captains and ships listed on the SAR Monument

Samuel Allen, *name unknown*
John Badcock, *Rainbow*
John Baudouine, *Governor Clinton*
Samuel Bigelow, *name unknown*
Andrew Brown, *Endeavor*
Nathan Brown, *Jack*
Samuel Brown, *Civil Usage*
Joseph Edwards, *Luck & Fortune*
Rufus Gardner, *Enterprise*
Baker Hendrick, *Charming Betsey*
Adam Hyler, *Revenge*
Samuel Ingersoll, *Santipe*
Nathan Jackson, *Greyhound*
Nicholas Keen, *Friendship*
James Leach, *Happy Return*
William Marriner, *Enterprize*
Thomas Quigley, *Lively*
David Scull, *Alligator*
Timothy Shaler, *Chance*
Micajah Smith, *Sly*
Robert Snell, *Rattlesnake*
Andrew Steelman, *Alligator*
David Stevens, *Chance*
Enoch Stillwell, *Hawk*
Joshua Studson, *name unknown*
Aaron Swain, *Revenge*
Yelverton Taylor, *Comet*
William Treen, *Unity*
Ebenezer Tucker, *Kitty*
Teunis Voorhees, *Revenge*
John Walton, *General Washington*
Lambert Wickes, *Reprisal*
Amos Willits, *name unknown*
Enoch Willits, *name unknown*
Hope Willits, *Luck & Fortune*



Monument

Made of bog iron sandstone from the Mullica River

Erected by

The Colonel Richard Somers Chapter
New Jersey Society
Sons of the American Revolution

In honor of the Privateers of the American Revolution

Dedicated October 1, 1988



Monument erected by
The Daughters of the American Revolution
at Chestnut Neck, New Jersey

*“In honor of the brave patriots of the Revolutionary
War who defended their liberty and their homes in a
battle fought near this site” October 6, 1778*

Dedicated October 6, 1911