



THE MONUMENT AT CHESTNUT NECK



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A STATUE of a militiaman, atop a shaft of white Vermont marble, stands guard at the site of the colonial village of Chestnut Neck. Erected on October 6, 1911 by the State of New Jersey, through the efforts of General Lafayette Chapter, National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution, the monument commemorates the British attack on the village during the Revolutionary War. This skirmish was our only encounter with the British in what is now Atlantic County.

In 1906, Governor J. Franklin Fort of New Jersey appointed the chapter's regent, Miss Sarah D. Doughty, and two of her officers, Mrs. Joseph Thompson and Mrs. John J. Gardner, commissioners to select the monument's design and contract for its erection. When dedication day arrived, on the 133rd anniversary date of the village's destruction, people gathered from all over the state.

In colonial times, Chestnut Neck's twelve homes, two taverns, a storehouse and wharf lay on the south side of the Mullica River, about ten miles north of Absecon, just east of the present Route 9. The village was completely destroyed by the British on October 6, 1778.

From the British viewpoint, there was good reason for the attack. Chestnut Neck was a center for privateers, those seafaring Jersey men, who, armed with a letter of marque from the fledgling United States republic, practiced piracy on the high seas. In fact, the entire Little Egg Harbor River, or Mullica River, as it is known today, was a hotbed of activity and its length belied its importance. Tidal for only about twenty-five miles upstream, it was navi-

gable by most sailing vessels and had easy access to the ocean. Chestnut Neck lay near its mouth, a short distance from open sea.

At the head of tidal water, Batsto Iron Works, its output of cannon, ball and "shott" geared for Washington's army, was considered so important to the United States that its workmen were exempt from military duty. A scant mile downstream and deep in the Pine Barrens, lay the Forks of Little Egg Harbor, headquarters for privateering. This settlement, equidistant from the coast and Washington's army in the valley of the Delaware River, was ideal for the final disposition of prize cargo. But it lay a full day's journey upstream, and many privateers, eager to be at sea again, brought captured vessels only as far as Chestnut Neck. There, cargo could be unloaded and later sold, while the ship, readied for sea again, was off for another prize.

During the summer of 1778, at least twenty vessels were brought here, and the biggest prize, the *Venus*, out of London, was so filled with goods that its sale, held at both Chestnut Neck and the Forks, took two days. The ship itself sold for more than seventeen thousand pounds. No wonder the British fleet was ordered to "seize, pillage, burn, and destroy this nest of Pirates!"

Sometime before this, Major Richard Westcott (Wescoat) and Lieutenant Colonel Elijah Clark of the Forks, officers in the Gloucester County militia, built a small earthenworks fort overlooking the river at Chestnut Neck. Called Fort Fox Burrows, it had embrasures for six guns, but, unfortunately, had not yet been armed.

The British struck on the morning of the 6th of October 1778, and the small group of defenders were no match for their larger, better armed force. On October 9th, Commander Colins, ranking officer of the British fleet, wrote that the village had been wiped out, its homes, barns, storehouse, wharf, and fort destroyed. Ten vessels lying in harbor, most of them British registry, were scuttled and sunk.

Originally, Colins intended to push on upstream to the Forks, to destroy that "nest of Freebooters" and deal a crippling blow to the Batsto Iron Works, but he concluded that it was unwise to bottle his fleet in enemy territory, so far from supplies.

As the British set sail and disappeared beyond the reaches of the river, a deep and terrible quiet settled over the October countryside. Chestnut Neck was gone, never to return. Wary now, of seeing a life's work go up in smoke, the settlers moved inland, near the headwaters of Nacote Creek, at present-day Port Republic.

For years, descendants of survivors handed down well-worn tales about the romance of a pretty Chestnut Neck lass, Michele Johnson, who met and fell in love with a handsome British soldier, James Bell, during the fighting. A lone old house on the banks of Nacote Creek was the setting for their story.

Michele, so they said, took refuge in the house just as the British were getting ready to put it to torch, and James Bell, in true story-book style, saved both Michele and the house. They fell in love and were married.

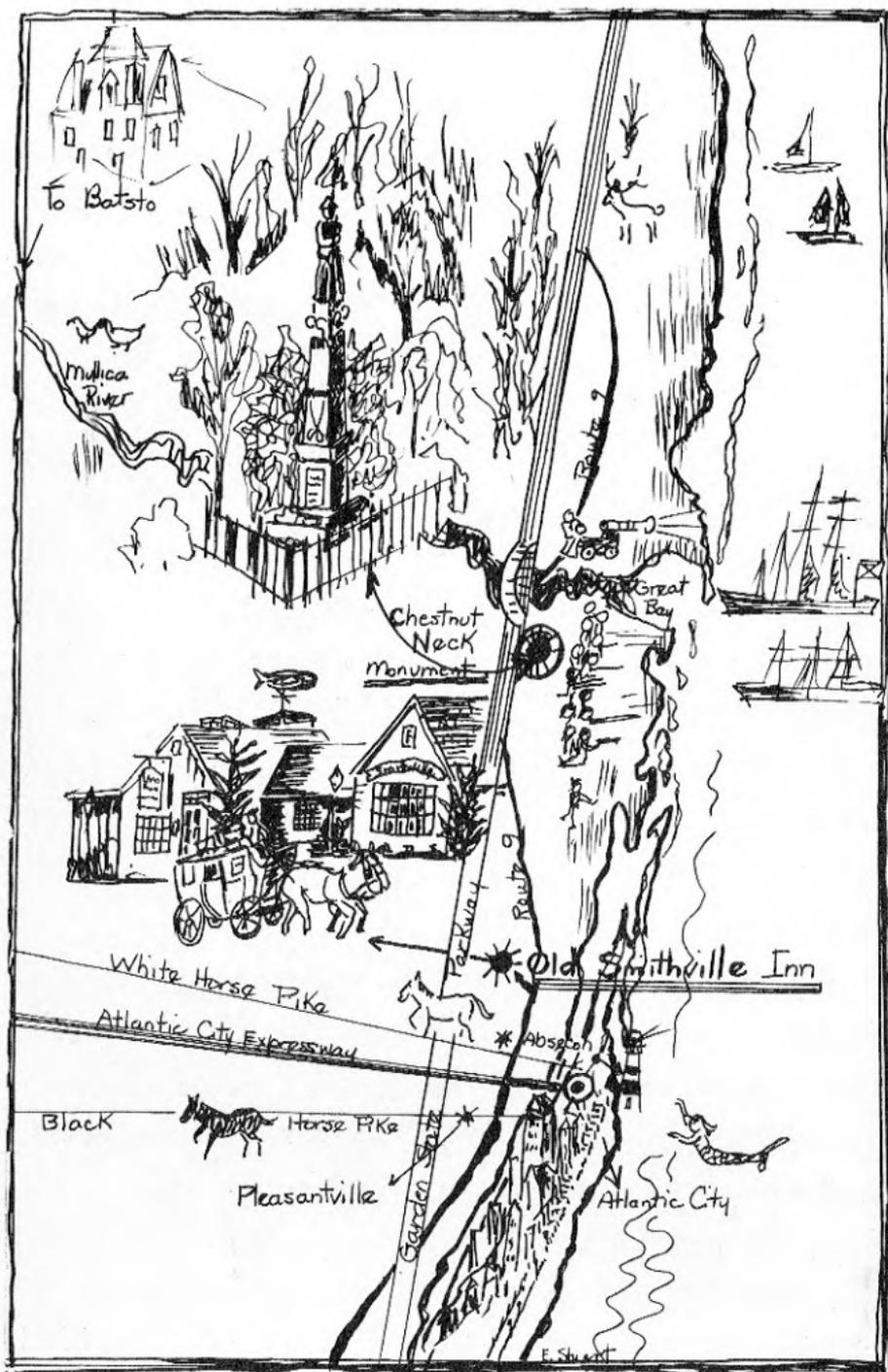
Another rumor said that Michele Johnson and her widowed mother, who were living alone in the old house by the creek, fed British officers, and, in return, their home was spared. James Bell, they went on, was a member of Pulaski's Legion which arrived too late to take part in the fighting. Bell saw Michele, fell in love with her, and, after the war, they were married and lived in this house.

Michele Johnson and James Bell were real people; they did marry and live in the vicinity of Chestnut Neck all their lives, raising a large family. However, James Bell was not English. A Marylander, he enlisted at the age of twenty to help the cause of the colonists, and, at the time of the burning of Chestnut Neck, he was attached to the 11th Pennsylvania Regiment. Today, he and three other Revolutionary War heroes, Micajah Smith, John Van Sant, and Jonas Morse, are buried on a tiny knoll overlooking Nacote Creek in the village of Port Republic.

Nor, as it turned out, was the Johnson house as old as it seemed. Not long ago, one of the country's leading historical architects examined the remains of the house to determine its age. He concluded that it was built some fifty-seven years after the burning of Chestnut Neck, about 1835.

So much for tradition. But facts cannot change, and the life-like militiaman atop the monument stands as a symbol of the brave patriots who defended their liberties and their homes in the "Affair at Chestnut Neck."

Sarah W. R. Ewing



Dedicated to the 200th Birthday of the United States of America, Bicentennial Committee of General Lafayette Chapter, National Society Daughters of the American Revolution.