

# Chestnut Neck — It's Gone But Not Forgotten

By Franklin W. Kemp

COMMANDER HENRY COLINS was wary as his ships approached the small American fort at Chestnut Neck. His ships had crossed Great Bay and were now in the Mullica River. It was shortly before 4:00 p.m., October 6, 1778 as the British warships prepared for bombardment.

Colins had a force of 11 warships, two transports and 1,690 soldiers, sailors, marines and loyalists to "wipe out the nest of rebel pirates at Little Egg Harbor." These were the orders of Sr. Henry Clinton, military commander in North America.

Clinton had had enough of the patriot privateering vessels operating out of Chestnut Neck. The British viewpoint concerning the Jerseymen preying on his ships can best be summed up from the Annual Report for the Year 1779:

"... and as the trade of New York had suffered greatly from their depredations, the commanders determined to root out this nest of privateers as effectually as possible."

But unknown to Colins and the commander of the troops, Capt. Patrick Ferguson, the American fort was without cannon. It had been erected under the direction of Lt. Col. Elijah Clark and First Major Richard Wescoat of Col. Richard Somers' Third Regiment, Gloucester County Militia. The fort had been erected on a slight rise between the Little Egg Harbor River (now the Mullica) and Nacote Creek on a level with the water to rake the channel. But its six embrasures were gunless and the hastily gathered militiamen, if they could even be called that, looked down the muzzles of the British guns.

Looking over the situation, both Colins and Ferguson realized that because of the swampy banks east of the fort, they would have to pass the fort for their landing. In order to protect his troops Colins ordered the warships in close for a point blank bombardment. The incessant firing into the fort soon drove the defenders from that position. The vessels carrying the men of the Fifth Foot, marines of the fleet and loyalist of the Third Battalion, New Jersey

Volunteers, stormed ashore near the public warehouses and in a determined bayonet attack drove the defenders into the nearby woods. Chestnut Neck was then in British hands.

COLINS FOUND 10 captured ships there including the large Venus of London. These were dismantled, set on fire and scuttled by the seamen all that night and into the early morning of Oct. 7. While the troops formed a line of battle around the little village some of their number and the seamen burned the large warehouses holding captured goods destined for the Continental Army. The fort was also destroyed as well as the properties of John Mathis, John Payne, Henry Davis, John Adams, Joseph Sooy, John Smith, Micajah Smith (one of the captains who had captured the Venus), Jeremiah Adams, Joseph Johnson, Edward Bowen, Robert Smith, Jeremiah Higbee and James Giberson. From that day on Chestnut Neck ceased to exist.

Colins had originally planned to move up the Mullica River in order to destroy

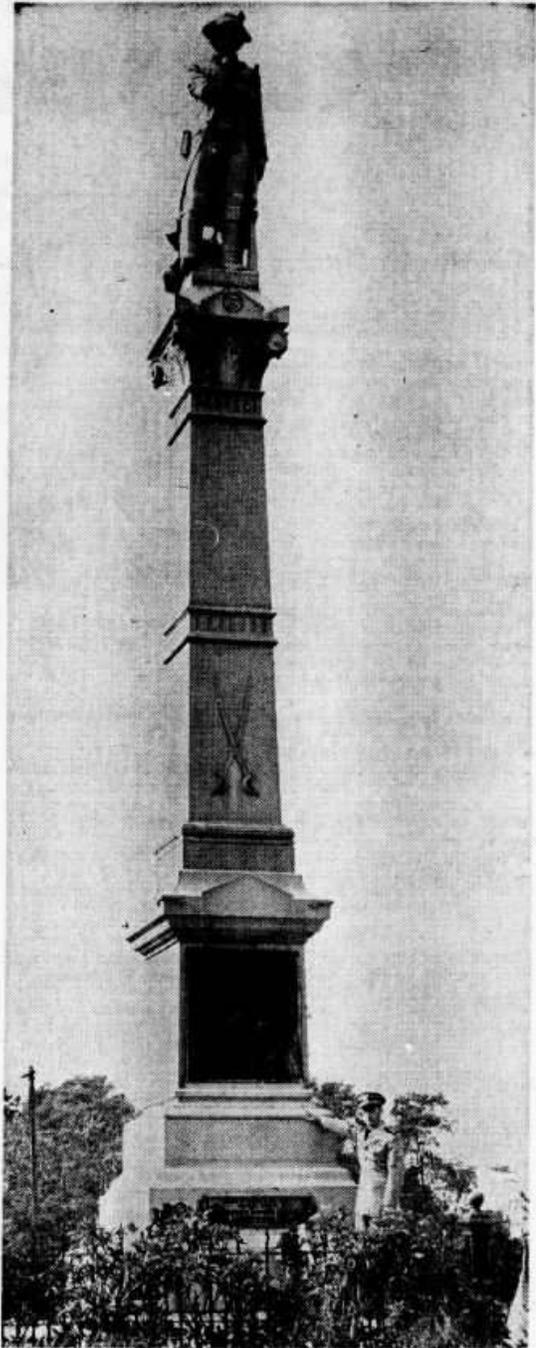
## N.J. Coast's Biggest Battle 190 Years Ago

the iron works at Batsto and the supply depot holding captured goods for Washington's forces that was located on an island in the river. When he learned from Tories that Procter's Pennsylvania Artillery and some Philadelphia Militia were moving east by orders of Benedict Arnold, military commander at Philadelphia, and that other Continental units, including the Pulaski Legion were moving south, he decided to abandon any plans for a strike farther inland.

At noon on October 7, 1778 the British forces assembled for their withdrawal. The British ships returned to their flagship ZEBRA in Little Egg Harbor Bay where they remained landlocked until Oct. 22. Following their withdrawal the British on Oct. 15 were able to bloody the Pulaski Legion as it lay encamped on the farm of Jeremiah Ridgway, south of Tuckerton, killing about 45 of its number, including the Legion's commander of infantry, Lt. Col. Charles August von Bose.

WITH THE EXCEPTION of three large landowners, Micajah Smith, John Mathis and Joseph Sooy, the former residents of Chestnut Neck resettled at present day Port Republic, about three miles up Nacote Creek. The site of their previous home, however, has remained Chestnut Neck and it is now within the city limits of Port Republic. A boat storage yard now occupies the site of the erstwhile and until a few years ago melted bottle and window glass and charcoal could be found on the site of the tavern. Some of the beautiful and unusual mixtures of this glass can be seen today at the Somers Mansion at Somers Point.

In 1911 a monument was erected at the Neck on land deeded to the Gen. Lafayette Chapter of the D.A.R. in 1906 by Thomas French. The sentinel atop this marble monument faces seaward in eternal watchfulness. Many feel this monument should be lighted at night, and perhaps some day it will be.



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