

The Burning of Norfolk

Shortly after the Battle of Great Bridge, in December of 1775, Virginia's Royal Governor Lord Dunmore, his soldiers, and perhaps one thousand Loyalist civilians evacuated Norfolk and took refuge on an assortment of ships in Norfolk Harbor. Lt. Col. Edward Stephens arrived with a Patriot detachment at Kemp's Landing on December 11, 1775 and began identifying leading citizens who were Loyalists that collaborated and supported Dunmore. He focused on those that had influence over others in the community. The Patriot commander, Col. William Woodford, issued a statement that citizens would be treated respectfully by Patriot forces.

As these events were transpiring, a British ship, the Lord Donluce, took refuge in Hampton Roads to escape dangerous weather at sea. The ship was headed to Cape Fear near Wilmington, NC, with 250 Scottish immigrants. Dunmore attempted to conscript the men in this group into his Loyalist militia leading some to believe Scottish Highland military units had arrived to reinforce Dunmore. After the Patriots occupied Norfolk on December 14, the Virginia Convention authorized Col. Woodford to assist these individuals in travel overland to North Carolina where that state's authorities assumed responsibility for their travel to the Cape Fear River Valley. As the Patriot forces occupied Norfolk, lookouts at the Pleasure House reported the arrival of the British frigate HMS Liverpool and store ship Maria. The Maria had 2,000 muskets and other armaments in her holds, the material Dunmore requested back in the spring finally arrived. Dunmore now had weapons but lacked sufficient soldiers to effectively employ them.

On New Years Day 1776, the British began firing from the ships at Patriots manning positions along the Norfolk waterfront. Under cover of the bombardment, British troops went ashore, setting fire to waterfront buildings and warehouses. The Patriots, seeing an opportunity to blame Dunmore for burning the city joined in the destruction and set fire to numerous homes and businesses. The city burned for the next four days. By mid-January, about two-thirds of Norfolk had been destroyed. At this point the Virginia Convention authorized the remaining structures inventoried and burned. The brick walls of St. Paul's Episcopal Church survived the fires, although the roof of the church and interior were burned. The Patriots evacuated Norfolk in early February, moving inland to Suffolk and out of the reach of the British Navy. British forces were denied any use of Norfolk and the Gosport shipyard in Portsmouth complicating their attempts to occupy Virginia.

Before its destruction, Norfolk was the best port city between New York and Charleston with direct ocean access. Its destruction prevented the British from establishing a base inside the Chesapeake Bay and complicated their efforts to establish effective maritime patrols of the Bay to interdict and seize Patriot commerce. The event left a lasting scar on the city's landscape and history, and is commemorated to this day.