

## The Battle of Great Bridge

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In June of 1775 Virginia's royal colonial governor, Lord Dunmore, then based in Norfolk, began raising an army. Dunmore organized two Loyalist regiments, one for whites [The Queens Own Loyal Virginia Regiment], and one for escaped enslaved men to whom he promised freedom in exchange for military service [The Ethiopian Regiment]. Dunmore used his 175 experienced soldiers and officers of the 14th Regiment of Foot to train and supervise his new Loyalist units.

The only land route into much of Norfolk and all of Princess Anne County was across the Great Bridge, part of a series of small islands, elevated manmade causeways and bridges at the meeting point of the Southern Branch of the Elizabeth River and the Albemarle-Pamlico Watershed. Today, a lock along the Intracoastal Waterway separates these two watersheds. Dunmore recognized the importance of the area and ordered the construction of a stockade known as Fort Murray on the north side of the bridge.

On November 28, 1775, Patriot forces arrived at the south end of the bridge and probed the defenses around Fort Murray. After experiencing casualties, the Patriots constructed earthen fortifications at the south end of the causeway about 500 yards south of Fort Murray and awaited reinforcements. For the next ten days Loyalists and Patriots skirmished at the bridge. The Patriot force, commanded by Colonel William Woodford, eventually grew to nearly 900 men. Dunmore sent all available manpower (about 500 men) from Norfolk on the evening of the December 8, with orders to attack at first light on the next day. About half of his force were members of the Ethiopian Regiment.

On the morning of the 9th, the Loyalist militia replaced the planking on the bridge, which had previously been removed by the Patriots to hinder any British advance. The activity alerted Patriot sentries of the ensuing crossing. One hundred and twenty British regulars of the 14th Regiment led the attack, followed by loyalist militia. British marines and sailors wheeled two cannons into place south of the bridge and opened fire to support the attack. Patriots from the 2nd Virginia Regiment and the Culpeper Minute Battalion manned the Patriot earthworks.

The advancing British soldiers came under the long-range rifle fire of the Culpeper Minutemen. Moving six men abreast on the causeway, they had no room to maneuver; the tightly packed formation made perfect targets for riflemen firing from behind the earthworks. British soldiers began to fall shortly after they crossed the bridge. The approaching British regulars were on the receiving end as militiamen poured large volumes of fire into the front ranks. Multiple British officers went down; soon the causeway was scattered with the dead and dying. Nevertheless, British soldiers charged within fifteen yards of the earthworks before being driven back into Fort Murray. The battle lasted less than an hour. British and Loyalists casualties totaled more than 100 men killed, wounded, and captured. Only one Patriot was wounded in the hand.

That evening under the cover of darkness the British spiked their cannons and abandoned Fort Murray. Within the next few days, the Patriots entered Norfolk. Lord Dunmore, his soldiers, and Loyalist supporters took refuge on British warships and civilian vessels anchored in Norfolk harbor.