

The Skirmish at Kemp's Landing

In late 1775, a Loyalist intelligence network was actively feeding information to the British governor, Lord Dunmore, including reports about Patriots forming at the Great Bridge in Norfolk County. To eliminate this group, Dunmore himself led a contingent of troops up the Elizabeth River to the Great Bridge. Arriving early in the morning of November 14, 1775, the force found the area devoid of any Patriot force. The intelligence network then provided information about a Patriot militia presence at Kemp's Landing, some 10 miles to the northeast.

While the militia had a 3 to 1 superiority in numbers over the British during an earlier October raid on Kemp's Landing, many of the militia were untrained and untested in combat and wisely made themselves scarce. Such inexperience would show in the ensuing encounter on November 15, 1775. Dunmore and his troops proceeded overland to Kemp's Landing where the Patriots, aware of the approaching force, waited in ambush. The anxious militiamen fired too early at the advanced guard, revealing their position. The British returned fire and scattered the militia, while killing several and taking prisoners. Casualty counts differ widely, with 5 killed in the skirmish and 2 drowning during the frenzied retreat being the generally accepted number. The one Patriot killed whose name is known was John Ackiss from Princess Anne County. Both militia commanders, Joseph Hutchings and Anthony Lawson, were captured. Some accounts claim Hutchings was captured by his former slave Samuel, who accompanied Dunmore's force.

Although small in scale and brief in duration, the Skirmish at Kemp's Landing was significant in several regards. It showed Dunmore that he was rapidly losing control of the colony, perhaps faster than he had anticipated. The Patriots at Kemp's Landing likely had knowledge of Dunmore's presence with the British at the Great Bridge and were willing to take shots at him and British soldiers as the force approached Kemp's Landing. No doubt irritated by this, Dunmore issued his Proclamation declaring martial law, freedom to enslaved persons and indentured servants willing to fight for the King, and labeling anyone not willing to take an oath of loyalty as a traitor. Some 300 Princess Anne residents signed the oath - although Lord Dunmore claimed it was administered to upwards of 3,000.

An important aspect of the Skirmish at Kemp's Landing was the presence of formerly enslaved persons bearing arms against the Patriots. Dunmore's promise of freedom to them, reiterated in his proclamation, and creation of an "Ethiopian Regiment" to augment his forces, fueled an ongoing flow of escapees from enslavement to the British lines. The escaped slaves not only proved their value to the British but to the Patriots as well. Some of the formerly enslaved, perhaps disaffected by British promises, either returned to the Patriot side or were sometimes re-captured. Either way, they provided a wealth of information on British strength, readiness, and even intentions.