

British Forces Attack Hampton

The Hampton Roads area is no stranger to the effects of hurricanes. One occurred on September 2, 1775 that led to a war of words between Captain Matthew Squire of the Sloop of War Otter and the Committees of Hampton and Elizabeth City County, Virginia. The HMS Otter's tender, Liberty, was driven aground during the hurricane. The next day, local Patriots boarded the vessel, removed the guns and stores, seized the crew and then burned the Liberty. Over the summer sailors from the Otter had seized supplies and liberated enslaved people in the area. The Liberty incident allowed residents of Hampton to achieve some form of retribution.

For almost two months British officials demanded return of property taken from the destroyed Liberty, while local Patriots demanded that British officers return Joseph Harris and other enslaved people who had escaped and sought refuge aboard the British fleet. Joseph Harris was a skilled harbor pilot. He and other "Freedom Seekers" participated under the British flag in the ensuing battle for Hampton.

On October 26, 1775, Captain Squire ordered four of his tenders to enter the Hampton River and destroy the town of Hampton. The Patriots fouled the channel with sunken vessels and three companies fired on the tenders preventing them from entering the river. Local leaders in Hampton called for reinforcements. Squire and his men worked all night to clear the channel. The tenders entered the channel just as Col. William Woodford and fifty Patriot reinforcements from the Culpeper Rifle Battalion arrived. The Patriots took up firing positions and drove the tenders from the harbor, inflicting multiple British casualties, saving the town from destruction and capturing one of the landing boats with crew. British blood had been spilled in Virginia in the first battle of the Revolutionary War south of Massachusetts. The Battle of Hampton resulted in no Patriot casualties and little property damage in the town.

This battle helped shift public opinion in Virginia towards independence and contributed to Virginia's leadership role in promoting independence in the Continental Congress. "Lord Dunmore has commenced hostilities in Virginia," wrote Thomas Jefferson from Philadelphia. "It has raised our countrymen into a perfect frenzy." The successful repulsion of British forces demonstrated the determination of Virginians to resist British authority and was a catalyst for further conflict, leading to the shelling of Norfolk and the eventual abandonment of the area by the British.