

The Battle of Cape Henry

In March of 1781, the Patriot militia and Continental Army were slowly massing and surrounding General Benedict Arnold and the British post at Portsmouth, Virginia. Inflicting the decisive blow was dependent on the arrival of American forces under the Marquis de Lafayette, traveling overland from New Jersey, and French forces traveling aboard the French fleet from Rhode Island.

The French fleet was locked in a maritime superiority struggle with the British fleet in New York, where a storm had damaged several British vessels. While the British were making repairs in Long Island Sound, the French saw the opportunity to make their move on Virginia. The British hurried their repairs and made their departure in pursuit of the French. This became a race to the Chesapeake Bay and resulted in the Battle of Cape Henry.

The race was influenced by copper. In the mid-eighteenth century, the Royal Navy had started experimenting with using copper sheathing on the hulls of ships. It was noticed that the copper had prevented fouling from marine growth and inhibited worms from eating away at the wooden hulls below the waterline. The initial expense and time needed to install the copper was offset by reduced maintenance and hull cleanings. A clean hull also provided an increase in speed. The British ships were coppered. The French ships were not.

The French fleet, 10 vessels under the command of Commodore Charles-René-Dominique Sochet, des Touches, departed Newport, RI on March 8, 1781. British lookouts reported the movement and the British fleet, 12 vessels under the command of Vice-Admiral Marriot Arbuthnot, set out in pursuit from Gardiner's Bay, New York 36 hours later. The advantage of speed with copper bottomed ships became a critical factor. The slow movement of the French due to winds enabled the British to steadily close the distance and eventually overtake the French.

On March 16, 1781, the French and British fleets fought just off Cape Henry, Virginia at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay. The British gained the upper hand as their positioning with the wind enabled them to bring more of their guns to bear and inflict heavier damage on the French. The battle was brief, with damage inflicted on both sides. Ultimately the French reversed course and sailed back to Newport, while the British entered the Chesapeake Bay and anchored in Lynnhaven Bay – seemingly the clear victor. But the damage to the British fleet was extensive. From a fleet-on-fleet engagement perspective, the French had won the Battle of Cape Henry; however, Patriot land forces ashore in Virginia received no additional troops or naval support from the French fleet. The March 1781 engagement at sea near Cape Henry maintained the status quo in Virginia for the time being.