

The Collier Raids

In 1779, the British offensive military strategy in America shifted from the mid-Atlantic states to the southern states. During this southern campaign, Virginia provided significant supply and manpower support to the Continental Army. The purpose of the Collier Raids was to attack and destroy Patriot resources and supply lines. These large-scale raids, under Royal Navy Commodore Sir George Collier and British General Edward Mathew, disrupted supply lines and harassed Virginia residents living near the coast. Collier's force of six men-of-war and twenty-eight transports carrying nearly 2,000 troops arrived in the Chesapeake Bay on May 8, 1779. They attacked and captured the Patriot fortification in Portsmouth, destroyed the vessels under construction along Virginia's rivers, and burned warehouses.

Some supplies were safely removed prior to the British attack, but a growing concern was the expected arrival of French merchant vessels, bringing additional supplies into Virginia for the Continental Army. If these vessels arrived during the period of British raiding, they would most assuredly be captured. Governor Patrick Henry ordered "look-out boats on the Sea coasts to furnish proper intelligence." These operated in conjunction with the Patriot militia patrols ashore in Princess Anne County.

The large British presence also produced escapes of enslaved people. This was the first large-scale operation in the region by the British in three years. Many enslaved persons viewed it as an opportunity for freedom. One account reported 256 men, 135 women and 127 children escaped their enslavers during these raids.

Local citizens were also harassed – four boys from Princess Anne County, returning from school in Suffolk, were robbed by the British. Several prominent Princess Anne County residents were kidnapped to be used to affect the exchange of certain Loyalist prisoners. This included Jacob Ellegood, a wealthy Loyalist landowner held by the Patriots since 1776.

The three-week operation captured or destroyed eight warships under construction and 137 merchant vessels. Some 9,000 barrels of salted pork were destroyed before they could reach the Continental Army. British forays near Lynnhaven Bay captured livestock and various foodstuffs, and destroyed others. Collier estimated they had destroyed at least one million pounds sterling worth of supplies in their raids. The Collier Raids were destructive and disruptive for residents of Princess Anne County, costly for the State of Virginia, and impeded the Patriot war effort.