

# THE BATTLE OF GREAT BRIDGE: War Comes to Virginia

The Battle of Great Bridge was fought on December 9, 1775 at a small bridge which crossed the Southern Branch of the Elizabeth River approximately twelve miles south of the City of Norfolk. At the time, this area was a part of Norfolk County but today it lies within the corporate limits of the City of Chesapeake, Virginia. This bridge, a narrow 100-150 foot span, was strategically important as it was on the main road connecting Norfolk to North Carolina. Fought over six months before the nation would declare its independence in Philadelphia, the Battle of Great Bridge marked an important victory for the untried American military units over forces which included professional British Regulars, loyalist soldiers, and escaped enslaved African Americans. The American victory forced the British to evacuate Norfolk, Virginia's richest commercial center, and contributed to the British withdrawing from Virginia within seven months of the battle.

The British royal government in Virginia began to collapse in the spring of 1774 as the colonies learned of the passage of the Intolerable Acts. That spring, the Virginia House of Burgesses voted to make June 1, 1774 a "day of Fasting, Humiliation and Prayer" as a sign of their solidarity with the people of Boston. When Lord Dunmore, the Royal Governor of Virginia, learned of this move, he dissolved the House of Burgesses. The Burgesses responded by meeting in an extralegal session at Raleigh Tavern in Williamsburg and called for the election of delegates to the First Virginia Convention. This provisional governmental body met in August 1774 and continued meeting periodically until Virginia adopted a republican form of government in 1776. It was the Second Virginia Convention held at St. John's Church in Richmond in March 1775 where Patrick Henry delivered his famous "give me liberty or give me death" speech.

With few British troops at his disposal, the Royal Governor had little power to stop the rise of the provisional government. In April 1775, British Marines seized the gunpowder in the Magazine in Williamsburg. During this same month, Patriots in Massachusetts confronted British troops at Lexington and Concord intent on seizing rebel arms. Militias from the Piedmont areas of Virginia responded to Lord Dunmore's action by marching on Williamsburg. On June 8, 1775, the Royal Governor, recognizing his precarious position, abandoned Williamsburg and fled to the safety of a British vessel in the York River.



**Magazine in Colonial Williamsburg's Historic Area. British marines seized gunpowder from this magazine in April 1775.**

Though Lord Dunmore fled Williamsburg, he did not give up the fight to reassert royal government and sought reinforcements from the British government. In addition, Lord Dunmore sought to increase the size of his forces on his own. First, he recruited loyalists, people who supported the King and did not support the revolution, to join his forces. These loyalists were placed in a unit which Lord Dunmore called The Queen's Own Loyal Regiment.

Lord Dunmore also hoped to raise British troops from the large numbers of enslaved African Americans who labored for rebel leaders. In November 1775, Lord Dunmore issued Dunmore's Proclamation. This proclamation instituted martial law throughout the colony of Virginia. Martial law placed the military authority of the Royal Governor over the civilian government. In addition, the proclamation declared anyone a traitor who refused to bear arms. Finally, the proclamation declared all "indentured Servants, Negroes, and others, (appertaining to Rebels) free that are able and willing to bear Arms, they joining His MAJESTY'S Troops." Dunmore placed the enslaved Americans who abandoned their rebel masters into a military unit he called Dunmore's Ethiopian Regiment. By the end of November 1775 there would be several hundred of them serving under white British commissioned and noncommissioned officers and bearing on their shirts the motto "Liberty to Slaves". Dunmore's actions cost him any support he had left among Virginia's landed gentry and drove many neutrals into the cause of the patriots.

*"...I do in Virtue of the Power and Authority to ME given, by his MAJESTY, determine to execute Martial Law, and cause the same to be executed throughout this Colony: and to the end that Peace and good Order may the sooner be restored, I do require every Person capable of bearing Arms, to resort to His MAJESTY'S STANDARD, or be looked upon as Traitors to His MAJESTY'S Crown and Government, and thereby becomes liable to the Penalty the Law inflicts upon such Offences..."*

Dunmore's Proclamation,  
November 7, 1775

Though Lord Dunmore had few land forces, he did have a number of British warships at his disposal. With these ships, Dunmore easily reestablished a base of operations in Hampton Roads. From this base he was free to maneuver



**Muskets with bayonets like this, British, Shortland Brown Bess were the primary weapon of the Revolution, Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation.**

up Virginia's rivers and raid rebel plantations for provisions whenever he wanted. These raids also gave him an opportunity to free blacks which he enlisted into his new Ethiopian Regiment.

As Lord Dunmore began to increase the size of his forces, he took the offensive against the American rebels and raided American positions. These raids were designed to gather provisions for his

military forces, confiscate American military supplies and keep rebel forces off-balance. Some of these raids were in retaliation for actions by the patriots.

After Lord Dunmore abandoned Williamsburg, the Third Virginia Convention in August 1775 voted to authorize the Committee of Safety to take control of the colony and took steps to raise an army for the colony's defense. The Committee of Safety ordered Colonel William Woodford, Commander of the Second Virginia Regiment, to proceed to Norfolk to counter Lord Dunmore.

After successfully resisting a raid by British forces against Hampton in late October, American forces proceeded to cross the James River to challenge Lord Dunmore. All of Colonel Woodford's forces had crossed by the end of November 1775. During this period, Lord Dunmore continued to conduct military raids in the Norfolk area against patriot positions. Hearing a rumor that American forces were at the Village of Great Bridge, Lord Dunmore moved his land forces to Great Bridge on November 14 to confront any American forces. Great Bridge was a critical position for Lord Dunmore to hold as it was on the main road which connected Norfolk to North Carolina. If Lord Dunmore lost control of this site, the patriots could cut off vital supplies coming from North Carolina to his forces.

Lord Dunmore did not find any American forces at Great Bridge on November 14. Recognizing the importance of the area as a vital choke point on the Great Road, he left a small detachment of men at Great Bridge to build a log fort

on the north side of the bridge. Dunmore also left a small garrison at Great Bridge to man this fort that the British called Fort Murray.

While at Great Bridge, Lord Dunmore learned that the Princess Anne County militia was gathering at Kemp's Landing and planned to join American forces at Great Bridge. The next day Lord Dunmore marched from Great Bridge to Kemp's Landing with approximately 150 British troops. Kemp's Landing, now located in the Kempsville section of Virginia Beach, was a deep water landing on the Eastern Branch of the Elizabeth River. Approximately 170 soldiers of the Princess Anne Militia planned an ambush of the British forces at the site. The ambush was thwarted when overeager militia men fired too early at the advancing British soldiers. British forces then easily routed the Americans who fled into the woods. The Americans suffered a number of casualties and some were taken prisoner. Only one British soldier was hurt during the skirmish.

Flush with his victory at Kemp's Landing, Lord Dunmore marched into Norfolk and took possession of the city. In Norfolk, he was greeted by a number of people who pledged loyalty to the Crown.

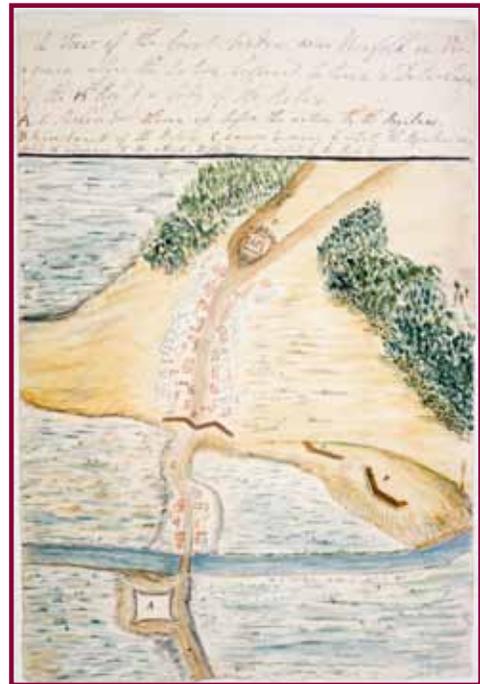
By December 2, 1775, Colonel Woodford reached the area of Great Bridge. Seeing the British safely behind the walls of Fort Murray on the north side of the bridge, he knew it would be suicidal to attack across the narrow bridge. In addition, Colonel Woodford had little knowledge of how many men were in the fort or if they had cannon. Instead, Colonel Woodford erected a semi-circular breastwork on the south side of the bridge and completed other defensive breastworks which allowed the Americans to fire at anyone crossing the bridge.

A stalemate ensued between British and American forces with both safely behind fortified positions. Between the two positions was the narrow bridge over swampy ground. The planks of the bridge had been removed to hamper any attack. Warned by the Committee of Safety not to unduly risk his soldiers, Colonel Woodford opted not to attack but to wait for reinforcements. Recognizing the importance of the site, additional American reinforcements were sent to Colonel Woodford on December 7, 1775 which increased his strength to approximately 900 soldiers.

Lord Dunmore decided to break the stalemate by going on the offensive at Great Bridge. At dusk on December 8, 1775, Dunmore ordered his troops to march south from Norfolk to Great Bridge. The British forces arrived at Great Bridge around 3:00 A.M. on December 9, 1775. Captain Samuel Leslie led the 14th Regiment of Foot while Captain Charles Fordyce commanded the grenadier unit. The arrival of the forces from Norfolk increased British forces to approximately 670 men. This number included British regulars, the loyalists' militia,



**British soldiers firing their muskets.**



**Drawing of 1775 Battle of Great Bridge by Lord Rawdon, with permission from the William Clements Library.**

and the Ethiopian Regiment. After giving his men an opportunity to rest, Captain Leslie pushed British forces to attack at dawn shortly after the Americans had conducted their morning reveille.

The British attack began with an advance party which had two small field cannon. The British began to shell the American positions and began to replank the bridge. Captain Fordyce and his British grenadiers followed with the loyalist units and the poorly armed and trained former slaves. The British regulars, with fixed bayonets, marched

across the narrow causeway. The American sentries at the south end of the bridge fired at the advancing British column and then fell back to the American redoubt to the rear. There the Americans held their fire until the British were only fifty yards from the American position. At that point, the Americans opened fire into the mass of Redcoats. At such close range, the concentrated American firepower decimated the British ranks. Though shot in the knee, Captain Fordyce attempted to rally his men but eventually collapsed only yards from the American position. After several attempts, the British advance faltered and then fell apart. The British retreated to the relative safety of their log fort.

The battle lasted only thirty minutes. Colonel Woodford reported to the Committee of Safety there were no American casualties and only one American was wounded in the hand. There are different estimates as to the number of British losses. In addition to the brave Captain Fordyce, the British suffered the death of two lieutenants. Colonel Woodford also reported twelve British privates died. A lieutenant and seventeen privates were taken as prisoners. When night fell, the British abandoned their fort and retreated to Norfolk. Colonel Woodford reported that Great Bridge was “a second Bunker’s Hill, in miniature, with this difference that we kept our post and had only one man wounded in the hand.”



**American soldiers drilling.**

It is not clear why Lord Dunmore, a man with some military background, made the calculated decision to march his forces against a well-fortified position. Colonel Woodford claimed he was told by a British prisoner after the battle that Lord Dunmore had received false intelligence regarding American troop strength and morale. Possibly Lord Dunmore thought the untrained and undisciplined Americans would run just as they had at Kemp’s Landing a few weeks before. More likely, Lord Dunmore realized that time was not on his side and that American forces would continue to receive reinforcements which would eventually overpower him. He probably understood his only hope of winning the battle was moving quickly and decisively, as he had at Kemp’s Landing, to defeat American forces before they could coalesce into a strong fighting force.



**American soldiers firing their muskets.**

In any case, the Battle of Great Bridge was a major defeat for British forces in Virginia. The British retreated from Great Bridge after the battle and returned to Norfolk. Along with a number of loyalist families, Lord Dunmore and the British soldiers quickly abandoned Norfolk and retreated to the safety of the British fleet in Norfolk’s harbor. The Americans took possession of Norfolk and sharpshooters began to fire at the sailors on the British ships. With control of Norfolk, the Americans refused to resupply the British with food and water. Dunmore threatened to fire upon the city if denied provisions. After the Americans refused to resupply his fleet, Dunmore’s ships began firing into the city of Norfolk on January 1, 1776. Fires spread throughout the city. What was not burned or destroyed by the British was later destroyed by American forces intent on eliminating Norfolk as a potential base for British operations.

After being driven from Norfolk, Lord Dunmore sought another base for his forces. Eventually he retreated to Gwynn’s Island near the mouth of the Rappahannock River in the Chesapeake Bay. There American units forced Lord Dunmore and British troops to evacuate Virginia completely in early August 1776. With Lord Dunmore’s departure, Virginia was free of British rule.

The Battle of Great Bridge was a major tactical and strategic victory for the American forces. As a tactical victory, the battle forced the British to evacuate Norfolk, Virginia's largest and richest commercial center. Not only did the victory force the British army to withdraw from the city, it caused a large number of rich and powerful loyalists to also flee the Norfolk area. The withdrawal of the loyalist families from Norfolk collapsed any support the British government had in this important area.

The strategic aspects of the battle cannot be underestimated. The battle forced the British into a defensive posture in Virginia. Lord Dunmore and his fleet left Virginia within seven months of the Battle of Great Bridge. British forces would not return to Virginia until May 1779 when the British conducted a major naval raid against Hampton Roads. During this critical three year period, Virginia served as a major resource for resupplying materials and men to Washington's armies. Without British interference, food and war materials from eastern North Carolina and Tidewater Virginia moved up the Chesapeake Bay to keep the American war effort alive.



**Virginia served as a major source of army supplies during the war.**



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