

THE BRITISH INVASION OF NEW HAVEN

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By standards of the major battles of the Revolution, the invasion of New Haven was a minor skirmish. But its impact deeply engraved itself on the people and their city. Taken as a unit, these thirty-six hours are a capsule reflecting the temper of the people and the times. It is a story of dedication, brutality, and heroism of John Gilbert, Samuel Tuttle, James Hillhouse, Aaron Burr, Joshua Chandler, Naphtali Daggett, and thousands of citizens who would have considered themselves average.

1779 and the war had dragged on for four years. The Continental Army was at its lowest ebb. The great decisive battles of Saratoga, Maomouth, Trenton, and Long Island had been fought. The embryonic thirteen colonies were destitute. The promised French aid had not materialized. Clinton, sitting secure in New York after Howe's withdrawal from Philadelphia and resignation as commander in chief of the British forces, was trying to draw Washington out to do battle. His troops were restless and he decided on a policy of probe to destroy the spirit of rebellion. Connecticut was first — Why New Haven?

It was the states largest port city, and except for New port, Rhode Island, the most important harbour between Boston and New York. It had been a hot bed for privateers and smugglers. Clinton had been led to believe that the majority of citizens were loyal to the crown,

and had awaited a chance to free themselves from the rebels. Also, New Haven was surrounded by rich farm lands and it was hoped that livestock could be rounded up for the commissary.

Fear of an attack had been anticipated for more than a year. Small defense work had been erected in March of 1778 at Black Rock on the east approach to the harbour. Unfulfilled plans had been made to protect the two bridges leading into the west side of town.

On December 12, 1778, Lieutenant Colonel Jonathan Baldwin of Waterburg was ordered by Colonel Thaddeus Cook to send a lieutenant and nineteen privates from Waterbury to join Captain Vale and thirty-four men from Wallingford and Durham for the protection of the inhabitants of New Haven.

There had been several false alarms, but on July 3rd two British war ships appeared off New London, sixty miles east of New Haven and it was expected that the invasion was to be staged at that town and the Militia was called to arms but these war ships had another purpose; to seal off Long Island Sound and prevent the escape of privateers.

On the night of July 4th, two men of war and forty-six transport vessels anchored off Savin Rock in West Haven. At sunrise on the fifth, nearly two thousand men consisting of a Brigade of Guards, the Seventh Royal Fusiliers, the Fifty-fourth Regiment, a detachment of Jaegers with four three pound field pieces, under General Brigadier Garth disembarked. After dispersing Thomas Painter and three of his fellow militia who had fired at the landing barges, the troops fell in line and marched to the green in West Haven.

The landing was witnessed by President Stiles of Yale College from the tower of the Chapel. His diary carries a most detailed description.

Aaron Burr, son of the President of Princeton College and later to become the United States most controversial vice president, was in New Haven visiting relatives, the Edwards family. With the first alarm he drove his five year old cousin to safety in North Haven and returned to join the hastily recruited defenders. With his commission as colonel in the Continental Army (he had served with Arnold on the ill-fated Canadian invasion) he assumed command of the troops assembled at Thompsons Bridge over the West River.

The troops under Garth, upon reaching the green in West Haven, were allowed a two hour rest and were fed a delayed breakfast. The Reverend Williston, pastor of the West Haven Congregational Church, while trying to hide his valuables and flee the parsonage, fell and broke his leg. His life was threatened by Tories and also the British soldiers who came upon him. He was rescued by Adjutant William Campbell, and his leg was repaired by the regimental surgeon. In recognition of this act of compassion and by Campbell's untimely death before the morning was over, the principal street in West Haven carries his name, Campbell Avenue.

The delay of the troops at the West Haven Green was planned to allow the second division under Major General Tryon to sail the four miles across the harbour and land on the eastern shore.

This two hour respite also allowed the hurried organization of the local defense. Lieutenant Colonel Sabin and Captain Phineas Bradley gathered all available militia and with one six pound cannon mounted a defense at the West Bridge.

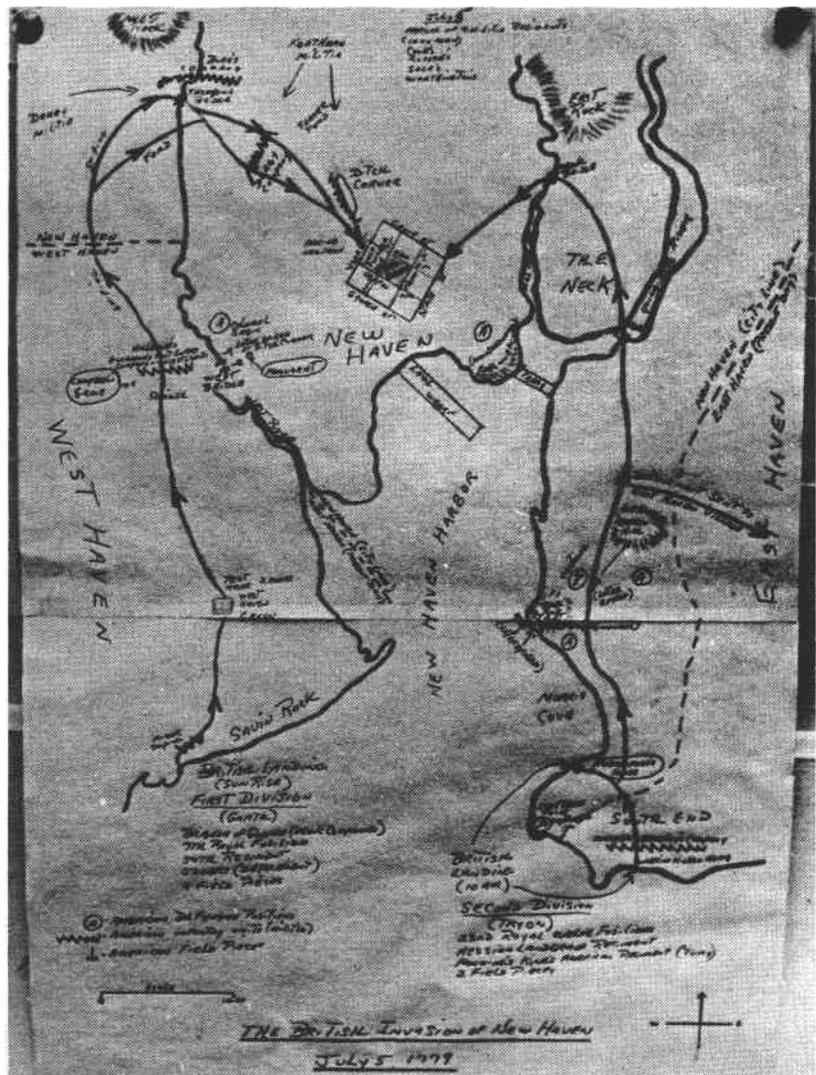
Captain James Hillhouse, Commander of the Second Company Governors Foot Guard, with all the company that could be mustered and with hastily recruited Yale students, marched across the bridge to form a skirmish line. Several members of the Foot Guard were strong loyalists, but marched with their company and fought well.

Elizar Goodrich of Hillhouse's Company described the surprise of the Yale students seeing the Reverend Naphtali Daggett riding furiously by on his old black mare, coat tails flying and carrying his long fowling piece.

This seventy-five year old president Emeritus of Yale had long preached the rebel cause. Now the time was at hand for action. Here is quoted his sworn statement.

"An account of the cruelties and barbarities which I received from the British troops after I had surrendered myself a prisoner into their hands.

It is needless to relate all the leading circumstances which threw me in their way. It may be sufficient to observe that on Monday, the 5th inst., the town of New Haven was justly alarmed with very threatening appearances of a speedy invasion from the enemy. Numbers went out armed to oppose them. I, among the rest, took the station assigned me on Milford Hill, but was soon directed to quit it and retire farther north, as the motions of the enemy required. Having gone as far as I supposed sufficient, I turned down the hill to gain a little covert of bushes which I had in my eye, but to my great surprise I saw them much nearer than I expected, their advanced guard being little more than twenty rods distant; plain, open ground between us. They instantly fired upon me, which they continued till I had run a dozen rods, discharging not less than fifteen or twenty balls at me alone; however, through the preserving providence of God I escaped them all unhurt, and gained the little covert at which I aimed, which concealed me from their view, while I could plainly see them through the woods and bushes advancing toward me within about twelve rods. I singled out one of them, took aim and fired upon him. I loaded my musket again, but determined not to discharge it any more; and as I saw I could not escape from them, I determined to surrender myself a prisoner. I begged for quarter, and that they would spare my life. They drew near to me, I think only two in number, one on my right hand, the other on my left, the fury of infernals glowing in their faces. They called me a damned old rebel, and swore they would kill me instantly. They demanded, "What did you fire upon us for?" I replied, "Because it is the exercise of war." The one made a pass at me with his bayonet, as if he designed to thrust it through my body. With my hand I tossed it up from its direction, and sprung in so near to him that he could not hit me with his bayonet. I still continued pleading and begging for my life with the utmost importunity, using every argument in my power to mollify them and induce them to desist from their murderous purpose. One of them gave me four gashes on my head with the edge of his bayonet to the skull bone, which caused a plentiful effusion of blood. The other gave me three slight pricks with the point of his bayonet on the trunk of my body, but they were no more than

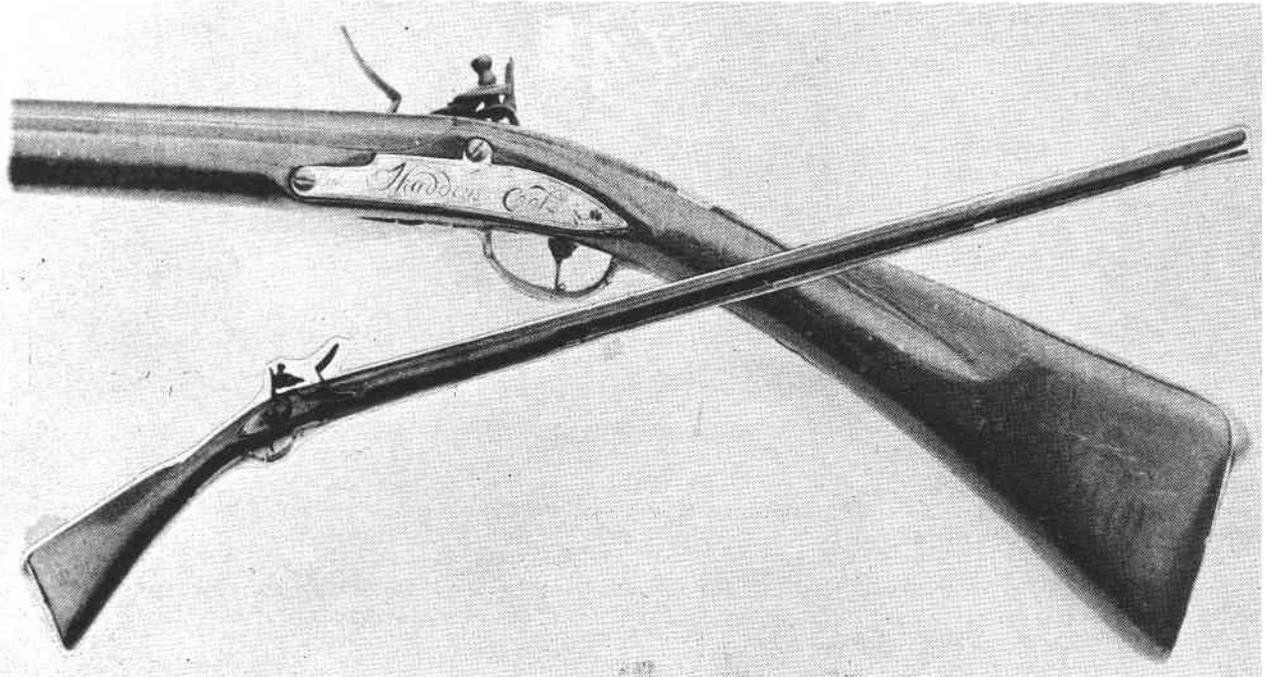


MAP OF NEW HAVEN SHOWING INVASION ROUTE

skin deep. But what is a thousand times worse than all that has been related, is the blows and bruises they gave me with the heavy barrels of their guns on my bowels, by which I was knocked down once or more, and almost deprived of life; by which bruises I have been confined to my bed ever since. These scenes might take up about two minutes of time. They seemed to desist a little from their design of murder, after which they stripped me of my shoe and knee buckles, and also my stock buckle. Their avarice further led them to rob me of my pocket-handkerchief and a little old tobacco box. They then bade me march toward the main body, which was about twelve rods distant, where some officers soon inquired of me who I was. I gave them my name, station and character, and begged their protection, that I might not be any more hurt or abused by the soldiers. They promised me their protection. But I was robbed of my shoes, and was committed to one of the most unfeeling savages that ever breathed. They then drove me with the main body, a hasty march of five miles or more. I was insulted in the most shocking manner by the ruffian soldiers, many of whom came at me with fixed bayonets and swore they would kill me on the spot. They damned me and those who took me, because they spared my life. Thus, amidst a thousand insults, my infernal driver hastened me along faster than my strength would admit in the extreme heat of the day, weakened as I was by my wounds and the loss of blood, which, at a moderate computation, could not be less than one quart. And when I failed in some degree through faintness, he would strike me on the back with a heavy walking staff, and kick me behind with his foot. At length, by the supporting power of God, I arrived at the Green in New Haven. But my life was almost spent, the world around me several times appearing as dark as midnight. I obtained leave of an officer to be carried into the widow Lyman's, and laid on a bed, where I lay the rest of the day and succeeding night in such acute and excruciating pain as I never felt before."

(Signed) Naphtali Daggett

At about this time, Adj. Campbell riding up the hill (which is now the present corner of Campbell and Derby Avenue) directing his company was hit in the chest by a musket ball fired by a militia man named Johnson. The mortally wounded officer was carried into a house. The following day his toilet case was carried into New Haven and sold by his servant. It is now on exhibition at the New Haven Historical Society.



GUN OWNED BY COL. THADDEUS COOK AND CARRIED BY HIS SON SAMUEL COOK
AT THE NEW HAVEN ENGAGEMENT

Captain Hillhouse's company of foot guard after slowing the advance, but being grossly outnumbered, retreated across West Bridge and proceeded to rip up the planks. The six pound cannon effectively mounted and fired kept the British from crossing at this point, and caused the invaders to take a five mile detour up the West River and across the Thompson Bridge. The Derby and Milford militia were arriving and were gathered under Colonel Aaron Burr to form a skirmishline. The river was shallow and easily forded below the bridge, making effective defense impractical. The men withdrew back across the bridge and were joined by Hillhouse and the foot guard. They reformed at Ditch Corner (the present Broadway and Dixwell Avenue). Here, the heaviest fighting of the day took place. Captain John Gilbert was killed at this point. The defense was slowly overrun and the defenders retired to the ground of East and West Rock to await the militia from the surrounding towns.

Amos Doolittle, (the eyewitness artist and engraver of the Battle of Lexington and Concord), returned to the city and hiding his gun under the bed, cared for his convalescing wife.

At ten a.m. the second division consisting of the Twenty Third Royal Welsh Fusiliers, a Hessian Langrave Regiment (a regiment of Tories under Col. Fanning) with two three pound field pieces under General Tryon,

landed with a two prong invasion. They surrounded Light House Point and captured the single cannon there. Two companies of East Haven Militia under Captain's Morris and Bradley were forced back after Adjutant Wilkins was killed as his landing craft touched shore.

The Morris house, the largest and most elaborate home on the east shore was burned in retaliation for the resistance of the local men.

The invaders marched up Woodward and Townsend Avenue. Black Rock Fort was defended by Captain Moulthrop and nineteen men. The fire from their cannons kept the fleet from sailing up the harbour. They kept up their fire until shot and powder was exhausted, then spiked their guns and hastily withdrew before the advancing column.

At a point opposite Beacon Hill, the assembled militia drew up a ragged line. Their determination to stand wilted with the awesome array of the ranks of the oncoming Red Coats. All but one, Adam Thorpe of Cheshire, proclaimed he would be damned if he would take another step backward for the whole British Army. He fell with a dozen balls through his body. Unfortunately, the unflattering light of recorded history somewhat shatters this gallant defiant unilateral stand. For it is recorded that this company of militia had been freely fortifying their bodies as well as spirits with cider brandy. The point was raised by Thorpe's surviving comrades that in all probability he was unable to take a step either way.

He was later buried on the spot; the first patriot to fall on this east shore attack. At about this spot Samuel Tuttle was captured and taken to New York as a prisoner of war.

The British force continued north to the ferry above Long Wharf, but this ferry had been scuttled and the approach protected by earthenwork and one cannon. This caused a detour across the Quinnipiac River and a two mile additional march into the city, via Neck Bridge and down State Street.

Along the march, a detachment was sent east to the village of East Haven to forage for cattle. As the British approached the river, they were harassed by the assembling militia from Cheshire, Wallingford, and Meriden under Colonel Thaddeus Cook.

The troops under Garth had reached the New Haven Green about noon. Tryon was several hours late in arrival, due to the unexpected resistance which was waiting for him. Garth wrote the following letter to Tryon who was still at Black Rock.

Military America July 5, 1779
Sir Henry Clinton
New Haven 1/2 past one o'clock

Dear Sir:

We have had a little difficulty with the rebels in coming hither, but I hope the loss is not much. The troops are greatly fatigued through heat, and every kind of cattle is driven from the country, and this place is almost deserted, and therefore merits the flames. The enemy are following us with cannon and heavier than what we have. I shall therefore as the bridge is secured that communicates to you begin the conflagration and retire over it and then break it up. As we may either lay there a few hours or embark with less molestation than from any other place I have seen.

I have the honor to be with great respect your most obedient servant

(Signed) G. Garth
(endorsed by Tryon and sent to Clinton)

The British Troops had marched in full pack under almost constant sniper fire and through several heavy skirmishes on the hottest day of the year. The recorded temperature was over ninety degrees.

At about three o'clock Tryon's forces reached the New Haven Green. The men fell out of rank and proceeded to loot the city going from house to house raiding and stealing. The abundance of rum in the well stocked cellars of the town probably saved the city from flames. The fate that Fairfield and Norwalk suffered two days later. The drunken state of the invaders immediately became a concern to their commanders. The hourly increase in number of militia from the surrounding towns were a threat. By the next morning the British were outnumbered and with the help of the free flow of liquor, a large number were completely ineffective. They were ordered to lay on their arms on the green the night of July 5th.



GRAVE OF ADJUTANT WILLIAM CAMPBELL

The mark of brutality of the British and Hessian's had its effect on many of the lukewarm patriots and Tories.

John Kennedy a staunch loyalist was accosted in his home when a soldier attempted to steal his silver shoe buckler. He resisted and was bayoneted to death.

Elisha Tuttle, originally from New Haven, had married and moved to upstate New York. While on a return visit to New Haven, his wife and family in New York had been killed by the Indians and his infant daughter was carried into captivity. After an unsuccessful search for his child he returned to New Haven deranged and heart broken to live with his mother. His derangement manifested itself in silence. This refusal to speak angered the soldiers who beat him, pried open his mouth with a bayonet and cut out his tongue. He died before the end of the day.

Late in the afternoon approximately one thousand sailors started to land and join in the looting of the city. They were stopped by General Garth and sent back to their ships.

There was little difference between Tory and Whig with abuse being equally distributed. One loyal lady rushed out to greet the king's men only to have her gold earrings torn from her ears. The drunken soldiers shot and bayoneted several aged and completely innocent men in retaliation for snipers shots.

Each of the British divisions had Tory guides; natives of New Haven. William and Thomas Chandler, sons of Joshua Chandler a prominent and prosperous attorney.

In 1774 Joshua Chandler had been a member of a committee of protest and had strongly petitioned parliament in behalf of the colonies. He had been a loud voice in demanding the right of the citizens of Connecticut. At the Declaration of Independence, he had searched his soul, and taken his stand.

Chandler, with his family, and three other Tory families left New Haven with the British forces. His tragic trail after the war is heart rendering. He and his family were shipwrecked off the coast of Nova Scotia and perished from exposure and starvation on the rocky coast.

These Tory families were partly responsible for the decision not to burn the city. Apparently a truce was arranged with General Ward, commander of the Connecticut militia. The city was not to be burned, and no attack was to be made on the invaders while in the city.

Next morning, the sixth of July, the army started its evacuation. Twelve captured militia were taken as prisoners of war. The Fifty Fourth Regiment embarked from Long Wharf leaving one hundred and fifty men to burn the store house. The balance of the force was ferried across the harbour and marched south along the coast.

Early in the morning, General Ward of the Connecticut Militia gathered the four regiments now completely assembled under Colonels Worthington, Sage, Russell, and Cook. With these regiments they crossed Neck Bridge and the enemy left the city by ferry, took a flanking position and kept pressing them as they passed along the harbour. This caused evacuation of Beacon Hill. Cannons were quickly mounted and bombardment was begun on the ships in the harbour.

By late afternoon, the entire British force had embarked and sailed westward into Long Island Sound. Two days later they landed in Fairfield and completely burned the town and its two meeting houses.

At New Haven the known British losses were fifty-two killed and twenty-six wounded. The colonials lost twenty-six killed, fifteen wounded, and twelve captured and taken to New York as prisoners of war.



MONUMENT AT SITE OF DEFENSE OF WEST BRIDGE