

THE PENNSYLVANIA NAVY – PART 2 (Ep22)

Opening:

In our last episode, we saw how the opening of hostilities between the American colonists and the invading British Army in April 1775 kicked off a race to defend the colonies turned states. The Pennsylvania Assembly leapt into action, creating a Committee of Safety made up of top provincial leaders who, in turn, called for the creation of a Pennsylvania navy, with new fortifications on islands along the Delaware River.

The island forts were meant to defend Philadelphia from the British Navy. When the British Army sought to reach Philadelphia, however, they sidestepped the River defenses, landed at the top of Chesapeake Bay in Elk Head, Maryland, and marched the 50 miles north to win the Battle of Brandywine Creek and then occupy the American capital. The forts and navy positioned south of the City suddenly found themselves with a very different objective. If the forts could be held, and the Pennsylvania navy and its series of underwater spikes – known as *chevaux de frise* – could be maintained, then the British Navy couldn't resupply General Howe and the British troops in Philadelphia. The Brits would be starved out and forced to evacuate the City. The patriots just had to hang onto the choke point they had created until the Delaware River froze in winter.

Both sides were frantic to beat the calendar. The British tried to seize the forts, destroy the Pennsylvania Navy, and remove the underwater spikes. The Americans tried to keep the Brits from doing any of those things.

Want to know what happened next? Man your battle stations, we are taking on the British Empire in this episode of Pennsylvaniana

Script:

The struggle for the Americans to keep or the British to wrest control of the Delaware River came down to two battles – the ones at Fort Mercer and Fort Mud Island.

As we mentioned in our previous episode, the river forts were still very much a work in progress at this time, and efforts to bolster their defenses became critical after the Battle of Germantown on October 9th, 1775.

The British strategy first focused on the New Jersey side of the river. British General Howe sent 2,200 Hessian soldiers under the command of Colonel Karl Emil Count von Donop to take Fort Mercer. Von Donop was proud, headstrong, openly critical of General Howe and, like all the Hessian soldiers, eager to cleanse their reputations from having lost the Battle of Trenton to General Washington and the Continental Army the year before. Von Donop's troops were ferried over to Camden, New Jersey, to lead the attack south.

At the same time, Admiral Howe was finally able to squeeze some warships through the lower line of *chevaux-de-frise* in Billingsport. They sailed up river to keep Fort Mud Island from sending assistance to Fort Mercer during the ensuing battle and to preoccupy the Pennsylvania and Continental Navies.

Work on Fort Mercer continued until the Hessian troops arrived, mid-day on October 22nd, after a difficult 8-hour march covering 17 miles. In front of them was Fort Mercer, surrounded by 400 yards of fields that had been cleared of trees and forests beyond that.

When British Colonel von Donop and his troops arrived at Fort Mercer, von Donop saw that it was much stronger and better protected than he had imagined. He hadn't brought sufficient cannon, and he and his fellow officers thought it unwise to attack without them. Howe's orders to von Donop had been to attack, but to use his judgment in the moment. Von Donop could refrain from attacking the Fort if he saw good reason to. He could have called for British ships to try to come within cannon range, which would have delayed the assault for at least a day, but he didn't do that. Historian Michael Harris concludes that ***"either von Donop misunderstood Howe's orders or was so focused on restoring Hessian honor without British assistance that he was willing to risk a bloody defeat."***

So, after about four hours of preparation, the Hessians launched an attack. In fairness to von Donop, the Americans had a history at that point of abandoning pretty much every strong position they held. The one time they didn't, at Fort Washington in Manhattan, 2,800 Americans were captured.

At the time, there were 550 Americans inside Fort Mercer, many of whom were from Colonel Greene's companies of Rhode Islanders.

Von Donop sent out Major Charles Stuart, one of just two British officers among the Hessians, as a messenger to the Americans to seek their surrender without a fight. Stuart asked to meet Colonel Greene and declared in a loud and, evidently, snotty voice, ***"The King of England orders his rebellious subjects to lay down their arms, and are warned that if they stand battle, no quarter will be given."*** To "give no quarter" means that no prisoners would be taken – if the Americans fought and lost, they would be killed.

Instead of frightening the Americans, Stuart's demand pissed them off. The American messenger's reply was this: ***"seeing Colonel Greene is... needless... he was going to defend the fort as long as he had a man, and as to mercy it was neither sought nor expected at their hands."***

When the British messenger conveyed this reply to von Donop, he could not avoid the attack without losing his honor.

This was not a good situation for the Hessians. Their assault on the Fort had, for the most part, been poorly planned. They had no food. They hadn't brought axes or saws to cut down the wooden spiked barricades placed as obstacles to get to the fort. They had insufficient cannon to breach the walls. They had no ladders to climb the walls. And they had no wagons to transport the wounded. They **had** thought this would be an easy assault and capture.

Fort Mercer bordered the river on the west. The attack would happen from the three remaining directions. The Hessians fired their guns from the woods for ten minutes, at which point the gunfire stopped, and the Hessians advanced out of the forest. It was about 4:45pm.

The sound of gun fire had alerted the Pennsylvania Navy's galleys that Fort Mercer was under attack. Several of them started shelling the woods with their cannons. as the Hessians neared the fort, the American guns blasted them, trapping the Hessians among the wooden obstacles in the field between the forest and the fort. It was a slaughter. Von Donop himself was mortally wounded when a bone-shattering musket ball hit him just below the hip.

The historian John Jackson notes, ***"The professional European soldier never learned that the Americans were, in most cases, dead shots and would withhold their fire until certain of their target. No one could out-shoot an American when stationed behind cover... The need for expert marksmanship was the difference between life and death on the frontier of Colonial America. On the other hand, the British and Hessian professional soldier was rarely trained to be a marksman; rather they relied on the bayonet as their principal weapon.... The compactness of the Hessian advance, the unerring marksmanship of the Continental soldiers, and their fatal waiting until their targets were so close that a miss was virtually impossible, the serious condition of the wounded, and the large proportion of dead compared to wounded again make this battle comparable to Bunker Hill."***

Of the 2,200 Hessians on the scene, fully 1,410 men directly attacked the fort. Of these, 376 – fully a quarter of them – were killed, wounded or captured by the Americans who were only half their number. Of the 500 Rhode Islanders defending the fort, just 38 were killed, wounded, or captured.

Only on the south side did the Hessians get close to the top of the wall.

The battle lasted just 40 minutes. The Hessians realized it was hopeless and retreated, leaving many of their dead and wounded behind, including von Donop, who was still alive, but would die from his wounds three days later. His alleged dying words, according to du Plessis, were "I die a victim of my own ambition and the avarice of my sovereign." (I should explain that, as a mercenary on behalf of the Landgrave of Hesse-Cassel, von Donop's "sovereign" would have been a Hessian count, not the British throne.) Despite von Donop's

earlier threat, the Americans did not kill the wounded or captured, as the Hessians had promised to do to them.

Both sides noted the role that the Pennsylvania Navy played in the battle. General Howe wrote: ***“The detachment, in moving up and returning from the attack, was much galled by the enemy’s galleys.”*** Joseph Reed, who would shortly take office as the President of the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania wrote, ***“The gallantry of our brave fellows in the fort has been emulated by the row galleys; every mouth is open in their praise and I can assure you from the best intelligence that they will come in for a full share of the honor acquired in defense of the river.”***

The Battle of Fort Mercer (also known as the Battle of Red Bank) was the only American victory in the entire Philadelphia campaign, and it was a lopsided one at that. The very day of the Battle of Fort Mercer, and probably before he heard the result, General Howe submitted his resignation to the British Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lord George Germain. This was presumably after Howe had heard of the British Army’s surrender up north in the Battles of Saratoga – which one could chalk up to General Howe invading Pennsylvania instead of joining General Burgoyne at Albany. Howe wrote ***“From the little attention, my Lord, given to my recommendations since the commencement of my command, I am led to hope I may be relieved from this very painful service, wherein I have not had the good fortune to enjoy the necessary confidence of my superiors, I humbly request that I may receive his Majesty’s permission to resign the command.”*** It would take over a month for this letter of resignation to reach the King in London and, as we saw in our episodes “The Valley Forge Winter” and “Occupied Philadelphia,” it would be over six months after that for Howe to receive a reply.

The day after the battle, the Americans discovered that two enemy ships, the 64-cannon HMS Augusta, and the 18-gun sloop HMS Merlin, had run aground near Fort Mud Island the night before, and the galleys of the Pennsylvania Navy attacked. The Brits lost both ships. The Merlin was set aflame to prevent its recapture, and the Augusta, finally afloat after being hit with artillery fire, caught fire. The resulting explosions of both ships’ magazines were felt for miles around Philadelphia. The Augusta burned for several days. Hazelwood ordered the crews of the Pennsylvania galleys to salvage what they could from the Augusta and the Merlin, which included two 24-pound cannons.

The loss of two naval vessels by the British – one of them a ship of the line – the day after the American victory at Fort Mercer left local Patriots on a high of enthusiasm.

The bigger picture wasn’t quite so optimistic. On October 29th, Hazelwood notified the Pennsylvania Supreme Executive Council head Thomas Wharton that the Pennsylvania Navy 250 men had deserted through “cowardice of disaffection.”

The victory at Fort Mercer and the destruction of the two British ships couldn’t stop the inevitable clash. General Howe remained determined to level the river forts and remove

the chevaux-de-frise to unblock the river. He had over 200 ships and 10,000 soldiers at his disposal, so it inevitable that the British would be in a position to attack both from land and the water. The only question was whether they could succeed before the river froze over for the winter.

With the river route blocked to them, the British had resorted to landing their ships in Chester, offloading supplies there, and then schlepping them over land north to Philadelphia. General Washington and the Continental Army troops could have attacked these supply routes. They could also have occupied the western shore islands to prevent the British from installing gun batteries there to threaten Fort Mud Island. But Washington didn't do that. He estimated that such actions would require at least 1,500 soldiers, and he was determined not to reduce the strength of the Continental Army that was camped in Montgomery County and stood between the British and Reading, Lancaster and York. He was willing to marshal an attack on the British south of Philadelphia after he got back the troops he had loaned to General Horatio Gates. Gates had won the second Battle of Saratoga and, on October 17th, had accepted the surrender of British General Burgoyne. Nevertheless, Gates procrastinated on returning the troops to General Washington, who ultimately had to send Alexander Hamilton to convey his orders in person.

By November 9th, the British had completed three gun batteries on Carpenter's Island, 600 yards from Fort Mud Island, and additional batteries on Province Island. By this point, the British navy could also send warships north of Fort Billingsport, having removed the *chevaux de frise* there.

So, this time, and with support from the British Navy's guns, General Howe would throw everything he could muster at Fort Mud Island – which, it was reported, was down to only 115 men fit for duty. A concerted foray by the British would be problematic for the Pennsylvania Navy, because Commodore Hazelwood believed that his galleys and guard boats were defenseless against canons in fixed positions, like the Brits' on-shore batteries. He was therefore hesitant to sail into the channel between Fort Mud Island and Province and Carpenter Islands in daylight.

The Pennsylvania Navy in general would have limited impact in the coming fight. The Navy wasn't designed to defend the forts; it's role was to defend the chevaux-de-frise blockade. There were only 13 single-cannon galleys – not enough to withstand attack.

De Fleury, the French engineer at Fort Mud Island, wrote to Alexander Hamilton that ***“the galleys which ought to be a security to us are absolutely useless – they have withdrawn to the Jersey [side of the river] the channel between us and Province Island is perfectly clear and if the enemy choose to make a descent here, as I have no doubt they do, we cannot hinder them.”***

The Continental Army and the Pennsylvania militia, meanwhile, were doing what they could to strengthen Fort Mud Island to prepare for the coming onslaught.

Recall that the fort featured a stone wall that zig-zagged facing the river on the eastern and southern sides. The northern and western sides were protected by palisades of pine logs 15 inches thick. A ditch further protected the fort except at the southern end

BATTLE OF FORT MUD ISLAND

November 10th, 7:30am – Fort Mud Island is bombarded by land batteries on Province Island and Carpenter’s Island. By noon, over 1,000 rounds of cannon fire had hit Fort Mud Island, damaging the walls in several spots. Amazingly, no American casualties resulted from this withering barrage, which continued until about 2pm.

Defenses were a bit slapdash for the Americans – there weren’t enough men at the fort. The Pennsylvania and New Jersey militias stationed on land on either side of the river weren’t particularly helpful, and coordination among these units was not great without a unified command.

The American commander of the fort, Samuel Smith, reported to General Washington that evening that five or six more days of this siege by the British, and the fort would be destroyed. The only way to avert such a loss was for General Washington to assault the British on-shore batteries by attacking from the west. Again, Washington was waiting for troops loaned to General Gates to be returned and didn’t want to risk a battle before that. That night, according to Captain Fleury, the British sent a round of shells into the fort every half hour to prevent repairs and keep the garrison awake.

The British bombardment restarted the next morning (**Nov 11th**). The British had repositioned some of their guns to damage a different part of the fort. One shell into the barracks injured Samuel Smith. He was evacuated to Fort Mercer, unable to continue to command.

He was temporarily replaced by Captain Fleury, a hard-driving, stubborn task-master. He believed the fort could withstand the bombardment by day, and the damage repaired at night. To his mind, they could hold out indefinitely if the men were not dispirited. But they were, exhausted by cold, rain, vigilance, physical and mental fatigue.

(**Nov 12th**) –The British bombardment continued. They wanted to deploy the guns on their ships, but the gales that day were too strong, and they would have problems bringing their naval assets into position for an attack.

General Washington wanted the fort held, of course, and ordered that men stationed there be rotated in and out, which they did by crossing the Delaware to Fort Mercer, but he also was making plans in case the fort had to be abandoned.

Despite their seeming advantage, the British were growing frustrated at this point. The Americans were holding the fort and firing back, using British cannonballs that had fallen within the fort to fire back at the Brits. Like the Americans, the British were contending with the weather, which was cold and windy. They were short of food, adequate clothing, and firewood. The shelling of the Americans continued on **November 13th**. The Americans worked to repair the damage to the fort so that the British could not storm it on foot.

As recounted by Bob Drury and Tom Clavin in their book *Valley Forge*, ***“When the Continentals lone 32-pounder ran out of ammunition, the fort’s commander offered a gill of rum, about four ounces, to any soldier who dared enter the parade ground to recover British cannonballs to be fired back at the enemy. Each night, under the tireless direction of the French engineer Maj. Francois de Fleury, the defenders attempted to repair the damage and shore up their crumbling walls. By the next afternoon the enemy’s artillery would have reduced their efforts to rubble.”***

The following day (**November 14th**), the British brought in additional land batteries, including one with four cannons firing 32-pound shells and another with six cannons firing 24-pound shells.

On November 15th, the British Navy joined the bombardment, firing their guns from south of the *chevaux de frise*. This included six ships of the line: a 70-gun warship and five 50-gun ships. The historian Jeffrey Dorwart notes that ***“The largest concentration of firepower in the American Revolution unleashed on Fort [Mud Island]. The British fired an estimated one thousand rounds in the first hour of attack.”*** American guns on the shore tried to defend against these ships. The galleys of the Pennsylvania Navy sought to drive away at least one of the big ships. They were shot up by the Brits, lost 38 men in the engagement, and then withdrew.

The Americans fired upon the British from two floating batteries, the galleys of the Pennsylvania Navy, and a battery on the Jersey Shore, but even that combined fusillade was unequal to the bombardment by the British.

Fort Mud Island was fired on from the west and northwest by the British shore batteries on Province and Carpenter Islands, and by the British Navy from south of the *chevaux de frise*. About 250 canons were firing on the fort at the same time and the sound rolled like thunder.

The damage to the fort was tremendous. Nearly every cannon the Americans had was unable to return fire. One soldier described how the defenders were ***“buried in ruins, unable to retreat during the day & unwilling to do it, as long as they could expect a reinforcement, had not much expectation but to sell their selves as dear as they could.”*** Another said of the destruction, ***“the fort exhibited a picture of desolation... The whole area of the fort was as completely ploughed as a field.”***

The Howe brothers, Admiral Richard and General William, watched this attack together for hours, until General Howe returned to Philadelphia after 7pm. That evening, Americans inside the fort took stock of their condition – few men were capable of discharging their duties, and it was assumed that the British would storm the fort again the following morning. So the fort’s commander at the time, issued orders to evacuate that night and to destroy everything they couldn’t take with them. A group of 70 or so soldiers completed the second task and, around midnight, the last group of the garrison got in boats and rowed across the river to Fort Mercer. As one historian notes, **“some 450 men had served on Mud Island during the prior five days but fewer than 200 left the island unharmed.”**

As it happens, Washington had received Daniel Morgan’s unit of Virginia riflemen back from General Gates. Recall that Washington had planned to attack the British on the western shore of the Delaware River who were bombarding Fort Mud Island, and to interdict the flow of supplies by land between the British Navy at Chester and the British Army in Philadelphia. With the abandonment of Mud Island, that operation was cancelled.

On the morning of November 16th, the British entered the remains of Fort Mud Island.

The battle had been the largest cannon bombardment in North America prior to Gettysburg in 1863. Memory of the battle faded over the years, even within the lifetime of the soldiers who were there. Private Joseph Plum Martin offered this explanation, **“There had been little notice taken of it the reason of which is, there was no Washington, Putnam or Wayne there. Had there been, the affair would have been extolled to the skies. No, it was only a few officers and soldiers who accomplished it in a remote quarter of the army. Such circumstances and such troops generally get but little notice taken of them, do what they will. Great men, get great praise; little men, nothing.”**

A week after the fall of the fort, Dr. Benjamin Rush wrote. **“I was a witness for one day... of their patience and fortitude under the most complicated dangers and sufferings.”**

On November 22, 1777, Ambrose Serle, Admiral Richard Howe’s Secretary, wrote, **“The Americans defended ... [Fort Mud Island] with a spirit they have shown no where else to an equal degree during the war.”**

The loss of the fort spelled the end of Fort Mercer a few weeks later. As General Washington noted a week after the fall of Fort Mud Island, the two forts **“mutually depended on each other for support, & reduction of [one] made the tenure of the [other] extremely precarious, if not impractical.”** Among the Americans there had still been hope of holding onto Fort Mercer and the *chevaux de frise* just long enough for the river to freeze over and become naturally impassable to the British. But General Howe was determined to outrun the onset of winter. Two days after Fort Mud Island fell, he ordered General Cornwallis to march on Fort Mercer with a force that would eventually total 6,800 men.

The Fall of Fort Mud Island, and thus its potential to become a British fortification, meant it was not safe for the Pennsylvania Navy to linger south of Philadelphia in the shallows of the Delaware. Advisors sent by General Washington recommended to Commodore Hazelwood that he try to move his ships upriver to north of Philadelphia. Hazlewood made plans to do so. These included ensuring enough combustible material on each ship so that, if there was a risk of capture, they could be torched rather than taken by the Brits. At about 3am on November 20th, Hazelwood sent half the fleet of Pennsylvania and Continental Navy, the smaller ships – 13 galleys and 9 guard boats – upriver. They seem to have gone undetected, and made it to Bristol by 10am.

The larger ships were delayed, and departed that night on their own without having received orders to do so. They were seen by the British, who opened fire. Some managed to make it to Bristol, but a large number were lost. As Thomas Paine wrote to Benjamin Franklin in France some months later, ***“The burning of part of the Delaware fleet, the precipitate retreat of the rest, the little service rendered by them, and the great expense they were at make the only material blot in the proceedings.”***

Meanwhile, at Fort Mercer, the Americans gathered about 2,000 men to oppose the British, but they were still far outnumbered. On November 20th, Colonel Green ordered the abandonment of the fort, leaving behind 400 cattle that were almost immediately used to feed British troops in Philadelphia.

The fall of Fort Mercer and the subsequent removal of the rest of the chevaux-de-frise gave the British Navy unimpeded access to the Delaware River to resupply the British occupiers in Philadelphia. Perhaps the best chance to forcibly dislodge the British was lost.

With the Delaware River open to them, the British settled in and holed up in Philadelphia, with further precautions taken against military forays by the Americans. As Michael Harris notes, ***“Howe issued orders on November 22nd to burn all the homes and structures just north of his line of fortifications so the rebels could not use them as outposts. One of those torched was Fair Hill, the estate of John Dickinson.”***

Among the Americans, there was something of a blame game going on. The Pennsylvania Navy took some of the blame for withdrawing from battle during the heavy bombardment and, of course, the loss of half their fleet in the run up the Delaware River. General Washington himself seems to have escaped blame, despite his repeated decisions to defer deployment of the Continental Army to relieve the fort. Washington wrote his brother that, had the reinforcements from the General Gates arrived ten days sooner, he could have saved Fort Mud Island.

So, what was the fate of Fort Mud Island once it fell into British hands?

The Brits repaired the walls of the fort for their own use during the occupation of Philadelphia. Surprisingly, when the British departed Philadelphia in June of 1778, they left

the rebuilt fort intact instead of blowing it up. The Pennsylvania militia periodically garrisoned the fort for the rest of the War. After the war, Fort Mud Island became an important piece in the young American government's national system of maritime fortifications. In 1795, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania granted ownership of the island and fort to the federal government, and it officially became known as Fort Mifflin. The masonry walls of the fort's original design were completed in 1797. When the nation's capital moved to Washington, DC, in 1800, the importance of Fort Mifflin waned. After the War of 1812, Fort Mifflin was superseded as a guardian of the Delaware River by the new Fort Delaware on Pea Patch island far to the south. The fort continued in various forms of national services, and was declared a national monument by Congress in 1906. The US Army returned the fort to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in 1962.

You can still visit Fort Mifflin today, and I highly recommend that you do. It is right off the grounds of Philadelphia International Airport and one can often get a good look at the fort if one is on a plane coming in for a landing. If you visit, you will see that the fortifications and its buildings are very old, but the stone wall that zig-zagged on the eastern and southern side are the only part of Revolutionary Fort Mud Island that remains, since the fort was rebuilt after the war.

Fort Mercer is no longer standing, unfortunately. You can, however, visit Red Bank Battlefield Park, where the fort once stood and where the battle of Red Bank was fought.

Though the Pennsylvania Navy continue in some form until 1783, it was active as a military force for only three years – from the summer of 1775 to the summer of 1778, when the British ended their nine-month occupation of Philadelphia. What couldn't be accomplished by the Continental Army and the Pennsylvania Navy, ultimately, was achieved by Ben Franklin's diplomacy, which led to the entrance of France into the War on the side of the Americans. That chapter of the story was covered in our episodes on "The Valley Forge Winter" and "Occupied Philadelphia."

Books that were relied upon to write this episode include

- *Fighting for Philadelphia: Forts Mercer and Mifflin, the Battle of Red Bank, and the Road to Valley Forge, October 5, 1777 - December 19, 1777* by Michael C. Harris, Savas Beatie LLC, 2025
- *The Pennsylvania Navy, 1775-1781, the Defense of the Delaware* by John W. Jackson, Rutgers University Press, 1974 – which is sadly out of print
- *Robert Morris: Financier of the Revolution* by Charles Rappleye, Simon & Schuster, 2010

I hope you enjoyed this two-episode series on the Pennsylvania Navy – the last America250 episode of this sesquicentennial year.

Next, we will be heading into the mountains to tell the origin story of much of north-central Pennsylvania. Over several episodes, we'll cover the emergence of the Commonwealth's great lumber industry and the massive conservation efforts that followed. As with the history of oil in Pennsylvania, lumber is a story of boom and bust, fortune and failure, boomtowns and ghost towns spanning several decades and populated with everyone from hardworking decent people to entrepreneurs, and a rogues' gallery of hard-drinking, hard-gambling lumberjacks and cut-and-run profiteers... and it has a happy ending.

So, join me, Mark Smith, next time on Pennsylvmania when we leave the Delaware and Allegheny Rivers and travel up the west branch of the Susquehanna River.

Bye-bye.

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