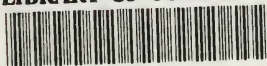


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The Battle of Red Bank

Resulting in the Defeat of the Hessians and
the Destruction of the British Frigate
Augusta, Oct. 22 and 23, 1777



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The Battle of Red Bank

Resulting in the Defeat of the Hessians and the Destruction
of His Britannic Majesty's Frigate Augusta

Much interest has been manifested by the Daughters of the American Revolution in the history of the British Frigate Augusta. To meet this, at the request of Miss Ellen Mecum, State Regent for New Jersey, the writer has prepared the following paper. It was originally given before the Gloucester County, N. J., Historical Society in July, 1905, at the Whitall Mansion in Red Bank, where the wounded Continental and Hessian soldiers were cared for by Ann Whitall, after whom the Chapter in Woodbury, N. J., is named. There, in full view of the spot where the Augusta was grounded, fought and blew up, within sight of Fort Mifflin on the Pennsylvania side of the Delaware River, where the most sanguinary and stubbornly contested siege in the Revolutionary War took place, within cannon shot of the battlefield around Fort Mercer on the Jersey side where Col. Christopher Greene, with four hundred recruits from Rhode Island, utterly defeated twenty-five hundred Hessians under Count Donop—at this historic spot, now a national park, this paper was first made public.

Since that time many pilgrimages have been made to Gloucester City, N. J., to see the remains of this unfortunate man-of-war, now ignobly stranded on the beach, and many

relics and mementoes have been taken away by seekers after antique and historic treasures. But best of all, through the co-operation of Miss Ellen Mecum, State Regent, and Miss Ellen Leaming Matlock, Regent of the Ann Whitall Chapter, enough of the timber from this old frigate, which has lain in the waters of the Delaware River for over one hundred and thirty years, has been gathered and preserved to make all the wood-work (except the floor), as well as the furniture, which adorns the New Jersey Room in Memorial Continental Hall, Washington, D. C.

The article as given originally has been somewhat condensed, but still retains the essential portions, with much additional data which has come to the writer more recently. Every statement made herein is supported by English and American authorities.

Many facts hitherto unknown in this country were courteously communicated to the writer by the British Admiralty in reply to his inquiries. From this official document it is learned that His Britannic Majesty's ship Augusta was built at Rotherhithe, in the year of our Lord 1763, which was the third year of the reign of King George III. It was constructed of quercus pedunculata, or white oak, and was probably cut from one of the forests at that time so numerous in England, and judging from the great width of the planks must have been centuries in growing.

Rotherhithe is one of the suburbs of London adjoining Deptford on the south bank of the river Thames where the

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tunnel runs under the river, and is about three miles east of the House of Parliament and two and a half miles in a southerly direction from St. Paul's Cathedral. It is famous for its dock yards and shipbuilding industry.

When the Augusta was launched she was 1,386 tons burthen, but when fully mounted and manned she was about 1,450 tons. She carried sixty-four guns arranged as below:

- 26 24-pounders on her lower deck.
- 26 18-pounders on her upper deck.
- 10 9-pounders on her quarter deck.
- 2 9-pounders on her forecastle.

The total weight of a broadside from all her guns was 1,200 pounds. She was one of the finest vessels in the English Navy and was commanded by Captain Francis Reynolds, who afterwards became the Earl of Ducie. She was one of the fleet under Admiral Richard Howe, who was a brother of Sir William Howe, who commanded the British soldiers then fighting the Continental Army.

To have a correct idea of the part taken by the Augusta in the attack on Fort Mercer and Fort Mifflin and of the American naval and military defense of the Delaware River below Philadelphia, we must remember that the American Army, under General Washington, after the battle of the Brandywine, September 11, 1777, returned to Philadelphia and, being closely pursued by the British Army, under Sir William Howe, fell back beyond the Schuylkill River, leaving Philadelphia in the occupation of the British. But al-

though the British held Philadelphia they did not control the Delaware River, and were unable to receive supplies for their army by water, as their ships could not safely pass the obstructions which had been placed in the river.

Benjamin Franklin had devised an ingenious plan of defense of the Delaware River which consisted of two *chevaux de frise*, the lower one in the main ship channel, between Billings Island and Billingsport, on the New Jersey shore, about six miles below League Island, and the upper one above Fort Mifflin and one mile below League Island.

In Allen's "Battles of the British Navy" is a concise description of how they are made:

"The *chevaux de frise* was formed of large square pieces of timber. Two long pieces at a proper parallel distance from each other formed the horizontal base, which rested on the bed of the river. Over these were placed two other beams of similar size, sharpened and pointed with iron, rising from toward the end of the horizontal base at such an angle that a vessel striking upon them would almost inevitably be pierced. The points did not appear above water and the elevation was such as to offer the greatest resistance. The four main pieces were united by many transversed ones and the whole so well contrived that its own weight and the ballast attached to it effectually prevented it being moved from its position or turned over."

The *chevaux de frise* were placed in position by Commodore Hazelwood, of the Pennsylvania navy. Before the British ships could sail up the river to supply their troops

with provisions these *chevaux de frise* had to be removed or gotten rid of.

Commodore Hazelwood's fleet consisted of about twenty vessels of all kinds, schooners, sloops, galleys, half-galleys, floating batteries and fourteen old vessels loaded with tar barrels and fitted up as fire ships, to aid in the defense of the river; armed with about one hundred cannon.

Admiral Howe's fleet consisted of about eight or nine war vessels and several transports. His vessels were fully manned and he had two hundred and eighty-five guns on his war vessels alone. On the two vessels of his fleet which were stranded he had more officers and men than Commodore Hazelwood had in his entire fleet.

On October 20, 1777, under the direction of Captain Hamond, five British war vessels contrived to get through the lower *chevaux de frise* and sailed up the river. These vessels were the *Augusta*, sixty-four guns, Capt. Francis Reynolds; the *Roebuck*, forty-four guns, Capt. A. S. Hamond; the *Liverpool*, twenty-eight guns, Capt. Henry Bellew; the *Pearl*, thirty-two guns, Capt. Thomas Wilkinson, and the *Merlin*, a sloop-of-war, sixteen guns, Commander Samuel Reeve. These warships were to force the upper passage, silence Fort Mercer, at Red Bank, and Fort Mifflin, on the Pennsylvania side, and open navigation on the Delaware River to Philadelphia.

In his report dated October 25, 1777, as printed in the *London Chronicle*, December 2, 1777, Admiral Howe admitted

the failure of his plans: "The wind continuing from the northward several successive days, the Vigilant could not proceed according to her destination. The Augusta, Roebuck, Liverpool and the Pearl were nevertheless ordered above the first line of *chevaux de frise*, on the 22nd, to be in readiness for such service as they could render when the redoubt (Fort Mercer) should be attacked, and Captain Reynolds (of the Augusta), being the senior officer, succeeded to the command of the advanced squadron.

"The attack of the redoubt (Fort Mercer) being observed to take place the evening of the 22d, just before the close of day, Captain Reynolds (on the Augusta) immediately slipped anchor and advanced with the squadron (to which the Merlin had been joined) as fast as he was able with the flood to second the attempt of the troops which were seen to be very warmly engaged; the change in the natural course of the river caused by the obstructions appearing to have altered the channel, the Augusta and Merlin unfortunately grounded some distance below the second line of *chevaux de frisc*, and the fresh northerly wind, which then prevailed, greatly checking the rising of the tide, they could not be got afloat on the subsequent flood.

"The diversion was endeavored to be continued by the frigates, at which the fire from the enemy's gallies was chiefly pointed for some time. But as the night advanced, the Hessian detachment having been repulsed, the firing ceased."

The Battle of Red Bank on the Delaware, in which Col. Christopher Green, with four hundred Rhode Island troops, successfully withstood an attack of twenty-five hundred Hessians, was one of the most glorious victories for our side during the Revolutionary War.

The capture of Fort Mercer was assigned to Count Carl Emil Kurt von Donop, one of the most distinguished Hessian officers, who had taken an active part with his regiment in the Battle of Germantown, and who was eager for an opportunity to display his ability as a leader. General Howe regarded him as an intelligent and bold soldier, and assigned him the three Grenadier battalions of Van Minnegerode, Von Linsingen and Von Lengerke; Mirbach's regiment, a dozen cavalrymen, some artillery and two English howitzers.

Donop recognized the heavy task entrusted him and asked in vain for more artillery, but Howe said that if Donop could not take the fort the British would. Donop was angry at this reply and sent back word that the Germans had courage to do anything, and to his associates he said, "Either that will be Fort Donop or I shall be dead."

Donop placed eight guns and two howitzers on the right and in support of Minnegerode's battalion and the Light Infantry; Von Mirbach's regiment in the center; Von Linsingen's battalion on the left; Von Lengerke's battalion and some Yagers on the Delaware to guard against a landing and to protect his rear. Before each battalion there were sappers and a hundred men carrying hastily gathered fascines, led by a captain.

Donop at 4 P. M. sent a summons to surrender with a threat of no quarter if it was refused, and received a reply that the fort would be held to the last man. As the report was that very few men were seen in the fort, Donop decided to attack at once, and made a stirring address, to which the men replied "We'll change the name from Fort Red Bank to Fort Donop," and put himself with his officers, sword in hand, at the head.

They charged gallantly, but soon found their road broken by deep ditches and could only move singly; they were met with a sharp fire in front and flank from a covered battery and from two vessels in the river. Still the troops pressed on. Von Minnegerode had taken the outlying redoubt by storm; the Americans at first gave way, but soon stood fast, and before their fire Donop and Minnegerode and many other officers fell, casting dismay on their men.

Col. Von Linsingen succeeded to the command and did all he could to restore order, but the Hessians fell back in disorder. Dead and wounded were abandoned, and Von Linsingen brought the little remnant off under cover of the night, and on the next afternoon reached Philadelphia.

The Hessians admit their loss to have been six hundred and fifty killed, wounded and missing.

The loss in the garrison bore no proportion to this. One captain, five sergeants, one fifer and seven privates were killed. One captain was taken prisoner and one ensign, two sergeants and twenty privates were wounded. All honor to Col. Christopher Green and his four hundred brave men!

The *Augusta* grounded near the mouth of Woodbury Creek, about two-thirds of a mile below in a southwesterly direction, according to a plan of engagement submitted by Commodore Hazelwood; the *Merlin* near the mouth of Mantua Creek (then called Mud Creek and by others Manto Creek), and the *Roebuck* ran aground during the night further down the river, but she was floated next day.

"October 23. The wind was northerly and fresh and cold," according to the diary of Capt. John Montessor, Chief Engineer of the British Army in America. This wind hindered the British in sailing up the river and favored the Americans in their movements.

Early on the morning on the 23d, the American galleys and floating batteries went down the river and kept up a constant fire on the *Augusta*, and hot shots were fired from Fort Mifflin, one of which was thought to have set it on fire. But this is not definitely known. Admiral Howe, in his report, states that it may have been caused by hot wads from their own guns.

J. Fennimore Cooper, in his "History of the Navy of the United States," states that the *Augusta* had been lightened previously to the going on this service and partially fitted as a floating battery, and that fire originated in some pressed hay which had been secured to her quarters to make her shot-proof. This is the most plausible reason, and as the fire spread so fast that the sailors could not control it, would account for the orders to lower the boats and carry her crew

to the other vessels in the fleet. Before this had been fully accomplished, the magazine exploded and the Augusta was destroyed.

In the communication from the British Admiralty it was stated that *no* lives were lost *on* the Augusta, but Lord Howe admits the loss of a second lieutenant, the chaplain and a few men. Capt. John Montessor, who was an eye witness, says, "Before the explosion of the Augusta's powder magazine, many of the seamen jumped overboard, apprehending it. Some were taken up by our ships' boats, but the chaplain and sixty-four men perished in the waters."

When the Augusta blew up, the other British war vessels fled down the river, and to save the Merlin from falling into our hands, orders were given to fire her and she was burned to the water's edge on the mud bank on which she had grounded.

From Colonel Bradford's report to President Wharton, of Pennsylvania, we glean these facts:

"The firing of the first gun from the Hessian battery upon Fort Mercer was the signal for the British vessels to approach and attack Fort Mifflin. They were kept at bay by the American galleys and floating batteries. These galleys did good execution, not only upon the British vessels, but upon the Hessians at Red Bank. The British fleet deferred its attack on Fort Mifflin until the next morning, and dropped down the river.

"The next day, the 23d, the Augusta, the Roebuck, two frigates and the Merlin came up as near as they dare to

the upper *chevaux de frise*, when a most furious engagement ensued between the galleys and the floating batteries with the enemy's ships; the fire was so incessant that by all accounts the elements seemed to be in flames. About 12 o'clock the Augusta blew up, whether by accident or from our shot is unknown, having taken fire some time before. Here presented a glorious sight before she blew up, she laying broadside too aground and the flames coming through every port she had. The action still continued with the other ships, and at three o'clock the Merlin took fire and blew up, also being aground, and then the fire soon ceased. Thus ended two glorious days."

This was the only engagement the frigate Augusta had ever been in, so the British Naval authorities admit.

From October 23, 1777, when she was sunk lower on Red Bank shoal by the force of the explosion, until 1869, ninety-two years, the Augusta, or all that was left of this fine man-of-war, remained on that shoal. She was a menace to navigation, lying lengthwise across the edge of the channel.

In 1869 she was raised by the American Dredging Company. The wreck was nearly covered by sand and mud which had been carried down the river and lodged against her, and it was necessary to dredge her out before she could be raised. Pontoons were then used to float her, and when the water was pumped out of her, and her hulk made navigable she was towed up the river to Gloucester City and exhibited. This venture not proving profitable she was allowed to go to pieces on the river bank.

It is a strange coincidence that the Augusta was built in Rotherhithe, adjoining Deptford, in England, and the first water she sailed in was the Thames River along old Deptford, England, and when she ended her course it was in the waters of the Delaware, in old Deptford, New Jersey. That which is seemingly destroyed does not necessarily pass out of existence. When the Augusta blew up, in 1777, it was apparently the end of her, but after one hundred and thirty-two years lapse of time her timbers were recovered and now furnish a lasting memorial of one of the most glorious victories gained by the American forces in the Revolutionary War.



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