

BATTLE OF THE NAVESINK

It Was Fought On the Highlands In Midwinter of 1777.

CONTINENTAL TROOPS WERE DEFEATED

Surprised by the British Regulars

Twenty-five of the Militia were Killed and Many were Taken Prisoners.

In midwinter of 1777 the situation of New-Jersey was most deplorable. The battles of Trenton and Princeton had just been fought, with all their uncertainties, and, at that time, really unknown advantages to either side. Gen. Washington, with his unorganized, half-clothed, badly fed little army, with many sick and disabled, was at Morristown, N. J. Lord Howe, from his headquarters on Staten Island, had just issued his proclamation of forgiveness and protection to the people if they would take the oath of allegiance to Great Britain. Many were forsaking what they considered a hopeless cause and placing themselves in a position of advantage with those who seemed most certain of victory.

The bells of Liverpool rang for a whole day, and the people of England were everywhere rejoicing over the "glorious success" of her troops at Princeton. "Mr. Washington" and the "poor, deluded creatures" following him were most contemptuously spoken of by some of the members of Parliament, while others were seriously contemplating the disaster of such a war,

giance, betrayed their friends and neighbors to the enemy, stationed at the lighthouse and blockhouse on Sandy Hook, who immediately sent word to Howe.

Major Gordon, with 170 men from the Twenty-sixth Regiment, and Col. Morris's new levies, (a regiment organized from the Tories of New York by Col. Roger Morris who married Mary Phillips,) with a warship Syren and her marines, embarked from Collis's Ferry, Staten Island, for Sandy Hook with the intention of "cutting off" the militia on the Highlands from the cargo on the vessel ashore on Sandy Hook.

For three days the troops were prevented from landing by "heavy gales and bad weather." Finally, very early in the morning, before daylight, on Feb. 13, 1777, piloted by McClees and the guides, who thoroughly knew the shoals and channels, into the fishing village of Parkertown, near Island Beach, Major Gordon, with the Twenty-sixth Regiment, "wading waist deep," landed upon the shore of the Highlands, below the present lighthouses.

Marching rapidly forward, silently taking the advance guard prisoners, they surprised the militia, who, gathered from the townships of Middletown, Haledel, and Shrewsbury, belonging to different companies, unorganized, untrained, inexperienced, without defense, utterly surprised, and probably awakened from sleep, were soon easily defeated and taken prisoners, by a force of regular troops superior in numbers and discipline. The main body of the enemy, under Major Gordon, had taken a direct road to Richard Hartshorn's house, upon which the advance guard had been placed. The guide, with the Grenadiers and Light Infantry, in their flanking movement to the right, were compelled to pass over the hills, then covered with an open, dense, and snow-encumbered forest. Through some fault of this guide their slow advance allowed about thirty or forty of the militia to make good their retreat.

In the meantime the marines and Col. Morris's new levies moved down the beach to the stranded vessel, and captured the officer and small party on guard (among them James Cooper) and a few who had escaped from the Highlands. It is probable that Col. Morris knew this part of the coast well, for a member of his family lived upon "Passage" or "Black Point." From this place, for many years, the iron from the mines at Tinton Falls, owned by the Morris family, had been shipped. Col. Morris and his new levies, with the marines, were carefully and well chosen for this the important, although hidden, pur-

of a Party of Rebels, stationed at the Highlands of Navesink. After being detained on board the hard Gale of Wind and bad Weather for three days, they landed (wading up their waists) on the beach at the Highlands, about two miles below the Rebel Posts.

A little before day they marched and surprised the Rebels, who were wading waist deep. From thence they proceeded about a mile farther to the house of one Hartshorn, at which as they were approaching by two different ways (the flanking Companies taking the right) to Gordon's post, about 200 yards from the house were first alarmed. These after firing a few shot, together with their Main Body, who at first affected to form and make a stand, being pushed by the Battalion, fled to sea, for the Rebels and Light Infantry to come up time enough to cut off their retreat. Between 30 and 40 escaped. We found several dead Bodies in the Woods, which were buried by the Soldiers. The whole of the Prisoners taken, amounting to 72 (amongst which are 2 Captains and 4 Lieutenants) were carried on board the Syren. Many had certificates about them of their having taken the Oath of Allegiance to Great Britain. There were 2 or 3 Barrels of Powder, 770 Ball Cartridges, some Salt Provision and 9 or 10 Quarters of fresh Beef, with a light Cart and Team. The 20th left one man killed.

The next day the Country People who had met the Fugitives reported that many were wounded. The guides were intelligent and behaved very well. Col. Morris's New Levies with the Marines from on board the Syren, who had been ordered to the Highlands, captured some of those who made their escape from Hartshorn's together with an Officer and a small Party who had crossed the River from a Rebel Post at Black Point, for the business of Tory Hunting.

"New-York Gazette and Weekly Mercury," March 3, 1777.

The victualing Ship which was lately cast away near Sandy Hook, had almost the whole of her Cargo is saved.

"New-York Gazette and Weekly Mercury," March 10, 1777.

Saturday (Mar. 8th) last about 250 of the Rebels made an attack upon the Light House at Sandy Hook. By the Bravery of the Men posted there, and by the Canon of the Syren (Anchor near the spot, they were beat off with the greatest ease. The Rebels had not either killed or wounded. Two are said to be missing. From the many attempts of the Rebels upon this Light House it seems a favorite Object.

Among the valuable old records to be found in the County Clerk's office in Freehold, Monmouth County, N. J., are quite a number of the applications for and the pensions granted to the widows of men belonging to the First Regiment of Monmouth militia who were killed in the engagement on the Navesink Highlands or were taken prisoners and died in the prison in New-York. These records partially reveal the consequences of that disaster to the militia, and are as follows:

NEW-JERSEY, MONMOUTH COUNTY, JAN. 27, 1780.

These do certify that Mathias Rue, a militiaman belonging to my company in the First Regiment of Monmouth Militia, commanded by Col. Nathaniel Scudder, was taken prisoner by the enemies of the United States of America, in an engagement on the Highlands of Navesink, on the 13th day of February, 1777, and was carried to New-York, and, as I am told, there died, and left a widow and one child, born four months after his death, and of which she yet remains the widow of said Witness my hand the day and year above written.

JOHN WALTON, Ensign.

William Johnson, being duly sworn, deposeseth and sayeth that he was taken prisoner in company with above mentioned Mathias Rue, and that the said Rue died on the 25th day of February, 1777, and further saith not.

WILLIAM JOHNSON.

Sworn before me, this 21st day of January, 1780.

P. SCHEENCK, Justice.

These do certify that we verily believe that Elizabeth, the above named widow, was the lawful wife of said Mathias Rue, deceased, and that his child was born in lawful wedlock, Witness our hands this 21st day of January, 1780.

JOHN ANDERSON, } Justices.
P. SCHEENCK, }

1780 April.

These are to certify that we have examined the within certificate, and allow the same to be registered, and the within named Elizabeth Rue allowed half pay, due to her husband, as the law directs, witness our hands.

JOHN ANDERSON, } Justices.
JOHN LONGSTREET, }
PETER FORMAN, }

Registered 13th June, 1780.

NEW-JERSEY, MONMOUTH COUNTY, OCT. 27, 1779.

These do certify that James Crawford, a militiaman belonging to my company in the First Battalion of Monmouth Militia, commanded by Col. Nathaniel Scudder, was killed in an engagement on the Highlands of Navesink with the enemies of the United States, on the 13th day of February, 1777, and left a widow named Margaret, and seven children, the youngest being five years old at this time. Witness my hand the day above written.

SAMUEL CARHART, Captain.

These do certify that we verily believe that the above named Margaret was the lawful wife of James Crawford, deceased, and that the said Margaret Crawford yet remains the widow of said James. Witness our hand this 27th day of October, 1779.

PETER COVENHOVEN, } Justices.
P. SCHEENCK, }

1780, April 27.

These are to certify that we have examined the within certificate and we do allow, that the same be registered, and also that the within named widow, Margaret Crawford, be allowed the half pay due her husband, as the law directs. Witness our hands.

JOHN ANDERSON, } Justices.
JOHN LONGSTREET, }
PETER FORMAN, }

Registered 17th June, 1780.

Entries similar to the above, and pensions granted, appear in the following cases:

Alexander Clark, killed Feb. 13, 1777, in the engagement of the Navesink Highlands.

John Whitlock, Second Lieutenant, killed in same fight, left a wife, Lydia, and a child five months old.

Obadiah Stillwell, militiaman of Capt. Joseph Stillwell's Company, taken prisoner in same fight. Joseph Goodenough swears he was also taken prisoner with Obadiah Stillwell, and saw him die in prison, in New-York, April 13, 1777. His widow's name was Mary Stillwell.

William Cole, taken prisoner in same fight. Joseph Goodenough swears he saw him die in prison in New-York, about March 15, 1778. His widow's name was Elizabeth.

James Winter, taken prisoner in same fight, died in prison in New-York March 4, 1777, and Joseph Davis, likewise taken prisoner, died in prison in New-York March 11, 1777, and James Hibberts, also taken prisoner, died in prison in New-York.

Capt. Barnes Smock certifies that Lambert Johnson was taken prisoner in the engagement of the Highlands, Feb. 13, 1777, and Jonathan Reid swears that said Johnson died in captivity at New-York March 25, 1777.

Family Tradition.

An account of the wreck and the capture by the British and Tories of the officer and small body of militia who had taken and were guarding that prize, is to be found among the family traditions of the descendants of James W. Cooper. The story has been told to the writer by three of his grandsons; James Cooper of Redbank, Monmouth County, N. J., born 1805; Thomas Cooper of Lake City, Minn., born 1810, and George F. Cooper of Redbank, Monmouth County, N. J., a younger man, who lived his life among the children and grandchildren of, and personally knew some of the friends and comrades of his grandfather.

Capt. Cooper, (Captain of a merchant vessel,) owned a large tract of land in Middle-town Township, Monmouth County, N. J. He had two children born there, named James W. and Catherine.

Before the "forests primeval" of old Monmouth were destroyed, the Navesink River carried a much greater volume of water than it does today. For its tributaries on the north side, Poricy Brook, the stream flowing into Patterson's Cove; McClees Creek, and Claypit Creek, which flows into Hartshorn's Cove—were, for a mile or more, navigable for small sailing vessels which carried lumber &c., to New-York and other markets. James W. Cooper's home was upon the east bank of Patterson's Cove, and he owned a sloop called the Lady Delight, or as he was sometimes pleased to say:

"Lady Delight,
Honor bright,
Capt. Cooper, bold commander."
A sailor's son, he knew and loved all the surrounding waters. He married Elizabeth Douglas of Trenton. Her brother, Alexander Douglas, was Quartermaster and Adjutant of the Burlington County (N. J.) Militia. At his house Gen. St. Clair had his headquarters at the time of the Battle of Trenton. After the battle, Gen. Washington and his officers there held the council of war which led to the battle of Princeton.

The story of the wreck, told by James W. Cooper's grandsons, states that:

An English vessel was cast ashore on Sandy Hook and fell into the hands of the militia. Aboard it were a small body of men were placed on guard. One of their number, named McClees, went to the lighthouse toward the point of the Hook and betrayed his comrades to the British and Tories stationed there. They surprised the militia and took them all prisoners. The first intimation of the attack that the militia had was seeing "the red coats dodging among the sand hills" of the Hook. The prisoners were sent to New-York and thrown into the "Old Sugar House."

While guarding the vessel the militia found a French Captain on board, whom they assisted in making his escape. In return for which he gave James Cooper a scarlet liberty cap. Mr. Benjamin Taylor, Town Clerk of New-York City, a prominent Tory, and a family connection of

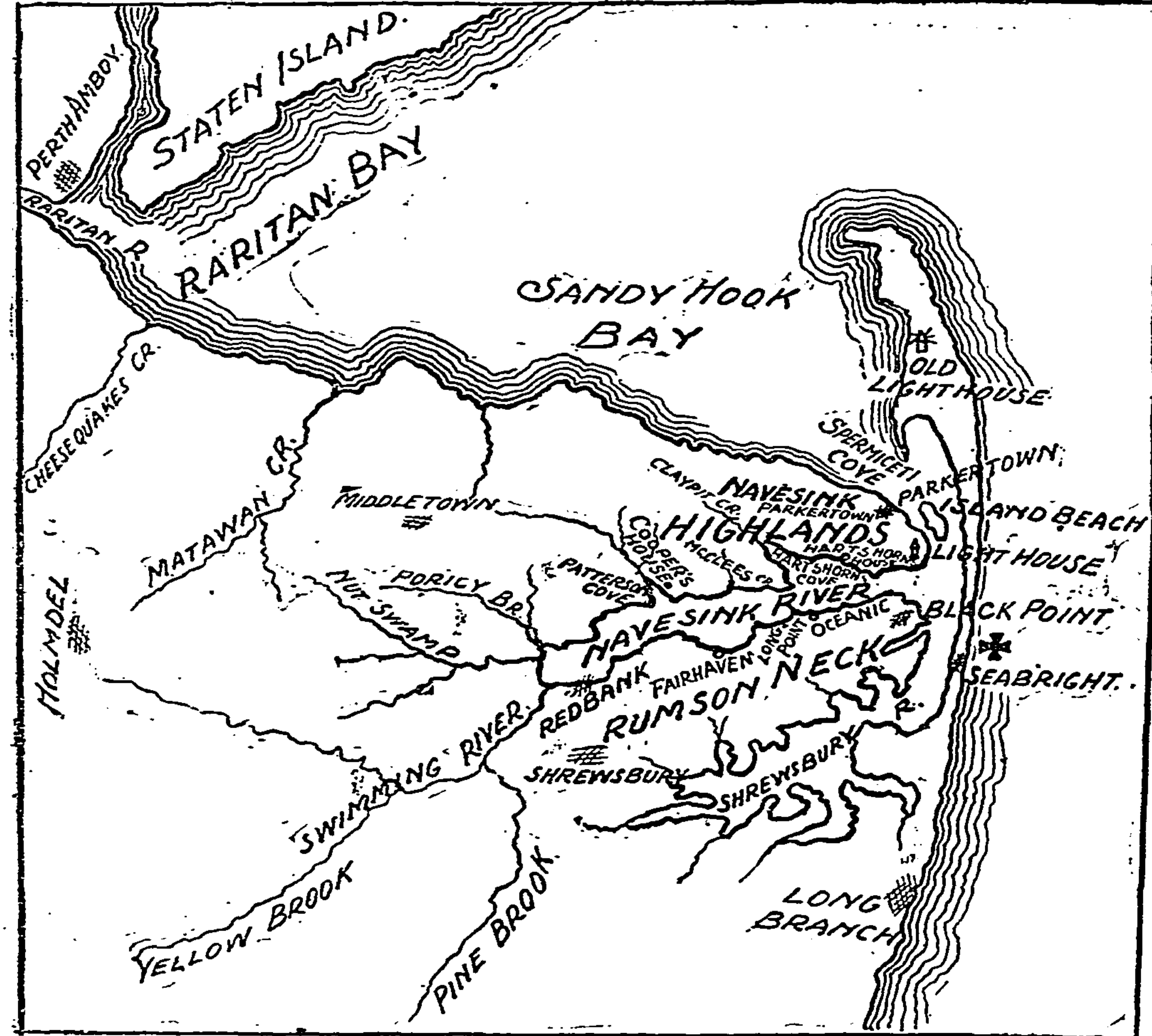
James Cooper's, obtained his release from imprisonment under the condition that he would pilot a vessel out of New-York Harbor, the Captain promising to give him a vessel in which to return to his home. "The prisoner replied 'that he would pilot a vessel out of New-York Harbor, but he would not bring one in.' The old newspapers of 1777 show that the British found much difficulty in obtaining pilots to safely take their vessels in and out of New-York waters. Any one who could either willingly or unwillingly perform this important duty was pressed into the service. In one instance the Captain of a British vessel retained the slave of a wealthy family returning to this country, who were taken from a prize captured during the voyage.

The family were Loyalists. James Cooper performed his duty as a pilot, and when off Sandy Hook was given a little "jolly boat," but before he was beyond reach of the guns he was recalled and given an old, leaky boat, in which it was thought impossible to reach land. Being an expert boatman and swimmer, he succeeded with much difficulty in saving himself. Several times while fishing off Sandy Hook he was picked up by incoming British ships, the Captains of which tried to compel him to pilot them into New-York Bay. He would not, and his reply always was: "No; I'll see you the other side of Jordan first." He was then locked up for a few days, and then given thirty shillings. He was very fond of fishing; for many years he was remembered him, wearing his liberty cap, and standing in the bow of his fishing boat, with one oar, passing through the Shrewsbury Inlet, (which was then open,) over the breakers, and out to the fishing banks off Sandy Hook. He was a quaint, brave, sturdy little man. When captured he was roughly handled before he would give up his gun.

Such are the records which have been preserved of the battle of Navesink Highlands. Although they have been hidden for over a century, the baleful effects of that calamity while fishing off Sandy Hook in the county. Immediately upon almost a hundred homes fell the deepest sorrow and despair. The betrayal of the militia at the very beginning of the struggle by a number of their own men caused the War of the Revolution to assume all the terrors of a civil war throughout Monmouth. In the panic produced by Howe's proclamation, families were divided, sons took the field against their fathers, and brothers were arrayed against brothers. Into many households were brought deep-hidden sorrows or shocking tragedies. There were men of such moral courage that they brought to justice those who were traitors, even while their own hearts bled in the performance of the duty. Many deeds of the most heroic patriotism followed the battle of Navesink Highlands.

Surely, some tribute is due to the heroes who fell in the battle, and to those who suffered worse than death in the "Old Sugar House," and in the performance of sternest duty. The lives of these men as well as brave and true Capt. Huddy and Joseph Murray, were sacrificed upon the hills of Monmouth for American Liberty. Truly it is time that we should give to them the honor and reverence which their sufferings and heroic deeds deserve. Shall their patriotism still remain untold, and must they longer sleep in unmarked and unknown graves?

Wm. C. Murray Ryder.



Probable Position of the Wreck of the English "Victualing Ship" Cast Ashore in February, 1777.

and about this time twelve members resigned because of their disapproval of England's policy toward her colonies in America. Benjamin Franklin had just arrived at Paris on his mission of vital importance to the new Nation.

New-York City was under martial law. Gen. Robertson, on Feb. 24, 1777, was succeeded by Gen. Pigot as commandant of the city. In the harbor British vessels were gathering and fitting for the expedition against Rhode Island. Incoming British war and armed merchant vessels were capturing on the ocean prizes and prisoners—French and Spanish vessels bearing supplies for our needy army, and messengers who were passing between the Old and New Worlds. Now and then one of our little vessels (a privateer) would capture a prize.

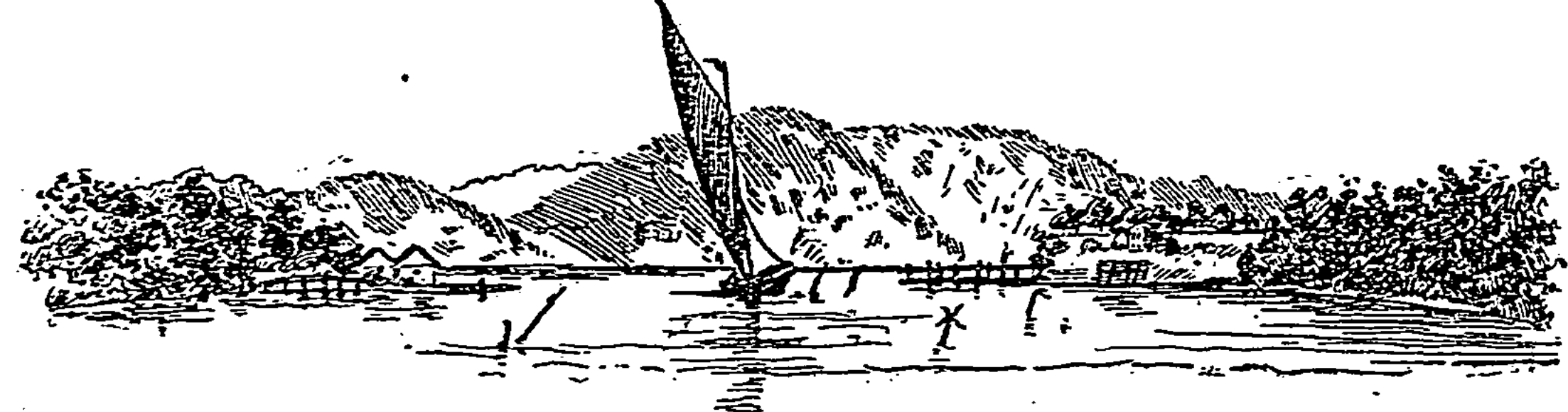
About the 1st of February, 1777, a very severe snowstorm swept over the country. Both armies were in need of food, and New-Jersey was the constant scene of skirmishes and battles between the militia and foraging parties sent out by Howe from Staten Island. Upon the Navesink Highlands on Feb. 13, 1777, the militia of Monmouth County, N. J., suffered most severely in an engagement of this kind. It seems strange that very little, if anything, should be generally known of such an engagement, in which twenty-five men were killed and seventy-two taken prisoners. Perhaps England allowed it to pass into the silence of contempt, while we were willing to allow it to rest in the silence of sorrow and shame. But, to-day, it is pitiful to contemplate what almost 100 of Old Monmouth's militia suffered in that one defeat. Let us look back through more than a century upon what was the probable truth

pose of the expedition. All the prisoners were placed on board the Syren, while the marines and soldiers unloaded almost all of the cargo of the wreck and moved it to the lighthouse. The vessel was lost.

On Saturday, March 8, 1777, G. A. David Forman, with about 250 of the militia of Monmouth and two six-pounders, made an attack upon the lighthouse on Sandy Hook. Their artillery proving too light and the Syren approaching they were repulsed. This was a brave attempt to retake the cargo of the wreck. The prisoners were taken to New-York and thrown into the "Old Sugar House" on the corner of Nassau and Liberty Streets. There some of these men died, within a few weeks or months, from uncaused for wounds, starvation, and the known horrors of that old prison. It was well filled during the winter of 1776-7 with New-Jersey militia. It is not to be wondered at that England has carefully hidden the records of her work in the prisons of New-York.

We learn from the letter of the British officer at Amboy, that twenty-five of the militia were killed in the engagement near Mr. Hartshorn's house; that many of those who escaped were reported wounded, and the pension records at Freehold show that some died of their wounds in the prison. From this we must arrive at one or the other of two conclusions—either the militia, betrayed, surprised, unorganized, and without defense, made a firm stand against a superior foe, or the British soldiers wantonly killed and wounded many frightened and defenseless men. At this time England's officers were not averse to such methods of sustaining England's power. Such brutalities were perpetrated for the purpose of "punishing those senseless mobs" and "teaching them the wickedness and folly" of rising and contending against Great Britain. But few shots were fired, yet twenty-five men were killed and many wounded. At dawn, unwarned and probably just awakened from sleep, the struggle was hand to hand with British bayonets. These men must have been heroes or martyrs.

Knowing well the reputation of the men of Monmouth during the Revolution, and knowing personally the character of their descendants at the present time, we believe that the patriots of the Battle of Navesink



Hartshorn's Cove, Long Point. The Highlands from Above.

of this event. The remarkable coincidence of records and traditions lead to the following deductions:

In the "severe snowstorm" and "heavy gales" which prevailed about the 1st of February, 1777, an English "victualing ship," with her prize (a French Captain) was cast ashore on Sandy Hook, near the present summer resort of Seabright, and not far from the late perilous position of the St. Paul. At Black Point, which we learn from Gordon's "History and Gazetteer of New-Jersey" was situated at the confluence of the Shrewsbury and Navesink Rivers, Shrewsbury Township, Monmouth County, N. J., (the point of Rumson Neck,) the militia, under Col. Nathaniel Scudder, held a post among the cedars which covered that point of land. From this post the militia of Monmouth kept a constant vigil upon Sandy Hook during the Revolution. Further out upon the Hook the lighthouse, built in 1762, and also a blockhouse near it, were held during the war by the British and Tories. Their warships were also constantly at anchor in Sandy Hook Bay. At this time the Shrewsbury Inlet was not open, and Sandy Hook was not an island, but a peninsula. The inlet broke through in 1778 and remained open for many years. When the vessel was cast ashore she fell into the hands of the militia from Black Point, who placed about her a guard and assisted the French Captain in making his escape.

In the meantime, hearing of the prize upon Sandy Hook, the militia were being collected at the home of Mr. Richard Hartshorn, Quartermaster of the First Regiment of Monmouth Militia. Under the command of Col. Nathaniel Scudder, these men of the vicinity, belonging to the First Regiment, were preparing to take possession of the victualing vessel and her cargo. McClees, who lived near Brown's Dock, a short distance further up the river, and several others, induced by the proclamation of Howe to take the oaths of alle-

Highlands did make a firm and brave stand to serve and to supply the greatest need of their country in the winter of 1777. The quick gathering of 250 men from the same regiment, in just three weeks after so severe a defeat, and the bold attack upon the lighthouse on March 8, with all the artillery that they possessed (two six-pounders,) shows great courage and determination on the part of the militia of Monmouth.

Newspaper Extracts.

In the files of old newspapers of this period, now so valuable and so carefully preserved in the Historical and Lenox Libraries of New-York, are to be found two accounts of the engagement upon the Navesink Highlands, a notice of the wreck, and a brief account of the attack upon the lighthouse by the militia on March 8, 1777. They are full of interest and Tory malice. We present them as follows:

"The New-York Gazette and Weekly Mercury." (A Tory paper published by Hugh Gaime, at the Bible and Crown, Hanover Square, New-York City.)

Monday, Feb. 7th, 1777.

Last Wednesday in the night, a Detachment of the Troops under Major Gordon passed over from Staten Island to the Cedars beyond Sandy Hook, and surprised a Party of Rebels, which had for some time past infested Shrewsbury and the adjacent Country. They killed 25 of them and took 70 prisoners, with the loss of only one man. It has been a common mistake of one of the guides they had secured the whole party, of whom about 50 scamped away.

"New-York Gazette and Weekly Mercury," Feb. 24, 1777.

Extract of a letter from an Officer at Amboy, Feb. 16, 1777.

On Monday (Feb. 10th) last a Detachment of 170 men from the 26th Regiment under Major Gordon, marched from Richmond, Staten Island, to Collis's Ferry. Where they embarked for Sandy Hook, with the intention of cutting