

History of The Battle of The Short Hills

Late in the Spring of 1777 General Washington moved his army of about 8,000 men to the mountain range above Scotch Plains to Bound Brook, as a watchdog in the Watchungs. Safe in this natural bastion he was still close enough to attack the British who by early June had encamped in New Brunswick and Perth Amboy with the intention of immediately opening the '77 campaign in New Jersey.

The British plan was to crush the American Commander-in-Chief's army by drawing it into open and disadvantageous combat on the plains in a major tactical manoeuvre to attempt to take the fledgling U.S. capitol at Philadelphia in a direct attack across New Jersey. Frustrated several times in attempts to draw Washington out of his mountain stronghold, the British Commander-in-Chief, Major General William Howe, conceived a way to carry out his objective. He pretended to be leaving New Jersey and by June 22nd had moved his army of over 12,000 men from New Brunswick to retire from Perth Amboy to Staten Island. He hoped to give the Americans the impression of a serious retreat from New Jersey and even plundered and burned the homes in and around New Brunswick as he left.

Washington was, in fact, confident of their impending departure and dismissed the State militia on June 23 and moved his army down to the plains. The division of Major General Lord Stirling (William Alexander) with Brigadier Generals William Maxwell and Thomas Conway took a post near Ash Swamp (Scotch Plains & Edison) extending themselves towards Metuchen Meetinghouse (Metuchen) to observe the anticipated crossing of the British to Staten Island. Major General John Sullivan's troops moved to Samp Town (South Plainfield) and the main army settled in Quibble Town (New Market to North Plainfield).

As night fell on the 25th of June, Howe secretly and hurriedly ferried his troops back into Perth Amboy; the men given three day's provisions and told to disembark ready to march against the enemy leaving behind their tents, kit-bags and all baggage. By one a.m. on the 26th Lieut. General Charles Lord Cornwallis' Division of about 5,000 men with Major General Grant, Brigadiers Matthew and Leslie and Colonel Donop marched up Smith Street, Perth Amboy to Amboy Avenue and onto Woodbridge, turning left at Green Street to Oak Tree Road toward Scotch Plains. The left column, commanded by Major General John Vaughan with over 7,000 men included Commander Howe with Major Generals Stirn, Grey and Brigadiers Cleveland and Agnew. They set out at about 3 a.m. down the old New Brunswick Road (today's New Brunswick Ave., Florida Grove Rd. to King Georges Rd. winding around the Wildwood Avenue onto Grandview Avenue, Woodbridge, to Woodbridge Ave., Metuchen, turning right to Main Street, Metuchen and onto the Plainfield Rd., Edison) in the British typical pincer attack used successfully at Long Island. A reserve of Vaughan's column of about 1,200 men was posted at Bonhamtown marching by way of the Old King Georges Post Road.

Fortunately for the Continental forces, the element of surprise on which Howe's master plan depended so heavily was soon lost as scouts of Colonel Daniel Morgan's riflemen encountered Cornwallis in Woodbridge (Green Street and Route #1) a little after sunrise. The small detachment of 150 riflemen under the command of Captain James Dark, delayed the British right column for half an hour and skirmishing continued down much of Oak Tree Road.

The shots alerted Washington of the enemy's approach and he began with haste to remove the main forces at Quibble Town ordering the divisions of Major Generals Nathanael Greene, Benjamin Lincoln, Adam Stephen and Sullivan back to the heights. The delaying tactics of the riflemen gave the American troops and the local militia time to assemble for battle.