

The Toms River Blockhouse Fight: A Tale of Honor, Capture, Revenge

by Victoria Ford



The British surround a captured Captain Joshua Huddy at the 2006 Re-enactment.

To commemorate New Jersey's efforts in the American Revolution and, specifically, those efforts that took place 225 years ago in the spring of 1782, the Toms River Blockhouse Attack will be reenacted at Joshua Huddy Park on Saturday, June 2.

The reenactment, to be staged by professional reenactors from the British Brigade and the Continental Line groups, has been organized by a committee chaired by Ocean County Cultural and Heritage Commission administrator Cynthia Smith and is jointly celebrated with the Toms River-Ocean County Chamber of Commerce.

By design, the event coincides with that morning's Founder's Day Parade, scheduled to go off at 9 a.m. The reenactment will take place twice, at 11 a.m. and again 2 p.m. Additionally, a 20-piece fife-and-drum band will perform 18th-century music from 11:30 a.m. to 12 and, throughout the day, sutlers (an old-time-y word for goods peddlers) will roam, and members of the public can enjoy colonial children's games and various demonstrations.

For those unfamiliar with the term, a blockhouse, historically, was a small timber fort; today it would more likely be a reinforced concrete shelter. The original location of the Toms River blockhouse, the site of the attack that would share its name, was on a hill where the township building stands today, according to Smith. From there, militiamen could overlook the harbor for approaching enemies. A blockhouse

was a typical stronghold to protect the townspeople and salt supply warehouses, which often were ships, she added. Salt was an invaluable resource, essential for food preservation and in the production of gunpowder.

Even after Gen. Charles Cornwallis' surrender at Yorktown in 1781 marked what is widely held as the end of the American Revolution, Smith said, battles between British troops and colonists continued. In those years New Jersey very nearly had a civil war on its hands, she explained, between the Loyalists, who clung to the rule of England's King George III, and the rebel Patriots, who fought for the new country's independence. The effects of such disparity – which had religious as well as political overtones – were felt even within families, pitting brother against brother and father against son.

In early 1782, while the Treaty of Paris was being negotiated, Patriots in what is now the Toms River area sent for militia captain Joshua Huddy of Colts Neck to come and defend the blockhouse from British invaders. Loyalists, however, had long had it in for Huddy, who had earned a reputation as a privateer who led raids and captured and killed a number of Loyalists, in particular a certain Philip White.

It was on Sunday morning, March 24, while Huddy was in Toms River, guarding the blockhouse with 25 men, that a throng of Loyalists 125 strong descended upon and seized the blockhouse in pursuit of Huddy, overwhelming the smaller band of Patriots.

Smith said the enemies likely sailed into the harbor through a break in Island Beach called Cranberry Inlet, between what is now Ortleigh Beach and Seaside Heights (long since filled in).

About nine of the men were killed, Smith said. Huddy and the others escaped, but were eventually found in a nearby farmhouse. Loyalists torched everything in town as they went in search of him, destroying all but two homes in the process. As a result, Smith pointed out, one is hard pressed to find a colonial home in Toms River today.

Once captured, Huddy was taken to New York City and held in irons at the Sugar House prison. He was imprisoned for several weeks until April 12 when, without the courtesy of a trial (as approved by Loyalist leader William Franklin, the illegitimate son of beloved Patriot Benjamin Franklin), he was taken to the Highlands in New Jersey and summarily hanged. He rests in an unmarked grave in Freehold.

Huddy's perceived mistreatment and subsequent death outraged the American people and, in particular, Gen. George Washington, who set his mind to taking an eye for an eye by having a captured British officer of equal rank hanged. Lots were drawn and one unlucky Charles Asgill was to pay the price; but Asgill's parents happened to be a former Lord Mayor of London and a Lady-in-Waiting to the queen of England, at whose behest the French, concerned with the Treaty, stepped in to plead with Washington to spare young Asgill's life.

Washington eventually agreed and Asgill was spared, but historians credit the ordeal with putting the Paris Peace Treaty on hold for much of that year, until it was finally signed in 1783, bringing a formal end to the Revolution.

"Some historians say it helped our cause in the negotiations," Smith said.

For more information about the reenactment and Founder's Day's other goings on, contact Cynthia Smith at (732) 929-4779, or visit www.co.ocean.nj.us/cultural/index.htm.