

“War of 1812: Attack on Stonington”

Adapted by Edward Dorgan from the original article by Nancy Steenburg, published in *Connecticut Explored*, summer 2012.

Stonington Point, a slim finger of land in Connecticut that extends into Little Narragansett Bay near the Rhode Island border, suffered a dangerous attack by the British during the War of 1812. By 1810 about 800 or 900 people lived in about 120 houses. Why did this sliver of land become a target for British attack? The residents of Stonington expressed puzzlement over the choice. The town had little wealth or plunder that they thought might attract British interest.

The War of 1812 became a reality for Connecticut citizens living along the coast in the summer of 1813, when a British squadron began patrolling Long Island Sound, seizing fishing and merchant ships, and generally blocking coastal communities from pursuing their livelihood on the sea. Several times that summer Stonington militia members marched to New London to help repel attacks, none of which materialized there.

No one in Stonington anticipated a British attack because the town was small and had little of interest that the British might want to plunder. Still, in June 1813, the State of Connecticut sent two 18-pound cannons for the defense of the harbor. The cannons were mounted on a small semi-circular stone wall, three or four feet high, built by local residents, who also erected a flagpole by the battery. All was quiet on the Point during the rest of 1813, despite the British troops' seizing many ships that were trying to escape the blockade on Long Island Sound.

In May 1814 the town of Stonington increased its defenses, setting up a tar-barrel signal pole at a high point in the northern part of town (now north of state Route 95) and maintaining a militia guard of 41 men. The townspeople were on edge, living in anticipation until the first act of war occurred on July 30. According to Haynes, ships of the British squadron chased a privateer into Stonington Harbor, but the militia drove the British off, killing British midshipman Thomas Powers. The town allowed his burial with honors in the Stonington Cemetery. Less than two weeks later, full-scale war arrived at the Point.

In mid-afternoon on August 9, 1814, four British ships anchored off Stonington Point: H.M.S. *Ramillies* with 74 guns, *Pactolus* with 44 guns, *Dispatch* with 22 guns, and the bombship *Terror*, all under the command of Captain Thomas M. Hardy. Hardy sent an ultimatum to the town: “Not wishing to destroy the unoffending inhabitants residing in the town of Stonington, one hour is granted them from the receipt of this to remove out of town.” The time on Hardy’s note was 5:30 p.m.

The first defenders rushed to the breastworks, small protection against the combined firepower of four ships of the British Navy. By 6 p.m. 16 volunteers from Mystic joined the original 4, including

Captain Jeremiah Holmes, a vital addition to the ranks of the defenders. Holmes, a Mystic native, had suffered impressment at the hands of the British navy several years earlier. It had taken more than three years for him to prove that he was an American with valid seaman's papers and gain his release. Unfortunately, for the British who attacked Stonington, during his service in the British Navy, Holmes had become an expert, accurate gunner.

Town officials sent messengers to all neighboring towns seeking powder and reinforcements, but an uneasy silence endured for two more hours as the town's defenders waited for the fighting to begin. The *Terror* started bombarding the Point at 8 p.m. The defenders fired back with its 18-pounder. Rockets and bombs showered the village, lighting up the night like fireworks. The band of volunteers manned the cannons and used the light of fire from the British ships to aim their returning cannonade. The bombardment continued until midnight.

At dawn the British again fired on the town. The *Dispatch* had moved in closer to shore overnight, within half a mile of the coast. Its guns laid down a withering broadside. It seemed impossible for anyone to survive the British firepower. She claimed that the shells blasted the flag from its pole, shattered the barricade, and tore up dirt around the little fort. Yet the tiny group of defenders stayed at their posts until they ran out of powder. The men rescued their flag, spiked their cannon, rendering them inoperable should the British try to capture them.

For more than an hour the British fired, unimpeded, on the hapless village. The defenders became a fire crew. At 8 a.m., fresh powder arrived from New London. The original 20 defenders, their number now increased by a half dozen more, returned to the barricade. They nailed their flag back to the flagpole, drilled out the cannon, and set about defending the village. The firing continued between shore and ship, nonstop, for four hours. The volunteers managed to damage the *Dispatch* severely, hitting it below the water line, damaging the rigging, killing a number of British sailors, and forcing it to withdraw out of their range.

Not only did the defenders have to cope with their wounded after their triumph over the *Dispatch*, but they had to resume fighting as the British returned to the attack. The *Ramillies*, the largest ship of the attacking squadron, now approached as close as it could to shore and seemed ready to take up the unfinished job of the *Dispatch*. The *Pactolus* also drew nearer and anchored. Stonington's end appeared near.

At noon, the British launched the renewed assault with bombs from *Terror*. She was able to launch her bombs from so far offshore that fire from the cannon at the Stonington battery couldn't reach her. The defenders again retreated from the protection of the battery walls and served as a fire brigade in the village.

That night the British bombardment stopped, but it began again early on the 12th. Both the *Pactolus* and *Ramillies* had worked their way even closer to the Point overnight. At 8 a.m., the two

ships “opened a cannonade with the design of raking the village and sweeping it, as it were, from the earth.” Fortunately, for the village, most of the balls fell short or overshot the town. The firing stopped at noon, and the two ships drew away from the shore. The next morning, the 13th, the British squadron set sail from Stonington without firing another shot, returning to its position at the mouth of the Thames River off New London.

The attack by the British was a horrible assault on the peaceful citizens of Stonington, yet despite hours and days of bombardment, damage to the town was surprisingly light. Haynes claimed that the real reason for the lack of damage was that the British aimed at the Stonington Congregational Church steeple, believing it marked the center of the village. In fact, he wrote, the majority of the Borough’s 100 houses actually were clustered near the Point, with the result that most of the British shells landed harmlessly in fields beyond the town center.

Nevertheless, the British assault damaged about 40 buildings but none beyond repair. On the Stonington side casualties were also surprisingly light. Aside from the wounds suffered by young Denison and Miner, four other defenders had minor injuries. Residents lost a horse and one or two other farm animals, but the total damage amounted to only about \$3,500.

British losses far outstripped those of the Americans—21 British men were killed and more than 50 wounded. The damage to the *Dispatch* and some of the British landing barges was severe, and the report estimated the British used 50 tons of metal in the bombs, rockets, and shells they fired at the town. Chroniclers of the defense of Stonington have focused on the bravery and recklessness of the original band of defenders. They exposed themselves to British fire to drag the cannon from place to place and to put out fires or help protect property. Yet foolhardy or foolish, the residents of the little coastal village of Stonington faced down the might of the British Navy, and they won.

Guiding questions:

1. How did the town of Stonington (Connecticut) prepare for a British attack on the coastal town?
2. How were the defenders (the local militia) able to defend against this British naval attack?
3. Based on the attack, what was the damage to the town of Stonington? What was the damage to the British squadron, attacking the town?
4. What lesson can we learn from the British attack on the town of Stonington, August 9–12, 1814?