

## THE BATTLE OF ROCK HARBOR by William Quinn

Cape Cod was particularly vulnerable during the War of 1812 and took part in a great number of naval conflicts. Rock Harbor, located on the west side of Orleans, is a relatively narrow and shallow inlet that serves as the town's gateway into Cape Cod Bay. This tranquil cove was the site of a skirmish between locals and the British navy on December 19, 1814.

The United States declared war on Great Britain on June 10, 1812; because U.S. sovereignty had been violated in ways that suggested the new nation was still a colony subject to Britain's imperial whims. Residents of Cape Cod, knowing well the negative effects war would have on the maritime industry, were not particularly supportive. Despite the American government's embargoes against England, much illicit business was carried on between American traders and British officers. Eventually, the United States government was driven to enforce laws prohibiting all trade with Britain.

When the war began, the British government initially enforced a state of blockade only around the Delaware and Chesapeake regions. Great Britain very much needed American supplies for its army in Spain, and Cape Codders wanted to maintain their livelihoods, so both sides remained willing to trade with one another in some capacity. As the war evolved, however, the blockade was extended along the south coast, and then, by May 1814, to the whole east coast, including Cape Cod.

In 1813, a few individuals from the town of Orleans had laid out a road leading to Rock Harbor on Cape Cod Bay, where they built a protected landing place for boats. These individuals originally claimed the land as their personal property, but written deeds or titles could not be produced. Rock Harbor was eventually deemed to be the legal property of the town, and Orleans agreed to pay the expenses for the training of a militia to protect the area, which was highly patrolled by British ships.

By 1814, the size and strength of England's Royal Navy allowed it to blockade all of the ports around Cape Cod Bay, from Provincetown Harbor to Falmouth. American ships that were caught running supplies or trading goods were seized and its crewmembers were taken prisoner. The British ships of war raided the Cape's harbors, sometimes indiscriminately, and burned boats at will. Threats of bombardment and destruction caused the people of Cape Cod to become very vigilant of the British vessels hovering around their shores.

Orleans appointed a committee of safety, and guards were placed on the west shore to sound an alarm if the enemy should attempt to carry out their repeated threats. As an added safety measure, the townspeople who were not formally involved in the militia proposed that they organize an artillery company in case their forces were called to duty in another town. A representative was sent to Boston to request the government supply them with proper weapons, but he was refused and returned to Orleans without munitions. British landing parties began making good on their threats. They ravaged the countryside, stealing crops and livestock, and threatened to destroy the saltworks and other property in the towns. Some of the less scrupulous British commanders demanded payment from the townspeople in exchange for not attacking them. Lord George Stuart, captain of the HMS Newcastle, was one of them.

The Newcastle, which was part of a squadron led by Commodore George Collier, captured American privateers and harassed the coastal towns of Cape Cod Bay. The British demanded that the town of Orleans ante up a hefty sum of \$1,000 for the safety of its citizens; otherwise the town would be bombed and the local saltworks destroyed. The neighboring towns of Eastham and Brewster had already paid handsomely to save their saltworks, but Orleans refused the insulting proposition.

Fortunately for Orleans, the heavily armed ship-of-war was too large to enter the harbor and navigate the marshy Rock Harbor Creek. Several barges full of British soldiers were sent ashore, but the harbor's watchful guards had sufficient time to alert the militia. Men quickly arrived from Orleans and the neighboring towns. After a short skirmish, the militia drove the enemy back to their ship, with only one British casualty.

Not content with the outcome of the failed landing, the Newcastle began to fire its cannons, but the ship was too far offshore and the cannonballs fell short. Unable to come any closer to Orleans, the Newcastle gave up and went on its way. Five days later, on Christmas Eve, 1814, the Treaty of Ghent was signed and the War of 1812 was over. The large and powerful Newcastle lived out a much more mundane career and was eventually disassembled and sold for scrap in 1850.

Orleans led a peaceful existence until another attack occurred one hundred years later, during World War I—only this time the action took place on the Atlantic side of the town. When driving along Route 6 through Orleans, history buffs will appreciate a quick detour into quaint Rock Harbor. No physical evidence exists of the battle, yet one can easily imagine the intimidating ships-of-war hovering along the coastline, and the earliest Americans standing their ground. Nowadays, tranquil Rock Harbor is known for its chartered fishing and breathtaking sunsets.