

Firefight in the Park: The Battle of Deering's Woods

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In 1689, the Maine frontier was much different than the way that we see it now. The frontier line ran through what are the now-populated areas of Freeport, Gray, and Gorham, with the population huddling along the coast in small farms. Maine was not a wealthy place, but it did have one aspect that made it the focal point for enemies: it was the easiest way for French troops and their American Indian allies in Canada to get Massachusetts. At the time, the District of Maine was a province of the colony of Massachusetts. This meant that Massachusetts had to provide protection to the citizens of Maine in case of attack. There had been many attacks in the past, as England and France fought each other for control of the New World.

One of the largest settlements in Maine at the time was at Falmouth, where present-day Portland is built. It was a farming and fishing community, made up of approximately twenty-five families, stretching from the slopes of Munjoy Hill in the east to Anthony Brackett's Farm in what is now Deering Oaks Park today to the west.¹ At the time, Deering Oaks was mainly swamp and marshland, with only one bridge allowing for freedom of movement. The town was protected by an earth and timber fort, Fort Loyal, which stood at the intersection of India and Commercial Streets in present-day downtown Portland. The fort stood on a hill that was levelled in the 1800s to make way for the railroad.

In 1689, another colonial war began, this one known as King William's War. Governor Andros of Massachusetts conducted several raids against the French and Indians, angering the Indians considerably. French and Wabenaki Indians conducted many harsh raids on English towns in Maine, including destroying the town and garrison at Pemaquid that summer. Towns north of Falmouth were abandoned as fear seized the colonists.² In order to stop the enemy offensive, the Massachusetts authorities ordered Major Benjamin Church, one of the most famous soldiers of the time, to take a force of soldiers by ship to Falmouth and seek out the enemy invasion. Church had created several companies of light infantry made up of both militiamen from Massachusetts as well as Indian allies. That Church had Indians under his command was an irony lost on the government of Massachusetts, when they authorized a "reward of *eight pounds* per head, for every fighting Indian man slain."³ Church and his men arrived in Falmouth on September 27, 1689, linking up with Captain Sylvanus Davis, commander of the Falmouth militia.⁴ Church ordered his men to stay on their ships as long as there was daylight and to come ashore at dark, so as to not give away their numbers to the enemy who were sure to be watching.⁵ They would not have long to wait.

On the morning of September 28, 1689, an advance party of Indians with a few French allies crossed under cover night in canoes from Peaks Island and took up positions on the isthmus, dividing the town from their only landward route of escape. The colonists were in ignorance to this invasion until several hostile Indians opened fire on Anthony Brackett and his sons who were working on their farm. Anthony Brackett was killed but his sons escaped the ambush to bring word to the town of the attack.⁶

¹ (Jones, 1940).

² (Drake S. , 1910), 36.

³ (Drake S. G., 1825), 129.

⁴ (Drake S. G., 1825), 130.

⁵ (Drake S. G., 1825), 133.

⁶ (Drake S. G., 1825), 134.

Major Church mustered his troops, including men of the town, bringing his force to almost four hundred soldiers.⁷ They quickly sped from Fort Loyal to the farm, in what is now Deering Oaks Park, where they were met with a fusillade of bullets from the hidden enemy. Major Church quickly deployed his troops into line of battle and they began firing towards their unseen foe. The French and Indians numbered approximately seven hundred and the New England militia was forced to fight them frontier-style, using light infantry tactics of cover and concealment – or as it was known at the time, the “Skulking way of war.”⁸ When fighting at a ranged distance of twenty-five to fifty meters, the English had the advantage because of their volume of fire and better weapons (both sides used smoothbore flintlock muskets), but the Indians excelled at close quarters combat.

Church attempted to flank the enemy, and detached two of his companies to attempt to get behind the enemy. Because much of Deering Oaks was still swamp and water, the going was tough, and the enemy was able to spot the movement. The French and Wabenaki began to retreat into the underbrush to escape Church’s enveloping tactic. Church, thinking that the enemy was attempting to gain the town from another angle, placed six Indians in an observation post by the bridge and withdrew his flanking companies to the town, but found no threats there.⁹ In the meantime, his other companies still engaging the enemy were running low on ammunition, as the bullets that had been provided for them were too large for their muskets. Word was sent to the fort to hammer musket balls into pieces so that they would fit the firearms. This ammunition was sent back down to the militia, carried by an Indian called Captain Lightfoot, and they were able to continue the fight.¹⁰ The invigorated New Englanders charged the Indian position, scattering them into the woods and winning the battle. The enemy disappeared into the brush, carrying their casualties with them as was the tradition. Reports of casualties from the colonial side differ, but they were probably ten to twelve men killed with about the same number wounded.¹¹ Falmouth was free of attacks for nearly a year because of the bravery of the men from Maine and Massachusetts.¹² However, the French and Wabenaki would not forget this defeat and would return the following year with deadly consequences.

⁷ (Church, 1851), 170.

⁸ (Committee, 1994), 1.

⁹ (Drake S. G., 1825), 136.

¹⁰ (Drake S. G., 1825), 134-135.

¹¹ (Church, 1851), 171.

¹² (Committee, 1994), 1.

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Massachusetts militia troops, ca 1690, as they might have looked at the Battle of Deering's Woods (Picture by David Rickman, courtesy of Canadian Military Heritage Group)

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Falmouth as it looked in 1690, one year before the battle (Image courtesy of the Maine Historical Society and the Maine Memory Network.)