

“Great Consternation and Alarm:”¹ Maine Militia and the Invasion of 1814

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¹ (United States Congress, 1832), 865.

It was June, 1814 when the seventy-four-gun ship of the line *HMS Bulwark* came into view off Seguin Island, which lies at the entrance of the Kennebec River in Maine. The massive warship had more firepower on it than most of the entire District of Maine, and yet militiamen still came forth to try to oppose her. Moses Davis, of Wiscasset, reported that the British warship had disembarked troops in barges that moved inland, “drove away militia and took two six pounders and sank them in the river.”² On June 22nd, the *Bulwark* struck again, this time sailing down to Sheepscot Bay and threatening the town of Wiscasset with her armed barges. The town was protected by the earthworks of Fort Edgecomb, mounting several twenty-four pound guns and carronades against enemy attack, as well as a massive fifty-pound Columbiad. As the barges approached the fort, they could hear the ringing of alarm bells along the Sheepscot River, as well as the thunder of alarm guns. This dissuaded the British from their raid and they retreated back to their floating menace.³

Maine had been largely spared the perils of war during the fledgling United States’ conflict with Great Britain, beginning in 1812. The British were careful to cultivate a friendly and almost conciliatory attitude with the New England states, in the hopes that the allure of commercial gains would keep that region neutral. This was especially important as Great Britain was expending the majority of its economic and military resources to keep Napoleon Bonaparte in check. However, by 1814, with all of Europe devoted to crushing the dwindling French Empire, the British could now turn their attention to the backwater war in North America. New ships were making the passage to Halifax, Nova Scotia, where the Royal Navy North American fleet was stationed. Hard-fighting veterans of Wellington’s Peninsula Campaign, fresh from combat with the vaunted French armies, and upset at having to be still under arms, were entering garrison in Canada. They came with a new strategy, one that aimed at crushing the American states into submission. The landward campaign through Canada and upstate New York would continue, with two sea-borne invasions to split the U.S. forces. The first would strike at northern Virginia, Washington D.C., and the commercial center of Baltimore. The second would seize Maine, in order to apply more pressure to New England’s already anti-war population and seize northern Maine permanently.⁴

So who would stand in the way of these English juggernauts that were accustomed to sweeping away anything that stood in their way? Most U.S. regulars were in northern New York or in other parts of the country. The regular Army was still small, as each state was used to calling up its own regiments of militia for defense. Maine was no different, save for one thing: it was not yet a state. Maine in 1814 was the District of Maine of the state of Massachusetts.⁵ Thus, it fell to the Massachusetts government under Governor Caleb Strong to provide for the defense of Maine. Massachusetts managed the Maine militia system, which theoretically held six divisions in eight counties, with a total of 24,925 men under arms.⁶ Theoretically, because not all the infantrymen had muskets, there was a scarcity of cannon for artillery, and horses for

² (Gratwick, 2013), 88.

³ (Gratwick, 2013), 88.

⁴ (Hickey, 2012), 201.

⁵ (The Yankee Soldier's Might: The District of Maine and the Reputation of the Massachusetts Militia, 1800-1812., 2011), 235.

⁶ (The Yankee Soldier's Might: The District of Maine and the Reputation of the Massachusetts Militia, 1800-1812., 2011), 245.

cavalry were even rarer. Training for the militia varied by region, as did discipline. Militia officers were more often than not chosen for their wealth and political leanings rather than their military acumen, a practice that doomed even some of the most determined militia companies.⁷

Still, they had stood as the symbol of American independence from Lexington to Bunker Hill, and from Saratoga to Yorktown. With all their flaws and issues, they had won the confidence of American leaders and the respect of their enemies. It was the militia who were entrusted to keep the British out of Maine.

On June 29th, the ubiquitous *Bulwark* was sailing between its blockading station off Portland and its home station of Halifax. She dropped her barges off Pemaquid harbor and the Redcoats rowed to shore in the fog. Captain Sproul's company of militia manned Fort Frederick and opened a brisk fire on the enemy as they heard the sound of the oars through the fog.⁸ This drove back the British who then attempted to row around to New Harbor, but were again met by volleys from Captain Sproul and his men, and forced to withdraw.⁹ These skirmishes in June characterized the fighting on the Maine coast during the summer of 1814: small coastal raids with limited goals.

As Mainers heard of the depredations of the British in northern Virginia and Washington D.C. near the end of the summer, they began to feel that the tolerance of the British forces was running out. Two hundred men of the infantry and artillery militia companies in Portland were called up for duty at Forts Scammel and Preble, in addition to the hundred who had been called up since June.¹⁰

In Nova Scotia, the second prong to the British strategy was ready. The invasion force set off from Halifax on August 26th, with seven warships and ten troop transports carrying nearly 6,000 British troops from the 29th, 60th, 62nd, and 98th Regiments of Foot, and the First Company, Royal Artillery. The entire invasion force was commanded by Lieutenant General Sir John Sherbrooke, who had been Wellington's second-in-command during the Peninsula Campaign.¹¹ It was a formidable force and it was aimed straight at Machias, until Sherbrooke heard that the 28-gun *USS Adams* was holed up for repairs in Hampden. The fleet changed course, heading for Castine.

On the morning of September 1st, the fleet struck Castine harbor, and the small U.S. garrison of regulars and militia barely had time to fire a shot before they were forced to blow up their magazines, spike their guns, and retreat. Castine fell quickly as thousands of British regulars streamed ashore.¹² Belfast fell the same day. Detachments of light infantry, riflemen, Royal Marines from the *Bulwark*, and light artillery, numbering about 500 men in all, set off towards Hampden to capture the *USS Adams*.

Meanwhile, the militia companies from Bangor and Hampden were assembling to meet the threat. Captain Charles Morris, commander of the *Adams*, had called on General John Blake, commander of the militia, to provide support to his beleaguered warship. Blake, a veteran of the Revolution, arrived outside Hampden on September

⁷ (The Yankee Soldier's Might: The District of Maine and the Reputation of the Massachusetts Militia, 1800-1812., 2011), 252.

⁸ (Burrage, 1892), 188.

⁹ (Burrage, 1892), 189.

¹⁰ (United States Congress, 1832), 866.

¹¹ (The Battle of Hampden, 1914), 185.

¹² (The Battle of Hampden, 1914), 185.

2nd, with nearly 500 militiamen from different regiments. Guns from the *Adams* and from the Bangor Light Artillery were set up on various positions along a commanding ridge overlooking a small creek.¹³ But while the terrain was good, the militia leaders were not. They quarreled all that evening on their best course of action, neglecting to build entrenchments or coordinate their various units. To add to the confusion, rain soaked the field and a heavy fog obscured the men's' vision. Militiamen who had never fired a shot in anger lay all night in the depressing dampness, nervously awaiting the morning.

The British attacked the next morning, before the sun had burned away the fog. The militia opened fire with several of their cannon, causing a few British casualties, but it did not slow the advance. The British formed in line of battle and began to advance, firing as they went. The militia were told to hold their fire until the British were close, in order to make every shot count, but the sight of the battle-hardened redcoats breaking into a charge with fixed bayonets was too much: the militia center broke and ran. The soldiers on the flanking guns and the sailors manning the guns aboard the *Adams* fired one last shot before spiking their pieces and retreating to avoid capture. Rather than see her under British colors, Captain Morris blew up the *Adams*.¹⁴

The militia had performed so poorly at Hampden that locals nicknamed the battle the "Hampden Races" because it seemed the object was to run away as fast as possible.¹⁵ Two British soldiers were killed and several wounded. The loss from the U.S. forces is unknown. Both Bangor and Hampden would pay for the defeat. Stores were looted, ships burnt, arms and gunpowder confiscated, and the male populace was forced to give their parole to not take up arms against the British.¹⁶ In all, the British caused \$80,000 worth of damage; this today would be valued at over one million dollars.¹⁷ Blake was brought up on court-martial charges of cowardice following the war, as were his subordinates Colonel Andrew Grant and Major Joshua Chamberlain (the grandfather of Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain of 20th Maine fame). Blake and Chamberlain were exonerated, but Grant was found guilty and forced to resign his commission.¹⁸

As the British occupied over one hundred miles of Maine coastline, the residents of southern Maine predicted that they that would be next. On September 5th, prominent residents of Portland asked for a force of 2,500 militiamen for the defense of the town.¹⁹ Coastal towns such as Biddeford, Arundel, Saco, and York did the same. Throughout September, thousands of militiamen saw service on the coastline, essentially acting as early warning systems in the case of a British advance, whereupon more militia could concentrate on the endangered area.²⁰ Citizens not in the militia pitched in to assist in

¹³ (The Battle of Hampden, 1914), 189.

¹⁴ (The Battle of Hampden, 1914), 190.

¹⁵ (The Yankee Soldier's Might: The District of Maine and the Reputation of the Massachusetts Militia, 1800-1812., 2011), 259.

¹⁶ (Hickey, 2012), 202.

¹⁷ (The Battle of Hampden, 1914), 193.

¹⁸ (The Yankee Soldier's Might: The District of Maine and the Reputation of the Massachusetts Militia, 1800-1812., 2011), 260.

¹⁹ (United States Congress, 1832), 867.

²⁰ (United States Congress, 1832), 892

this troubled time. Residents of Portland fortified the tip of their peninsula at Fish Point, with carpenters building platforms for the cannons that were mounted.²¹

City leaders in Portland also appealed to Massachusetts for military assistance, but on September 11th, the Portland Committee of Public Safety received a letter stating that anti-war Governor Caleb Strong had refused their request.²²

By September 14th, the warnings of British incursion were becoming more and more urgent. British warships, including the *Bulwark*, were sighted off Portland Head Light.²³ An express rider from the eastern coast arrived in Portland on the 11th, with the news that “seven sail of the enemy’s ships had left Castine and stood to the westward.”²⁴ All the militias of Cumberland and Oxford counties were called up for emergency duty, bringing the numbers in the town to between two and three thousand.²⁵ Among these were the Portland Light Infantry, brought into service from September 7th to 19th and then from the 26th to October 3rd.²⁶ On September 25th, fifteen troop transports were spotted off Owl’s Head (Rockland).²⁷ Some residents evacuated town as Portland was turned into an armed camp.

Issues with the militia remained, however. Some militia officers refused to serve under regular officers, causing a near revolt that was solved when all militia units were placed under the command of Major General Alford Richardson, commander of the Portland defenses. And again, there were issues with discipline. Colonel Sumner, aide to Governor Strong, described a unit of militia from Oxford County as, “undisciplined, badly armed, miserably provided, and worse commanded.” This same officer, communicating with the adjutant general of Massachusetts, laments, “Though it is the only means of defence we can at present afford, yet my short experience convinces me that the system of defence by militia is the most troublesome and expensive as well as the least efficient that could have been devised by a wise people.”²⁸ Sumner was expressing a common feeling, one that many officers shared. However, he was also working for the governor of Massachusetts, whose troops these were. Strong had declined to mobilize troops against the British both in 1812 and earlier that July.²⁹ When the War Department called on Governor Strong to provide troops for the aid of Portland and to expel the British from Maine, he declined.³⁰

Due to the squabbles within the militia, General Richardson spent the majority of his time arguing with the officers under his command and pleading with them to keep their companies in position, while also requesting support from Massachusetts, rather than planning for the defense of the town. Still, he managed to do both, as fortifications and batteries were placed at all the critical approaches to the town and the majority of the militia stayed to fight the battle that everyone thought was coming.³¹

²¹ (Goold, 1886), 441.

²² (United States Congress, 1832), 895.

²³ (United States Congress, 1832), 893.

²⁴ (United States Congress, 1832), 895.

²⁵ (Goold, 1886), 491.

²⁶ (National Guard, 1928), 25.

²⁷ (United States Congress, 1832), 900.

²⁸ (United States Congress, 1832), 900.

²⁹ (United States Congress, 1832), 612.

³⁰ (Hickey, 2012), 203.

³¹ (Goold, 1886), 492.

But it never came. Viewing the works and preparation around Portland, the British thought that an attack would be too costly. As contemptuous as they were to the militia, they realized that an orderly defense could break up their assault. The ships that were seen on September 11th were most likely an invasion force that viewed the defenses around Portland too strong. Over half the British force departed Castine in mid-September, bound for Louisiana and the offensive aimed against New Orleans. By early October, the majority of the militia in and around Portland had been sent back to their homes.

Still, there remained the several thousand British still occupying Castine and Machias. As late as December, 1814, Maine citizens remained incensed that British soldiers still occupied their lands. Many would echo Samuel Whiting, who wrote to General King of the Bath militia that a suitable force could be raised to relieve Castine of British occupation, saying: "I hope the effort of the general Govr will not be defeated for want of means— I anticipate no assistance from Mass.s.— — and if no efficient measures can be adopted— the crisis has arrived when the District of Maine ought to Legislate for herself— release from the thraldom of Boston influence, we would not suffer this Eastern Section of the Country to sink into insignificance— we would not suffer one third of our teritory to be controlled by British laws — if we can get no assistance let us make an effort to take care of ourselves."³²

Although the British would leave Maine in 1815 with the signing of the Treaty of Ghent, the feelings of anger towards being in "thraldom of Boston" did not depart with them. The frustration that boiled over during the war was turned into political action, as more and more Mainers called for an independent state. Within five years, they would see their dream realized as Maine entered the Union as part of the Missouri Compromise of 1820. The militia and their officers, much maligned, much blamed, had still maintained the borders and sovereignty of the district on their own, and helped bring Maine to statehood.

³² (Whiting, 1814)

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