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Turning on the Redcoats

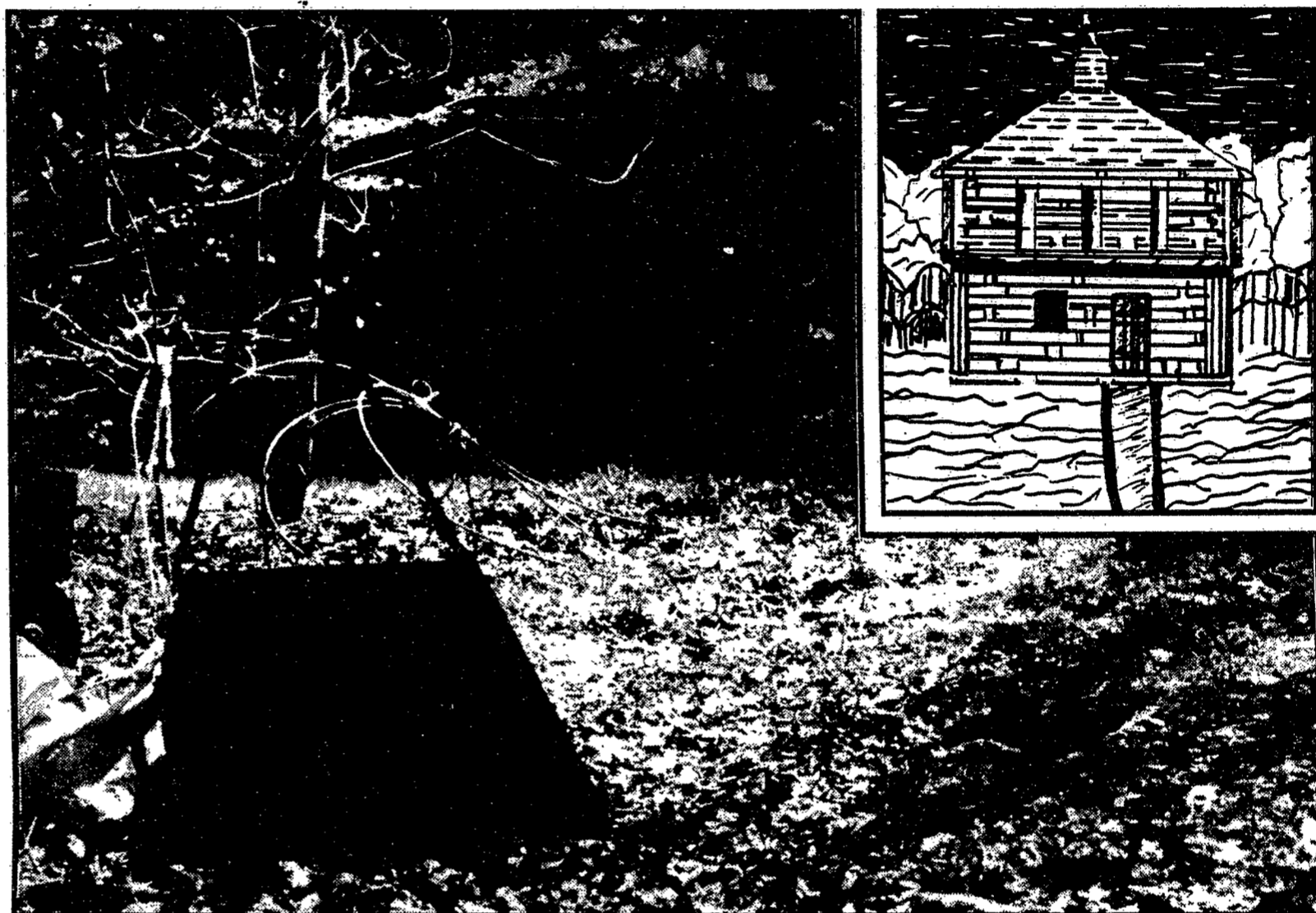
Northport's Own Revolutionary Spy

To look at it today, tucked behind a weathered garage in the wooded hills of the North Shore, it is hardly recognizable as a place of any historic significance at all. No markers note the site. There are no hot dog stands or souvenir hawkers waiting for tourists to come by. A visual inspection of the ground reveals barely a clue that there was ever a structure of any kind there, never mind a Revolutionary War fortress.

Even when you consider the site in the scheme of things during the American Revolution, little Fort Salonga would have to be considered a minor British outpost, located in what was a rear guard backwater amid the great events of the day.

Yet when it came time for General George Washington to bestow the Badge of Military Merit — the first American military medal ever created — on an American soldier for valor in battle, the father of our country did not turn to the heroes of Bunker Hill, Fort Ticonderoga, Trenton, Yorktown, or Valley Forge. Instead, he gave the honor, one of only three ever to be awarded during the entire war effort, to a fire-breathing patriot who helped successfully storm Fort Salonga on an October morning in 1781.

The story of that engagement, and the Rebel spy from Northport who made it possible for raiders from Connecticut to succeed in their attack, is enough to make the casual reader of history pause and rethink the intensity and importance of the American Revolutionary War effort on Long Island.



Nowadays the site of Fort Salonga is virtually indistinguishable from any other small clearing in the woods located on a small hill in somebody's backyard. But in 1781, a fort built there (Inset — artist's rendering) commanded an impressive view over Long Island Sound. Photo by George Wallace

Long Island Occupied

The broad story of the American Revolution is told in terms of actions in New England and in the Middle Atlantic states. But from the point of view of the American patriots of Long Island, it is a story of occupation, subjugation, espionage and guerilla war. The British, to the extent they had any strategy at all, decided early in the conflict to separate the troublesome New England region from the rest of the colonies by occupying the countryside between Canada and Manhattan — essentially through the Hudson Valley and up to Canada along Lake Champlain. After the battle of Long Island, where the British successfully chased Washington and his troops out of the area, the New York City region (and Long Island in particular) became their main locale for quartering and provisioning of troops.

Long Island became, as one chronicler of the times put it, "a torch on fire at both ends." At the mercy of the sometimes ruthless British troops, homes, provisions, livestock, and in fact all the possessions of the residents of Long Island became fair game for the force of occupation. Failure to swear an oath of allegiance to the King resulted in deportation from the island. Forced labor, cruel punishments, and swift execution for espionage or acts of rebellion were the order of the day.

The degree of the Redcoats' ruthlessness may be illustrated by two incidents in this area. In Huntington, for example, where it is widely recorded Col. Benjamin Thompson ordered the Old First Church torn down, and the beams, timbers and planks used to build a barracks on the old burial ground across the street. As for the home of the pastor of the church, Rev. Ebenezer Prime, it was broken into, ransacked, his furnishings vandalized, and the aged minister cast out so that British officers could use it as quarters. Upon his death, his grave and other burial sites were levelled by Thompson, who is said to have delighted in stepping on "the old rebel's head" everytime he went in or out of his tent

in the encampment on the burial ground.

Or take the case of Northport's Henry Scudder, a man who was among the inner circle of patriots in the area who resisted the British. A veteran of the Battle of Long Island, he devoted himself to the cause of espionage during the occupation, serving as an important facet of the rebel spy network. One day when the British came to capture him in his home, he hid in a chimney to escape discovery. An officer by the name of Capt. Coffin, it is related, threatened Mrs. Scudder with a gun to her head, saying, "If I don't find your rebel husband in a week, I'll be in my coffin." Less than a week later, Henry Scudder surprised Capt. Coffin and other British soldiers playing cards at a house in Huntington, and shot him dead.

A String Of Forts

The British set up their string of forts on the North Shore of Long Island for several reasons. For one thing, they wanted to protect the rear flank approaches to Manhattan, the southerly of their two bases of operations in sealing off New England. Promontory positions were scouted out in dozens of locations, including the little point on what was then known as Treadwell's Neck (now Fort Salonga) — from which a view across miles of the Long Island Sound was possible. The fortress was built on a mound, and fortified with a tower and cannon.

One of the main uses Long Island was put to by the British was to supply wood for fuel — and Fort Salonga also served as an outpost for the safety of woodcutters engaged in their foraging expeditions.

It was the job of patriots who remained in the area, and for those who fled to Connecticut, to harry the British and make their life difficult on Long Island. For several years early in the war, that job was

done along the Long Island Sound by an irregular legion of whaleboat raiders, who would cross from Connecticut in stealthy fashion, wreak whatever havoc they could manage on the British garrisons, and vanish back across the Sound before they could be confronted by superior force.

These forays went on for several years of the war at points throughout the Island, until they became enough of an annoyance that they prompted an expedition of British Forces into Connecticut in 1779, to punish the towns harboring those responsible for the guerrilla actions.

The Whaleboats Are Coming!

After that expedition, General George Washington bolstered the espionage network on Long Island, under the command of Col. Benjamin Tallmadge (a Setauket native) of the Second Continental Dragoons, in order to facilitate major assaults on British operations on Long Island.

Tallmadge moved fast. His first raid took place in 1779 with an attack on Fort Franklin on Lloyd Neck, where his raiding party captured 500 Redcoats. A year later, it was the turn of Fort St. George, on the South Shore in Mastic near the home of William Floyd. There, Tallmadge himself went in disguise and familiarized himself with the layout of the stockade. With 80 of his dragoons in eight whaleboats, he crossed the Sound on a rainy night in November of 1780, marched across the Island, and — in order to avoid forewarning the British by accidentally discharging a weapon — made a bayonet charge on the fort with unloaded muskets. Tallmadge's men demolished the fort, burned the British vessels, and marched back across the island with 300 prisoners.

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