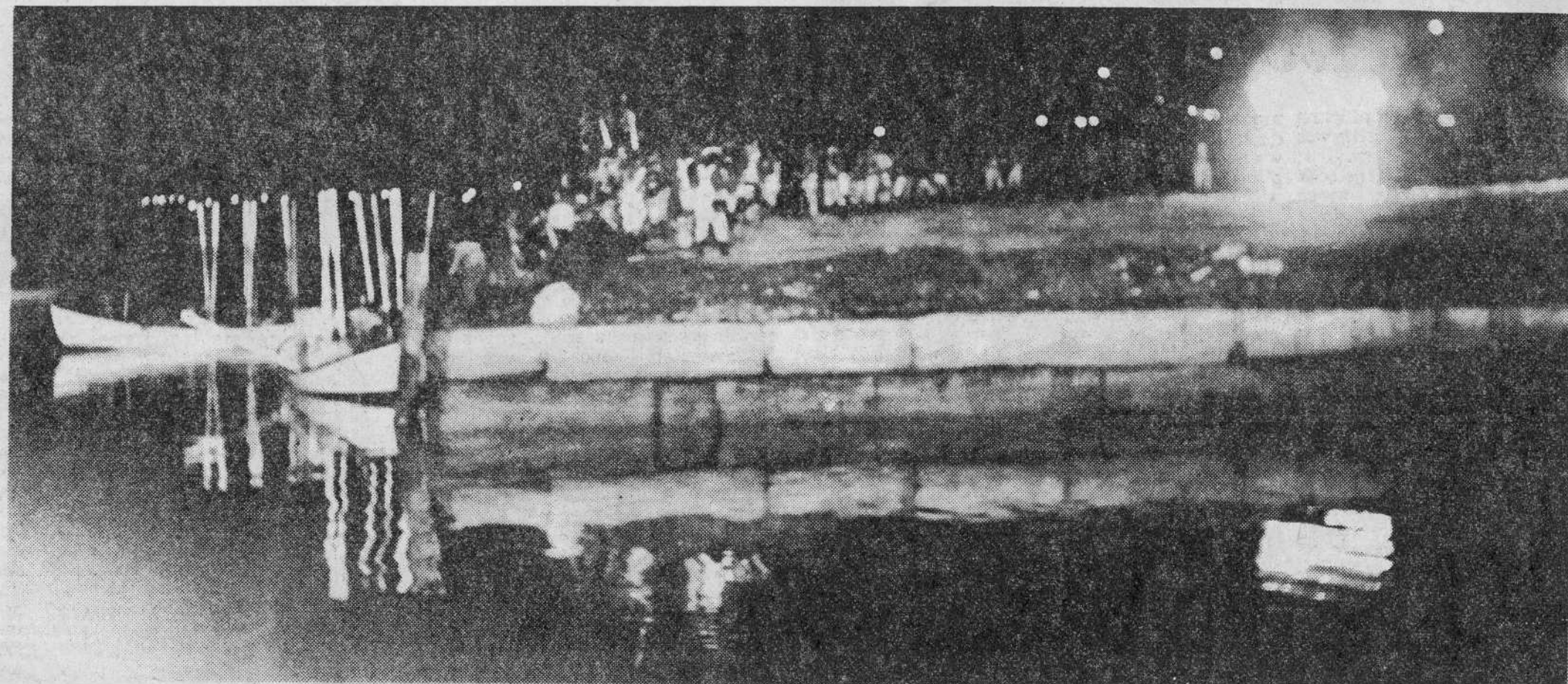




Mockups of buildings burn in Battleship Cove in re-enactment of raid by British troops on a Fall River sawmill.

Brave Villagers Tu

Centuries have mellowed the tale of Fall River's single battle of the American Revolution. But if the history books could echo the heroic encounter, the din would be of exploding cannon and muskets, slow cadence of snare drums, crackling of buildings aflame, and the cries of the wounded and dying.

It was not an epic battle like Monmouth or Saratoga. Still, it was a pitched fight between King George III's crack troops and the embattled Fall River farmer, and the principles involved were the same: subservience or freedom.

What had happened to make the sleepy little village of 200 persons the target for a strategic landing of 100 redcoats that May Sunday in 1778? The answer is complex, yet the reasons simple.

On Dec. 7, 1776, long after some of the principal battles of the war, and months after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the British Royal Navy and some 5,600 men moved from New Jersey via Long Island to Newport for the winter.

Newport's fine harbour, usually free from ice, was the main reason for the ships coming and the army of occupation that always accompanied such a move.

For nearly two years the battle-seasoned British troops languished. There were few encounters. Desertions were reported daily. There were several suicides. Many troops were court martialed or killed trying to escape to Bristol or via Howland's Ferry (Stone Bridge, Tiverton).

The restlessness was added too by the reports of loyalists or spies. Some 11,000 temporarily enlisted militiamen and members of the Continental Army were in Tiverton at a site now known as Fort Barton, awaiting to storm Aquidneck and drive the Redcoats out.

Raids like Col. Barton's to the heart of the heavily

fortified island and the night capture of British commanding Gen. Prescott made matters worse. Frustratingly, supplies were not always in keeping with British needs. By summer of 1778 the forseen need of wood for the winter mandated raids in New Bedford, and ships, too, were destroyed there.

All signs in July of that year were nervewracking. The Americans were ready to storm the island. Landing barges were reportedly being readied in several locations.

The redcoats wondered about the war. Dispatches were few. For them in Portsmouth, Middletown and Newport, the war was seemingly far away in New York. Rhode Island was just a base. They waited for the key battles to take place in other areas so they could go home. Whatever happened in Newport, they presumed, was of little consequence.

Reports of the on-again-off-again plans from Tiverton for the American attack were confusing. Wherever British ships and troops were sent to forage, such as Providence, Bristol, Swansea, or areas of the Taunton River, they met sporadic, but fierce resistance. But the Americans failed to show any solid massed front in this area.

Fall River's turn came on May 31, 1778. For the date we look to the diary of Lt. Frederick Mackenzie of the Royal Welch Fusiliers. He spent from 1775 to 1781 in the New England area on duty, keeping a daily account, amazingly unbiased, intensely accurate, and oftentimes poetic.

As adjutant to Gen. Smith, Mackenzie was privy to all information dealing with the 43rd, 54th and 63rd regiments of Smith's brigade.

He wrote: "31st May. Cloudy day. Cold Wind at S.S.E. Some rain in the evening."

"The general and the commodore having deter-

mined to attempt destroying some saw mills and a quantity of plank for building boats, which they had upon Fall River; the Pigot Galley, a gunboat, some flat boats, and the boats of the Flora, Juno, Venus, Orpheus, and Kingfisher; with 100 men of the 54th Regiment under the Command of Mayor Eyre of that regiment were ordered for this service."

Meanwhile, here in Fall River, a 17-member militia company of local residents had been told of the recent British raid on New Bedford, where ships and landing barges were destroyed. Fall River had its own sawmill near the shore, at the foot of what is now Central Street, and nine longboats, which could be used as landing craft by the Fort Barton invaders, were being constructed.

Col. Joseph Durfee, who headed the minutemen here, was young, only 28, but already a veteran of the Revolution's early conflicts and was in retirement.

He had trained his men as he himself had been trained. The British were expected, so Durfee posted a church deacon, Samuel Reed, as night sentry.

When Durfee came to write his memoirs some 56 years later, he made a mistake about the date. He says the battle occurred "on a sabbath morning on the 25th of May 1778." Historic tablets in this city carry that date.

In actuality, the 25th was not a Sunday in that year. But the 31st was. British naval logs of two ships that took part in the incident, and the commanding officer who sent his report to the commander of British forces in this country . . . as well as Mackenzie, said the battle was on the morning of May 31.

How could Durfee have made that mistake? We find a plausible explanation in Mackenzie's diary. It seems British forces did

come to the Fall River harbour on May 25, captured a ship in the Taunton River, but did not land.

On both occasions, the British came the same route, up Narragansett Bay past Bristol Ferry encountering heavy fire from Bristol artillery batteries.

The diarist wrote of May 25: "The Pigot came to an anchor at the mouth of Taunton River, while the boats proceeded to Fall River, where a rebel galley called the Spitfire lay at anchor. They surprised, boarded, and took here without the smallest opposition, and immediately towed her down to the Pigot." The British then returned to Portsmouth and Newport.

Imagine Durfee's plight. He was facing veteran soldiers of one of the greatest armies in the world. The redcoats all carried the famed 75-caliber Brown Bess musket, a highly accurate piece at 30 yards; and each man in the infantry had to have qualified in loading and shooting 15 rounds in three and three quarters minutes. Their professional massed front poured out horrendous volleys.

Durfee couldn't match that, managing only a slow fusillade. Most of his men had old fowler pieces or at best one of the new 69-caliber Charleville's recently brought from France at a cost of \$5 each. He ordered a planned retreat up the hill. He sent two men to remove the planks used to cross the Quequechan River (now the site of Route 195) thus barring the British from crossing southerly to homes there.

The main bridge was at Bedford and South Main Street and crossed over to the top of what is now Pocasset Street. There Durfee and his band took up positions behind bridge timbers and boulders, and waited.

The redcoats, their 17-inch triangular-shaped bayonets fixed, marched

urned Back British

boldly up Central Street to the agonizingly slow 87 steps a minute, their drums thundering the pace. At this stage in the war the regulars knew no opposition when it came to bayonet warfare. Many of the British soldiers would rather have rushed with bayonets than to have counted on firing.

The ensuing battle was fierce. Main Street exploded with musket fire and the smell of black powder hung in the air.

The volleys echoed over the banks of the Quequechan, wafted over the Taunton River and were heard in Bristol. The brave farmers held.

Durfee later wrote: "So thoroughly were the enemy handled by our little band of Spartans that they soon beat a retreat, leaving behind one dead, another bleeding to death, besides the wounded whom they carried away."

And he added: "We had

not a man either killed or wounded." According to Durfee the battle lasted an hour and a half.

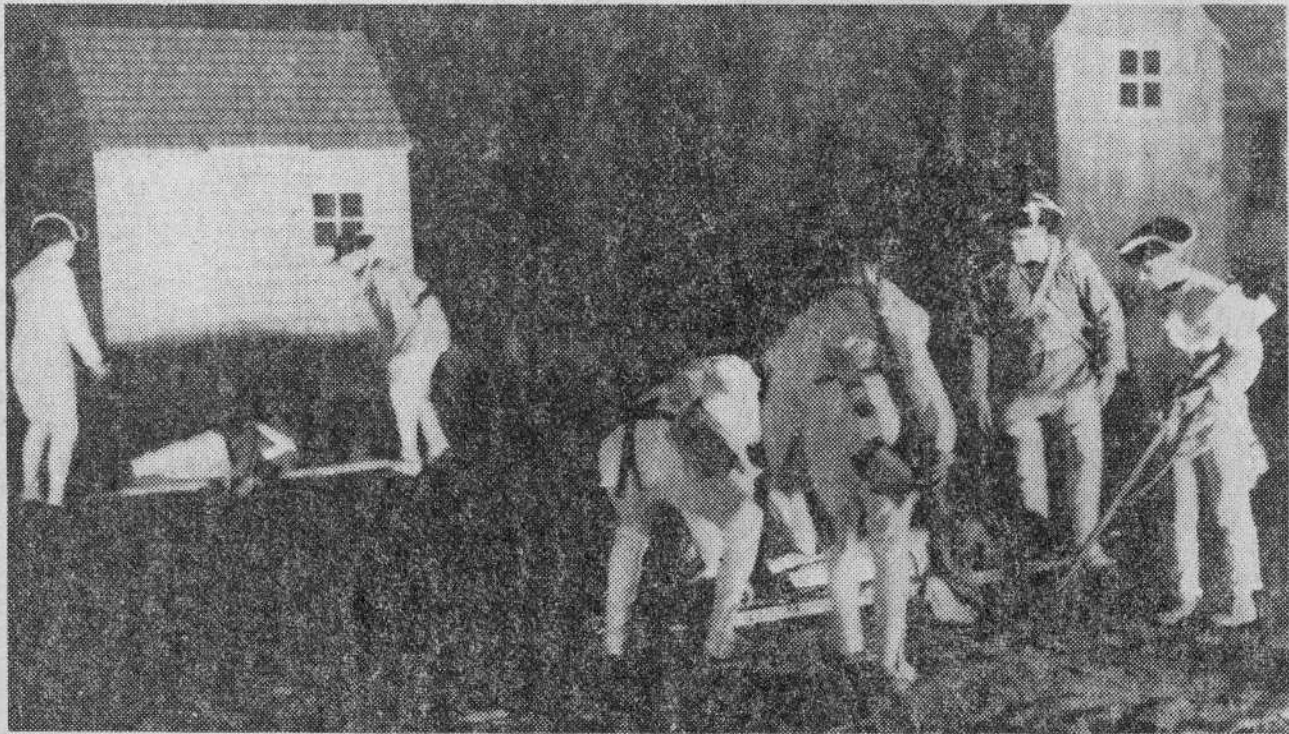
Durfee's men found five British Brown Bess muskets, and five, black, fur felt cocked hats.

The two dead redcoats, listed as Pvt. Charles Burnham of Capt. Stephen Breenfield's company, and Pvt. William Danks of Capt. William Tidswell's company were buried at the cemetery at the top of Pocasset Street

by Durfee and his men.

Pigot wrote of the casualties: "The rebel loss is thought to be more considerable."

It was Fall River's finest hour of the Revolutionary War. The dreaded "lobsterbacks" had been met at a definite disadvantage and had bravely and heroically been driven off. The sawmill and the houses and barns were rebuilt and within a decade the population here had tripled.



So Fierce was the defense by Fall River Minutemen that the British were forced to retreat.