General Wayne loses the Battle of Bull's Ferry, July 21, 1780

On this day in history, July 21, 1780, General Wayne loses the Battle of Bull's Ferry. Bull's Ferry was a ferry on the New Jersey side of the Hudson River in the vicinity of modern day West New York and North Bergen. The ferry was operated by the Bull family who had settled in the area much earlier.

During the American Revolution, the British operated a blockhouse in the area, which was then called Block House Point. This was a strategic location as it was located just across from the British main base in New York City. The area was used to raise cattle and gather firewood for the British army and the blockhouse housed approximately 70 Loyalist troops who guarded the cattle, chopped wood and watched out for patriot infiltrators.

By 1780, the focus of the war had shifted to the south and no more major battles were fought in the north, but smaller skirmishes were frequent, especially around New York City. The British had their main army holed up in New York and George Washington constantly shifted the Continental Army around the area to keep watch on them.

On July 20, Washington ordered General "Mad" Anthony Wayne to attack the blockhouse at Bull's Ferry and capture the cattle if possible. On the morning of the 21st, Wayne sent the dragoons (soldiers on horseback) under Henry "Lighthorse Harry" Lee to capture the cattle, while Wayne led an attack on the blockhouse itself.

Lee easily rounded up large numbers of cattle and drove them back for use of the Continental Army. Wayne, however, didn't fare so well. He started a cannon bombardment of the blockhouse that had little effect. The impatient soldiers under his command rushed on the blockhouse, but were unable to penetrate it, taking heavy casualties. Wayne eventually called the attack off, having suffered 15 dead and 49

wounded out of almost 2,000 soldiers. The British had only 70 men defending the blockhouse, but they held off the attackers, with only 5 killed and 16 wounded.

The Battle of Bull's Ferry became the subject of a satirical poem by British Major John Andre, the soldier who would later be executed for his role in the Benedict Arnold treason affair. Andre was a musician, poet and artist and he wrote a poem making fun of General Wayne for capturing a bunch of cows, but failing to capture the blockhouse, even though he had such superior numbers. The poem was called, "The Cow Chace," and mentioned by name many of the American players at the battle, including General Wayne, Colonel Lee, Brigadier General William Irvine, Wayne's subordinate and Colonel Thomas Proctor, the artillery commander.