

The Battle of Paoli, September 20, 1777

On this day in history, September 20, 1777, the Battle of Paoli seals the fate of Philadelphia, allowing the British to take the city unopposed. British General William Howe had landed 17,000 troops in Maryland on August 25 and begun marching the 60 miles to capture the American capital.

George Washington's Continental Army had put up a fight at the Battle of Brandywine, but was driven back by the superior British forces. Washington retreated beyond the Schuylkill River, but then crossed back over to fight near present day Malvern. This battle was averted, however, when both sides were forced to abort because of a severe storm. The battle became known as the Battle of the Clouds.

Following the storm, Washington withdrew to the west to get dry ammunition and supplies from Reading, Pennsylvania, while General Howe's army remained stationary due to the wet and rutted roads. Washington sent Brigadier General Anthony Wayne with 1,500 men to pursue and harass Howe's rear. Major General William Smallwood was sent to assist him with 1,000 Pennsylvania militia.

On the evening of the 19th, Wayne camped near the Paoli Tavern, which is near modern day Malvern, while Smallwood camped two miles to the west near White Horse Tavern. Wayne believed his presence was unknown to General Howe, but Howe had learned of Wayne's mission from spies and local Loyalists.

On the evening of September 20, Major General Charles Grey left the British camp with 1,800 soldiers. As they approached Wayne's camp late that night, Wayne's sentries fired on the British and alerted the camp. Three waves of British soldiers carrying bayonets rushed through the camp. The Americans, surprised and with few bayonets, were quickly overcome. They began to scatter and many ran toward General Smallwood's camp hoping for reinforcement. As the British

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pursued and ran into Smallwood's force coming to the rescue, Smallwood's men were routed as well.

The Battle of Paoli, which has also been called the Paoli Massacre, was a stunning defeat to the Continental Army and the Pennsylvania militia. 53 Americans were killed, 113 were wounded and 71 were captured. The British suffered less than a dozen casualties. The outsized British victory was soon called a "massacre" by American patriots because of the high rate of American casualties. Rumors even spread that the British had bayoneted wounded survivors and surrendering men, but there is no evidence that has proved this accusation.

General Wayne was accused of poor decision making leading to the rout, which angered him and led him to demand a full court-martial. The court-martial later found him innocent of any wrong doing or guilt in the loss.

After the battle, General Howe's rear was clear of any American interference and he continued the march to Philadelphia. Washington and Howe maneuvered on opposite sides of the Schuylkill for a few days, but Howe was able to find an unprotected ford on the river and marched unopposed into the city on the 26th. Philadelphia would be occupied for the next 9 months.