

Major Henry Lee wins the Battle of Paulus Hook, August 19, 1779

On this day in history, August 19, 1779, Major Henry Lee wins the Battle of Paulus Hook, New Jersey, during the American Revolution. Paulus Hook was a strategically located piece of land across the Hudson River from the tip of Manhattan Island. George Washington had realized the strategic importance of the ground and ordered a fort built there before the arrival of the British, but it was abandoned when the massive British force of over 40,000 soldiers took over the area in September of 1776.

In July, Brigadier General Anthony Wayne had captured Stony Point, a strategic prominence on the Hudson River below West Point, in a daring nighttime raid, capturing hundreds of British soldiers in the process. Major Henry "Lighthorse Harry" Lee, who had been involved in the reconnaissance at Stony Point, was inspired by the victory to propose a similar excursion to capture Paulus Hook.

George Washington turned down Lee's proposal at first, but when Lee added boats for a quick escape, Washington changed his mind and authorized the mission. Lee gathered about 350 troops together at New Bridge, New Jersey on the evening of August 18th to march to Paulus Hook. The plan was to attack around midnight. Unbeknownst to Lee, Colonel Abraham Van Buskirk left Paulus Hook that same day with 130 Loyalists to track down patriot rebels in the area. Only around 250 soldiers were left to guard the fort.

During the trek, Lee's guide led them rough terrain and his forces were separated. He lost track of about 200 Virginia soldiers and was forced to replan his attack. Paulus Hook was surrounded on two sides by water and by marshland on the rest. A single causeway crossed the marsh, which flooded with high tide. Once they arrived at the marsh, and already delayed by the guide's route, it was nearly 3 am and the tide was rising. The soldiers were forced to wade in marshland in water

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up to their chests in some places, ruining their ammunition. When the time for the attack came, Lee ordered everyone to draw their bayonets instead.

When the attack began, the patriots quickly overtook the outer defenses of the fort, forcing some of the soldiers to retreat into a redoubt. Sleeping quarters were quickly surrounded and many were taken captive. Within half an hour, 159 prisoners were taken and 50 more British soldiers were killed or wounded, while only 5 patriots were killed or injured.

Unable to take a redoubt where several Hessian soldiers were barricaded and unable to break into its powder magazine, Lee ordered a retreat before reinforcements from New York City arrived. When they arrived at the designated location where the boats were supposed to pick them up, they found no one. The officer in charge had sent the boats back, thinking the mission had been called off due to the late hour. Instead, Lee was forced to march his men back to New Bridge, with British soldiers in pursuit. Eventually, he was reinforced by some of the Virginia soldiers he lost track of earlier and by another large force sent by General Stirling.

For his bravery at the Battle of Paulus Hook, Major Lee was commended by Congress and awarded a gold medal, the only such award given by Congress during the war to anyone with a rank lower than general. Later, Paulus Hook would be the last outpost in New Jersey to be abandoned by the British at the end of the war.