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Alexandria Community Media

America250: Alexandria's role in the war, part one

This year marks the Declaration of Independence's semiquincentennial. In celebration, Historic Alexandria has participated in the America250 celebrations, including the signature Sails on the Potomac event and the Alexandria Forum.

This Veterans Day, we remember Alexandria's role in the American Revolution and the Alexandrians who experienced combat during the eight years between Lexington in 1775 and the Treaty of Paris in 1783. Next month, we will discuss the ideology of Alexandria's support of the revolution.

The origin of Alexandria's role in the American Revolution stemmed from British General Edward Braddock's 1755 departure to Fort Duquesne from the Carlyle House. Braddock's prolonged stay in Alexandria endeared him to prominent Alexandria residents for many years after his death.

The combat experience many Alexandrians gained in what they called the French and Indian War made them excellent candidates for officer commissions when hostilities broke out almost 20 years later between the British and the American colonists.

As early as the spring of 1775, British Loyalist Nicholas Cresswell recorded a militia led by George Washington drilling in Alexandria. Cresswell estimated that 150 men regularly participated in the militia drills. The town and nearby areas experienced few actual skirmishes, but the fear of attack, especially by Native Americans, led to a heightened state of alert in Alexandria throughout the war.

The British sent two expeditions into the Potomac River in 1776 and in 1781. The British governor of Virginia, Lord Dunmore, led the 1776 incursion, but did not get within 25 miles of Alexandria. The 1781 skirmish involved a Loyalist privateer arriving in Alexandria harbor, only for several armed colonial vessels to chase the ship away.

Free black men could serve in the Continental Army, and at least one Alexandrian did. Joe Pipsico fought in multiple battles in the southern Colonies. Pipsico's 1842 obituary in the Alexandria Gazette recorded his death at age 93, noting that he was a Revolutionary War soldier, and "a longtime citizen of this place, where he lived and died respected."



PHOTO/HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA

Historic Alexandria has participated in America250 celebrations including the signature Sails on the Potomac event.

Continental Army doctors chose Alexandria as a smallpox inoculation center in 1777. City residents also received the treatment. George Mason estimated that 600 Continental soldiers were inoculated within city limits. The experimental medical techniques were blamed for the death of 20 soldiers. That was a higher mortality rate than at other inoculation centers, and the supervising doctor, Dr. William Rickman, was later investigated but absolved of his role in those deaths.

In 1781, French General Rochambeau's army camped in Alexandria after the Battle of Yorktown, during their march from Williamsburg to New York. Contemporary accounts noted that the brief stay in Alexandria was festive, rather than on wartime alert.

In many ways, the encampment served as a broader theme of Alexandria during the Revolution. Our city both contributed to and was affected by the war, without experiencing direct combat within its limits.

In part two, the final installment of our America250 series, we will discuss Alexandria's role as a home front during the American Revolution.

Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.