

EXPLORING THE CITY

BY JIM MURPHY

Historic Fort Mifflin

On a muddy little island near the airport sits “The Fort that saved America”

Thanks to the popular Disney TV mini-series “Davy Crockett,” there’s probably not a child in the U.S. who hasn’t heard about the Battle of the Alamo. That 1836 siege lasted 13 days. Some 182 to 257 Texans were killed, along with 400 to 600 Mexicans, and the battle became a rallying cry for Texas independence.

Contrast that with the 6-day siege of Fort Mifflin, a wood and stone structure located nine miles from center city Philadelphia, on a muddy island in the Delaware River. What happened here may well have changed American history. But few people are aware of it.

An extraordinary assault

In 1777 (from November 10th to the 15th), 2,000 British troops — with a fleet of ships and 228 cannon — bombarded the 22-acre fort with more than 10,000 cannon balls, eventually destroying the structure.

Inside the fort, a cold, wet and hungry garrison of 400 men held off the British — with just 10

cannon — and suffered 240 casualties in the effort. So short were the Americans on ammunition that anyone retrieving a cannonball that could be fired back was promised a gill of rum — about four ounces.

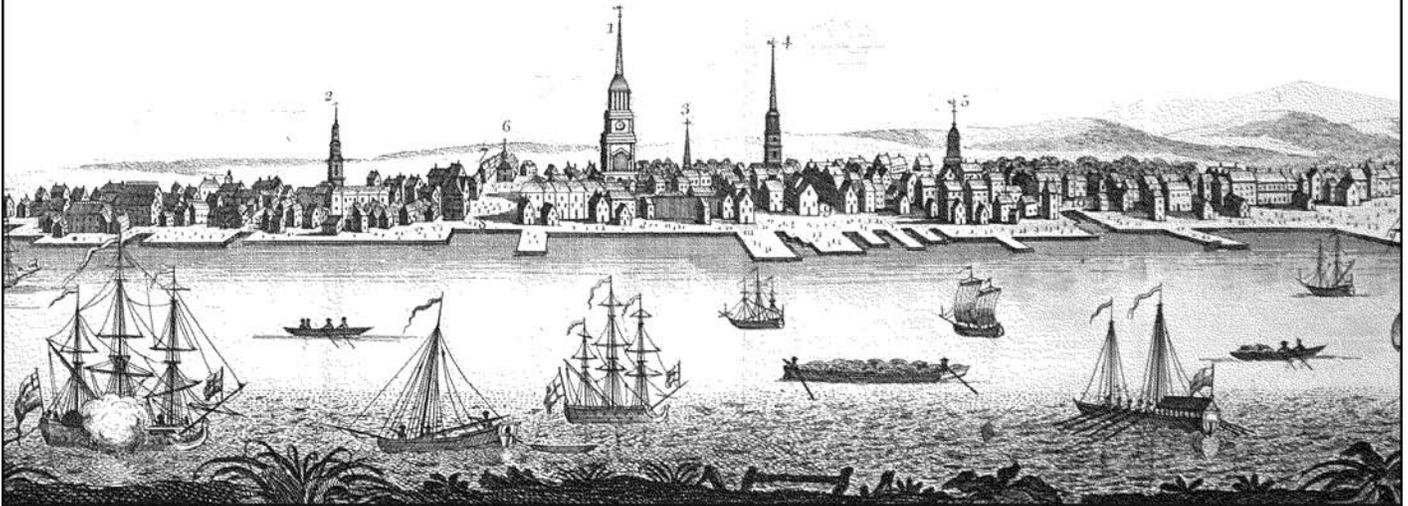
“Conditions were simply unimaginable,” says Elizabeth (Beth) Beatty, executive director at Fort Mifflin. Supplies were gone, it was unseasonably cold, and the parade grounds were iced over. Even the mud froze overnight.

The weather hurt the Continental soldiers in another critical way. With unusually heavy rains flooding the back channel, two British ships were able to sail up the channel and bombard the fort’s only unfinished walls at point-blank range. British Marines even climbed up to the crow’s nest of the HMS Vigilant and threw hand grenades at soldiers inside the fort.

With the fort walls collapsing around them from the incredible shelling, most of the Americans evacuated after nightfall on November 15th,

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This 1777 map of the Delaware River (that's Philadelphia in the upper right) shows the plan of attack on Fort Mifflin, with an inset map detailing the lines of fire from cannon both on land and on ships.

rowing with muffled oars across the river to near Fort Mercer (now part of Redbank Battlefield Park, Gloucester, New Jersey).

The 40 men remaining at Fort Mifflin set fire to what was left of the structure, and then joined their comrades. But they left the fort's flag flying, and they never surrendered.

What they accomplished: The troops at Fort Mifflin bottled up 250 British ships in the Delaware River for about six weeks, destroying several — and preventing food, clothing, gunpowder and munitions from reaching the British army in Philadelphia.

By holding “to the last extremity,” as General George Washington had ordered, the men at Fort Mifflin gave Washington time to move his exhausted troops to Valley Forge for the winter — and very possibly saved the country.

After the war, Fort Mifflin was rebuilt. It served as a prison during the Civil War, and a naval munitions depot during World War I and II. Beth Beatty, who became executive director in 2010, views the fort as a veteran who has served and sacrificed for the country over an extended period of time.

Visiting Fort Mifflin, with its 15 buildings, is a truly unique experience. I know of no military facility like it in the Philadelphia area.

This historic fort has something for everyone: Living history, military reenactments and even a strong reputation for paranormal activity.

It's time-travel made simple — to a place of remarkable valor and supreme sacrifice.

Leatherneck, the magazine of the Marines, perfectly summed up Fort Mifflin's performance in a story published in 1956. It concluded: “at the finish, the little river fort hadn't been defeated. It had simply been obliterated.”

For donations to Fort Mifflin, or to volunteer, go to: www.FortMifflin.us, or call 215-685-4167.



Jay Tittermary, a long-time staff guide and educator at Fort Mifflin, fires a cannon during a reenactment.

Photo courtesy of Fort Mifflin on the Delaware.

FAST FACTS

Annual visitors: 15,000 from all over the world

Named for: General Thomas Mifflin, who helped finish the fort after concerns about war with Britain grew in 1775

Number of British cannon against the fort: 228

Defending American cannon: 10

Cannonballs that hit the fort: over 10,000

Unusual activity: Fort Mifflin is known as one of the most haunted sites in America

Oddity: Captain John Montrésor of the Royal Engineers designed Fort Mifflin, then was sent here by the British to destroy it.

Location: Fort Mifflin and Hog Island Roads, Philadelphia, PA 19153

Phone: 215-685-4167

Open: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Wednesday – Sunday, March 1 – December 15; call at other times

Admission: Adults, \$6; Seniors, \$5; Children 6-12 and Veterans, \$3; Children 5 years and under, Free

Web site: www.fortmifflin.us