

The History of...

THE BURNING OF THE HAY AT CORAM

&

CAPTURE OF FORT ST. GEORGE IN MASTIC

From the
Memoir of Col. Benjamin Tallmadge
November 21-23, 1780

(The following excerpts were prepared by Col. Benjamin Tallmadge)

As soon as I had settled again in the course of our duties, my former scheme of annoying the enemy on Long Island came fresh upon my mind. I therefore directed my agents there to obtain for me the most accurate returns of the fortifications in Suffolk county, Long Island, at a point which projects into South Bay, on Smith's Manor, being their most easterly point of defense. This I found to be a triangular inclosure of several acres of ground, at two angles of which was a strong barricade house, and at the third, a fort, with a deep ditch and wall encircled by an abates of sharpened pickets, projecting at an angle of 45 degrees. The fort and houses were entirely connected by a strong stockade, quite high, and every post sharpened, and fastened to each other by a transverse rail strongly bolted to each. The works were nearly finished, when I proposed to the Commander-in-Chief to let me go over and demolish the same. He heard me with pleasure, but on the whole concluded that the danger attending the whole expedition was too great to warrant the undertaking. My hoped being disappointed for that time, I did not abandon the project, but continued my inquiries on Long Island. Towards the last of October, or the beginning of November, 1780, I determined to cross the Sound myself, and go over to Long Island for the purpose of obtaining intelligence. This I accomplished and returned in safety. Among other things, I learned that the fortress at Smith's Manor was completed – that it was the depository of stores, dry goods, groceries, and arms, from whence Suffolk county could be supplied; and the works presented, on the whole, a most formidable appearance.



Having now procured an accurate draft of Fort St. George, as delineated on a small scale on the foregoing page, and also information that a large quantity of hay and

forage had been collected by the enemy at Corum, from the East end of Long Island, I began urgently to importune Gen. Washington to permit me to capture the fort and destroy the magazine of forage.

On the 11th of November he answered my letter, and authorized the enterprise. All necessary preparations being made, on the 21st of November, 1780, at about 4 o'clock P.M., I embarked my detachment, composed of two companies of dismounted dragoons, and in all short of 100 selected men, at Fairfield, and the same evening, at 9 o'clock, we landed at a place on Long Island, called the Old Man's. I was obliged to go thus far East, to avoid a large body of the enemy which lay at Huntington and its vicinity, in our direct course from Stamford. Soon after we landed, say by 10 o'clock, I put the troops in motion to cross Long Island. We had not gone far, say four or five miles, before the wind began to blow from the southeast, and the rain soon followed. I faced the troops about, returned to our boats, which were drawn up and placed in the bushes for concealment. There we remained through the night, and the next day, at evening, the rain abated, and I ordered the troops to march for our destined place on the South side of Long Island. At 4 o'clock next morning, I found we were within two miles of Fort St. George. We halted for a short time to take a little refreshment. Having made my arrangements for the plan of attack, I placed two small detachments under the command of subaltern officers of high spirit, at different positions from the fort, with orders to keep concealed until the enemy should fire on my column. Just as the day began to dawn I put my detachment in motion. The pioneers, who preceded my column, had reached within 40 yards of the stockade before they were discovered by the enemy. At this moment, the sentinel in advance of the stockade, halted his march, looked attentively at our column, and demanded "Who comes there?" and fired. Before the smoke from his gun had cleared his vision, my sergeant, who marched by my side, reached him with his bayonet, and prostrated him. This was the signal for the other detachments to move forward, when all seemed to vie with each other to enter the fort. So resolute were the troops, that a break was soon made in the stockade, where the rear platoon halted to prevent the prisoners from escaping. I led the column directly through the Grand Parade against the main fort, which we carried with the bayonet, in less than ten minutes, not a musket being loaded. At the same instant that I entered on one side of the fort, the officers commanding the two smaller detachments mounted the ramparts on the other side, and the watch-word, "Washington and

glory," was repeated from the three points of the fort at the same time. While we were standing, elated with victory, in the centre of the fort, a volley of musketry was discharged from the windows of one of the large houses, which induced me to order my whole detachment to load and return the fire. I soon found it necessary to lead the column directly to the house, which, being strongly barricaded, required the aid of the pioneers with their axes. As soon as the troops could enter, the confusion and conflict were great. A considerable portion of those who had fired after the fort was taken, and the colors had been struck, were thrown headlong from the windows of the second story to the ground. Having forfeited their lives by the usages of war, all would have been killed had I not ordered the slaughter to cease. The prisoners being secured, it was soon discovered that the shipping which lay near to that fort, loaded with stores, etc., were getting under way. The guns in the fort were brought to bear on them, and they were soon secured. All things were now secured and quiet, and I had never seen the sun rise more pleasantly. It now became necessary to demolish the enemy's works, as far as possible, which was done. An immense quantity of stores, of various kinds, was destroyed. The shipping and their stores were also burnt up. Some valuable articles of dry goods were made up in bundles, placed on the prisoners' shoulders, who were pinioned two and two together, and thus carried across the island to our boats. The work of capturing and destroying this fortress being effected, at 8 o'clock A.M. I put the troops under march to re-cross the island to our boats. Having given the command of the detachment to Capt. Edgar, with orders to halt at a given point at the middle of the island, I selected ten or twelve men, and mounted them on horses taken at the fort, with which I intended to destroy the King's magazine at Corum. This place was nearly half way to the place where a large detachment of British troops was encamped, East from Huntington. I reached the place in about an hour and a half, made a vigorous charge upon the guard placed to protect the magazine, set it all on fire, and in about one and a half hours more reached the place where I had ordered the detachment to halt, having ridden about 16 miles.

When I arrived at the rendezvous, I was gratified to see the head of the detachment under Capt. Edgar, with the prisoners, just then advancing. As none of us had halted since we parted, we sat down for nearly an hour and refreshed. After this we took up our line of march again, and by 4 o'clock reached our boats. These we soon put into the

water, and before the sun set we were all afloat on the Sound, heading for the port whence we embarked.

By midnight, or about 1 o'clock the next morning, every boat arrived at Fairfield beach, although we had entirely lost sight of each other by reason of the darkness of the night.

This service was executed without the loss of a man from my detachment, and one only was badly wounded, and him we brought off. The enemy's loss was seven killed and wounded, the most of them mortally. We took one lieut.-colonel, the commandant, one lieutenant, one surgeon, and fifty rank and file, with a host of others in the garrison. (See Journals of Congress, December 4th and 6th, 1780, vol. vi.)

No person but a military man knows how to appreciate the honor bestowed, when the Commander-in-Chief and the Congress of the United States return thanks for a military achievement. On this occasion, the most honorable mention was made by both, and conveyed in the most flattering manner.

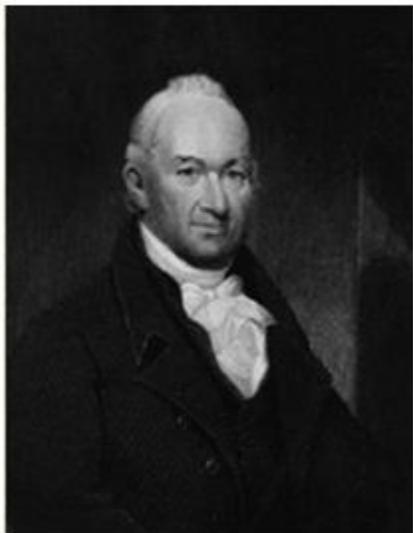
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References:

Who Was Benjamin Tallmadge? Benjamin Tallmadge District; <http://www.btdistrict.org/id124.htm>
The Capture of Fort St. George at Mastic, NY and The Burning of the Forage at Coram, NY
November 23, 1780; Alvin R.L. Smith

FUN FACT: *The actual date of both battles was Nov 23, 1780, which fell on the fourth Thursday of the month...a day we now call Thanksgiving!*

Did you know?



Congressman Benjamin Tallmadge

Major Benjamin Tallmadge was born February 25, 1754 at the Presbyterian parsonage in Setauket, Long Island. Major Tallmadge retired from the army at the rank of Colonel. On March 16, 1784, he married Mary Floyd, daughter of William Floyd, a Signer of the Declaration of Independence. Tallmadge's father officiated at the ceremony. Colonel Benjamin Tallmadge settled in Litchfield, Connecticut and became a wealthy man through several investments. In 1801, he was elected to Congress on the Federalist ticket where he challenged Presidents Jefferson and Madison on many occasions. He retired in 1817 and devoted himself to establishing a training school for Native American and Asian missionaries. He died, at age 81, on March 7, 1835.

To the end, he praised the efforts of those "untrumpeted and unknown" members of his spy ring who helped secure victory against the British. See [Culper Ring](#).

The following account of
The Burning of the Hay at Coram
was written by local Longwood historian
Thomas R. Bayles
in 1975

(as published by the Longwood Public Library)

The Burning of the Hay at Coram
and Capture of Fort St. George at Mastic
by
Thomas R. Bayles
1975

One of the most daring exploits of the Revolution in Brookhaven Town was planned and carried out by Major Benjamin Tallmadge in November 1780. This was the burning of the 300-ton stack of hay at Coram, which had been collected by the British, and the capture of Fort St. George at Smith Point, Mastic, which had been constructed by the British with strongly barricaded houses at two angles, and the third angle was a fort ninety-six feet square. According to a letter from Gen. Washington to Major Tallmadge on Nov. 11, 1780, he states "that the destruction of the forage collected for the use of the British army at Coram, on Long Island, is of so much consequence that I should advise the attempt to be made." Evidently he considered the burning of the hay at Coram to have been more important than the capture of the fort at Mastic.

Major Tallmadge left Fairfield, Conn., at 4 o'clock in the afternoon on Nov. 21, with 80 men in eight open whale boats. They rowed across the Sound and landed at Mt. Sinai harbor, near Cedar Beach, about 9 o'clock that night. A hard rainstorm came on, so they had to take shelter under their boats and stay until the next night, when they marched across the Island to Mastic. They arrived within two miles of the fort by 3 o'clock in the morning and divided the troops into three companies so as to make attacks on the fort from three directions. Major Tallmadge led the main company and they were not discovered by the enemy until they were within 20 yards of the fort. They rushed in with their bayonets and captured the fort without firing a single shot. At the same time, the other two companies mounted the fort and a chorus of "Washington and Glory" went up. Just then the British opened fire from one of the barricaded houses near by where their men were hidden. A sharp gun battle took place for a short time and Tallmadge's men drove the British from the house.

During the battle, 7 of the enemy were killed or wounded, the fort was destroyed, 54 prisoners were taken and also a quantity of merchandise, and a vessel lying nearby in the harbor was burned.

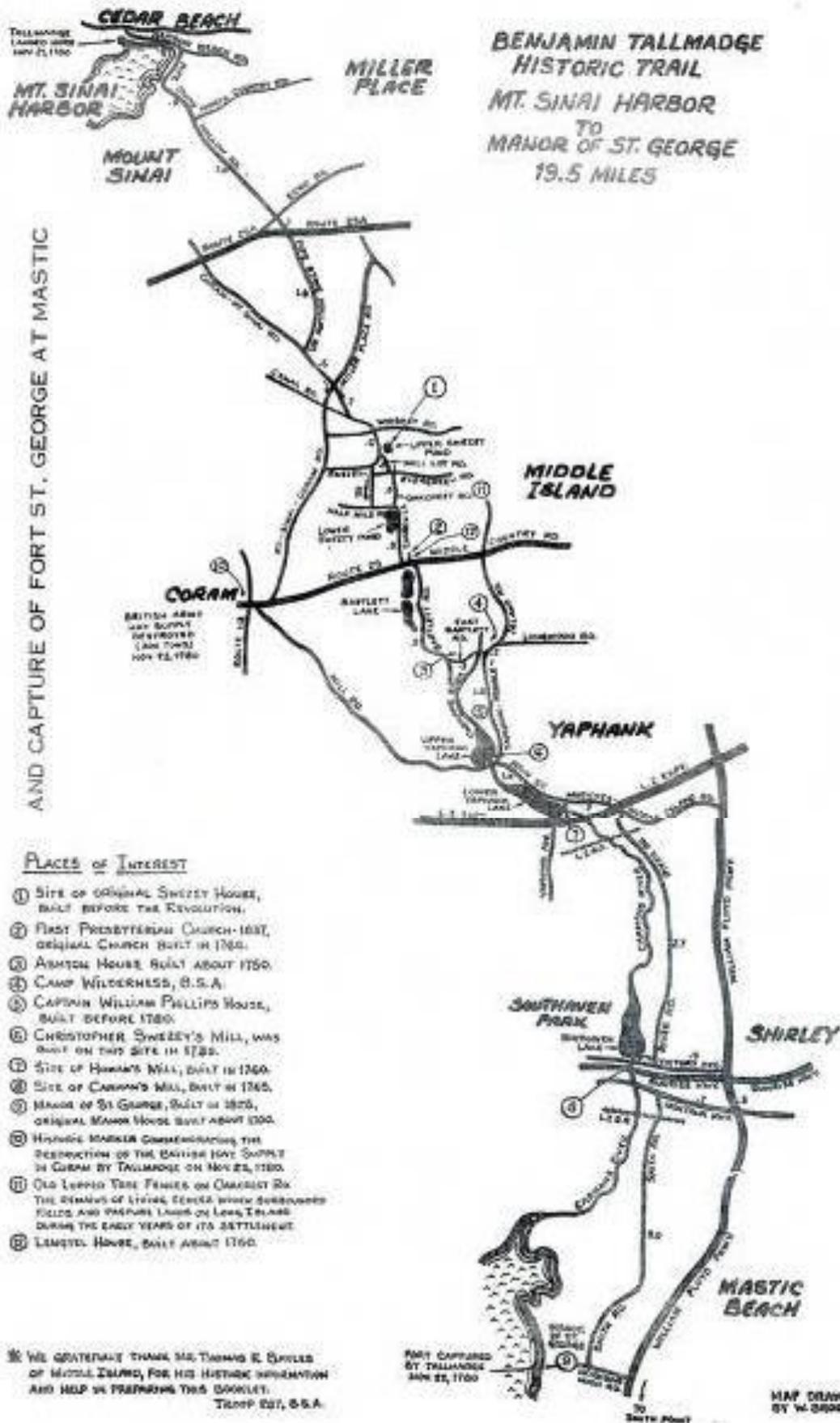
Tallmadge picked 12 men for the Coram raid, among them Brewster and Jackson. They were mounted on horses captured at the fort and rode off ahead of the prisoner caravan. They turned away from the River road at Millville (Yaphank), and riding through the oak forest that covered the middle of the Island, they soon reached Coram, where they quickly put to rout the small forage guard. The 300 tons of hay made a fine blaze, and soon they were on their way to Old Man's (Mt. Sinai harbor) where they joined up with the main detachment and prisoners. As the November darkness approached they were soon afloat in their boats, passing through an opening at the east end of Old Man's harbor, which has long since filled in, and began their long row across the Sound in the darkness to Fairfield, arriving there about 11 P.M. In a little over thirty hours the expedition had covered about forty miles on land and twenty on water.

An engagement had been fought, a magazine destroyed, and only one of their men seriously wounded. Washington sent him a letter of commendation for this brave and successful expedition, which reads as follows:

"I have received with much pleasure the report of your successful enterprise upon Fort George, and the vessels with stores, in the bay, and was particularly well pleased with the destruction of the hay at Coram, which must be severely felt by the enemy at this time. I beg you to accept my thanks for your planning and spirited execution of this business, and that you will offer them to the officers and men who shared the honors of the enterprise with you."

*Yours, &c
G. Washington*

Much credit is due the Boy Scout troop 287 of Ridge, who with their leaders developed the Tallmadge trail from Mt. Sinai to Mastic, which has been well marked at all intersections with plain signs, "Tallmadge Historic Trail," so that anyone may follow the trail across the Island without any difficulty.



The Smith Homestead at the Manor of St. George

One of the most beautiful of the historic spots in Brookhaven town is the old Smith homestead at the Manor of St. George, Mastic, which overlooks the Great South Bay and the mouth of the Carman's river. Just to the west of the house is the site of the old British Fort St. George, which was captured by the American troops under the command of Major Benjamin Tallmadge in November 1780.

Col. William Smith, the original patentee of the Manor of St. George, came to America in 1686 and purchased Strong's Neck in Setauket where he built his family mansion.

In 1691 he purchased from the Indians an enormous tract of land that extended from the Carman's river east to Forge river, and north to the middle of the Island.

Col. William and Madam Martha Smith had 13 children, and one of his sons Major William Henry Smith inherited the southern part of his father's estate and established his home at the Manor of St. George, Mastic. William Smith, son of the Major, was a member of the Provincial Congress in 1776.

The last of the Smith family to occupy the Manor homestead was Miss Eugenia T. Smith, who left the property as a museum to the people of Brookhaven town. It is open to the public without charge from May to November, and a visit to this old Manor house, with its priceless furnishings of generations past, is like turning back the hands of time to the days of long ago.



The old Smith homestead at the Manor of St. George at Longwood, now owned by Brookhaven Town. This house is located at the north end of the Manor.

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CCA EDITOR'S NOTES

The **Burning of the Hay at Coram** was written by Thomas R. Bayles in 1975. It is available for online access at the Longwood Public Library website under Research & Learning-Local History-Bayles Local History Room-Online Collections-[Burning of the Hay](#).

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