

= Battle of Millstone =

The Battle of Millstone , also known as the Battle of Van Nest 's Mill , was a skirmish that occurred near the mill of Abraham Van Nest in Weston , New Jersey (near present @-@ day Manville , New Jersey) on January 20 , 1777 , during the American Revolutionary War . A British foraging party was flanked and driven off by forces composed mostly of New Jersey militia , depriving the British of their wagons and supplies .

This action was one of a series of skirmishes known as the Forage War that persisted in northern New Jersey through the first few months of 1777 , and it demonstrated that militia companies were capable of putting up a significant fight .

= = Background = =

After George Washington 's successful movements around the army of Charles Cornwallis that culminated in the Battle of Princeton on January 3 , 1777 , Washington faced the dilemma of being caught between Cornwallis in Trenton , New Jersey and the rest of the British Army at New Brunswick , New Jersey . Rather than make an attempt on the British outpost at New Brunswick with his exhausted troops , Washington moved his army up the Millstone River valley toward Morristown , New Jersey , a place he knew could be strongly fortified and used as winter quarters . Cornwallis and the remaining British and Hessian troops in and around Trenton and Princeton withdrew to New Brunswick to regroup after the battle at Princeton .

On January 13 , a significant portion of the British army advanced from New Brunswick west to Somerset Court House (present @-@ day Millstone , New Jersey) , and remained there for about a week before retreating back to New Brunswick , destroying houses and plundering supplies . During this time , militia companies mustered to assist the Continental Army . These movements established the area west of New Brunswick up to the Millstone and Raritan rivers as a no man 's land between the two forces . Following the British retreat , Somerset Court House became one of several outposts garrisoned by Patriot militia companies , with support from the Continental Army .

= = Battle = =

A British foraging party of 500 men , led by Lieutenant Colonel Robert Abercromby of the 37th Foot , left New Brunswick on January 20 , and headed west toward the Millstone River . They crossed over the river (it is unclear exactly which bridge they used) , leaving a rear guard of Hessians with some field artillery to cover the bridge , and eventually reached Van Nest 's mill at Weston , New Jersey (near present @-@ day Manville , New Jersey) , a few miles north of Somerset Court House , and near the point where the Millstone empties into the Raritan . There they seized supplies of all varieties , and prepared to return to New Brunswick .

Militia companies to the north were alerted to the British movement early in the day , and some marched for Bound Brook , New Jersey . When reports arrived of the activity at Van Nest 's mill , they marched for that place . In all about 400 New Jersey militia and 50 Pennsylvania militia formed under Brigadier General Philemon Dickinson to dispute the British action . While detailed accounts of their movements are sketchy , Dickinson apparently divided his forces , sending one force to meet the front of the British wagon train , while a second moved to flank them . Both of these forces forded one of the rivers , wading in icy water that was waist deep . One successfully surprised the British wagon train in the lane near the mill , before it reached the main road and the bridge toward New Brunswick ; their fire struck horses from the first wagon . This stopped the train , scattered the wagon drivers and drove the British to retreat precipitously toward the bridge , leaving their booty behind .

When the militiamen reached the bridge , the Hessian rear guard fired grape shot from its artillery to cover the retreat . After an exchange of fire across the river without apparent consequence , the British withdrew .

= = Aftermath = =

Dickinson wrote in a letter to Colonel John Nielson on January 23 , " I have the pleasure to inform you that on Monday last with about 450 men chiefly our militia I attacked a foraging party near V. Nest Mills consisting of 500 men with 2 field pieces , which we routed after an engagement of 20 minutes and brought off 107 horses , 49 wagons , 115 cattle , 70 sheep , 40 barrels of flour - 106 bags and many other things , 49 prisoners . " General Washington , who was not always happy with the performance of the militias , wrote , " Genl Dickinsons behaviour reflects the highest honour upon him , for tho ' his Troops were all raw , he lead them thro ' the River , middle deep , and gave the Enemy so severe a charge , that , altho ' supported by three field pieces , they gave way and left their Convoy " , and only reported the taking of nine prisoners .

Archibald Robertson , a British officer who was not part of the expedition , reported that " Lieutenant Colonel Abercromby with 500 men went on a foraging party towards Hillsborough . Part of this Corps was attacked by the Rebels , which occasion 'd such disorder Amongst the Waggon Drivers that 42 Waggons were left behind . " One British witness was " absolutely certain the attackers were not militia , they were sure that no militia would fight in that way . "

Casualty figures were extremely variable , but British casualties (killed , wounded , or captured) appear to have been in the low 30s according to press accounts (contrary to Dickinson 's claim of 49 prisoners taken) , while militia casualties were relatively small in number .

Skirmishing continued between American and British forces throughout the winter in a period that historian David Hackett Fischer dubbed the Forage War , since it revolved around the British need for forage for its horses . The American tactics , primarily driven by New Jersey militia commanders but supported by Washington and the Continentals , were so successful that even British foraging parties of 2 @, @ 000 men came under attack .