

= Burning of Falmouth =

The Burning of Falmouth (October 18 , 1775) was an attack by a fleet of Royal Navy vessels on the town of Falmouth , Massachusetts (site of the modern city of Portland , Maine , and not to be confused with the modern towns of Falmouth , Massachusetts or Falmouth , Maine) . The fleet was commanded by Captain Henry Mowat . The attack began with a naval bombardment which included incendiary shot , followed by a landing party meant to complete the town 's destruction . The attack was the only major event in what was supposed to be a campaign of retaliation against ports that supported Patriot activities in the early stages of the American Revolutionary War .

Among the colonies , news of the attack led to rejection of British authority and the establishment of independent governments . It also led the Second Continental Congress to contest British Naval dominance by forming a Continental Navy . Both Mowat and his superior , Vice @-@ Admiral Samuel Graves , who had ordered Mowat 's expedition , suffered professionally as a consequence of the act .

= = Background = =

Following the battles of Lexington and Concord on April 19 , 1775 , the British army was besieged in the City of Boston . The British were supported and supplied by the Royal Navy under the command of Vice @-@ Admiral Samuel Graves , who was under Admiralty instruction to suppress the burgeoning rebellion . Under his orders , vessels were searched for military stores and potential military communications . Laid @-@ up vessels were stripped of their masts and rudders to prevent their use by privateers and military equipment was salvaged from readily @-@ accessible recent wrecks .

Captain Henry Mowat had been in the port of Falmouth (present @-@ day Portland , Maine) in May 1775 , during Thompson 's War when local Patriots captured several ships carrying supplies for Boston and weaponry from Fort Pownall at the mouth of the Penobscot River . Graves ' Admiralty orders (issued in July 1775 and received by him on October 4) required that he " carry on such Operations upon the Sea Coasts ... as you shall judge most effective for suppressing ... the Rebellion " . Graves ordered Mowat to " lay waste burn and destroy such Sea Port towns as are accessible to His Majesty 's ships ... and particularly Machias where Margueritta was taken " .

= = Sailing to Falmouth = =

Mowat left Boston harbor on October 6 , 1775 aboard his 16 @-@ gun hydrographic survey sloop HMS Canceaux , in company with the 20 @-@ gun ship Cat , the 12 @-@ gun schooner HMS Halifax , the bomb sloop HMS Spitfire , and the supply ship HMS Symmetry . While his instructions were broad in the number of possible targets , he opted against attacks on harbors on Cape Ann , where the buildings were too widely spaced for naval cannon fire to be effective . On October 16 he reached the outer parts of Falmouth harbor and anchored there .

The people of Falmouth had mixed reactions to the presence of the British fleet . Some recognized the Canceaux and believed there was no danger ; but militia members remembering Thompson 's War were more suspicious . The next day was windless : Mowat kedged the ships into the inner harbor and anchored them near the town . He sent one of his lieutenants ashore with a proclamation stating that he was there to " execute a just punishment " for the town 's state of rebellion . He gave the townspeople two hours to evacuate .

As soon as they received this ultimatum , the townspeople sent a deputation to plead with Mowat for mercy . He promised to withhold fire if the town swore an oath of allegiance to King George . They must also surrender all their small arms and powder , along with their gun carriages . In response , the people of Falmouth began to move out of the town . No oaths were sworn . A small number of muskets were surrendered , but no gun carriages .

= = Attack = =

Mowat had set a deadline of 9 : 00 am on October 18 for the town 's response . By 9 : 40 the town appeared to be deserted , so he ran a red flag up the Canceaux 's masthead , and ordered the fleet to begin firing . Incendiary cannonballs set fire to the harbor installations and most of the town 's houses and public buildings . One witness reported :

The firing began from all the vessels with all possible briskness , discharging on all parts of the town ... a horrible shower of balls from three to nine pounds weight , bombs , carcasses , live shells , grapeshot and musketballs The firing lasted , with little cessation , until six o 'clock .

When the bombardment appeared inadequate to Mowat , he sent a landing party to set fire to any buildings that had survived . The town militia offered little significant resistance , as most were helping their families to safety . In spite of this , some of the landed British marines were killed or wounded . By evening , according to Mowat , " the body of the town was in one flame " .

= = Aftermath = =

Following the bombardment , Mowat went on to Boothbay , where he set fire to a few houses and raided for livestock , but his expedition was faltering to an end . The decks of some of his ships had been inadequately braced for prolonged gunnery , and many of his guns had jumped their mounts . He returned to Boston , and remained there as winter was setting in . When Admiral Graves was relieved in December 1775 , these punitive raids were gradually abandoned . One of the last , undertaken to avenge British military losses to revolutionary Patriots , was the burning of Norfolk , Virginia , on January 1 , 1776 , instigated by Lord Dunmore , the Royal Governor of the Colony of Virginia .

= = = Damage assessment = = =

More than 400 buildings and houses were recorded as damaged or destroyed by fire . In his report to Graves , Mowat stated that eleven small vessels were destroyed in the harbor itself , and four captured , at the cost of one man killed and one wounded . The people were left to fend for themselves for the winter . A visitor to the town reported that , a month later , there was " no lodging , eating or housekeeping in Falmouth " .

On October 26 , the town formed a committee to raise funds for the distressed families . More than 1 @, @ 000 people (out an estimated population of 2 @, @ 500) , including at least 160 families , had been left homeless by the raid . The Massachusetts Provincial Congress authorized £ 250 to be paid to the distressed families , and arranged for the distribution of up to 15 bushels of corn to those left destitute . As late as 1779 , additional grants were made to needy families in Falmouth . Despite numerous earlier entreaties to a wide variety of parties , significant recompense was not made until 1791 , when Congress granted two tracts of land as compensation . These tracts became the towns of New Portland and Freeman . The town of Falmouth accounted losses in the raid at over £ 50 @, @ 000 .

The citizens of Falmouth began rebuilding their town . In 1784 they built over 40 homes and 10 shops . By 1797 over 400 homes had been built , or rebuilt , along with factories , offices , and municipal buildings . Part of the Falmouth Neck was politically separated in 1786 to form the city of Portland .

= = = Political reaction = = =

News of the raid caused uproar in the colonies . Propagandists emphasised its cruelty . The Massachusetts Provincial Congress authorized the issue of letters of marque , licensing privateer actions against the British navy . The Second Continental Congress heard of the event just as word arrived of King George 's Proclamation of Rebellion . Outraged by the news , Congress recommended that some provinces adopt self @-@ rule and that Royal Navy ships in South Carolina be seized . The attack on Falmouth stimulated Congress to advance its plans for

establishment of a Continental Navy . It authorized the commissioning of two ships on October 30 " for the protection and defense of the united Colonies " . The Falmouth incident was again mentioned on November 25 , when Congress passed legislation described by John Adams as " the true origin of the American Navy " .

When news of the event first reached England , it was dismissed as rebel propaganda . When the reports were confirmed , Graves ' superior , Lord George Germain expressed surprise rather than offence , noting that " I am to suppose that Admiral Graves had good reason for the step he took " , in spite of orders (not received by Graves until after Mowat had sailed for Falmouth) to not take such acts unless the town clearly refused to do business with the British . Graves was relieved of his command in December 1775 , in part due to his failure to suppress the rebel naval forces . Germain issued the orders before Falmouth burned .

News of the event also reached France , which was carefully monitoring political developments in North America . The French foreign secretary wrote : " I can hardly believe this absurd as well as barbaric procedure on the part of an enlightened and civilized nation . "

Mowat 's career suffered as a result of his actions . He was repeatedly passed over for promotion , and achieved it only when he downplayed his role in the event , or omitted it entirely from his record .

= = Similar acts of reprisal = =

On August 30 , 1775 , Royal Naval Captain James Wallace , commanding HMS Rose , fired into the town of Stonington , Connecticut , after the townspeople there prevented Rose 's tender from capturing a vessel it had chased into the harbor . Apparently not seeking to burn the town , he did not fire any heated rounds or incendiaries . Wallace also fired on the town of Bristol , Rhode Island , in October 1775 , after its townspeople refused to deliver livestock to him .