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The American Revolution -- The Burning of Fairfield

On April 25, 1777, an army of British troops led by General William Tryon landed at Compo Beach, an area now part of Westport. They marched inland through North Fairfield (now Weston and Easton) and Redding to Danbury. Tryon launched the raid to destroy military supplies stored in Danbury. Although Fairfield was not touched, a second British invasion on July 8, 1779 proved catastrophic.

As the war dragged on, British commanders became increasingly irritated by the rebel resistance in this area. Of particular annoyance were the privateering and spying activities originating from Black Rock Harbor. In response, the British decided to run a series of punitive raids against New Haven, Fairfield, and Norwalk with the sole purpose of destroying rebel property.

On July 7, 1779, the people of Fairfield awoke to a warning from the fort at Black Rock. A British fleet had been spotted and was anchoring off the coast. With feelings of dread and uncertainty, residents prepared to defend the town. Livestock was driven to safety. In haste, people gathered their possessions, hiding their valuable silver in wells and stonewall crevices. Some loaded wagons with household goods and food, and took refuge inland. Others stayed to defend the town. A few remained in their homes, believing the British would not harm them. No one predicted the extent of destruction that was about to occur, and with it, the downfall of the town's prosperity.

The British invasion came in late afternoon when the troops disembarked at McKenzie's Point (near the end of what is now South Pine Creek Road), and marched along the beach, heading northeast. When they came to the lane that is now Beach Road, they marched inland toward the center of the town. As they came within range of cannons at Black Rock Fort, Isaac Jarvis, the fort's commander, ordered his men to fire on the troops. Local militia near the town center opened fire with muskets. Undaunted by the attack, General Tryon and his troops proceeded to set up headquarters in a home on Beach Road. The Fairfield men did not give up. They successfully defended a makeshift fortification at Round Hill, and tore up a strategic bridge crossing Ash Creek.



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British troops under the command of General George Garth landed near Mill River and marched over Sasco Hill toward Fairfield to join Tryon. Tryon's intention to march the combined forces to Black Rock Fort and attack from the rear had been foiled by the destruction of the Ash Creek bridge. In retaliation he began burning homes one by one. The terrifying scene became even more dramatic at night; a lightning storm illuminated the sky, making the flames visible to distant observers. But the greatest damage was inflicted on the following day as the British left Fairfield. A rear guard of German mercenaries had been ordered to cover the withdrawal. In the face of furious inhabitants, they set fire to virtually all the buildings, including the churches and ministers' homes, which Tryon had given protection. Three men were bayoneted and another was shot. Reverend Andrew Eliot, the Congregational Church minister, called the Jaegers "the vilest [soldiers] ever let loose among men."

Fairfield never fully recovered from the destruction. In 1789, ten years after the fire and six years after the war ended, President George Washington stopped at Penfield's Sun Tavern in Fairfield. He observed, "The destructive evidences of British cruelty are yet visible both in Norwalk and Fairfield; as there are the chimneys of many burnt houses standing in them yet." Fairfield's stature as one of the most influential and prosperous towns in the region diminished in the slow process of rebuilding. In the decades following the war, the economic center of coastal Fairfield County shifted to Bridgeport and its superior harbor.