

The 1781 American Raid on Annapolis Royal

By Brian McConnell, UE*

Annapolis Royal in Nova Scotia is the most fought over place in Canada. There have been over 13 conflicts there in its history involving the French, British, Mi'kmaq, Acadian, Mohawk, and Americans. (1) The last one occurred in 1781 when two ships commanded by American privateers raided the settlement.

For most of the years during the American Revolution the 84th Regiment of Foot, also known as the Royal Highland Emigrants, had soldiers stationed at Annapolis Royal. However, during the time they were not there the raid occurred by two ships with American privateers. As early as 1758 Nova Scotia had enacted a law requiring creation of militia units to be raised across the province on a county basis. It provided that "all male persons, planters and inhabitants and their servants between ages of 16 and 60 residing in and belonging to the province shall bear arms and duly attend all musters and military exercises of their respective Companies...". Each person must provide a musket, gun, or fuzil. (2) During September of 1781 there was no British military presence stationed in Annapolis Royal and the militia was not on alert.

The following report appeared in the Boston Globe on September 24, 1781:

"Friday last returned into port privateer schooner *Resolution*, Capt. Morgan, from a cruise, during which he, in company with Cap. Curtiss of the schooner *Reprisal*, went to Annapolis Royal, landed their crews, and destroyed the fort there, which consisted of nine 18 and 9 pounders, and made the whole garrison prisoners. The Governor and Captain of the garrison, with some others, they paroled and brought off the Standard, a Sergeant and 5 or 6 other prisoners. Capt. Potter, late of the *Resolution*, was exchanged for the Governor of Annapolis and arrived last Evening from Halifax." (3)

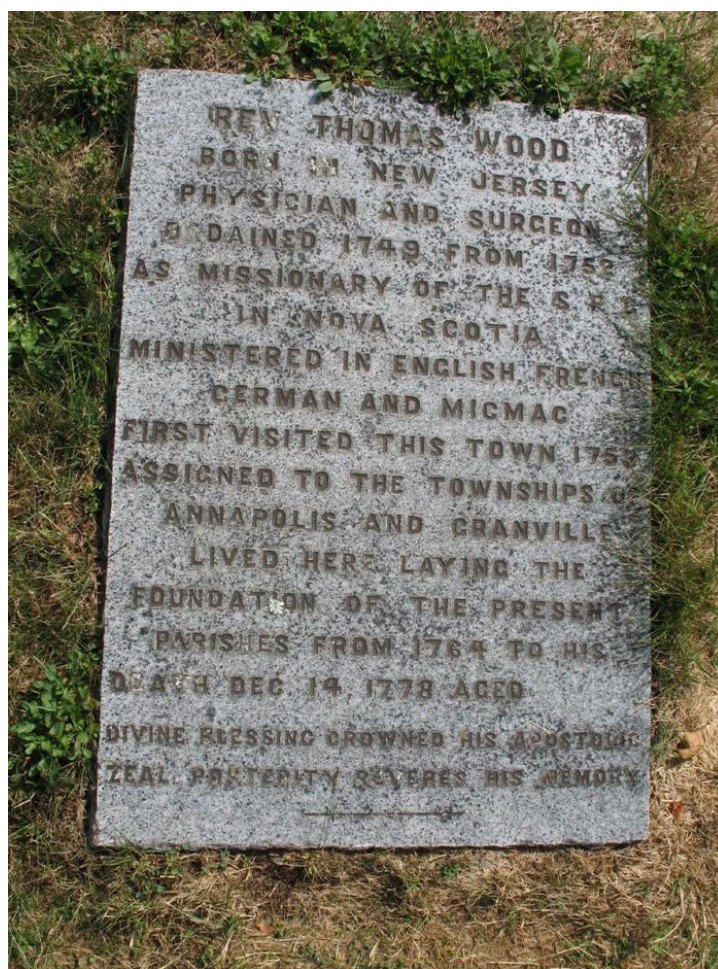
Beginning in 1775 and lasting until 1782, actions regularly occurred between American privateers and British ships as well as privateers from Nova Scotia off the coast of Nova Scotia as well as attacks on settlements. (4) The Second Continental Congress authorized privateers to operate against British shipping in a resolution of March 23, 1776. A few days later it made provision for issuing "letters of marque," the formal licenses issued to privateers. Nova Scotia issued 77 letters of marque during the American Revolution.

A Company of the 2nd Battalion, 84 Regiment was sent to Annapolis Royal in the fall of 1778. In 1776 Fort Cumberland had been put under siege. The old fort at Annapolis Royal named Fort Anne had been empty for several years. Citizens of Annapolis Royal and Granville petitioned the government of Nova Scotia for some defense from attack. It supplied two six – pounder cannons in the summer of 1775 and authorized the formation of a light militia. Colonel William Shaw, a former Lieutenant in the 47th Regiment then residing at Granville mustered men and garrisoned the fort.



84th Regiment Re – enactors at Fort Anne in Annapolis Royal

The Reverend Thomas Wood, father – in – law of Colonel William Shaw, born in New Jersey and minister for the Propagation of the Gospel in Annapolis Royal noted the town was in confusion “expecting every night to have our houses burned about our ears by the rebels.” (5) He died in 1778 and was buried in Garrison Graveyard at Annapolis Royal.



Gravestone of Rev. Thomas Wood in Annapolis Royal

The Company of the 84th Regiment stationed at Annapolis Royal was commanded by Captain John MacDonald. He had settled on Sain John's Island (Prince Edward Island) and been recruited as an Officer. The Regiment were started in 1775 and formed into two battalions, the 2nd became headquartered in Halifax, Nova Scotia. During the summer of 1778 the Headquarters moved to Fort Edward at Windsor. The officers were all born in Scotland and it recruited in parts of America, including New York, Massachusetts, and the Carolinas as well as Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland. In 1779 they became the 84th Regiment as part of the British regular military establishment. (6)

The following notice appeared in the Nova Scotia Gazette and Weekly Chronicle on October 3, 1775:

“CONDITIONS to be given to such soldiers who will engage in the ROYAL HIGHLAND EMIGRANTS.

THEY are to engage during the present troubles in AMERICA only. Each soldier to have Two Hundred Acres of land in any Province in North America, he shall think proper, the King to pay the Patent Fees, Secretary's Fees and Surveyor Fees, besides Twenty Years free of Quit Rent, each married man gets Fifty Acres for his Wife and / sic / Fifty for each Child, on the same Terms. And as a gratuity beside the above great Terms, ONE GUINEA Levy Money.

Allen McLean, Lieut. – Col., Commandant

N.B. All those Gentlemen who are willing to accept of the above Conditions are desired to repair with convenient speed to Halifax, Nova Scotia where they will be kindly entertained, receive Pay, Provisions, Arms, Clothing, and Accoutrements fitting for a Gentleman soldier, by applying to Captain Alexander McDonald, of the above said Regiment.

GOD SAVE THE KING”

Company No. 7 commanded by Captain John MacDonald was one of ten companies forming the 2nd Battalion of the 94th Regiment. Each Company aimed to have fifty men. John Small, the Commanding Officer of the 2nd Battalion, 84th Regiment reported that in June, 1780 the Companies were distributed throughout Nova Scotia (then including New Brunswick) and in Newfoundland.

In Nova Scotia

At Halifax 1 Grenadier Company

At Fort Hughes (Cornwallis Township) 1 Battalion Company

At Annapolis Royal (Bay of Fundy) 2 Battalion Companies

At Fort Howe (Embouchure of the River St. John) 2 Battalion Companies

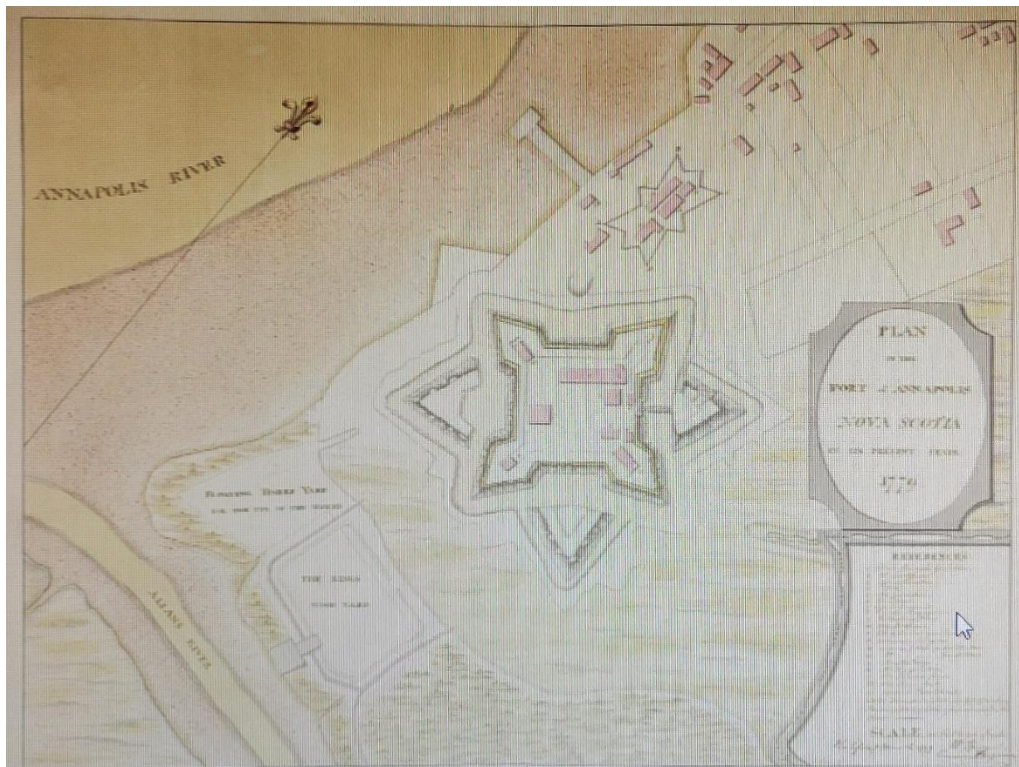
At Fort Edward (Windsor Township) 2 Battalion Companies

In Newfoundland

Placentia Garrison 1 Battalion Company

Total 10

After an inspection of Fort Anne it was decided to place the garrison of the 84th outside on the waterfront near the King's Wharf. A palisade was there built around the building with a gate facing the Wharf. A blockhouse was erected in 1779. From November 1778 to June 1780 the 84th served at Annapolis Royal. In June 1780 the two battalions then there were sent with others to fight in a Southern Campaign taking place in the Carolinas.



1779 Plan showing Palisade constructed outside Fort Anne (7)

During the evening of August 28, 1791 two armed American schooners, the *Resolution* and the *Reprisal* sailed through the Annapolis Basin arriving off of Annapolis Royal. The next morning, after daybreak, privateers from the ships took over the town. Men were imprisoned in the ditch of the old fort and everything of value was taken including window glass from the church. The 84th was not stationed in Annapolis Royal at the time and there was no other garrison.

When the privateers finished looting they left with two of the town's most prominent citizens as prisoners, John Ritchie and Thomas Williams. They also took captive a Sergeant and five or six others. All were later exchanged the following month for American privateers who had been captured by the British in other conflicts. John Ritchie who was born in Scotland immigrated to Boston and then to Annapolis Royal before 1775 where he carried on a successful mercantile business. He had been commissioned a Captain in the local militia. Thomas Williams was born in England and had been a conductor of stores in the military and justice of the peace.



John Ritchie House in Annapolis Royal, built about 1715

Notes:

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(1) Dunn, Brenda, "A History of Port – Royal/Annapolis Royal 1605 – 1800", Nimbus Publishing Limited, 2004.

(2) An Act for Establishing and Regulating a Militia, Nova Scotia, 1758, Chapter 6 - 32 George II, accessed March 16, 2025 at British North American Legislative Database, 1758 – 1867 .

<https://bnald.lib.unb.ca/legislation/act-ready-admission-such-his-majestys-subjects-colonies-continent-who-may-be-induced>

(3) "Massachusetts Historical Society Collections", Boston, Massachusetts Historical Society, 1792 accessed March 16, 2025 at

<https://archive.org/details/massachusettshis77mass/page/258/mode/1up?view=theater&q=Annapolis>

(4) See Appendix A – Actions by American Privateers During American Revolution

(5) Wood was appointed in 1753 by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel and ministered both at Annapolis Royal and Halifax. He became noted for his close relationship with the Mi'kmaq people and devoted from three to four hours daily acquiring their language. "In 1767 he was able to officiate in the Mic-mac tongue, which he did publicly in July of that year in St. Paul's, Halifax, in the presence of the governor, most of army and navy officers and the inhabitants... Soon after Mr. Wood officiated at the marriage of the daughter of "Thoma" the hereditary king of the Mic Macs and entertained the Indians at his own house...By the next year he had made such proficiency in the Indian language that he had made a translation of the Prayer Book into Mic Mac and also a Mic Mac Grammar." (Source: "Nova Scotia's Historic Churches", The Halifax Herald, 8 May 1897, p. 10)

(6) McConnell, Brian "The 84th Regiment of Foot Royal Highland Emigrants Loyalist Re – enactment" accessed on March 14, 2025 at <https://www.uelac.org/PDF/The-84th-Regiment-of-Foot-Royal-Highland-Emigrants-Loyalist-Re-enactment.pdf>

(7) William L. Clements Library, accessed on March 14, 2025 at <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/w/wcl1ic/x-8397/wcl008468>

APPENDIX A

AMERICAN REVOLUTION & PRIVATEERS TO NOVA SCOTIA

April 19, 1775 – American Revolution begins with skirmishes at Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts.

May 14, 1775 – Battle of Fairhaven, Mass. American militia capture two British ships on Buzzards, Bay.

June 11 – 12, 1775 – Battle of Machias. American Privateers Jeremy O’Brien and Benjamin Foster with sloops *Unity* and *Falmouth Packet* captured British warship *HMS Margareta*.

June 14, 1775 – 2nd Continental Congress formed Continental Army and appointed George Washington as Commander – in- chief.

July 12, 1775 – Two more British warships captured in Bay of Fundy by Jeremy O’Brien.

August 27, 1775 – American privateers from Machias raided Saint John area.

October 18, 1775 – British burn Falmouth (present day Portland) in retaliation.

November 17, 1775 – American privateers raid Charlottetown.

September 22, 1776 and November 22, 1776 - American privateer John Pual Jones raids Canso.

October, 1776 – Maugerville Rebellion.

November 10 -19, 1776 – Battle of Fort Cumberland.

December, 1776 – American privateers took four vessels and prisoners at Cape Forchu.

March 1777 – Battle off Yarmouth. USS *Cabot* captured by British HMS *Milford*.

May 2, 1777 – American privateer vessel *Sea Duck* captured and taken to Windsor, NS

June 1777 – Americans launch St. John River expedition.

July 1777 – British capture American privateer off Cape Sable Island

August 13 – 14, 1777 – British raid Machias.

April 1778 – American privateers attack Liverpool, NS

August 9, 1778 – American privateers raid Cornwallis (present day Kentville). British build Fort Hughes.

1778 – British schooner *Hope* defeats American vessel at Canso. Seven patriots escaped but later captured near Halifax.

1778 – British build Blockhouse called Fort Hughes at mouth of Oromocto River.

June 1779 – British troops at Windsor capture American privateers in Bay of Fundy.

1779 – American privateers raid Canso. NS.

1779 – Americans launch Penobscot Expedition. Siege started July 25. Relieved by British force after 3 weeks.

July 10, 1780 – Battle off Halifax. British privateer *Resolution* surrenders to American privateer *Viper*.

August 29, 1781 – Raid on Annapolis Royal.

September 28, 1781 – Continental Army's most decisive win (with French armies) captured entire British Army at Yorktown, Virginia

1782 – Naval battle off Halifax.

1782 – Raid on Lunenburg.

September 3, 1783 – Treaty of Paris. United States granted territory East of Mississippi and South of Great Lakes. 60,000 Loyalists left.

APPENDIX B

MUSTER ROLL

7th Company, 2nd Battalion, 84th Regiment

October 10, 1783, Fort Edward, NS

Captain John MacDonald

Lieutenant John McDonald

Ensign Donald Smith

Sergeants:

Alexander Cummins, Michael Doyle, Michale Dunford, Robert Hall, John McAlpin,

Corporal: Thomas Payne

Drummers: Robert Charlotte, Charles Trapollet

Privates:

James Bell, James Burnes, John Butler, *Donald Chisholm, *John Cochrane, Michael Davies.
William Ellis, William Godfrey, Jenry Gotlshil, *John Grant, Thoms Green, *Christian Hennigar,
*John Johnston, Michael Kilkineer, Alexander Leslie, Albert Ligsleve, William Long, Charles
Masson, Alexander MacDonald, David MacDonald, Thomas MacDonald, *William MacDougald,
Angus Mackay, Donald MacLeod, *John MacPhee, John O'Hara, William Peach, James Peters,
William Physick, John Soaff, Hans Vinson (Vincent).

Total 42

One Christian Hennigar born in Germany.

Others Scottish, Irish, and English.

Nine remained in Nova Scotia *

