

DEFENSE OF THE EAGLE: New Discoveries about this Coast Guard Legend



The Hallockville Museum Farm in the hamlet of Northville, Riverhead, New York, has two cannon balls on display from a battle that took place late in the War of 1812 nearby on the shore of Long Island Sound. The museum's gift shop sells reprints of an article Samuel Terry Hudson (1843-1919), who lived in the museum's Hudson-Sydowski House, wrote about the battle.¹

As Hudson tells the story, the engagement near Hallockville involved a revenue cutter named the "*Nathan Hale*" out of New Haven and manned by a bunch of Yale students. Hudson's tale begins with a company of local farmers fishing at Luce's Landing (now Iron Pier Beach at the end of Pier Avenue, about a mile west of Hallockville) on a foggy early June morning in 1814. When the heavy fog lifted, they spotted an American cutter near shore and a British double decked seventy-four gun frigate further offshore, but unable to move within gun range because of the lack of wind.

According to Hudson, the fishermen attempted to tow the *Nathan Hale* to Mattituck Inlet (about 3.5 miles east of Luce's Landing), but were forced to beach the *Hale* when the wind came up allowing the "great frigate" to sail in closer. Then, the heroic local militia worked with the crew of the ship to haul one of the *Hale's* cannon to the top of the nearby cliff, where they held off the British for three days before finally running out of ammunition. On the fateful third day, after bringing in a second seventy-four gun frigate, the British finally captured the *Hale*, but not without heavy casualties.

While searching the Web for images of cutters from the War of 1812 for a painting of the battle the late marine artist Fred Bender hoped to paint, I made some interesting discoveries. I found several accounts by historians associated with the Coast Guard of a battle involving the revenue cutter *Eagle* that took place on the north shore of Long Island near Negro Head (now called Friar's Head) about seven miles west of Hallockville in Baiting Hollow. The accounts are mostly based on a single source from a New Haven newspaper. This battle occurred in October 1814 and followed an attempt by the *Eagle's* captain to run the ship into Wading River Creek (about 6.5 miles further west).² The *Eagle's*

captain dragged four cannon to the top of a 200-foot bluff to defend the ship, but lost the battle after three days of hard fighting.

Because the revenue cutter *Eagle* was the namesake of the current *USCG Eagle* training ship and the revenue cutter service was the direct ancestor of the modern Coast Guard, the story of this battle became an important part of Coast Guard lore. One official Coast Guard source calls it "one of the more dramatic incidents of the war."³ These accounts include a "popular legend" about how the men of the cutter, after exhausting their large shot, resorted to firing back the spent shot of the British and tearing up the cutter's logbook to use as wadding. There is even a dramatic (but not very historically accurate) WPA era mural by Aldis B. Browne II at the Coast Guard Academy in New London, showing crew members with a canon on top of a cliff with little resemblance to any place on the north shore of Long Island with three British warships offshore and the ruined *Eagle* in the foreground.



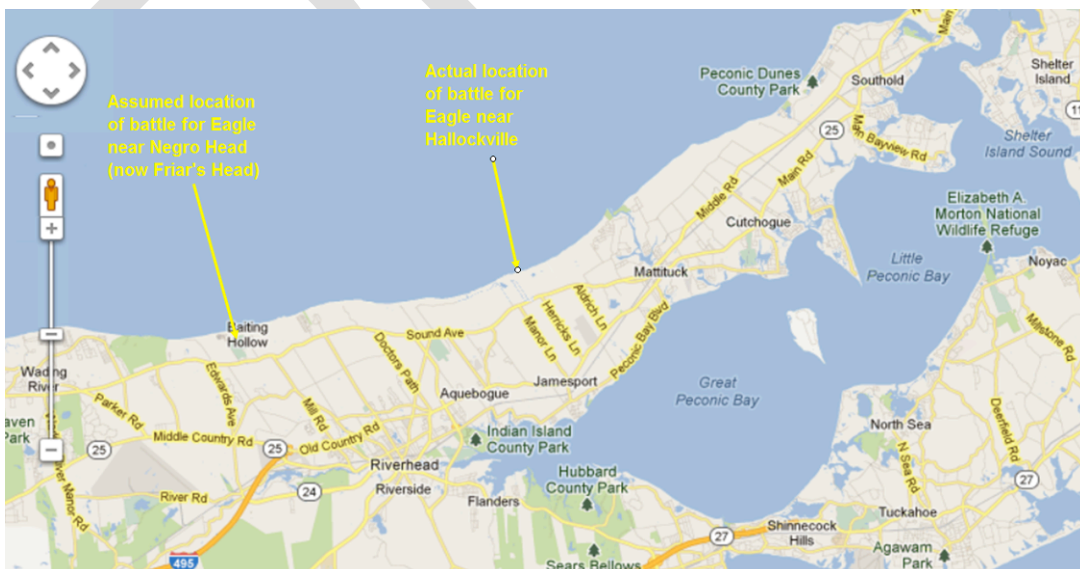
"Defense of the Cutter Eagle" by Aldis B. Browne, II. One of the murals depicting various incidents in Coast Guard history organized by the Works Progress Administration for the Coast Guard Academy.

As I did more research, I soon realized that that the two battles are the same. Because the names of the ships are different and the battle's location was not accurately stated in the Coast Guard accounts which are mostly based on primary sources from New Haven, no one ever put the two stories together from opposite sides of Long Island Sound. Obviously Hudson got some of his details wrong:

- The cutter was named the *Eagle*, not the *Nathan Hale*
- The volunteers on board were mostly mariners and local New Haven militia, not Yale students as he recalled
- The date was October 10, 1814, not June just after another local battle as Hudson states.
- The first British ship was the *HMS Dispatch*, with only 18 guns, not the 74-gun frigate Hudson describes, and the larger second ship, the *HMS Narcissus*, carried only 36 guns.
- Overall, the crew and volunteers on board the *Eagle* played a much larger role in the battle than Hudson implies.

None of these errors are surprising, given that Hudson was writing nearly 90 years after the battle and did not have any written primary sources -- just local oral history. Dates and names are the first to fade. Events are always remembered selectively and embellished over the years.

But Hudson's account is more reliable than others on a few points, especially the location. The battle occurred near Hallockville, not at Friar's Head. Similarly, the captain of the *Eagle* probably tried to head for Mattituck Inlet, not Wading River Creek. And most important, the local militia played a much larger role in the engagement than the Connecticut based accounts acknowledge. Indeed the earliest Connecticut account fails to mention the Long Island militia at all!⁴ Neither does the most recent account of the battle by a Coast Guard historian.⁵



Map of part of North Fork of Long Island showing Negro Head (now Friar's head in Baiting Hollow), long presumed the location for the battle, and actual location of battle for the Eagle near Hallockville. (Google Maps)

Now, with the name of the ship, I have been able to locate additional contemporary accounts from Connecticut newspapers and even a letter, dated from Riverhead the day after the battle, where the captain reports the loss of his ship. I have also consulted the logs of two of the British ships in the British National Archives. The captains of both ships provide a totally different perspective on these battles -- as just a typical workday in the British navy with yet another captured American prize. Their sailors and marines performed admirably and easily captured the *Eagle* on the third day of the engagement. The biggest difference between the two perspectives is that while Hudson claims that numerous British seamen were killed and injured, the British captains recorded that over the entire three days they suffered only one marine wounded.

Knowing that the engagement took place near Hallockville also allows use of the information in the British captains' logs to determine the positions of the ships at various points during the battle. This in turn produces a much more accurate assessment of the military situation. It turns out that the captain of the *Eagle* probably did everything right, but nevertheless lost the battle mostly because of two strokes of very bad luck.

In some ways, the three different perspectives on the engagement are more interesting than the engagement itself, which after all doesn't even rate a footnote in most general histories of the war. Hudson's account clearly exaggerated and romanticized the experiences of his ancestors. The histories written over the years by Coast Guard historians tend to glorify the heroics of the crew of the *Eagle*. And, of course, the British captains had a totally different perspective on the engagement.



Aerial view with the Hallockville Museum Farm in the foreground and the battle site to the northwest on the shore of Long Island Sound.

Britain was maddened and furious

In his account of the local battles, Samuel Terry Hudson uses rather colorful language to describe the threat:

"Britain was maddened and furious at the outlook and in 1813-1814 sent her war ships in the Long Island Sound and Gardiners Bay to soundly cuff our ears for our temerity. It is with this fleet of heavily armed, double decked, seventy-four gun frigates that the grandfathers of Northville had to deal in that altogether spunky fight of 1814. These great, hulky and imposing ships were in the habit of cruising up and down the Sound, capturing our locally owned and industriously managed wood sloops.

The first two years of the War of 1812 had been quiet on the North Fork of Long Island. The war was almost over by October of 1814. Peace negotiations had already started in Gent that August and a peace treaty was just two months away. After defeating Napoleon in April of that year, the British were able to focus their immense naval power to bring America to bay. They flexed their muscles by burning Washington on August 24. In September, the British attempted to capture Baltimore, leaving us the "Star Spangled Banner."

British warships arrived in Long Island Sound in April of 1814 and attempted a blockade. They set up a base on Plum Island, now a federal animal disease laboratory, and began cruising up and down the sound to harass, destroy or

capture American shipping, much as they were doing in the Chesapeake. American privateers were doing significant damage to British mercantile interests, but without much of a navy, the Americans were nearly helpless to prevent the British fleet from cruising at will off its shores.

Towns along the Connecticut shore, such as Saybrook, New London and Stonington suffered the most, as the British squadron attempted to capture local shipping and neutralize Commodore Stephen Decatur's force bottled up in the Thames River.⁶ There were no significant ports along the Long Island Sound shores of the North Fork for the British to attack.

The "wood sloops" in Hudson's narrative were carrying cordwood to New York City. These small sloops could be brought in to the beach at high tide at numerous landings along the north shore of Long Island. Then when the tide had gone out (about five or six feet difference), wagons could drive along side to off load cordwood. The sale of this wood became the primary source of cash income for many local farmers at the time.

The British either burned these little American ships, or better yet, sailed them off to either sell or ransom. The British had codified a formal system in which the officers and crew shared in the proceeds. Contemporary newspaper accounts indicate that there was a brisk business, with the owners of vessels negotiating with the British enemy and then buying back their ships.

Our sacred honor to defend it as far as in us lies

Unlike their neighbors across Long Island Sound in New England who opposed the war from the beginning and eventually considered succession, the citizens of Riverhead were always strong supporters of the war. In response to the declaration of war and a proclamation from President Madison, a special town meeting adopted a strongly worded resolution to "cordially approve" the declaration and proclamation. It went on to state that they "hold it as our indispensable Religious and Bounden duty to rally around the Standard of our Common Country with firm and determined resolution to the last cent of our property and the last drop of our Blood and that upon our sacred Honor to defend it as far as in us lies."⁷

Although Riverhead's inhabitants were primed and militia was ready, they saw no action until May of 1814. The first attack on the North Fork occurred on May 30 at Wading River where a British landing party managed to burn four or five American sloops and about 300 cords of wood on the beach ready for market.⁸

The following day the British sloop-of-war, the *H.M.S. Sylph*, attempted to deliver the same fate to the American sloop *Nancy*, which was loading cordwood on the beach at Penny's Landing about 11 miles to the east of Wading River in the hamlet of Northville -- just a few miles west of the site of the *Eagle* engagement

four months later. Hudson includes this battle in his narrative since he assumes the two engagements happened on successive days. The British tried to land marines and capture the *Nancy*. The local militia under Capt. John Terry quickly assembled and managed to hold off the British landing attempt.⁹ Hudson claims "there cannot be the slightest doubt as to the [many] British killed and wounded at Penny's Landing," but this can not be confirmed until we consult British records.¹⁰

The *Sylph* and her sister ships *Maidstone*, *Hogue*, *Peacock*, *Nimrod* and *Borer* continued to be active on Long Island Sound during June 1814, capturing or destroying merchant vessels. On June 23, 1814, the *Sylph* and the *Maidstone* were involved in the only other significant action on the North Fork -- the capture and burning of an American "torpedoe boat" near Horton Point in Southold.¹¹ By early fall, the British commander seems to have rotated the warships assigned to the Sound, as accounts of the *Eagle* battle mention a different set of ships -- the *Pomone*, the *Narcissus* and the *Dispatch*.

From a Gentleman in New Haven

We are blessed to have a variety of primary sources for the battle in defense of the *Eagle* against which we can compare Hudson's account. The earliest sketchy account appeared in the *Columbian* on October 13, before the engagement was even over. The brief piece was apparently based on witnesses on high grounds in Killingworth, Connecticut, who reported five hours of cannon fire and assumed the worst: "The Connecticut revenue cutter *Eagle*, Capt. Lee, we have too much reason to believe, is captured by the British, after a long engagement, on Tuesday."¹² Several other brief accounts appeared in various papers over the next couple of days. With varying degrees of certitude, they all assumed the *Eagle* was lost, but generally expressed hope that the crew had survived.¹³

The first relatively complete account of the battle appeared under the headline "Extract of a letter from a Gentleman in New-Haven." The article is dated October 13th, and may have appeared in a local New Haven paper that day. But the version that has survived in the *Boston Repertory* didn't appear until almost a week later on October 18. Most of this article is based on the eyewitness account of a "gentleman" who was a passenger on the American sloop *Susan*, whose capture by the British sparked the whole incident. We will refer to this article as the "Gentleman's Account."

During the first day of the battle for the *Eagle*, the *Susan* was held by its British captors within two or three miles of the battle, so the "gentleman" had a good view of the everything from the deck. The British put the "gentleman" ashore and paroled him on the second day of the engagement, so details are sketchy beyond that point. He says he had "no certain knowledge relating to the fate of

the men on board the cutter or the militia who assembled on the heights. It is believed, however, that they have received little or no injury." ¹⁴

The first reasonably full account of the battle, headlined "Loss of the Cutter *Eagle*", appeared on October 17, in the *Connecticut Journal*. This piece is based on reports from the volunteers who joined the crew of the *Eagle* in New Haven in their vain effort to recapture the *Susan*. We will refer to this as the "Volunteer Account." This account has a lot of detail -- and no small amount of bragging swagger about the bravery of the crew of the *Eagle* and the volunteers from New Haven. However, thinking the battle was over on the second day, the volunteers returned to New Haven. Consequently, except for a quick editorial note at the end saying that the editor had "since learned" that the *Eagle* was captured and towed away by the British warship, there is nothing about the second and third days of the engagement. ¹⁵ It is this account that was reprinted by Coast Guard historian Horatio Davis Smith in 1880 and has become the main source of most subsequent historic portrayals of the incident. ¹⁶

A number of brief articles appeared in other newspapers over the next two weeks with various degrees of information about the fate of the *Eagle*. None of these are terribly helpful. Then on October 25, the *Connecticut Herald* published extracts of a letter from Captain Lee to his superiors reporting on the loss of his ship. It is dated in Riverhead on October 15, just two days after the British made off with the *Eagle*, but was not published for another 10 days. This letter is written with military precision, with times noted down to the quarter hour, and gives a very full account of the whole battle, providing significant insight into Lee's decision making. ¹⁷ Amazingly, no earlier historian seems to have discovered this source, which we will call the "Lee Letter. "



A miniature portrait of Frederick

Lee, captain of the Eagle, painted by Revolutionary War hero Tadeusz Kosciuszko. (Madison Historical Society, Madison, Conn.).¹⁸

We are fortunate to also have the British perspective on the battle. On December 17 the *London Gazette* published a brief account from Captain Lumley of the *HMS Narcissus* reporting the capture of the "American revenue schooner *Eagle*, pierced for ten guns, but only two mounted." This account is dated October 13 off of Negro Head, giving rise to the misinformation about the engagement's location.¹⁹

But perhaps the most interesting primary sources are two sets of log books for the *Dispatch* and the *Narcissus* in the British National Archives. One set was kept by the masters of those ships and the other by the captains. These careful military chronicles corroborate many of the details from the accounts of the American eye witnesses -- even agreeing precisely on the timing of different parts of the engagement. Of course, there is nothing about the heroism of the Americans and much praise for the professionalism of the British sailors and marines involved. But the two sets of log books also reveal that the British suffered far less harm than the Americans imagined they had inflicted.

Put together, these accounts are a fascinating study of how the same event can appear quite different depending on the perspective (and loyalty) of the observer. Quite naturally, Hudson plays up the heroism and bravery of the local fishermen and militia involved in the engagement. And the British ships become much larger and menacing than they actually were. Similarly, the accounts from the Connecticut observers play up the bravery of the crew of the *Eagle* and the volunteers from New Haven who joined it. The British accounts, however, portray the whole incident as just another few routine work days for the His Majesty's navy.

Exactly where the west line of Mr. George C. Hallock's farm meets the cliff

Of all the sources, only Hudson had first-hand knowledge of local Long Island geography. He is very precise about the exact location of the engagement, telling us that the local militia took up positions "behind the bluff exactly where the west line of Mr. George C. Hallock's farm meets the cliff." George C Hallock's farm was immediately to the east of the farm where Hudson grew up, hearing stories about the battle from his grandparents. Even if we didn't want to trust Hudson's grandparent's memory on this, there are enough cannonballs -- at least a dozen -- that have been dug up on the Hallock and Hudson farms and others nearby -- to confirm the location.



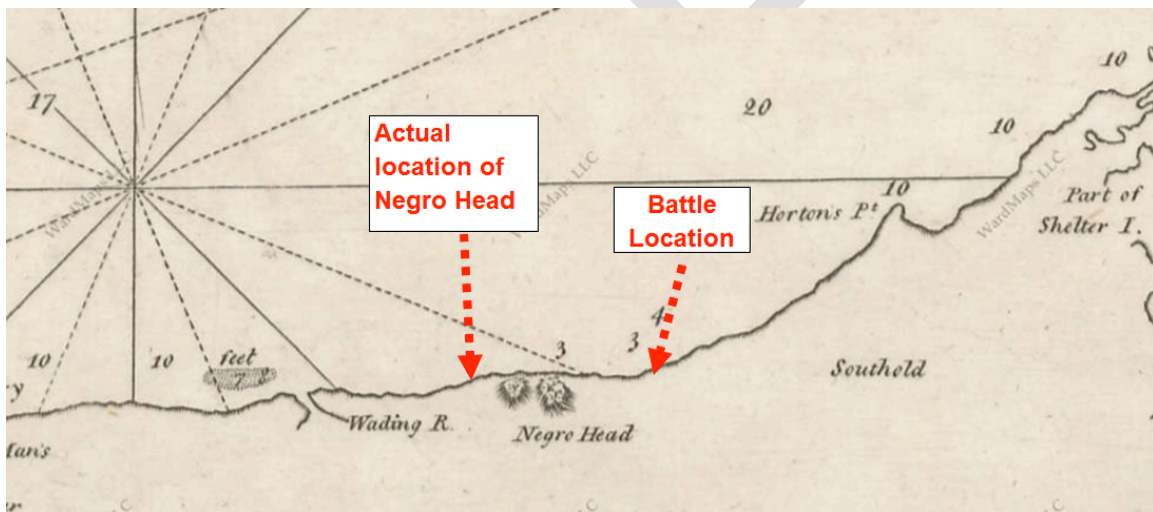
Map showing location of Samuel Terry Hudson and George C. Hallock farms in relation to Hallockville Museum Farm, Hallock State Park and likely site of the battle for the Eagle. (Google Earth)

The Hudson and Hallock farms were in the northeast corner of Riverhead Town, in the hamlet of Northville. Like most farms the area, these were bowling alley shaped, about a mile long, with the houses on the south end along Sound Avenue and running up to the shore of Long Island Sound on the north. Hudson calls it the "Battle of Luce's Landing," apparently because that is where the fishermen started out that morning, although it actually took place about half a mile eastward, in the area nicknamed "Hallockville" because of all the Hallock families nearby. Today, the battle site is the northwest corner of the undeveloped Hallock State Park Preserve, about a mile northwest of the Hallockville Museum.

So, why do all other accounts of the battle claim it occurred at Negro Head, about seven miles to the west in Baiting Hollow? As several historians writing about this engagement have determined, "Negro Head" is today called "Friars Head." The name change occurred sometime in the mid-19th century. It was a sandy dune or knoll surrounded by low vegetation that gave it the appearance of a bald head. Although vegetation has now overgrown the sand, it still remains as part of the Friar's Head Golf Club.

Several contemporary accounts referred to Negro Head as a reference point for their narratives. The "gentleman" who observed the first day of the battle from the deck of the captured sloop *Susan* reported that the *Eagle* was run aground "near Negro Head." The log of the captain of the *Dispatch* recorded that he was sailing "towards Negro head" on the morning of October 13, the day the *Eagle* was later captured. The report in the *London Gazette* from the captain of the *Narcissus* recounting the capture of the *Eagle* is "dated off Negro Head." So it is not surprising that every historian of the battle assumed it occurred at Negro Head. The most detailed research paper is even subtitled "A New View on Negro Head."²⁰

To explain the confusion, we need to look at Edmund M. Blunt's "Chart of Long Island Sound" -- the standard navigational aid that both the British and American captains likely carried with them. The detail below is from the 1822 edition, but this chart probably appeared in every edition of Blunt's *American Coast Pilot* from the original 1798 version and was not updated until about 1828.²¹



Detail of from Edmund M. Blunt's "Chart of Long Island Sound" in his *American Coast Pilot*, 1822. Note that Negro Head (now Friar's Head) is the only landmark shown between Wading River and Horton's Point, but is actually located several miles west of where Blunt shows it.

From Blunt's chart it is immediately obvious why contemporary American accounts and the British captain mentioned Negro Head as a reference point. It is the only landmark on the north shore of Long Island between Wading River and Horton's Point -- a distance of nearly 25 miles. From the water, Negro Head and a second hill a little to the east were prominent landmarks -- both towering about 240 feet above the shore. There were no towns, no other major landmarks, and probably not even any buildings visible from the water along this entire section of the Long Island shore -- mostly just high bluffs that would have been hard to differentiate for a mariner unfamiliar with the area. As it turns out,

even Negro Head itself is not very precisely located on Blunt's map. It is actually a couple miles west of where he shows it.

A careful reading of the contemporary accounts reveals there are several clues that all point toward the Hallockville location. Captain Lee's letter reports that he sailed southeast from New Haven. That would put him closer to Hallockville than to Friars Head. The Volunteer's Account based on the stories of the men who returned to New Haven on the second day of the engagement reports that the cutter was beached "nearly opposite Falkland Island."²² The lighthouse there is clearly marked on Blunt's charts. Today it is called Faulkner's (or Falkner's) Island. A 40 foot lighthouse was built there in 1802 and is still a maritime landmark about 3.5 miles off the Connecticut shore of Long Island Sound.

Hallockville is nearly due south of that island. The log of the Captain of *Dispatch*, as he leaves the battle site on the morning of the second day, describes his bearing as "Falkland Island N N to 4 miles." If he were sailing from Negro Head (Friar's Head), presumably his bearing would have been north by north east.

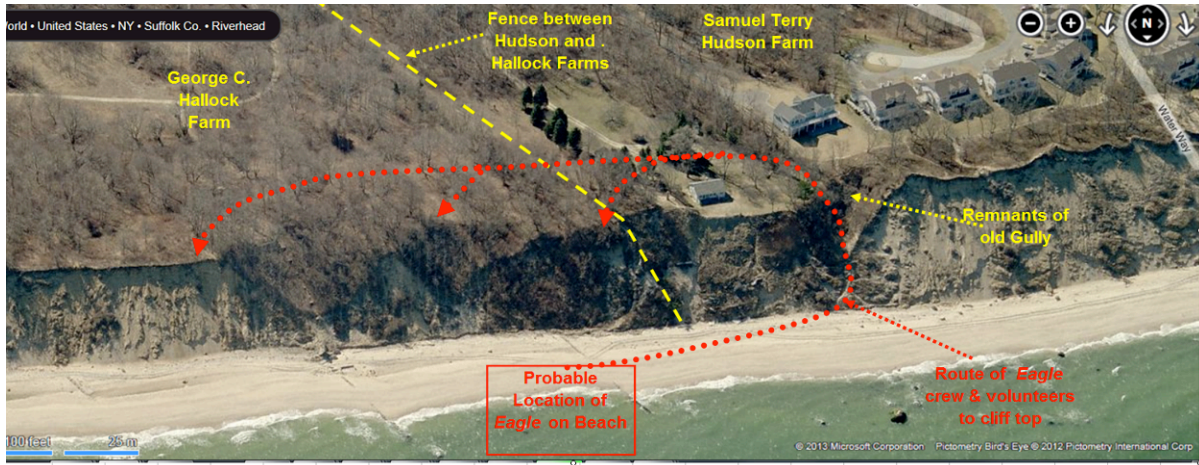


Chart showing Captain Lee's southeast course (yellow line) in the *Eagle* from New Haven to Hallockville and the bearing close to due north from Hallockville to Falkner Island (green line). The bearing from Negro Head (Friar's Head) to Falkner Island is more north northeast (red line).



Falkner Island Lighthouse, built in 1802, was used as an orientation point by the British captains involved in the blockade of Long Island Sound. It is almost exactly due north of the Hallockville battle location. Photograph courtesy U.S. Coast Guard

Despite the detail in Hudson's account, we can only identify the location where the Eagle was beached within a range of 100 yards or so. Hudson says that it was near the "East Gully" on the farm he grew up on. But he says that the militia gathered near the west line of the Hallock farm next door. The patterns of cannon ball discoveries also point to this area. Today there is only the barest indication of a gully on the north end of what was once the Hudson farm, and an examination of the earliest USGS survey map of the area from 1902 shows only a little more of a gully then. However, the bluffs along Long Island Sound shore in this area erode about six inches per year. In 1814 the shoreline would have been about 100 feet further out, so much of the gully could have been eroded away over the ensuing years.



This aerial view looking south to the cliffs of the area today shows the most probable location where the Eagle was beached, as well as a route up through the "East Gully" on the Hudson farm to the cliff tops on the Hallock farm to the east farm above the beaching site. The farmers tethered their horses to the fence between the two farms, according to Hudson, and at one point in the engagement a cannonball knocked down the fence setting many of the horses free. (Microsoft Bing Maps.)

We left the Light at half past five in the evening

Hudson of course had no idea why either the *Eagle* or the *Dispatch* appeared that foggy morning so dangerously close to each other off Luce's Landing. The real spark for the battle occurred the day before, Monday, October 10, about 35 miles to the west off of Mill River, Connecticut with the capture of the American packet sloop *Susan* out of New Haven. There are three "Mill Rivers" in Connecticut, but this was apparently the one that empties into Long Island Sound in Southport, about 25 miles west of New Haven. We are fortunate to have three accounts of this incident, including one by the "gentleman" passenger on the *Susan* who later witnessed the battle at Hallockville and one by the captain of the *Eagle*.²³

The *Susan* left New Haven at 3 p.m. on the 9th of October, bound for New York city with a valuable cargo that included 300 barrels of flour, 15 barrels of gunpowder, a considerable quantity of dry goods, paints, oil and other dry goods" as well as 16 passengers including the "gentleman's" young daughter and two other children. Given the hazardous conditions, the sloop was armed with two four-pound cannons and a few muskets. There was a captain and four crew members. Most likely the sloop stayed as close to the Connecticut shore as possible, in hopes that if a British man of war were sighted, there would be time to run into one of many small inlets or rivers for protection.

The following morning, at 9 a.m., they passed two New Haven bound packet sloops and then fell in with another sloop which they assumed was a Long Island

boat. However, it was actually an American sloop that had been captured by the British and was serving in disguise as a tender to the British frigate *HMS Pomone* which was then operating in Long Island Sound. The disguised tender carried an 18 pounder, two four pounders and 60 men armed with muskets, bayonets and swords. So when she identified herself at about 40 yards distance and hailed the *Susan*, the latter did the sensible thing and immediately hove to and surrendered.

The British put a boarding party of 40 on the *Susan*, forced the crew and passengers below decks and confiscated all weapons and ammunition. They left 13 men on the *Susan* as a guard. With the *Pomone* tender as an escort they headed eastward towards Plumb Island where the sloop presumably could have been ransomed by its owners, following the customs of war then in practice. The "gentleman" reported that while they were captive "we were all treated with lenity and civility, our cook dressed our victuals, and three or four were allowed by turns to be upon the deck."

Meanwhile, one of the American sloops which the *Susan* had just passed observed the whole incident and immediately put a passenger on shore who rushed to New Haven with the news. As soon as this messenger arrived in New Haven about 4 o'clock in the afternoon, Captain Lee decided to take the *Eagle* out in pursuit, with hopes of recapturing the *Susan*. He rounded up 41 volunteers, including many masters and mates of vessels in New Haven harbor, and set off about 4 p.m. Because the winds were light, he used the ship's boat to tow the *Eagle* out of the harbor. As Lee wrote later in his account of the incident, "We left the Light at half past 5 in the evening, and steered S.E, in order to close with the two sloops by day-light in the morning, the wind being light and variable."

Captain Lee's enterprise was not entirely foolhardy. With its six small cannon, the *Eagle* certainly had a good chance of recapturing the *Susan* if she came upon her alone, and probably would have been a match for the *Pomone's* tender which only had three cannon.

This was not the first time that Captain Lee took the *Eagle* out in pursuit of a captured ship. On May 30, a British privateer captured a New Haven sloop loaded with flour within sight of that town. Lee rounded up about 50 volunteers and set sail as soon as possible to recapture the sloop and possibly the privateer too. However, shortly after clearing New Haven harbor, they sighted a British frigate and two smaller warships "bearing up [the] Sound" and reluctantly decided to return to port.²⁴ This incident resulted in a reprimand from Treasury Secretary George Campbell, who wrote to the New Haven customs collector to remind him that "the Cutter 'Eagle' being exclusively intended for the protection of the Revenue, cannot with propriety be employed in the manner they wish [as a naval warship]."²⁵ After all, it was not part of the job description of a revenue cutter to be chasing down enemy warships.

The farmers were up by candle light

The first part of Captain Lee's plan worked perfectly. At daybreak, about 5:30 that morning, he found himself within three miles of the sloop *Susan* and the *Pomone* tender that was escorting the prize. What Lee had not counted on was also being within cannon shot of an 18-gun British brig, the *HMS Dispatch*.

Hudson writes that the "farmers were up by candle light" that morning so that they could finish their chores and go to Luce's Landing where they hoped to catch bunker fish (menhaden). For some years, the local farmers had been using these fish as fertilizer to restore their depleted soils.²⁶ The farmers organized themselves into companies of 12 to 18 men, each with a share in the company. On the beach they had a large reel on which to store the seine and a small boat to take it out.

But their fishing was interrupted early that morning. There was a thick fog, but before it had lifted they heard the boom of cannon and knew the British were near. According to Hudson, they immediately abandoned their fishing and set out northward into the fog. There they soon encountered the *Eagle* which itself was much surprised to find itself within sight of a British warship as the fog lifted..

The presence of the *Dispatch* was totally chance. Indeed, the Captain's Log reported that: "at 4.10 saw two sail to the south & Sent the Boats in chase. They proved to be the Pomone's Tender with a sloop her Prize in Co."

Although the *Dispatch* was far from the "towering man of war" with 74 guns that Hudson described, she did seriously outclass the *Eagle*. The *Dispatch* was about 100 feet long and displaced 384 tons. Most importantly, she carried 18 guns -- sixteen 32-pound carronades and two six-pound bow guns. (Carronades were shorter than cannon, less accurate, but easier and faster to use in close quarters naval battles.) In contrast, the *Eagle* was about 60 feet long, displaced only 130 tons and carried just six cannon -- four four-pounders and two two-pounders. Warships in those days were measured by the weight of shot they could fire. By this calculation, the guns on one side of the *Dispatch* were capable of firing 524 pounds of shot, more than 20 times what the *Eagle's* guns could have hurled. Moreover, the *Dispatch* was equipped with carronets, which were shorter and much faster to load and refire -- although also less accurate at any distance -- than the cannon on the *Eagle*. The *Dispatch* usually carried a crew of 121. There were another 50 or so men on the *Pomone's* tender. The *Eagle* had only 41-- a crew of about 25 plus the New Haven volunteers -- giving the British a four-to-one manpower advantage. The only sensible option for Captain Lee was to run, but his options were severely curtailed by topography and wind.

Hudson says that:

Her startled crew got lively. They put over the small boat ahead tied to the cable of the cutter and rowed for dear life. Others of the crew rigged side oars or sweeps worked from the deck, and thus slowly widened the gap between themselves and the anchored frigate.

This is confirmed by Volunteer's Account in the *Connecticut Journal*:

At daybreak [the *Eagle's* crew] found themselves nearly under the guns of a sloop of war -- all hands were immediately called to man the sweeps; got out two boats ahead, with a view to get her into a creek on the Long-Island shore, there being no port of safety which she could reach."

However, the British did not remain idle either. According to the Volunteer's Account:

Being almost calm, the [British] brig manned several barges and sent them in pursuit, and a firing commenced between them and the cutter at about 7 a.m.

In Captain Lee's words:

The brig made all sail in chase, the wind being light sent two barges, which soon come up and opened fire on us from a carronade. After receiving 4 shot from them without injury, I directed our fire to be opened on them, which was immediately done with such effect that they pulled with speed the other way.

The cutter was laid on shore

Hudson continues the story, adding that when the fishermen met up with the *Eagle*, Captain Lee asked if there was any place they could get the cutter into. The fishermen directed Lee to Mattituck Inlet, about three miles to the east. They

added their own oars to the efforts, and . . . were making good progress eastward when to their dismay the wind sprang up, and the great frigate with all sails filled came bearing down on them.

Captain Lee does not mention the local fishermen in his letter to his superior, but the Volunteer's Account mentions that as the *Eagle* approached the shore, Captain Lee, who had hoped to put into a local creek, learned from the fishermen that it was not deep enough for the cutter.

At this point, Captain Lee made a decision to beach the *Eagle*. In his own words, "we found it impossible to clear [the British ships] on either tack, and had not alternative left but to run on shore and save what we could. " The Volunteer's Account reported that "The brig drawing near, and seeing no other chance of

escape, the cutter was laid on shore, under a high bluff." Hudson, of course, says that Lee was acting on the advice of the fishermen when he beached the *Eagle*, but none of the other sources confirm this.

The log of the *Dispatch* corroborates some of these details. Captain Galloway reported that "At daylight Saw a Schooner [and] Sent the boats in chase." At this point, he had no idea this was an armed American revenue cutter. At 7:30, he recorded light and variable breezes and that the "schooner" had fired several guns at his boats. The log next indicates that at 8.15 "the Schooner [was] run on shore and continues firing at our boats." Remarkably the time given by the two opposing captains is always within 15 minutes of each other.

To the top of the cliffs

At some point that morning, the fishermen sent out three messengers on horseback, Paul Revere style, to arouse the local militia. One of these messengers, according to family story, was the ten-year-old Herman Hallock, who grew up in the Hallockville Museum's 1765 Homestead and probably was at Luce's Landing that morning fishing with his father, Zachariah Hallock, Jr., one of the members of the fishing company.²⁷

Hudson says that the farmers sent out men by horseback as soon as they touched shore. But they must have given the alarm much sooner, perhaps with a gun, because the militia had already started to gather when the *Eagle* landed, according to Captain Lee's account. The Penny's Landing engagement in June had demonstrated their capability to muster rapidly in the face of a British threat.

Again back to Captain Lee's account:

At 8 A.M. ran the cutter on the beach. The militia gathering in considerable numbers, we landed our arm-chest with muskets and 4 guns, and took them up the bank, which is 130 feet high. -- cut away and landed all our [sails ?] and secured them.

Hudson only mentions one cannon, but the Volunteer's Account confirms that "with the assistance of the people on shore" they were able to get two four-pounders and two two-pounders up onto the top of the bluff, "where they were planted, and the colors near them, with a determination not to 'give up the ship.'"

High tide that morning was around 9:50, and it was close to spring tide, so when Lee beached the *Eagle* about two hours earlier it should have been able to clear the bar about 40-50 yards off shore and to put it reasonably high on the beach -- but not so high that it could not be floated off later. The fullest historical account of the incident, Melvin Jackson's, has trouble reconciling this with near shore conditions at Negro Head, where there is quite a bit of shoaling. He assumes that the *Eagle* could not have come within 100 yards of the beach, necessitating

using small boats to remove the cannon and other equipment. Under fire, this would have been extremely difficult, as Jackson notes, if not impossible.²⁸

However, at Hallockville, the *Eagle* could have been driven directly onto the beach, making the off-loading easier. Near shore, the bottom falls away fairly quickly to 10 feet, and probably allowed the bow to be in wading depth. Similarly, Jackson is somewhat incredulous that the crew and volunteers could have "manhandled" the cannons and equipment up a 160 foot sand cliff and another 80 feet to the top of Negro Head where he thinks the pieces and the flag were planted. At Hallockville, the bluffs are a bit less -- generally 80 to 100 feet, not even the 130 feet Lee mentions.

Just how they managed to fortify the cliff so quickly is not totally clear. The log of the *Dispatch* clearly states that as the ship stood in closer to shore 45 minutes after the beaching of the *Eagle*, the captain observed "a number of soldiers with several pieces of cannon on the cliffs endeavoring to protect the Schooner."

With the 41 volunteers and crew on the *Eagle*, at least a dozen fishermen and probably a few dozen militiamen initially, there could have been a workforce of about 90 men. Hudson's account describes how "the entire force like a stream of loaded ants staggered into the winding gully, climbing up to fortify the crest of that plucky hill and save the cutter." Assuming a somewhat roundabout route up the gully, the total distance was probably about 400 yards. A man walking at a brisk pace could have made it to the top in about seven minutes, and probably returned straight down the cliffs in about three. This would have allowed each man to make four round trips. But cannons capable of shooting four pound shot weigh about 1,400 pounds each, so dragging them up to the top of the bluffs was not an easy task. Definitely an "impressive feat" as Jackson claims -- especially when accomplished in only 45 minutes.

The numbers of militia present may have been much larger. The local militia must have been on high alert. There were 307 men between the ages of 16 and 45 in the town, out of a total population of 1,627 according to the 1810 census. Assuming that some of the 106 men over 45 were also fit to serve, total available manpower was about 350, most of whom lived in the eastern half of the town, nearer the battle site. If even half of those required to serve made it for this battle there could have been well over 150 militia present.

As difficult as this would have been under normal circumstances, it must have been even more difficult with the *Dispatch's* boats still in the water harassing the *Eagle*. This required diverting some of the men to the defense of the ship. As the Volunteer's Account reported, even while unloading cannon and arms, the *Eagle* maintained "a brisk fire on [the British barges] with round and grape shot." This may also be why the last two cannon were never removed from the *Eagle*. The Volunteer's Account claims the British barges were forced to retreat by the

American fire, but it may be that the British actually recalled their barges to give the *Dispatch* a clear shot with its cannon.

A lesson in first class war

While Captain Lee was unloading the *Eagle* and fortifying the top of the cliff, Captain Galloway was maneuvering the *Dispatch* closer in to shore. The next entry in his log is: "At 9.00[?] anchored with a spring on the cable and kept up a fire on the Schooner and Infantry." The detail in the *Dispatch* log about the spring line is important. This was a line attached to the anchor before casting it off. The crew walked the other end of the line to a capstan at the stern. They could then use that capstan to pull the ship around in a wide arc so that its broadside guns pointed directly at the target. This was a standard part of naval warfare in the age of sail.

Seeing the warship anchor and aim its broadside at them must have struck fear into the waiting farmers. Hudson reports that:

On the ship [*Dispatch*] the crew were swarming aloft to furl and tie up the sails, while the high sided hull opened its double rows of port holes, ominously thrusting forth the blackened muzzles of more then seventy wicked looking cannon. And under the light breeze, with a topsail or two yet drawing, casting the lead at frequent intervals, the ponderous ship was being floated in close to the shore to give the Yankees a lesson in first-class war.

Captain Lee is a bit more terse in his account:

At 3 quarters past 8, the brig and sloop came up and both commenced a heavy fire on the cutter, which we returned in the best manner our means would admit.

And both of these accounts are confirmed by the Gentleman observing from the deck of the *Susan*:

The brig opened her fire against the cutter and our people on the hill about 9 o'clock.

Back to Hudson:

The tired patriots with their guns in hand had taken up position behind the bluff exactly where the west line of Mr. George C. Hallock's farm meets the cliff. Here they rested and awaited events, and awaited the British cannon balls and rain of grapeshot that a little later they had in plenty.

The little force had scarcely got the single cannonade [sic] upon its carriage and mounted to command the beach before the ship let loose the thunder of her cannon and smote the hill with a mighty broadside, and then another and another. The British artillerists worked with a will to fairly exterminate and wipe out the handful of our folk on the hill; large shot, small shot, canister shot and grape shot screamed and howled into and over that hill, knocking the stones to atoms and filling the fishermen's necks with sand, while the large balls that went too high landed in Aquebogue, and some of them, so the story goes, almost reaching Flanders.

The last bit is probably typical Hudson exaggeration. Flanders is over five miles away, well beyond cannon range, and Aquebogue is more than three miles, at the limit of cannon range. A cannonball was found on the Sweezy farm in Aquebogue after the engagement and, in the 20th century a cannonball was found just to the west in a cistern on a farm in Jamesport about the same distance. from the action.²⁹

Now back to Hudson:

The aggressive enemy having vented their spite and some tons of cannon balls and of good black powder, now changed the program, ceased firing, and thinking they had broken the spirit of resistance of the farmers sufficiently, ordered up the barges, filled them with scarlet-coated soldiers, and sent them straight and confidently for the prize. But they reckoned without the "host," as the saying is, for the farmers were by this time doubly numerous, and sharp to follow the tune at Penny's Landing, of which every man had heard. So when they saw the barges coming for the shore, some kept to the hill, while others crept out of sight down the edges of the great and sinuous gully, making cover behind rocks and bushes where they could make their buckshot tell. On came the barges with measured oarstrokes and abundant discipline, until they had almost touched the sand. Were the pestilent Yankees all dead? Ah, no the very next instant there flamed out from a half acre of crest and rocks, underbrush and gully sides, the most appalling fire the Reds had met since Waterloo. [Note that Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo was actually June 15, 1815, nearly a year later.] The whip-like crack of the deer guns, the roar of the old muskets and the boom of the cutter's high up cannonade perched on the commanding hill a hundred and fifty feet above their heads was quite unlooked for. They were stung, torn, mutilated. Soldiers were falling upon the rowers, rowers were dead and had to be replaced, again as before the *Nancy* they were pulling their comrades into the boat by the legs, and again they hurried back to the ship, many of them food for surgeons' knives, sadder and wiser men.

Immediately there tore forth from the frigate's sides a volley of cast iron missiles against the sandy hill. With redoubled fury the bombardment was kept up till the smoke of the engagement could be seen from the farther side of Peconic Bay, like a pillar of cloud above smoldering fire. Before nightfall another and more cautious advance with the barges took place, only again to be met with that stinging and intolerable reception.

The basic outlines of Hudson's story are corroborated by the Volunteer's Account in the *Connecticut Journal*:

These, with the musquetry, kept the enemy from landing or taking possession of the cutter, though several attempts were made by the barges, whilst the brig kept up a heavy cannonade, taking a distance out of our reach, and hoping to drive us from the hill. Finding their efforts unavailing, they commenced firing upon the cutter to destroy her, at the same time keeping up their fire upon the hill from the sloop that captured the *Susan* and a barge, taking positions so as to rake on every quarter, which they kept up till about 2 P.M. when the sloop and barge hauled off and the firing ceased.

The log of the *Dispatch* reports that at 11 it weighed anchor and "stood closer in." At noon, she anchored again with a spring line in 4 1/4 fathoms (about 26 feet). This would have put the *Dispatch* about 700 yards off shore -- still not close enough for real accuracy (the preferred distance for naval battles was a couple hundred yards), but nevertheless capable of doing damage if enough balls were fired. And various accounts indicate that before the day was over, about 300 balls were shot.

Captain Lee reported in his letter:

"At 3 P.M. [firing] began again; [the British] sent a barge full of men, which seemed to threaten a landing, but never came within reach of our grape."

Hudson's paper and the Volunteer's Account both mention several failed attempts by the British to land. Lee only mentions one and says that the British did not come close enough to even get within grape shot range -- which presumably would have left the barges well out of musket range.

Interestingly, the log of the *Dispatch* totally skips over the several failed attempts by its boats to capture the *Eagle*. Captain Gallaway only reports keeping fire on the schooner [*Eagle*] until they had dismasted it sometime after noon. Then at 4 p.m. he sends the *Pomone's* tender and her prize, the *Susan*, down the Sound towards Plum Island.

The "Gentleman" watching from the decks of the *Susan* also reported:

And by two the cutter's masts were cut away and her hull appeared to us who were in the sloop, about 2 or 3 miles from the brig, to be a wreck.

Captain Lee reported in his letter:

In the course of three hours they cut away both masts, and shot her through above water in every direction. The firing then ceased."

Nether Hudson's account nor the *Dispatch's* log record the actions the tender of the *Pomone*, with its 18 pounder and two small cannon, but the Volunteer's Account, clearly states that:

At the same time keeping up their fire upon the hill from the sloop that captured the *Susan* [i.e. the *Pomone's* tender] and a barge, taking positions so as to rake on every quarter, which they kept up till about 2 P.M. when the sloop and barge hauled off and the firing ceased.

Similarly, the Gentleman's Account corroborates the role of the tender, which he refers to as a "sloop."



"Defense of the Revenue Cutter Eagle," Coast Guard Academy Art Collection.

The various accounts differ on what happened the rest of the afternoon and evening. The *Dispatch* stayed at its anchorage 700 yards out. Its log reported that firing continued from shore until 7 p.m., well after dark. The Gentleman's

Account claims that: "Several other attempts were made by the barges during night to gain the cutter, but the vigorous and well-directed fire from the hill always compelled them to return. " Hudson says that "All night long watches on the barges were kept up lest the cutter should under cover of the night be spirited away" by the Americans, implying that the *Dispatch's* barges stayed in the water patrolling near shore, even if they didn't attack. Neither the log of the *Dispatch* nor Captain Lee's letter mention any nighttime attacks. Lee simply states that "A strong guard was kept during the night." Hudson just says that "The farmers also kept watch, and slept by turns on their arms, lest the British by night secure their coveted prize undetected. "

We supposed we should see no more of them

The following morning, Wednesday, October 12, dawned fair with light and variable winds. Observing that the "schooner" (i.e., the *Eagle*) was full of water, Captain Gallaway weighed anchor in the *Dispatch* at 8:30 and started tacking across the Sound northward towards "Falkland Island " while keeping his crew busy refitting the gun breechings and doing other repairs on the boat.

Lee noted that "the cutter being full of water; supposed we should see no more of them at least for a day or two." He took advantage of the situation to land all the rigging and spars from the *Eagle*, and at low tide, about 4 that afternoon, "stopped the shot-holes." Then at 10 that evening, about an hour before high tide, after pumping out all the water, they refloated *Eagle* and "hailed her to anchor." Lee does not say exactly what his plan was, but the cutter was too seriously damaged to sail back to New Haven and Lee had already taken off all the sails, spars and rigging. More likely he intended to tow it.

Curiously, Hudson totally omits all of the events on the second day of the battle, skipping ahead to what was actually the morning of the third day. We also lose the perspective of the New Haven volunteers. "Provisions, etc. being scarce" and thinking the battle was over, they left Captain Lee and his crew behind and made their way back to New Haven where they arrive the following evening on a sloop from Long Island. Their account of the first day of the battle appeared in the *Connecticut Journal* five days later, on October 17. This article, with all of its typical volunteer bravado, was reprinted by Smith in 1880 and has become the main source for most modern historians of the incident.

We drank [to] a speedy and honorable peace

On the second day, we also lose the perspective of the "gentleman" passenger held captive on the *Susan* within sight of the battle. Tuesday evening, along with the young boy and two young girls, one of them his daughter, he was transferred to the *Dispatch*. The rest of the prisoners were sent on the *Susan* to Plumb Island "to be paroled or otherwise" as the commanding officer there, Captain Cartwright, "thought proper."



The second church at Guilford, which Captain Galloway of the Dispatch used as a landmark while landing his prisoners.

War was a different experience then. The "gentleman" reported that "the girls, little boy, and my self were treated with every attention by Captain James Galloway" and the crew. They "dined and supped with the captain who was a very polite and well-informed man, and appeared to regret the existence of war between the two countries." The ship's doctor gave up his berth that night for the two girls, and the gentlemen slept in the berth of Lieutenant Barker, the second in command.

The *Dispatch's* mission that day was to return the Gentleman and children to New Haven. Because of the wind direction, after a brief stop at Falkland Island, Captain Galloway decided to return his young prisoners to Guilford, a little further to the east. That afternoon under a white flag of truce they were rowed ashore at Guilford in the captain's launch. There they were met by an American military officer, Captain Northrup, who invited the party, including the British officer, to the local public house where they drank to "A speedy and honorable Peace between Great Britain and America." The American captain denied the British officer's request for a newspaper, deeming that "improper to comply with" but otherwise was exceedingly civil. After the drinks, they saw the British officer off on his launch with a handshake and his stated wish to be able to "reciprocate the civilities" in the future.

After paroling his prisoners and dropping them off at Guilford, the *Dispatch* sailed back to Falkland Island where it sent a boat ashore for unspecified reasons and then moved to Falkland Shoal where it anchored for the night in 13 fathoms in light breezes, according to the Captain's log.

When morning broke, instead of one ship to deal with there were two great men of war

The following morning, Thursday, October 13, unbeknownst to Captain Lee and any of the local militia still encamped along the bluffs, trouble was brewing fast. At 5:20, about daylight, the *Dispatch* weighed anchor and "made sail towards Negro Head" As noted earlier, most likely Captain Gallaway was using "Negro Head" as a general direction, not a specific target. His intention clearly was to go back to the site of Tuesday's engagement and check on the *Eagle*. The wind was light and from the northeast, perfect for sailing south across the Sound.

Captain Gallaway soon spotted another British warship, the *HMS Narcissus*, "at anchor, westward of Horton's Point." The *HMS Narcissus* was under the command of Captain John Rich Lumley. Though still not the 74 gun ship of Hudson's imagination, she was an even more serious opponent for the *Eagle* and the assembled militia. In British naval parlance she was a fifth-rate ship, rigged as a frigate. She carried 32 guns (probably including 32 pound carronades, long 18 pounders and some smaller cannon). With a length of 184 ft, beam of 38 feet and a displacement of 894 tons, she was nearly three times the size of the *Dispatch* and had twice as many guns.³⁰

The meet-up between the *Dispatch* and *Narcissus* appears to have been entirely fortuitous from the British perspective -- and very unlucky for Captain Lee. The log of the *Narcissus* reports that she spotted the *Dispatch* and the *Pomone's* tender soon after making sail and that the ships exchanged signal messages at 6:15. about a "schooner" on shore protected by four guns. At this point, neither captain realized they were actually dealing with a U.S. Revenue Cutter.

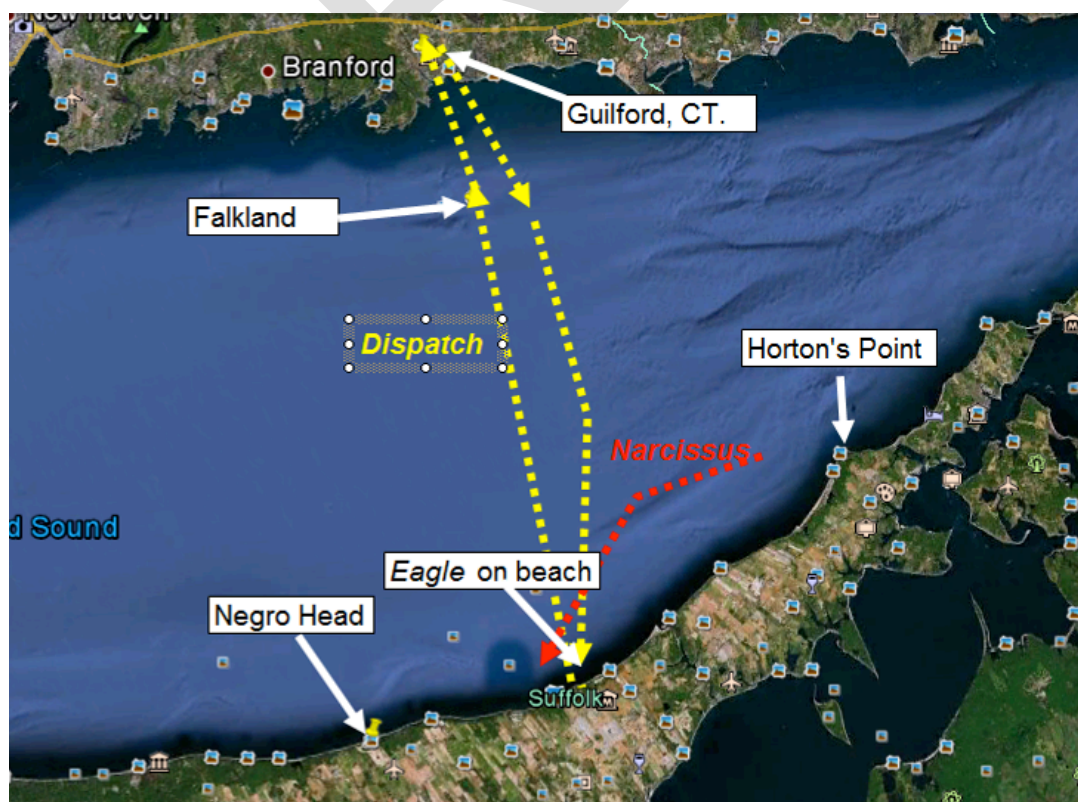
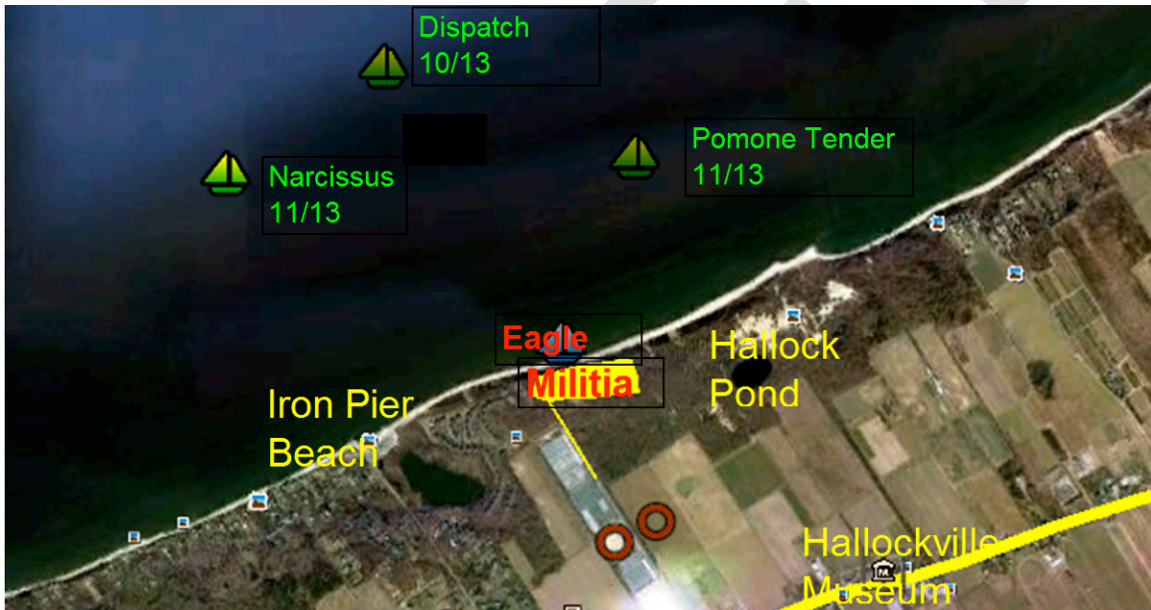


Chart showing route of *Dispatch* on Day 2 of engagement to Falkland Island and Guilford, Connecticut, and the route of the *Dispatch* and *Narcissus* back to the engagement site the morning of Day 3.

Both ships proceeded to the scene of the previous day's battle. The *Dispatch* came to and dropped anchor in 6 fathoms of water (36 feet) directly abreast of the *Eagle*. At 8:15 The *Narcissus* also came to and anchored in five fathoms (30 feet), which put it about 1,300 yards off shore, somewhat to the west of the *Dispatch*. Given the bottom profile of Long Island Sound in the area, the *Dispatch* was probably about 1,500 yards offshore. The *Pomone's* tender took up a position to the east, directly off shore from the David Halsey Hallock farm that is now the Hallockville Museum. Given its much smaller size and the high tide, it could easily have come within 700 yards of shore and possibly much closer.



This image shows the positions the three British warships took on the morning of October 13, the third and final day of the engagement.

At that point, the three British ships sent all of their boats, "mand & armd . . . with Hawsers to Have off the Schooner," according to the log of the *Narcissus*. The situation could not have been worse for Captain Lee and the crew of the *Eagle*:

On Thursday morning, at sunrise, blowing fresh from the N.N.W. saw the brig returning and the *Narcissus* frigate of 36 guns in company. I directed an alarm fired, and the cutter's anchor to be hove up which was done, and she drifted on to the bar. At 9 A.M. the ship anchored directly abreast of us; the tender sloop on our right, and the brig on the left. They manned 7 barges and launches, and as soon as they came near the shore, a heavy

fire was opened from the shipping, and at the same time with musketry from their boats.

Now, the American forces were under fire from three British warships, including the much larger *Narcissus*, from three different angles. Fortunately, the range was rather long -- about three-quarters of a mile for the two larger ships-- making accurate hits difficult for the British. Nevertheless, the thunderous broadsides must have been very frightening. The Americans, with reduced forces and diminishing ammunition, were now facing seven boats loaded with armed marines and small cannon. Even worse for the defenders, there were still about two hours to go before high tide and the ship may have been low in the water because of leaks, so instead of drifting in to shore as Lee had probably hoped, the *Eagle* was blown against the bar about 50 yards offshore. The rising tide made it relatively easy for the British to attach their hawsers to the *Eagle* and use the combined oarsmen of the seven barges to tow her off. Meanwhile, the three British warships were safely beyond the effective range of the small cannon on the cliff and way beyond the range of musket fire from the militia.

Nevertheless, the Americans fought bravely. The *Narcissus's* log reported that at 9:10 "the Enemy opened his Fire [on the boats] from the Guns on the Cliff and from his musketry". The *Dispatch's log* reported that "the Americans [were] keeping up a constant fire from the Heights on shore."

In Captain Lee's words:

Our guns were loaded nearly to the muzzles with grape and canister, and the fire reserved until they were within a [illegible] distance, and then discharged. At the same time, a well-directed fire of musketry was kept up for 3 quarters of an hour when they succeeded in getting a line to the cutter, and as the tide came in, hauled her off, and at 12 stood to the eastward with her in tow.

There was little Lee could do. He had made all the right decisions. All of his actions were very professional. None were rash, except possibly the decision to go after the *Susan* in the first place. But events and fate were against him. If the *Eagle* in fact lodged on the outer bar, it would have been at about 50 yards offshore, and about 150 yards from the militia at the top of the cliffs. While not beyond the range of musket fire, this was certainly beyond the range of accuracy.

It is worth quoting Hudson at length on this episode:

When the morning broke, instead of one ship to deal with, there were, to the astonishment of the farmers, two great men of war in the offing. The second "seventy-four" [actually only a thirty-eight] on hearing the desperate cannonading of the first day, had sailed up during the night from Gardiner's Bay to have a hand in the fight, and finding out that the little

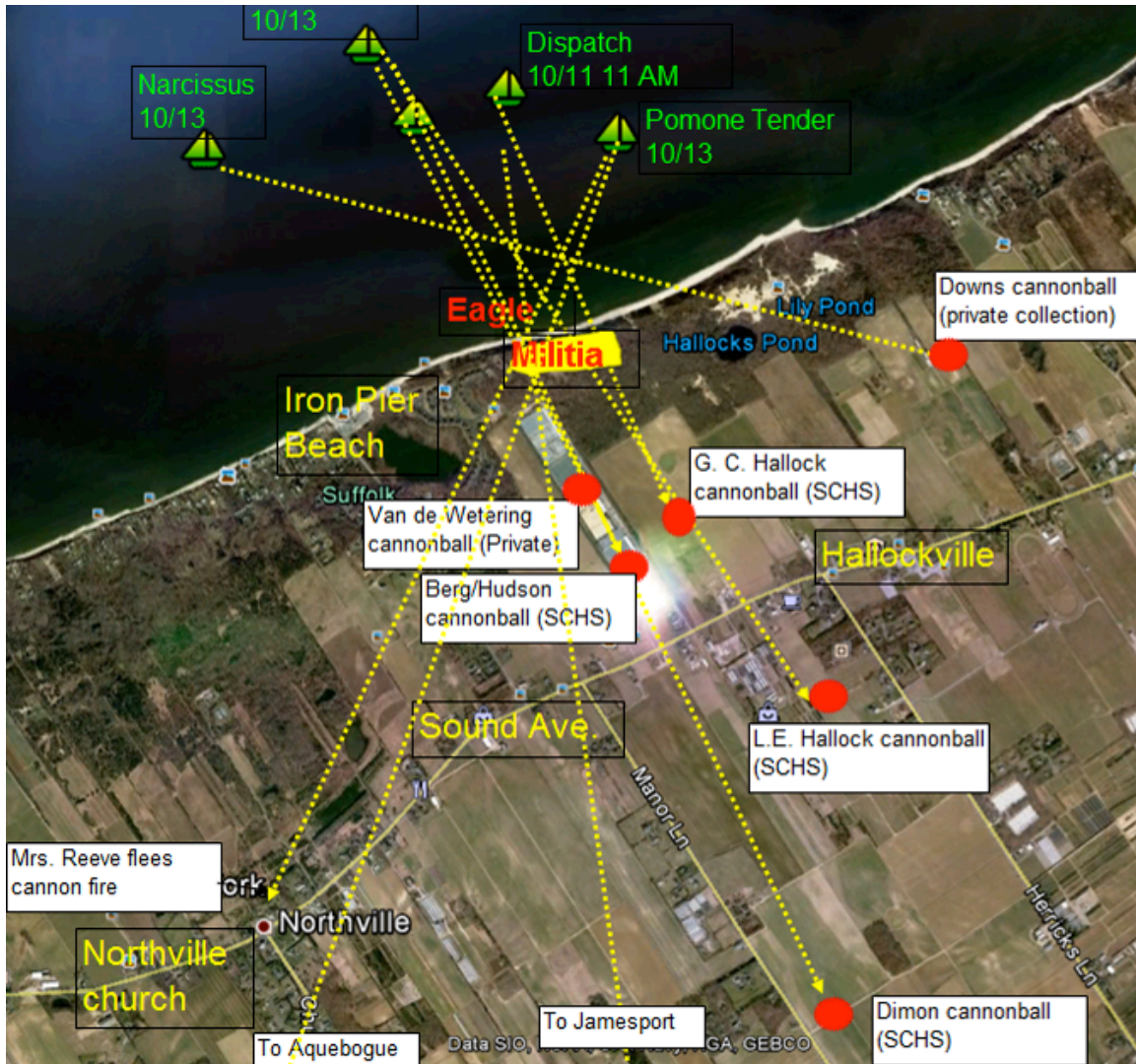
craft in the trap belonged to the navy of the States, took hold of the matter of reducing the farmers with a vim. On this second [actually third] forenoon the first ship resumed her position in front of the hill, while the newcomer shrewdly sailed east to a point opposite to Mr. Halsey Hallock's farm [now the Hallockville Museum Farm] and there came close into the land and aimed her guns west, just behind the crest of the bluff, hoping to hit the line of defense endways, and rake behind the bank so closely as to drive the farmers from the place, but ladies and gentleman, your ancestors through all that double cannonading, balls to the right of them, balls to the left of them, balls striking the sand in their faces, and balls screaming over them, and just, in many instances, clearing their scalps, stuck to their posts. I think two more efforts by the combined barges of the two ships were repulsed the second day [actually the third day], but the powder and bullets of our people were getting exhausted. My grandmother told me how they sent down for all the lead, and for bullet molds, and for wadding for that single howitzer on the bank, and how she sent up a bag full of tow and one of her old and ample petticoats to keep the little cannon going as long as possible.

When the east ship at Halsey Hallock's farm opened fire the great balls came bellowing Westward even farther than this location. So terrifying was the experience to the women who remained at home, for fear the house would be struck and crushed, that the wife of Captain Moses Reeves, living at that time at the present homestead of Mr. Horace Downs [just east of the Sound Avenue Hall], left her batch of bread in the oven of heated brick, to take care of itself, and fled southward deep into the woods, dragging her bevy of crying children into a well known hollow which can still be seen. It is needless to record that she lost her batch of bread.

So passed the time. How many approaches were made by the barges, to be met and repulsed by the stinging fire of the farmers, cannot be stated. We only know that the powder horns were getting empty, and that the return volleys missed the bass notes of the invaluable little cannon on the hill.

The British found the fire of the men on the hill was getting scanty and feeble. The patriots were compelled to use few and insufficient charges of powder, and finally forced their boat quite under the stern of the grounded vessel and fastened a long cable to the rudder. A British officer was then seen to jump forth into the water, and to wade along the fated cutter's side, and then to hack off the remaining cables with his shining sword, and then the Red Coats backed safely away to a distance, united all their barges upon the powerful cable, and our helpless farmers with their empty muskets, saw the craft and the flag move off and fall into the hands of their victorious adversaries, and the battle was over.

With at least three forays reported by Hudson and the sending back and forth of ammunition and wadding, this was a lot of action for three-quarters of an hour, the length of time recorded by Lee for the heavy firing. Although both Hudson and the Volunteer's Account speak of lack of ammunition, surprisingly, Lee does not mention that in his account. And the British captain mentioned that the Americans kept up a constant fire.



Map showing likely location of British warships at various points in the engagement and the approximate locations where cannonballs have been found subsequently. Cannonballs were found in both Aquebogue and Jamesport, about 3.5 to 4 miles from the ships.

With that, the battle for the *Eagle* was over. By 11:30 or noon, the *Dispatch* set sail to the eastward with the *Eagle* in tow, accompanied by the *Narcissus*. Only at this point did British captains learn that their prize was "the American

Revenue Schooner Eagle Pierced for 6 guns but only 2 on board" -- although Hudson assumed they had known the ship's identity from the beginning.

In one final piece of bad luck for Captain Lee, help was apparently on the way but didn't make it quite in time. Again according to Hudson:

Early in the fight, recognizing the prospect of heavy fighting, a messenger had also been dispatched to the commandment of the American Militia with headquarters at [Sag Harbor, about 45 miles away by land], then the leading town of Suffolk County, for instant aid, describing the plight of the little cruiser with the United States flag against the hovering and implacable ship.

Answering that appeal, Sag Harbor had hurried forth an armed column, with two more cannon, and a full supply of powder, to march by way of Riverhead to the scene of action. The roads in that day were too sandy, and the distance too long, and too circuitous to save the cutter. They had reached some point in Aquebogue when the cutter was captured on the third day of the battle.

Hudson recounted numerous British casualties from "the most appalling fire the Reds had met since Waterloo." He asked rhetorically, "How many of the British forces were killed and wounded in this stoutly contested engagement and also at the defense of the Nancy, we may never know." But of course we do know. Captain Gallaway of the *Dispatch* reported in his log that despite the "constant fire from the Heights on shore" they only suffered one man wounded in the entire engagement.



Recent photo at Maidstone Landing, just west of the battle site, showing the type of ridge at the top of the bluff that provided natural shelter from British cannon shot for the militia.

This put the British even with the Americans, who also suffered only one man wounded -- if we don't count the one sheep killed. The terrain near the Sound is quite rugged in this area. There was a ridge along the top of the cliffs, and the American militia took cover behind that. They used a simple strategy to stay safe. They posted a watch, and whenever the watchman saw a cannon flash he simply yelled for everyone to take cover -- which they were able to do by the time the cannon ball reached the shore about three seconds later. The low casualties were typical of the war as a whole in which only 2,260 were killed and 4,505 wounded out of more than half a million soldiers, volunteers and militia involved.³¹

The Remains of the Cutter Eagle

All that was left for the crew of the *Eagle* was to ship the "remains" -- i.e., the sails, spars, cannon and anything else Lee was able to carry the top of the cliff during the heat of battle -- back to New Haven and make their way home.³² Meanwhile, the story of the *Eagle* switches to Plum Island, off the tip of Orient Point, which the British used as a headquarters for their operations in Long Island Sound. The 44 gun frigate *Pomone*, French built, but later captured by the British, as a semi-stationary base under the command of Captain Philip Cartaret.

The *Pomone's* log recorded hailing the *Dispatch* on October 10, the day before she showed up off of Hallockville. Then on October 13, after the battle ended that morning, the log reports at 2 p.m. that it "saw the *Dispatch* coming down the sound with the *Eagle* Schooner in tow." At 4 p.m., the *Dispatch* and *Eagle* anchored by the *Pomone*. The next day, Captain Cartaret's log reported bringing a captured sloop, "*2 Friends*," along side the *Pomone* and remove her masts and sails for use on the *Eagle*. That afternoon, the log reports removing the stumps of the old masts on the *Eagle* and stopping the shot holes. Each of the next five days, the log reported that they were busy "fitting out" the captured ship. Presumably, the *Eagle* was then pressed into British service, but there is no further reference in the *Pomone's* log, although one source indicates that she was sailed to Halifax as a British prize.³³

Ironically, during the same period, the log also records that a ship came under flag of truce from New Haven to "ransom" the *Susan*, whose capture on October 10 by the *Pomone's* tender *Harold* started the chain of events that led to the loss of the *Eagle*.³⁴

Sir -- It is with extreme regret

The first incomplete account of the battle appeared that day in the *Columbian* that "The Connecticut revenue cutter *Eagle*, Capt. Lee, we have too much reason to believe, is captured by the British, after a long engagement, on Tuesday last."³⁵ This sketchy account actually anticipated the loss of the ship and was based mostly on observations from a high point on the Connecticut shore.

Two days after the battle, on Saturday, October 15, while still in Riverhead, Captain Lee wrote a report to his commanding officer. The letter begins with what must have been difficult words for Lee to write:

SIR -- It is with extreme regret I have to inform you of the loss of the revenue cutter *Eagle*, lately under my command.

The letter ends:

The officers and crew, together with the volunteers on board the cutter, have done their duty as become American sailors. Much praise is due to the Militia of this and the surrounding towns for the promptness in meeting, and a cool determination to repel any attack upon their shores."

Over the next couple of weeks, the story ricocheted around American newspapers, as news articles generally did in those days, with papers reprinting each other's stories.

Captain Lumley of the *Narcissus* sent a report up the chain of command to Vice-Admiral Alexander Cochrane, commander of the American Station for the British.

That report eventually led to this terse account of the engagement in the *London Gazette*:

And from Captain Lumley, of His Majesty's ship *Narcissus*, dated off Negro Head, the 13th October, stating that, on that day, the boats of the *Narcissus* and *Dispatch*, under Lieutenant Scott, of the former, brought out from under the fire of a battery, and of a number of militia, the American revenue schooner *Eagle*, pierced for ten guns, but only two mounted.³⁶

This 62-word item appears to be the only mention in the British press, and the main source of the misinformation in historians' accounts that the battle was off of Negro Head in Baiting Hollow. The number of guns for which the *Eagle* was pierced had grown from six in the *Narcissus*'s log to ten in the press account. But, either way, the four missing guns were those taken to the top of the cliff.

And, with this, the *Eagle* passed into the realms of myth and history. It first emerges into Coast Guard lore in 1880 when Horatio Davis Smith reprinted without comment a newspaper account of the engagement in his *Early History of the United States Revenue Marine Service 1789-1849*.³⁷ And the story on the Long Island side doesn't reappear until Hudson starts his efforts in 1898 to have a monument erected to the battle and the earlier engagement at Penny's landing. Hudson died in 1913 without achieving this goal, but the local chapter of the Daughters of the Revolution (a competitor to the Daughters of the American Revolution) took up Hudson's cause by publishing his essay in the *Riverhead News* in 1924 as part of their effort to raise funds for the monument. They finally succeeded in erecting the monument two years later in 1926.

History is a collection of facts and remembrances seen through the lenses of individual actors and observers. We will never know exactly what happened during those three October days in 1814. Two hundred years later we can only weigh the evidence and make our best efforts at piecing it together in to a coherent story.



Monument erected in 1926 by the local chapter of the Daughters of the Revolution to commemorate the successful defense of the sloop Nancy at Penny's Landing in May 1814 and the unsuccessful defense of the Eagle (incorrectly called the "Nathan Hale" on the plaque) at Luce's Landing nearly five months later.

¹ Samuel Terry Hudson, "An Account of the Battles at Penny's Landing and Luce's Landing, June 1814," reprinted by Hallockville Museum Farm in 1990 from *Riverhead News*, August 5, 1924, with an introduction by Courtney T. Burns. The *Riverhead News* article was in turn reprinted from a paper Hudson presented to the Suffolk County Historical Society in 1899.

² William R. Wells, II, "US Revenue Cutters Captured in the War of 1812," *American Neptune*, Vol 58, Number 3, p 237-239., 1998 (Wells was a USCG retiree with an academic interest in its history). Wells cites as his main source Horatio Davis Smith, "the United States Revenue Marine," *The United States Magazine* (new series), August, 1880) 234-243 [reprinted several times later, see original for more notes]. (Smith was a Captain Commandant of the USRCS). Other accounts of the engagement include: Melvin H. Jackson, "The Defense of the Revenue Cutter Eagle; or a New View on Negro Head", c. 1960, MSS, online (Jackson was working on an exhibit about Coast Guard history for the Smithsonian); Paul H. Johnson, "The Search for Captain Frederick Lee," *Bulletin*, March/April 1977 (Johnson was a curator at eh USCG Museum); William H. Thiesen, "Captain Frederick Lee and Cutter Eagle in the War of 1812," *Coast Guard Alumni Association Bulletin*, June 2012 (Thiesen is Alantic Area Historian for the USCG).

³ U.S.C.G., "U.S. Revenue Cutters in the War of 1812", Web.

⁴ Smith, "US Revenue Marine," 23-24 [get proper full title].

⁵ Thiesen, "Captain Frederick Lee."

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- ⁶ Marilyn E. Weigold, *The American Mediterranean*, p. 33.
- ⁷ Riverhead convened a special town meeting on July 13th, 1812. RTR, 292-295.
- ⁸ *Columbian*, June 4, 1814.
- ⁹ *Columbian*, June 4, 1814.
- ¹⁰ Hudson, p.4-7., reprinted from Thompson's History of Long Island 258-259
- ¹¹ Geoffrey K. Fleming, "The H.M.S. Sylph," Southold Historical Society. Southoldhistoricalsociety.org, p. 1-3.. The Southold Historical Society has some artifacts from the Sylph in its collection.
- ¹² *Columbian*, October 13, 1814.
- ¹³ A dispatch dated October 11 from York, Baltimore Patriot, October 15, 1814; *Columbian*, October 14, 1814; Boston Daily Advertiser, October 15, 1814
- ¹⁴ *Repertory*, October 18, 1814.
- ¹⁵ *Connecticut Journal*, October 17, 1814.
- ¹⁶ Horatio Davis Smith, "The United States Revenue Marine," *The United States Magazine* (new series), August, 1880) 234-243 [reprinted several times late].
- ¹⁷ *Connecticut Herald*, October 25, 1814.
- ¹⁸ Thiesen, "Captain Frederick Lee."
- ¹⁹ *London Gazette*, December 17, 1814, p. 2466.
- ²⁰ Melvin H. Jackson, "The Defense of the Revenue Cutter Eagle; or a New View on Negro Head", c. 1960, MSS, online
- ²¹ Edmund M. Blunt, "Chart of Long Island Sound," *American Coast Pilot*, William Hooker, New York, 1822. the same chart likely appeared in earlier versions of the book.
- ²² *Connecticut Journal*, October 17, 1814.
- ²³ *Connecticut Journal*, October 17, 1814, *Repertory*, October 18, 1814 and *Connecticut Herald*, October 25, 1814.
- ²⁴ News article dated New Haven, May 31, reprinted in *New-England Palladium*, June 3, 1814
- ²⁵ "Eagle, 1809", U.S. Coast Guard History Program, [available on Web]
- ²⁶ See Richard Wines, *Fertilizer in America*, p. _____.
- ²⁷ Bessie Hallock, "Autobiography of an Old House," MSS, Virginia Wines Albums; Hallock family diaries record participation in the fishing company.
- ²⁸ Jackson, p. 12-13.
- ²⁹ Letter from Mrs. R. A. Penny to Mrs. E. W. Tooker, January 6, 1925, MSS, SCHS. The letter describes a cannonball Mrs. Penny, then living in Connecticut, has that was found by the mother of Isaac Reeve of Aquebogue. His mother was Sarah Jane Swezey, who also grew up in Aquebogue. So I assume that she found it on her family's farm there. Although the letter says the cannonball was from the *Sylph* off of "Terry's Landing" (another name for Penny's Landing) where there was an engagement in June 1814 as she describes, an 18 pound ball does not match the armament of the *Sylph*. Consequently, this cannonball must have been fired from the *Pomone* Tender. Todd Tuthill has a cannon ball found in a cistern on the George Tuthill house at 1291 Main Road, Jamesport, about three miles form the battle site.
- ³⁰ "Naval Database", <http://www.pbenyon.plus.com/18-1900/N/03174.html>. Other sources give slightly different list of armaments.
- ³¹ Donald R. Hickey, *The War of 1812: A forgotten Conflict*, University of Illinois Press, 1989, p. 302.
- ³² Wells, "US Revenue Cutters," p. 238-9, describes an inventory taken after the "remains' were returned to New Haven on the sloop *Lutor*, but does not give a source.
- ³³ Boston *Daily Advertiser*, December 19, 1814, cited in U.S. Coast Guard History Program, "Eagle, 1809," p. 4.
- ³⁴ Captain's Log, *HMS Pomone*, July 1, 1808 - September 4, 1815, MSS, British Archives.
- ³⁵ *Columbian*, October 13, 1814.
- ³⁶ *London Gazette*, December 17, 1814, p. 2466.
- ³⁷ Smith, *Early History*.