

The material in this file is excerpted from the following sources:

Maryland War of 1812 Battlefields, Selected Skirmishes, Encampments, Earthworks and Riot Sites. R.E. Eshelman, 2000;

Maryland Revolutionary War and War of 1812 Battlefields/ Skirmish and Associated Historic Properties Survey. Eshelman et al, 2002).

KEDGES STRAITS BATTLE (also called the Battle of the Barges and Battle of Cages Straits).

Dates - Beginning: 11/30/1782 **Ending:** 11/30/1782 **Duration of Engagement:** Began about 9:30 a.m. with actual combat lasting less than one hour

War: Revolutionary War **Campaign:** Chesapeake Campaign of 1782

Location: no street address (nearest island location): Bounded by Chesapeake Bay on the west, Salt Marsh Island on the north, Smith Island on the south, and Tangier Sound on east, Somerset County, Maryland

Quad name(s): Kedges Straits, Terrapin Sand Point, Great Fox Island

Maryland Inventory Historic Property Number: none

ABPP Site ID: no ABPP Site ID assigned

Summary: Here on November 30, 1782, in Kedges Straits, was fought the largest and bloodiest naval engagement in Maryland during the Revolutionary War and the last major naval battle of the Revolutionary War (over a year after the siege of Yorktown and on the very day that peace between England and the colonies was signed in Europe), known as the "Battle of the Barges," "Battle of the Kedges" and "Cages Strait"). On November 27 Virginia Loyalist John Kidd, in command of a fleet of barges manned by Tory "refugees," and escaped slaves, was observed by an American force under the command of Commodore Zedekiah Walley [Whaley]. Next morning off the lower lee of Tangier Island the Americans saw that the British had seven (some accounts claim only six) armed barges of which Kidd commanded the barge *Kidnapper*. The American force consisted of the armed barge *Protector*, commanded by Walley; the armed barge *Defence*, commanded by Solomon Frazier; the armed barge *Terrible*, commanded by Robert Dashiell, the armed barge *Fearnaught* commanded by Levin Speddin; and a supply ship *Flying Fish* commanded by Daniel Bryan. Because of the superior number of British barges, a request was made to the American forces at Onancock, Virginia, to supply the barges *Langodoc* and *Victory*, both captured from the British earlier on separate occasions. *Victory* could not keep up with the other barges and was eventually ordered back to Virginia. In the early morning light of November 30th, the American flotilla, manned in part by unseasoned volunteers, gave chase toward the British flotilla now located at Kedge's Strait. By 9 a.m. the British hove to and formed a line, rowing toward the oncoming Americans. The *Flying Fish* and *Langodoc* lagged behind and never took part in the action. By half past nine Kidd opened fire at about two hundred yards. *Defence* returned fire first, followed by *Protector* and *Dreadnaught*. Dashiell's *Terrible* for some unexplained reason dropped back. The British now outnumbering the Americans two to one concentrated their fire on the *Protector*. In the heat of the battle some powder from a carelessly handled cartridge spilt and a spark ignited it which lead to an ammunition chest in the stern. It exploded followed by a second exploding ammunition chest. Bodies were hurled into the air and men with burning clothes jumped into the water and still

others leap from the barge to escape the flames. The explosion was so terrific that some nearby Tories were also disabled. Confused and with no leader, *Dreadnaught* and *Defense* withdrew toward the *Terrible* leaving *Protector* alone to face the Tories. After fierce hand to hand combat all the officers of the *Protector* were either killed or wounded and struck their colors.

Principal Military Leaders Present

USA: Commodore Zedekiah Walley

Tory: John Kidd, commander of Tory fleet

Principal Military Units Involved

USA: Armed barge *Protector*, commanded by Walley; the armed barge *Defence*, commanded by Solomon Frazier; the armed barge *Terrible*, commanded by Robert Dashiell, the armed barge *Fearnaught* commanded by Levin Speddin; supply ship *Flying Fish* commanded by Daniel Bryan; and barge *Langodoc*. *Flying Fish* and *Langodoc* lagged behind and never took part in the action.

Tory: Seven (some accounts claim only six) armed barges, Kidd commanded the barge *Kidnapper*.

Number of Troops Present

USA: Total strength unknown but sixty-five men manned *Proctor*

Tory: Total strength unknown but well over 100 men.

Number of Casualties

USA: All the casualties were crew of *Proctor* of whom twenty-five were killed or drowned and twenty-nine were wounded; an unknown number of whom also later died. Captain George Christian was among those killed

Tory: Captain Allen of one of the Tory barges was killed as well as eighteen other men either killed or wounded. Captain Kidd of *Kidnapper* was also badly wounded.

Numbers of Troops Missing

USA: None; but some were captured and later exchanged.

Tory: None; but some were captured and later exchanged.

Intensity of Engagement: canon and musket fire between ships and ultimately hand to hand

combat.

Owner/Zoning: N/A - Entire engagement took place on Maryland waters.

Threats to Battlefield/Skirmish Site: None unless dredging is conducted in area.

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Defining Feature Inventory (such features are very limited for a naval engagement):

1. Kedge's Straits (or Cageys Straits) - "at the head of Cagey's Straits we fell in with and engaged the enemy" (Col. Cropper letter to Col. Davis, Dec. 6, 1782); "sent on board a small schooner... to gain information, who informed us that the British Barges certainly lay in Cages straits" (Levin Handy letter to William Paca, December 13, 1782); Captain Kidd's force was then under easy sail standing westward through Cager's Straits (Smith and Earle, p. 243)

2. Fox Island (erosion has divided the island today into Little and Great Fox Islands) - "At about 10 P.M. came to off Fox Island" (Levin Handy letter to William Paca, December 13, 1782).

3. Annemessex River - "Longodoc and Flying Fish went into Annamessex [Annemessex]" (Smith and Earle, p. 244)

Primary Source Accounts:

Colonel John Cropper, Jr., letter to Colonel William Davies in Richmond, Virginia, December 6, 1782; reprinted in Isaac W. K. Handy, *Annals and Memorials of the Handys and Their Kindred*, William L. Clements Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1992.

...On the 30th at the head of Cagey's Straits we fell in with and engaged the enemy. When we approached them, within about three hundred yards, and the fire began to be serious, our barges all ran away except the Commodore's [*Protector*] in which was Major Smith Snead, Captain Thomas Parker, Captain William Snead, myself an five other volunteers. This dastardly conduct of our comrades, brought on our barge the whole fire of the enemy, which was very severe, and it was as severely answered by the *Protector*, until the enemy's six barges were within fifty yard, when most unfortunately, the cartridges of our short eighteen-pounders caught fire amidships; explosion of which burned three or four people to death, caused five or six more all afire to leap overboard, and the alarm of the barge blowing up made several others swim for their lives. The Enemy, almost determined to retreat from our fire, as they told us afterwards, took new spirit at this disaster, and pushed up with redoubled fury. On the other hand, our people opposed them with the most daring resolution, there was one continual shower of musket bullets, pikes, cold shot, cutlasses, and iron stantials for eight or ten minutes, till greatly overpowered by numbers, and having all the officers of the barge killed and wounded we struck to them, after having

wounded their Commodore, killed one Captain, wounded another, killed and wounded several of their inferior officers, and killed and wounded fifteen of the *Kidnapper's* crew, the barge which first boarded us. Commodore Wally was shot down, a little before the enemy boarded, acting the part of cool intrepid gallant officer. Captain Joseph Handy fell nigh the same time nobly fighting with one arm, after the loss of the other. Captain Levin Handy was badly wounded. There went into action in the *Protector*, sixty-five men; twenty-five of them were killed and drowned, twenty-nine were wounded, some of which are since dead, and eleven only escaped being wounded, most of which had heaped into the water to save themselves from the explosion. At the foot you have a particular account of the loss sustained by the volunteers on board the *Protect...*

Major Smith Snead was wounded with a cutlass in the head, a boarding pike in the arm and a contusion of a cold shot in his body.

Captain William Snead was wounded in the head with a cutlass, and had his arm broken with a musket ball.

Captain George Christian was killed with a musket ball.

Mr. John Revell was wounded in the arm with a musket ball and in the head with a cutlass.

Captain Thomas Parker, Mr. William Gibb, and Mr. Evans escaped being wounded by leaping overboard at the alarm of the barge blowing up.

Myself was wounded with a cutlass in the head, slightly by a pike on the face & thigh, slightly by a cutlass on the shoulder, and after the surrender was knocked down by a four-pounder rammer, the blow with which was unfortunately near the same place where the cutlass hit...

Levin Handy letter to William Paca, December 13, 1782; reprinted in Isaac W. K. Handy, *Annals and Memorials of the Handys and Their Kindred*, William L. Clements Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1992 [pp. 116-119]).

I make no doubt before this you have been informed of Commodore Walley's misfortune; however it is probable it may be imperfect. As I am the only officer from the Commodore to the gunner's mate that survived, I shall endeavor to relate the circumstances as nearly as my memory will admit. On Wednesday, 27th November, we lay in Onancock, where we had been windbound for several days, which detained us from pushing after the enemy, who, we were informed, were on the seaside at Chinqateague [Chicoteague] Island; but the wind which detained us brought them into the Chesapeake. The number of barges we had an account of, were six. On Wednesday, the day above mentioned, we got out of Onancock about 1 P.M., in order to meet a small privateer, which we were informed was lying off Watts Island with four prizes. As soon as we cleared Onacock bar, we discovered seven sail bearing S.S.W., which we soon discovered to be barge rigged, one of which had the appearance of being a galley. Capt. Bryan, in our supply boat, making much better weather than we, stood near them, and on his return, informed us that it was his opinion, that one was a galley, which confirmed a report we had of a galley joining them. They stood their cruise for the Tangier. It was then generally concluded (though I must confess, contrary to the Commodore's or my own opinion) to push after them to the Tangier coast, where it was supposed they would come to. Upon finding it would be impossible to gain them before

night, I was much against pushing them, and gave such reasons to the Commodore, that he determined not to risk an engagement in the night, (I imagine that if I had never seen anything of the kind in the night, I might have been as anxious as any other officer, but from what I had experienced in the land service, convinced me, that expeditions in the night gave a shock to the greatest veteran.) It was then concluded to make Watts Island harbor, which was from the enemy's place of rendezvous about 3 leagues, and about 7 P.M., came to the harbor before mentioned, in a gale of wind at S.W.

It was the Commodore's intention to reconnoitre the enemy the next day, and endeavor to gain their force; if a galley was among them, he was determined not to attack them; but if only the six barges which we gained every information of that was necessary, and being convinced were not able to stand our force, it was the determination of the Commodore to make an attack, there not being a doubt among any of the officers but we were very able to drub them; and some of the officers were sanguine enough to think we ought to attack if there was a galley among them. However, the wind being at N.W. on the next day, put it out of our power to reconnoitre the enemy, as they lay almost in the wind's eye from us. In the evening it was determined to return to Onancock, which harbor we reached a little before dark. The Commodore sent an express to Col. John Cropper, commanding officer of Accomac county, soliciting a few men in order to completely man our barges, as well as a barge and galley that belonged to Accomac and then at Onancock. The next morning (Friday) being moderate, the Commodore dispatched the Defence, Capt. Frazier, to reconnoitre the enemy. At 10 A.M. Col. Cropper joined us with about 50 militia, which completely manned the Onancock barge. We then got under way, and stood out, and about 1 P.M. came to without the bar, where we were to await the return of Capt. Frazier, and about 3 o'clock he joined us and said he had been in the harbor where the enemy had been two nights last, and that we might rest assured there were only six barges, and that the seventh sail which we saw, was a prize to them, and that they had that morning got under way and stood up Tangier sound. Upon this information it was concluded to discharge the Onancock galley, and only take such volunteers as would act on board our State barges. Col. Cropper and sundry other gentlemen came on board the Commodore, who nearly or fully manned us. About 4 P.M. got under way and stood up the sound, and manned a small barge which we took from the enemy on the 16th Nov., the command of which was given to Lieut. Samuel Handy of the Protector. At about 10 P.M. came to off Fox Island. I was then ordered by the Commodore on board of Lieut. S. Handy, to go on shore and gain what intelligence I could of the enemy. I accordingly landed and was informed the British barges passed there that afternoon and stood for Cages Straits. At 4 P.M. (A.M.) Saturday morning got under way and stood up the sound; at daylight sent on board a small schooner which lay above James Island to gain information, who informed us that the British Barges certainly lay in Cages straits, as he had seen their lights just at the break of day. The Commodore then informed the other barges of the same, and let them know his opinion the enemy's barges push would be at him, and requested they would take notice and support him; which they all positively declared they would do, or all sink together. At 8 A.M. we discovered the enemy's barges under way, bearing from us, as we supposed, endeavoring to make their escape-however they soon hove to. We then knew they meant to make battle, and continued our course, bearing down on them. At about 9 ½ A.M. the action commenced at long shot, between our barge and the enemy's but reserved our shot from our long 18 pounder until we thought it was in our power with round and grape to sink them. However, it

had not the desired effect, though it gave them a considerable shock. Our long 18 pounder was but twice fired when by accident one of our ammunition chests blew up which confused us greatly; we discharged her afterwards, and before we could charge and direct her again, three of the enemy's barges were alongside, when the second ammunition chest took fire, which caused several of our men to jump overboard and disabled many others. Upon that, and seeing our barges did not give us the assistance we expected, and they falling astern, I spoke to the Commodore and asked him if he thought we had not better strike: who returned for answer, we should not. I then gave all the attention to our musketry in my power, every thing being in the greatest confusion. The ammunition which blew up, belonged to the short 18 pounders on our side, which rendered them useless. The Commodore fell soon after their musketry began to play upon us, and Lieut. Joseph Handy near the conclusion of the action. We being much overpowered, and our men chiefly driven from their quarters, the general cry on board, was for quarters which our enemy's positively refused. We were soon boarded by their blacks, and little mercy shown to any of us. I received seven wounds, but am happy to inform you that none of them are mortal.

I am at a loss to know what to think of Frazier and Spedden; Their behavior was exceedingly odd, though I do not think they are cowards; as to Dashiell I pronounce him a coward -- and as such I hope he will be treated. Lt. Samuel Handy, who commanded the small barge, I believe did as well as he could. He never left us (although he could do us little good) until all the other barges were on the flight. Capt. Bryan in the supply boat was to have been up, but was prevented by the breezes falling, which was I believe fortunate as I am doubtful he never could have got off.

I must beg you must excuse any incorrectness in this, as you may rest assured I have not been able to sit up as long since I received my wounds, as I have since I begun this letter.

N.B. -- It was generally supposed the action lasted 25 minutes.

[Non-contemporary account] *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, February 7, 1857.

...Com. W[haley]. was sufficiently reinforced to sail in pursuit of the enemy, whom he found drawn up in order of battle of Tangier Island, awaiting his approach. The American fleet now consisted of four sail nominally, one of which had been, as above mentioned, pressed into service to covey the additional volunteers, who insisted on engaging in the fight. The British fleet, as before said, consisted of six barges. As might naturally be expected, the motley force of Com. Whaley, part of whom had never been accustomed to the sea at all, could be under no kind of discipline, nor was there any order of battle arranged beforehand, with the exception that whichever captain laid his barge alongside that of an enemy was the best fellow.

Com. Whaley was brave even to rashness. So eager was he to join battle with the enemy, and such exertions did his crew make at the sweeps, that he engaged the whole British fleet before the remainder of his force came with gun-shot. Now ensued one of the most sanguinary sea-fight that occurred at any time during the war on this coast. Whaley received the fire of the British fleet at a distance, and then, without returning it, dashed into their midst, reserving his fire until within pistol-shot, when his guns served with such skill and rapidity, directing his whole fire upon one of the enemy as long she resisted, and then taking the next in turn, until four of their vessels had struck their flags, when his victorious career was checked by the explosion of his own magazine, which was occasioned by the carelessness of one of his men in carrying a

cartridge uncovered across the deck to his gun. By this terrible disaster the greater part of the officers and many of the crew were killed and wounded, and the vessel totally disabled. So close were they to one of the British barges that many of the enemy were also disabled.

Now the hastiness of the American commodore was strikingly evident. Four of the British barges had struck their flags, and a fifth had with his own vessel been disabled by the explosion. There was now left, but one of the British vessels to cope with the remaining three American barges. But the barge that had been manned by the volunteer force, for want of a practical seaman to direct her course, was now fast aground upon the tail of a mud-bank, just out of gun-shot, where the agonized crew could watch the fight without being able to strike a blow, either in the victorious combat of their fleetier friends, or to help them while sinking. The crews of the two remaining vessels, however, when they saw the disastrous termination of the fight, tacked ships, and *ingloriously fled!* Fled, too, at the moment of victory, when the only remaining British vessel must have instantly surrendered upon their approach!

Sources

1. Cropper, Colonel John, Jr., letter to Colonel William Davies in Richmond, Virginia, December 6, 1782; reprinted in Isaac W. K. Handy, *Annals and Memorials of the Handys and Their Kindred*.
2. Handy, Levin letter to William Paca, December 13, 1782; reprinted in Isaac W. K. Handy, *Annals and Memorials of the Handys and Their Kindred*.
3. Smith, Myron, Jr., and John G. Earle, "The Maryland State Navy," in Eller, Ernest McNeill, editor, *Chesapeake Bay in the American Revolution* (Centreville: Maryland: Tidewater Publishers, 1981), 600 p.

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Secondary:

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- Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 3(61):145-6, February 7, 1857.
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