

Towns remember devastating British attack, response in 'Light Up the Night'

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Volunteers with the Old Lyme Historical Society fire their muskets over the Connecticut River Tuesday, commemorating the bicentennial of the British raid on Connecticut River shipping in the War of 1812 during the "Light Up the Night" event at the waterfront on Ferry Road in Old Lyme. Go online at www.theday.com to see a gallery of more photos from the event.

Old Lyme - As a bonfire glowed by the Connecticut River on Tuesday, residents commemorated a night 200 years ago when citizens lined the shores to thwart the British retreat after a raid on Essex.

"The shipping in the whole harbor has been destroyed," announced a lantern-bearing messenger to the crowd, after drums sounded on the town's dinghy dock.

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Tuesday marked the bicentennial of a British attack two years into the War of 1812 that burned 27 ships at the ship-building center of Pettipaug, the historic name for Essex. Old Saybrook, Essex and Old Lyme were commemorating the event Tuesday in "Light Up the Night" re-enactments along the river.

During the war, the British had been blockading Long Island Sound and running ships aground along the shoreline. The British then attacked Essex in the early-morning hours of April 8, allegedly in retaliation for an attempted raid on a ship by local Americans.

The raid had a devastating effect on the ships in the harbor, and residents Tuesday learned that "vessels large and small" were destroyed.

"You can hardly name a shipping family in the valley that has not suffered great loss," said the event's narrator, Mark Lander, the co-chairman of the Old Lyme Historical Society.

As day turned to night on April 8, 1814, residents and local militia lit bonfires to detect the retreating British after the shipbuilding loss. To thwart the British, American citizens began firing at the retreating British along the Connecticut River. The British were able to escape successfully, though two sailors were wounded.

Town resident Matt LaConti brought his two daughters Ada, 7, and Celia, 9, to the event to be a part of local history and learn about the events that took place years ago.

"I like them to learn about history," he said, "and we have a lot of it here."

For more information about the British attack on the town of Essex, Connecticut
<http://connecticuthistory.org/the-british-raid-on-essex/>

Also see: <http://www.amazon.com/The-British-Raid-Essex-Connecticut/dp/0819574767>

BOOK: THE BRITISH RAID UPON ESSEX, THE FORGOTTEN BATTLE OF THE WAR OF 1812
By Jerry Roberts

This is the dynamic account of one of the most destructive maritime actions to take place in Connecticut history: the 1814 British attack on the privateers of Pettipaug, known today as the British Raid on Essex. During the height of the War of 1812, 136 Royal marines and sailors made their way up the Connecticut River from warships anchored in Long Island Sound. Guided by a well-paid American traitor the British navigated the Saybrook shoals and advanced up the river under cover of darkness. By the time it was over, the British had burned twenty-seven American vessels, including six newly built privateers. It was the largest single maritime loss of the war. Yet this story has been virtually left out of the history books—the forgotten battle of the forgotten war. This new account from author and historian Jerry Roberts is the definitive overview of this event and includes a wealth of new information drawn from recent research and archaeological finds. Lavish illustrations and detailed maps bring the battle to life

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