

FORT BILLINGSPOINT

Birthplace of Homeland Security

On the morning of July 5, 1776, the Second Continental Congress authorized the Committee of Safety to purchase a 96 acre tract of farm land in Billingsport, New Jersey (a section of Paulsboro). This was the first land purchase made by the United States of America. As such, it became the "Birthplace of Homeland Security."

The Committee of Safety was charged with the security and defense of the national capital in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Billingsport was chosen as one 13 alarm posts that stretched from Cape Henlopen, Delaware to Point No Point, Pennsylvania.

In January 1776, the Committee of Safety recommended that a fort be constructed at Billingsport to protect the anchorage for a chevaux-de-frise. The Delaware River turns and narrows at this location. There is also a high bluff that provided a commanding location for a fortification.

During late August 1776, Thaddeus Kosciuszko was commissioned as a Colonel. Kosciuszko was a Polish citizen who had studied military engineering and artillery in Paris. General George Washington immediately sent Kosciuszko to Billingsport to select the exact location and draw plans for a fort. More than 1,000 laborers and skilled workman quickly began construction of Fort Billingsport. The fort was composed of a redoubt with an unfinished northwest bastion and armed with five cannons.

During October 1776, The British Navy departed from Staten Island, New York headed for Philadelphia. The Committee for Safety immediately sank the chevaux-de-frise to block the Delaware River at Billingsport.

The chevaux-de-frise, consisted of a series of large boxes, each about 30 feet square, chained together across the river channel. Stone ballast sunk the boxes below the water's surface and iron-tipped posts jutted up from the boxes.

General Washington realized little time was left before the British would threaten the Delaware River defenses. He wrote to the Pennsylvania Board of War:

I am afraid from the Situation of Billingsport, that the works which you are constructing there, cannot be supported, if an attack is made upon it by land, and I should therefore think that a small work with a few pieces of heavy Cannon, would be all that would be necessary (about 300 troops).

The British fleet rendezvoused with the blockading squadron at the Delaware Capes. After learning from Loyalists of the river defenses along the Delaware and the chevaux-de-frise at Billingsport, the British commanders decided to attack Philadelphia through the back door. The fleet sailed up the Chesapeake and disembarked in Maryland, 57 miles from Philadelphia.

During late September 1777, two British regiments consisting of infantry and a battery of light artillery crossed the Delaware River into New Jersey about six miles south of Billingsport. On October 2, 1777, 1,500 seasoned British troops attached and occupied Fort Billingsport.

The guerilla tactics of the New Jersey militia resulted in losses to British soldiers foraging for food and supplies. As a result, on October 5th the British army evacuated Fort Billingsport. They left in such a hurry that an American detail of soldiers close upon their heels found "all our own guns and one of which was a twelve pounder they had taken out the spike and left it open."

October 7, 1777 the British returned to disable the chevaux-de-frise. About a week later, a gap in chevaux-de-frise was opened enough to get the British Warship Roebuck through. Americans sent "two chains of fire rafts" downriver and the Roebuck retreated. A dispatch from General Washington written on November 6, 1777 stated, "I beg liberty to repeat that Billingsport is of far more Importance than all the Forts and Gallies put together..."

On April 4–5, 1778 American forces attempted to surprise about 150 Loyalists entrenched at Fort Billingsport. The Loyalists remained in control of Fort Billingsport until the British evacuated Philadelphia in June 1778. For the remainder of the Revolutionary War, Fort Billingsport was staffed by three soldiers and four pieces of heavy artillery.

The Revolutionary War formally came to a close with the signing of the Treaty of Paris on September 3, 1783. Fort Billingsport was left to deteriorate.

During the War of 1812, Fort Billingsport was utilized for an encampment of a militia brigade of 1,300 men.

During 1814, Fort Billingsport was rehabilitated and converted to a military training center. By April 1825, the fort was described as “a desolate place - not a single post or rail of the fences to be seen nor a vestige of any building”

In December 1834, the United States Secretary of War sold the 96-acre tract to Joseph C. Gill and his partner John Ford for \$2,000.