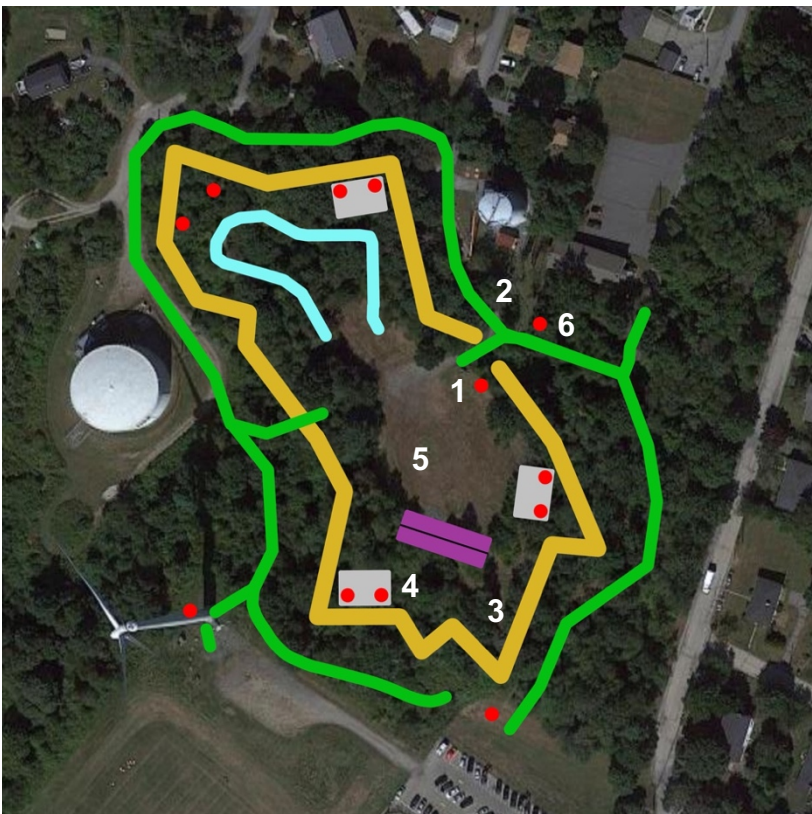




A Tour of Butts Hill Fort

Portsmouth, Rhode Island



Butts Hill Fort Tour Stops

1. **Introduction:** Entrance
2. **North/East Rampart and Moat:** British
3. **Southern:** Siege of Newport
4. **SW Corner:** Battle of Rhode Island
5. **Parade Grounds:** French/American
6. **Monument:** Dedication

2023 Background for Tours

Gloria Schmidt

Part 1: *An Introduction*

We welcome you to Butts Hill Fort. It may be difficult to understand what you can see today at Butts Hill Fort. The landscape doesn't quite make sense, but if you are fortunate to have a knowledgeable guide with you, you can imagine the fort as it used to be in 1781. The goal of this guide is to help visitors understand what they see when they come to the fort. There is nothing better than a “field trip” – actually being at an historic site. The Butts Hill Fort Restoration Committee as part of the Battle of Rhode Island Association is working towards a time when there are marked trails, observation posts of three battle vistas, signage and QR codes to scan for more information. Meanwhile, we hope this guide helps to explain what you see at the fort.

Butts Hill Fort (or Windmill Hill Fort) evolved along the way. The British called this area Windmill Hill because it was a traditional site for a windmill. The Americans called this area “Butts Hill” after the John Butts family that held the land when the war began. The outlines we are seeing date from the improvements made by the French (with the help of Americans) in 1780-1781.

There are some military terms for the parts of a fort that we have to understand.



Battery: A fortified emplacement for heavy guns or artillery pieces; companies of artillery usually had six to ten guns used together or separated based on the situation.

Rampart: A large earthen mound used to shield the inside of a fortified position from artillery fire and infantry assault.

Glacis: A defensive feature which is simply a natural or manmade slope incorporated into the defenses of a fortification. The slopes were initially designed as steep man-made slopes to deter attack on foot.

Moat: A depression surrounding the fort. Often the moat was created as a natural result of early methods of fortification by earthworks. The ditch produced by the removal of earth to form a rampart made a valuable part of the defense system.

Parade Ground: Place where soldiers practice or have parades.

Dr. Kathy Abbass wrote a plan for restoration of the fort in 2009 that has blueprints overlaid on the current terrain. They help us understand the development of the fort and the outlines of what we see today.



Some of the basic parts of the fort that we see today are:

North battery ramparts: The oldest portion of the fort. It is intact except for its south wall which opens to the parade.

South battery ramparts: The north, south and east faces of this battery's ramparts are basically intact. The West ramparts were removed during the expansion of the fort when the French and Americans modified it (1780-1781).

North and east ditch and glacis: At the base of the ramparts the moat is still recognizable, with the glacis descending to the north.

Parade ground: In the center of the fort. This parade ground is maintained and mowed on a regular basis and has been used for events and re-enactments.

Part 2: *At the North/East rampart and moat. Butts Hill in British Hands*



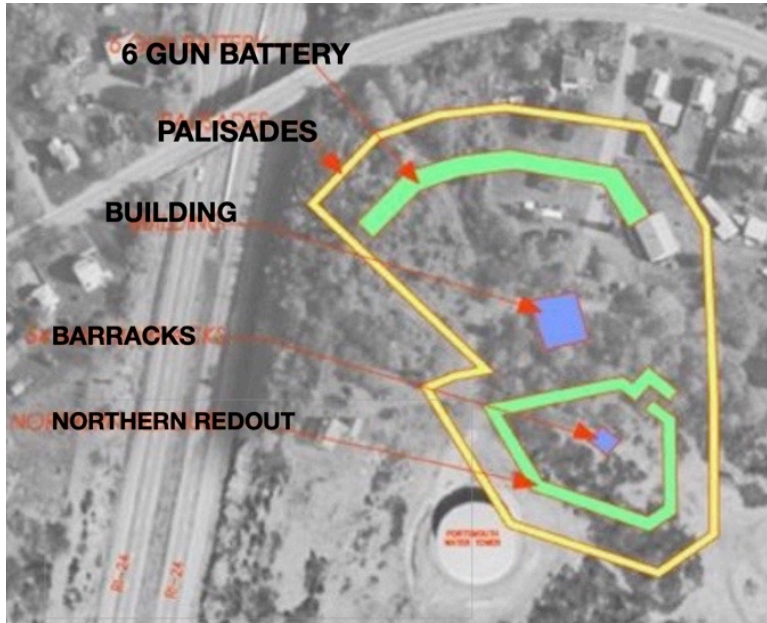
If what we see today at Butts Hill Fort is the outline of the modifications made by the French and Americans, what was the fort like just before the Battle of Rhode Island?

If we start the tour with the oldest section – the North ramparts, we could begin to discuss the British improvements to the fortifications left behind by the Americans. The diaries of British soldier Frederick Mackenzie and blueprints of the proposed fort construction can give us a good idea of the fort at what the British called “Windmill Hill.”

December 30, 1776: “The redoubt constructed by the Rebels above Bristol Ferry, and abandoned by them, is ordered to be repaired and a guard house to be erected therein for the accommodation of the advanced post. It is a much better situation for the advanced guard

than that they are now in, and the troops on duty will not be liable to accidents from the wanton firing of the Rebels on the opposite side.” (From Mackenzie diary).

We believe this to be a reference to the Butts Hill Fort in the area “above Bristol Ferry.” The Rebels had fortifications across in Bristol and they would often direct fire at the troops stationed on the Aquidneck Island side of the Bristol Ferry crossing. The order here is to repair the redoubt and build a guard house. The British are beginning construction to enlarge the American fortifications.



September 12, 1777: “As the works intended to be made for the defense of the North Part of the Island, require a good many workmen to complete them, and the duty of the Soldiers is rather severe, General Pigot sent a summons this day to the Inhabitants of the township of Portsmouth to assemble on the 15th instant at Windmill Hill in order to assist in carrying them on. They are required to work three days in the week.” (From Mackenzie diary).

September 15, 1777: “In consequence of the General’s summons to the Inhabitants of the township of Portsmouth, to assemble in order to be employed to work on the Redouts,

17 only appeared this morning at the place appointed. The Majority of the Inhabitants being Quakers, they informed the General that it was contrary to their principles to assist, in any manner in matters of War, and that therefor they could not appear. They even refuse to be employed in constructing Barracks for the accommodations of the troops.” (From Mackenzie diary).

Portsmouth residents are used as forced labor to construct fortifications for the British.

September 17, 1777: “We are at present very busy in fortifying different posts on the Island; and there are already more works planned and traced out, than can possibly be finished by the end of December.A fortified Barrick on Windmill hill for 200 men.” (From Mackenzie diary).

Blueprints of the British fort plans and an overlay done by Dr. Abbas in her plans for Butts Hill Fort help us to visualize what the fort looked like just before the Battle of Rhode Island. Some of the fortifications were in what is now a residential area. We need to know two more terms to understand the visuals.

Palisade: Typically, a fence or defensive wall made with wooden stakes or tree trunks and used as a defensive structure or enclosure. Palisades form the walls of a stockade.

Redoubt, (pronounced rih-dowt): An enclosed field work which had several sides and was used to protect a garrison from attacks from several directions. A redoubt could also extend from a permanent fortress.

Part 3: Role of Butts Hill in the Siege of Newport:

Butts Hill in American hands. We are at the southern fortifications.



The Northeastern part of the fort with its moat, glacis and ramparts remind us of the British fortifications that General Sullivan and the American troops would move into during the Siege of Newport and the Battle of Rhode Island.

The narrative of our tour of Butts Hill Fort has taken us through the British improvements to the fortifications. This part of the story takes us to the three weeks in August of 1778 when the Americans held this high position during the Siege of Newport.

Drone images from Butts Hill illustrate what a commanding view was

possible from this location. The British were concerned with the view of possible American invasions from the north from Bristol and the east from Tiverton. For the Americans, however, the view south was essential.

July 29th: d'Estaing met with American Commanders when he arrived at Point Judith. Plans called for Sullivan's American forces to cross from Tiverton to Aquidneck Island and advance to the British fortifications at Butts Hill. The French would land on Conanicut Island (Jamestown) before arriving in Newport to cut off the British forces.



August 9th: Fearing an attack, British forces abandoned Butts Hill and General Pigot withdrew his forces to Newport as the French were landing on Conanicut. Sullivan discovered that the British had abandoned Butts Hill, so he crossed over to Aquidneck and occupied the high fortifications. He called for the heavy cannon at Fox Point to be moved to Portsmouth. Sullivan was supposed to wait until August 10.

August 11: Most of the almost 10,000 American troops were camped about Butts Hill. The diary of Rev. Manasseh Cutler who served as chaplain for American General Titcomb's Brigade, provides a few glimpses of what was going on around Butts Hill. He wrote on August 11th that at 4 o'clock the whole army paraded and passed in review by the general officers. "The right wing of the army was commanded by General Greene and the left by the Marquis de Lafayette."

August 12-13: A hurricane hit that destroyed men, horses, camps and supplies on both the British and American sides. The storm caused the French Navy to abandon the attack in Newport. Rhode Island's governor (William Greene) replaced the ruined powder on the American side.

August 16: As the Americans built earthworks and dug trenches toward Newport, American reserves and the sick who were healthy enough to do garrison work remained at Butts Hill which served as Sullivan's headquarters.

August 17: Sullivan calls a Council of War. All officers recommend holding positions until they could be reinforced.

August 26: Americans now know that the British fleet is coming and that it would be at least three weeks before the French would arrive. They begin to send their heavy cannon back to northern locations like Butts Hill. The Council of War again determines to hold American positions until they could be reinforced. General Sullivan began to prepare for a retreat. He knew that enemy reinforcements were coming and his best course was to retreat. Cutler's entry on Monday, August 24th "As much of the heavy baggage moved off last night as possible. A body of men retreated to strengthen the works at Butts Hill. At the lines – heavy fire – army preparing to retreat." Cutler's story ends on August 26th when he, like many in the militias, escaped to Tiverton and away from the battle.

This was not a hasty retreat. Sullivan ordered increased defenses in the North (especially Butts Hill and fortifications guarding the Bristol Ferry and the ferry to Tiverton). He wanted to get all his weaponry out so it would not fall into enemy hands to use against them another day. In his letter to Congress after the retreat, he makes it clear that this was an "unanimous" decision to first retreat to Portsmouth and hope that the French would return.

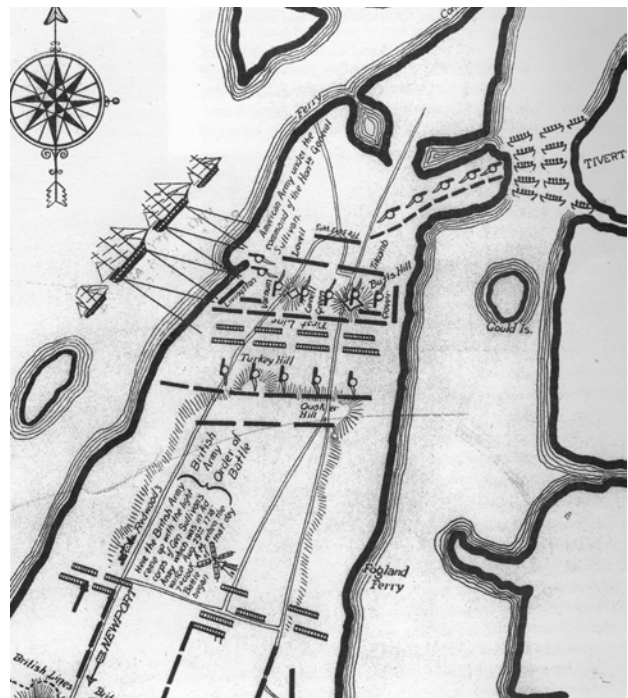
Part 4: Focus on the Battle of Rhode Island. At the SW corner of the Fort.

We pick up our battle timeline:

August 28th: (From Sullivan's letter to Congress after the battle) Sullivan details the positions of his forces on the evening of August 28, 1778.

"One regiment was posted in a redoubt advanced to the right of the line. Colonel Henry B. Livingston with a light corp, consisting of Colonel Jackson's detachment, and a detachment from the army was stationed in the east road: Another light corp, under command of Colonel Laurens, Col. Fleury, and Major Talbot, was posted on the west road. These corps were posted near three miles in front; in the rear of these was the picquet [a party of soldiers] of the army, commanded by Col. Wade."

"On the evening of the 28th we moved with our stores and baggage, which had not been previously sent forward, and about two in the morning encamped on Butts's Hill, with our right



extending to the west road, and left to the east road; the flanking and covering parties further towards the west road on the right and left.”

August 29th, 1778:

What was going on around Portsmouth during the day of the battle?

West Main Road and Union Street Engagement:

During the early hours on August 29th around 7:00 AM, Hessian Chasseurs [rapid movement soldiers] made contact with American forces near the intersection of West Main Road and Union Street. A small engagement took place from that area and would eventually lead towards the Lawton Valley. The Hessians would eventually break the American line with Artillery.

East Main Road and Union Street Engagement:

By 8:00 AM the British 54th, 22nd, 43rd, and the 38th Regiments of Foot are ambushed by Col. Nathaniel Wade’s American picket line. The Americans fired two volleys into the British column. The picket line retreated towards Quaker Hill. The 43rd took pursuit down Middle Road while the 54th, 38th, and 43rd continued down East Main Road.

Turkey Hill Engagement:

German Captain Von Malburg pursued Col. Laurens Regiment to Turkey Hill. Laurens men took up a strong defensive position on top of Turkey Hill. Col. Laurens sent a request for reinforcements to General Sullivan. Sullivan responded with orders to “fall back to the main line.” General Sullivan sent Webb’s Connecticut Regiment to support Laurens’ retreat. American and Hessian units engaged on Turkey Hill before the Americans fell back. Laurens’ Regiments fell back to General Nathanael Green’s position to the right of Butts Hill. By 8:30 AM the Hessians had secured Turkey Hill.

Quaker Hill Engagement:

The British units that had engaged with American forces were now engaged on Quaker Hill. The British forces formed a line that extended from East Main Road to about where Sea Meadow Drive is now located. Americans were also formed between the Quaker Meeting House and Hedly Street. General Sullivan sent reinforcements to Quaker Hill, giving the Americans the upper hand, but only for a short time. Both sides engaged on the hillside over a poorly defended artillery position. American forces were able to secure the position. The British attacked and poured effective volleys of musket balls into the Americans causing them to retreat. Sullivan ordered the units fighting on Quaker Hill to retreat back to the mainline around Butts Hill Fort. The engagement on Quaker Hill lasted a full hour. The British attempted to attack Butts Hill Fort but the 18-pound cannons from Butts Hill Fort kept the British from advancing

Lehigh Hill Engagement (Durfee’s Hill):

General Nathanael Greene held the right flank of the American Army and along the right-wing stood a small artillery redoubt. This was a vital position for both sides. The 1st RI Regiment (the “Black Regiment”) was under the direct command of Major Samuel Ward who was commanded by Col. Christopher Greene, a distant cousin of Nathanael Greene. German (Hessian) Captain Malsburg was ordered to attack the hardened position. The first attack failed. The 1st RI Regiment held its ground. The Hessians tried multiple times to take the position. The Hessians tried to flank the position, this also failed. On the third attempt, the 2nd RI Regiment supported the 1st RI Regiment. As the 2nd RI Regiment approached the redoubt, the Hessians were attempting to climb the walls. All together Greene had about 1,600 soldiers fighting on Lehigh Hill. Units included 1st RI Regiment, 2nd RI Regiment, Livingston’s 1st Canadian, Sherburne’s, and

Webbs Regiments. More than 800 Continentals including Laurens' advance guard and Jackson's Detachment participated. The American line veered SW at a 45-degree angle from Butts Hill to Durfee's Hill making the American fire even more effective. Col. Henry Jackson's men fixed bayonets and charged into the Hessian line, turning the tide of the battle. The Battle was over at 4 pm. The Hessians retreated to Turkey Hill. Both sides exchanged cannon fire throughout the night. Cannon fire was also exchanged between Turkey Hill and the Butts Hill. From Sullivan's letter: "The morning of the 30th I received a letter from his Excellency General Washington, giving me notice that Lord Howe had again sailed with the fleet, and receiving intelligence at the same time that a fleet was off Block Island and also a letter from Boston, informing me that the Count D'Estaing could not come round so soon as I expected, a council was called, and as we could have no prospect of operating against Newport with success, without the attendance of a fleet, it was unanimously agreed to quit the island until the return of the French squadron."

The retreat plan in Sullivan's words:

"To make a retreat in the face of an enemy, equal, if not superior in number, and cross a river without loss, I knew was an arduous task, and seldom accomplished, if attempted. As our sentries were within 200 yards of other, I knew it would require the greatest care and attention. To cover my design from the enemy, I ordered a number of tents to be brought forward and pitched in sight of the enemy, and almost the whole army employed themselves in fortifying the camp. The heavy baggage and stores were falling back and crossing through the day; at dark, the tents were struck, the light baggage and troops passed down, and before twelve o'clock the main army had crossed with the stores and baggage."

A continuation of a tour of Butts Hill Fort

Part 5: *At the parade grounds*



In December of 1779 the British finally departed from Aquidneck Island. The Americans regained possession of Butts Hill. The French arrived on Aquidneck Island on July 11, 1780 and the island was again occupied by troops. In October of 1780 one American militiaman would report in a letter:

"...there are about 7500 Men on the Island at the Several ports, 5000 of which are French, at Newport, 2000 Three Months Men, at this place and 500 Continentals, under Col. Greene of this state."

The allied French and American forces felt secure, but they continued to prepare to defend the Island. On

Butts Hill there were American troops assigned to support the work of the French troops in restoring the fortifications. Through the summer and fall of 1780, Butts Hill was actively being enclosed and made into a fort by the Americans and their French allies. This is the fort shape we recognize today.

We get a glimpse of their work through the Orderly Books of Ebenezer Thayer and John Jacobs. An orderly book is a record of the day-to-day activities of a unit. Thayer recorded the activities of a troop assigned to support the Expedition Pariculiere, the French Expeditionary Army under the command of Rochambeau. Their service was from August 16th to November 28, 1780. Other orderly books and some letters written from the camp give us an idea of life in the camp. That life was not easy.

The September 9th entry by Thayer shows they were assigned six men to a tent with a cook for each group of six. Later entries show that the kitchens had to be moved higher to prevent the smoke from filling the tents. A later entry tells us that the guard consisted of sixty rank and file soldiers. There were also sentinels around the encampment – 2 in front and one in the rear. This is kept up day and night. This day's entry also includes concern about the filth around the camp that could be detrimental to the soldiers' health.

They were not equipped well. An entry expressed concerns that there were not enough axes. One of the "fatigue duties" (labor duties that don't require arms) was gathering wood. The axes would have been essential to chopping wood. Wood on Aquidneck Island was so scarce because the British had cut down much of the wood. They had to go to Freetown, Massachusetts to obtain firewood.

Soldiers were hungry and stole from nearby homes and they were disciplined for that. The officers had a hard time securing enough food to last a day so that they might be fit for duty. In an October 10, 1780 letter to friends in Boston, Major May of the Boston Regiment shares his experience.

"We have but 21 days to tarry here, but famine seems to stare us in the face. I could give you particulars, but I never was fond of telling all. It may suffice to say, that we have one day's rations of Indian meal on hand, no meat, no wood, no sauce etc. Before I go any further I must tell you I have been, even now, sick with a stupefying cold. I hope I may be returned to you all again, in health and safety."

One group that were assured of good provisions were those actively helping the French masons. "There are four men to be detached from the brigade to attend constantly on the French Masons until the stone pillars [pillars?] of the Fort are completed and two masons detached to assist the French Masons until the works are finished and for their service they shall receive half a pint of rum a day when in the store." Their provisions are ready for them so that they can complete the Fort works in a timely manner.

Fort building was hard work. One entry records that the American wagons are bringing loads of stone to the works at Butts Hill Fort. They are building a "sally port" which is a secure, controlled entry way to an enclosure like a fort. All tools must be returned to the engineer. Members of the Black Regiment continued the "works" at Butts Hill Fort once the Massachusetts militias departed.



When Did Butts Hill become a Fort?

"The fortifications there were called 'works' from 1775/6 to 1780. There was never a 'Windmill Hill Fort' because the Fort did not exist until the French combined the separate works in 1780/81 and by that time the hill was called "Butts Hill."

Going back to the revolutionary terminology guides (American Battlefield Trust Glossary) clarified things for me.

Fort: fully enclosed earthwork; a fortified building, enclosure, or strategic position.

Fortification: Something that makes a defensive position stronger, like high mounds of earth to protect cannon or spiky breastworks to slow an enemy charge. Fortifications may be man-made structures or a part of the natural terrain. Man-made fortifications could be permanent (mortar or stone) or temporary (wood and soil) Natural fortifications could include waterways, forests, hills and mountains, swamps and marshes

The British works at “Windmill Hill” were fortifications. When they arrived on the island they took over an American militia made natural (hilltop) defensive position that was a temporary construction of wood and soil. The British sought to make it a more permanent fortification with the building of barracks and a guard house. Note there is an “Abatis” around the barracks.

Abatis: A line of trees, chopped down and placed with their branches facing the enemy, used to strengthen fortifications.

As we look at the military maps of the time, it is clear that the British fortification at Windmill Hill was not enclosed as a fort would be. It was a more permanent fortification because they had built structures such as a guard house and a barracks. It was carefully planned and as Frederick Mackenzie's diary proves, it was worked on over time to improve the position. The Edward Fage map (1778) shows a second redoubt – the Southern Redoubt – was added to the fortifications. This was the condition of the fortifications when the Americans returned to Aquidneck Island in August of 1778.

The Black Regiment at Butts Hill Fort:

We think of the Black Regiment's valor during the Battle of Rhode Island, but I am discovering more ties between the First Rhode Island Regiment (commanded by Col. Christopher Greene) and the construction of the fort at Butts Hill. This was a time of transition for the soldiers of the Black Regiment and it is not always easy to follow them as they were absorbed into other units and divided for assignments.

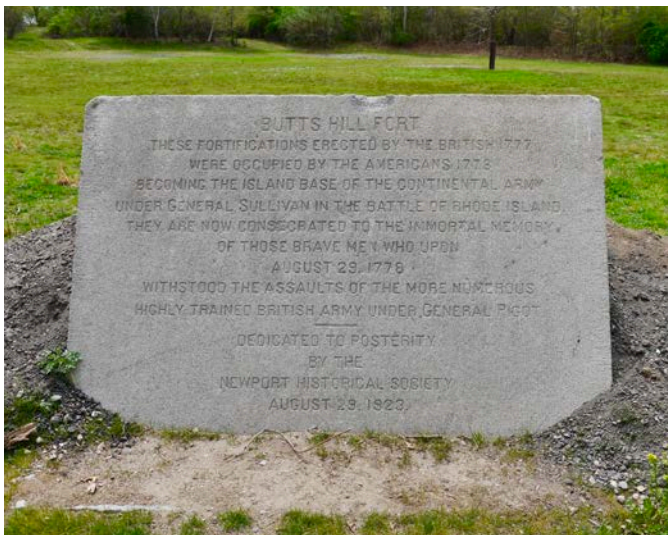
First, we need some background. When the British voluntarily left Aquidneck Island in October of 1779, the Americans came back to find the Island decimated. The First Rhode Island Regiment joined the Second Rhode Island Regiment in Newport on November 3, 1779. After the British Occupation, supplies of food and wood were dangerously low in Newport. They were sent to winter in Providence and East Greenwich. In early February of 1780 one report had the regiment at about 143 privates. They had orders to march for New York, but the arrival of the French on Aquidneck Island changed the plans.

On July 10, 1780 the French fleet and army arrived in Newport. General Heath of the American Army acted as Washington's liaison, but on July 25th he was joined by Major General Lafayette. Five thousand French soldiers set up camp in Newport. Although a small number of the Black Regiment soldiers were sent as guards to Providence, by the end of July the remainder of Col. Christopher Greene's men and the Rhode Island Six Months Continental Battalion encamped in Portsmouth. They performed guard duty at Butts Hill, Howland's Ferry, and Bristol Ferry.

The Massachusetts Militia Orderly books show that Greene's men were transported to East Greenwich to prepare for a march west with the American Army. However, the activity of the Royal Navy caused alarm and American General Heath ordered Greene's troop to return to the Island. Greene was disappointed but made a request in a letter to George Washington. The letter, dated October 14, 1780, gives us a further link between the Black Regiment and Butts Hill Fort.

“When Gen. Heath left this post, the command of the American Troops devolved on me. The difficulty of getting supplies of provisions has been such that we have been almost entirely without. This has greatly retarded the completion of the very important work at Butt’s Hill, where the three militia from the Massachusetts State have been employed. Their time of service expires the first of next month; I am confident they will not be able to put the fort in a defendable state by that time. Should your Excellency not call my Regiment to join the Army. They will undoubtedly be very usefully employed making it so. I wish to know your Excellency’s pleasure as to our staying here or joining the Army. If we stay in this state which part of it (for) Winter Quarters? – as the season is far advanced and the Times of the Six months Service expire the first of January. Perhaps in the short time they have to serve may be useful here as with the Army, though for my own part I ever wish to be with the Army...”

According to pension petitions, they helped the French soldiers and masons complete the job of re-enforcing the fortifications at Butts Hill. Fifty of their soldiers were detached to help the French move their artillery. After two calls back to Aquidneck Island, they would later join the American Army on the march south and participated in the final battle at Yorktown.



Part 6: *At the Memorial*

“Butts Hill Fort. These fortifications erected by the British 1777 were occupied by the Americans 1778 becoming the island base of the Continental Army under General Sullivan in the Battle of Rhode Island. They are consecrated to the immortal memory of those brave men who upon August 29, 1778 withstood the assaults of the more numerous highly trained British Army under General Pigot. Dedicated to posterity by the Newport Historical Society, August 29, 1923.”

This memorial stone was dedicated with some fanfare. There were speeches and battle reenactments, marching bands and the blast of cannons. This sacred piece of land was saved from being a housing development by the then President of the Newport Historical Society, Rev. Roderick Terry. He personally bought the property (and Fort Barton as well) and gave them to the Society. This gift came with some restrictions:

- The Newport Historical Society and its successors were to forever “preserve, keep and maintain” the property as a monument to those who fought in the Revolutionary War.
- That the property will always keep the name “Butts Hill Fort.”
- That the property should never be used for monetary gain.

The Newport Historical Society could not maintain the fort. In 1968 the land was transferred to the State and on to the Town of Portsmouth. Terry's restrictions on the property remain today as the responsibility of the town of Portsmouth.

The Butts Hill Fort Restoration Committee aims to fulfill Rev. Terry's mandate to preserve, keep and maintain the property as a monument to those who fought in the Revolutionary War. The Committee

is working on a land management plan to restore the fort and create an open space area of walking trails and informational signage. The three acres of land with the fort provide ample space for major re-enactments.

As the anniversaries of the American Revolution (2026) and Battle of Rhode Island (2028) draw near, the task of “preserving” the fort and ensuring that it is a monument to those who fought in the Revolutionary War becomes even more vital.



French map after the fort's completion. (Berthier, 1781.)



LIDAR (Light Detection And Raging) image of the fort today.

