

TOUR OF BATTLE OF RHODE ISLAND SITES IN PORTSMOUTH, RI



Gloria Schmidt - 2024



Tour of Battle of Rhode Island Sites in Portsmouth, Rhode Island

Created for the Battle of Rhode Island Association
& Butts Hill Fort Restoration Committee

Gloria Schmidt

2024



Portsmouth Battlefield Driving Tour

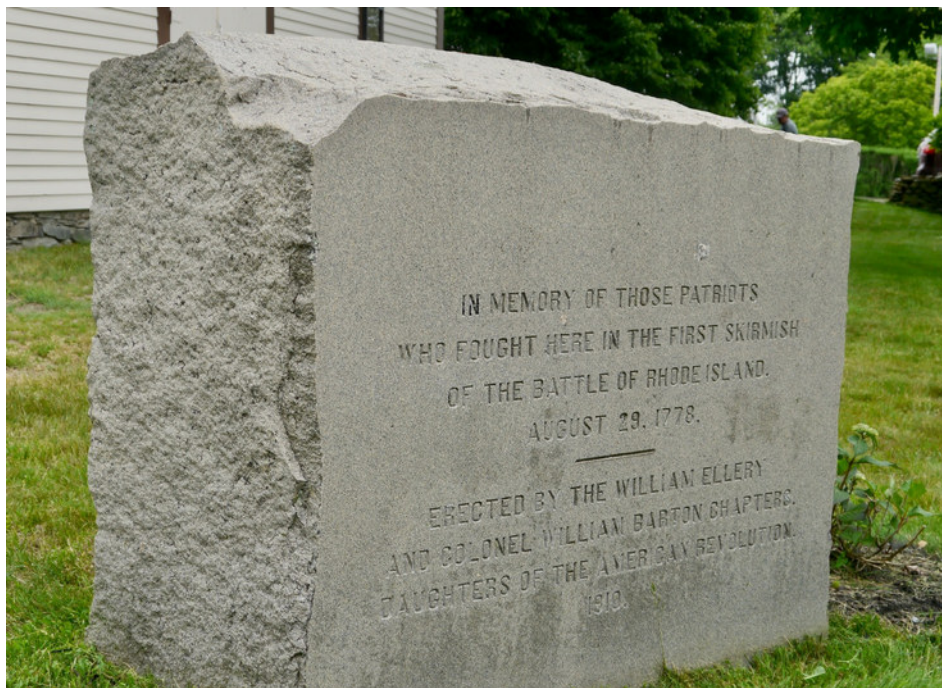


Stop 1. Corner of East Main Road and Union Street Portsmouth Historical Society

At D.A.R. Memorial

This marker was placed to honor those who fought in the Battle of Rhode Island. The Battle of Rhode Island took place in Portsmouth, Rhode Island on August 29, 1778. To understand the importance of the battle, you must set it in context. From December of 1776 to October of 1779 the British occupied Rhode Island (Aquidneck Island). In July of 1778 the British still controlled the island, but now the French were allied with the Americans. The five-week Rhode Island Campaign was a joint effort of the allies, the French and Americans, to remove the British control of the island. On July 17, 1778, George Washington received a letter from Congress proposing this operation to free Rhode Island. At the same time, Count d'Estaing, the commander of the French expeditionary force agreed to participate in this operation. On July 24th, Major General John Sullivan received orders to gather a force of 15,000 troops to assist the French in removing the British occupiers from the island. This was planned as a joint effort with Americans working by land and the French working from the sea.

A fierce storm damaged the French Navy and they sailed to Boston for repairs, but Sullivan and his troops were already on Rhode Island. When Sullivan received word that the French would not come back, he and his officers made the decision to lift the siege and retreat off the island. The American forces had been diminished as militias left the island. The Battle of Rhode Island was this action that took place as Sullivan tried to extract his troops and the British attempted to block their retreat. Sullivan succeeded in ushering his army safely off the island overnight. The 1st Rhode Island Regiment, (also known as the Black Regiment) was noted for the way they held their position against fierce attacks. Although the British held the island for another year, the battle sent a message to the British that their position on the island was not secure.



Stop 1: Portsmouth Historical Society

Occupied Portsmouth - Southermost School

This one room school house was built in 1725 by the town of Portsmouth to educate their young. The building's original location was on the corner of Union Street and East Main Road, across from where it is today.. It would have been in the thick of the skirmish on this corner. We are fortunate to have this building because so many Revolutionary Era buildings were lost when Aquidneck Island was occupied by the British.

The British had ample reason to invade and occupy Aquidneck Island (called Rhode Island at that time). Newport had a fine harbor from which the British fleet could raid up and down the coast. It would enable them to blockade ships carrying supplies from abroad that were needed by the Americans. On December 8, 1776, British General Prescott landed at Weaver's Cove. The American militiamen were unable to mount a defense and they escaped by using the ferries to Bristol and Tiverton.

The British and Hessians (German soldiers) came with wives and children and all needed food, supplies, housing and heat. The residents competed with the British for scarce items. The British took hay and confiscated cattle and livestock. Residents could hunt birds, catch fish and collect shellfish. The British collected boats and guns. The longer the Occupation lasted, the harder it was on those in the maritime trades such as coopers, sailors, rope makers, etc. Wharves were pulled up for fire wood. Merchants had no supplies coming in so they had little to sell. Local citizens couldn't count on growing food for their families. Gardens were raided, fruit was plucked from trees and potatoes were dug up by British soldiers. There was no freedom of movement. Women could travel a little more freely at first, but later they needed passes to leave town. The border of Newport and the rest of the island was gated and locked There was no free press or local government. Births, deaths and marriages were not recorded and Newport lost its property records when the British shipped them to New York and they were ruined by water.



At the back Stone Walls

The first skirmish in the Battle of Rhode Island was around 7AM on August, 29, 1778. A document in the collection of the Newport Historical Society records the general order for the whole army of the Americans to retreat. The order instructs the army to retreat beginning on East Main on the left flank and West Main on the right flank. The first action was near the intersection of Union Street and West Main Road. American General John Sullivan had stationed an elite unit of Continentals and Rhode Island state regiments. The troops were under the leadership of John Laurens who was assisted by Silas Talbot and Lt. Colonel Fleury from Lafayette's staff. Laurens' forces were from independent town companies and Boston and they totaled less than 250 men. British forces were under Major General Friedrich Wilhelm von Lossberg. He led 1,000 men up West Road.

A letter from British Major-General Pigot to General Sir Henry Clinton dated Newport, Rhode Island, August 31, 1778 provides a British view of the early stage of the battle.

"Major-General Lossberg marching by the West Road, with the Hessian Chasseurs and the Anspach Regiments of Voit and Seaboth, in order, if possible, to annoy them in their Retreat.....On hearing a smart Fire from the Chasseurs engaged on the West Road, I dispatched Colonel Fannings Corp of Provincials to join General Lossberg..."

The German (Hessian) Chasseurs (sharpshooters) made contact with American forces near the Redwood home north of West Main Road and Union Street. A small engagement took place from that area and would lead towards the Lawton Valley. The Hessians would eventually break the American line with artillery (large caliber guns). In withdrawing, the American Light Infantry fought masterfully as they hid behind stone walls. Captain von der Malsburg ordered his Chasseurs forward in a series of bayonet charges which drove the American pickets (small defensive units) back from two different positions. They retreated to Laurens' main body of troops some three miles south of Turkey Hill. With the Hessian vanguard (leading soldiers) engaged in the fight, British General Pigot pushed in reinforcements; the von Huyn Regiment and Colonel Fanning's King's American Regiment which gave the attackers 1,800 men compared to Laurens' 300.

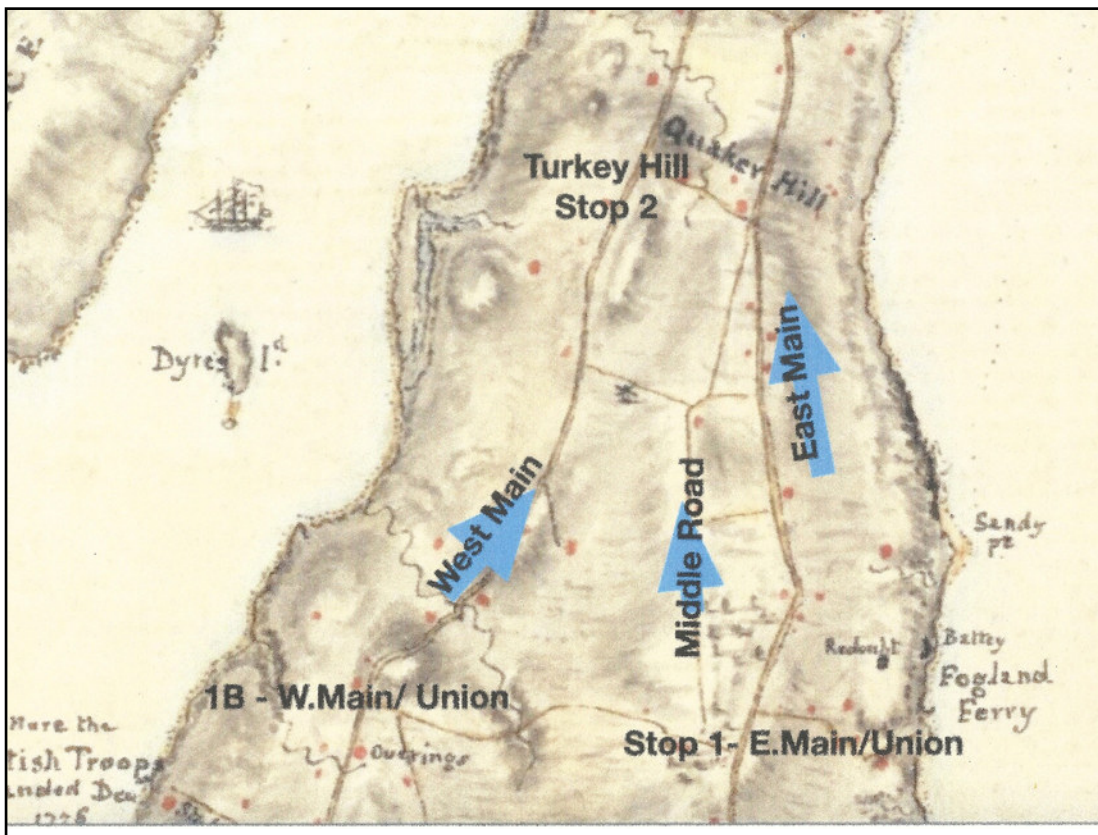
Laurens retreated skillfully. He was in constant jeopardy of having his flanks (sides that could be weaker) attacked yet he held firm against the 1st and 2nd Ansbach Regiments. The Hessian Chasseurs continued in the thick of the fighting. Captain Von der Malsburg was wounded in the hand and shot through his hat but still maintained pressure on the retreating Americans.

East Main Road/Union. 8 AM

Early the morning of August, 29, 1778, British General Pigot sent General Smith up the East (Main) Road toward Quaker Hill. He had General Prescott send the 45th Regiment and the Prince of Wales Regiment up the East (Main) Road as reinforcements, but he held back some troops in case the Rebels were planning on doubling back to Newport. This gave Smith more than 1800 troops. Smith's men moved toward American Col. Livingston's advanced guard and Wade's pickets. In the lead for Smith's forces were Captain Thomas Coore's elite flank companies of the 38th and 54th Regiments, followed by the 22nd Regiment of John Campbell. At 8 AM, Coore's and Campbell's troops encountered Wade's pickets who were behind stone walls on the western side of the East Road at Union Street.

American General John Sullivan had placed an advanced unit commanded by Livingston and the

New York 4th as well as Henry Jackson's soldiers. This gave the Rebels around 950 men. A short way up Union Street was the beginning of Middle Road which runs parallel to East Main Road. Colonel Nathaniel Wade's Rebel troops were hidden in the fields between East Road and Middle Road. Wade instructed his men not to fire until he gave the order. Then they were to reload, fire again, and retreat. Half of the British 22nd Regiment headed up Union Street to cross to Middle Road. At Wade's signal his men rose up from their hiding spots and fired the two volleys at the British troops. There were heavy losses for the Red Coats. As Lieutenant Colonel Campbell's 22nd Regiment came up to help, it too began to take casualties. Musket balls tore through Campbell's coat without harming him. The 22nd Regiment suffered many casualties that day, most of them from this ambush. Livingstone did not linger. Like Laurens on West Main Road, he pulled back to safer ground. The picket line retreated towards Quaker Hill. The 43rd Regiment of Foot (RoF) took pursuit up Middle Road. The 22nd Regiment continued up East Main Road.



British troops head up West Main, East Main and Middle Road. Adapted from Fage Map.

Stop 2: Turkey Hill - Heritage Park on Highpoint Ave off Hedly

Overlook area - Heritage Park

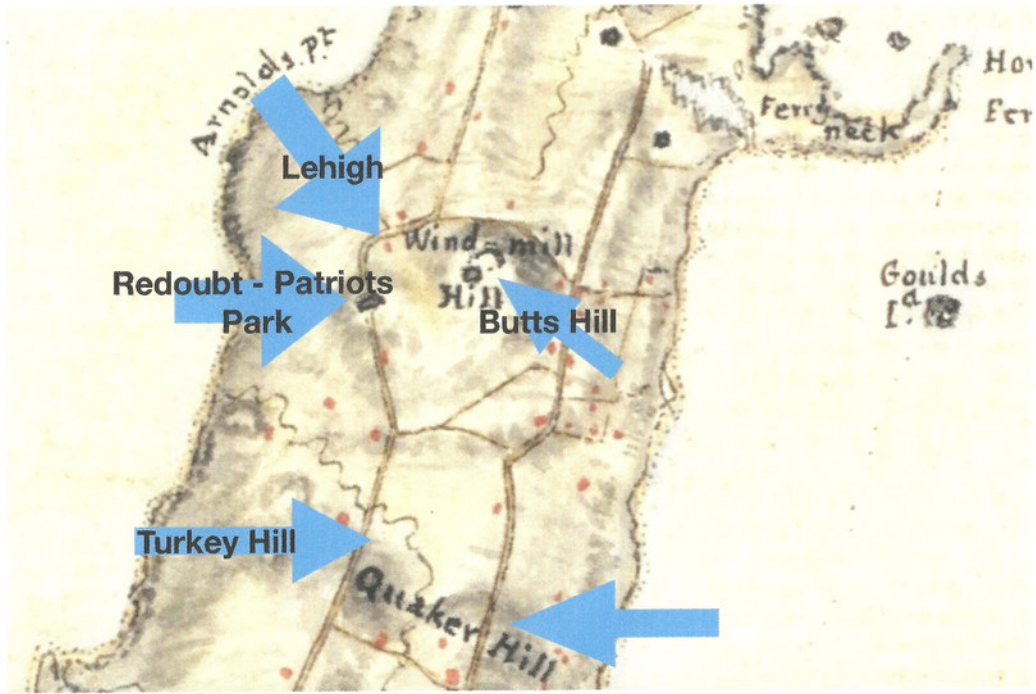
At 8 AM the British forces under the command of Von Der Malsburg chased Col. John Laurens and his American troops. There were skirmishes up West (Main) Road as the two sides made contact. Malsburg's troops charged the Americans who were positioned behind stone walls. At times the Americans could not hold their ground. Laurens was outnumbered, so his advance guard withdrew with Malsburg's Hessians (Germans) in pursuit. A group of Americans hid in tall stalks of Indian corn and fired at the Hessians. A German officer, Noltenius, was wounded by a musket ball to the abdomen. Malsburg came to his friend's assistance and that gave the Americans a chance to make an escape. Local civilians were casualties of the combat. There were reports of German Ansbach troops shooting and killing an elderly Quaker man in the back.

Stonewall Signage

Lauren was fighting from a position just below Turkey Hill. Captain Malsburg's hand was wounded in the fighting. Laurens' men took a strong defensive position on Turkey Hill. He asked for reinforcements, but Sullivan ordered Lauren to fall back to the main lines. To protect Lauren's troops, Sullivan sent Webb's Regiment of Connecticut Continentals under Major Huntington and forty soldiers from Jackson's detachment.

By 8:30 AM the Hessians were stationed on the top of Turkey Hill. Von der Malsburg led his soldiers down into the valley between Turkey Hill and Durfee's Hill. Out of ammunition, Malsburg had his troops take cover behind stone walls to wait for more supplies. American artillery on Butts Hill kept Von der Malsburg's troops pinned down. He sent his own artillery back to the top of Turkey Hill to pound the American right wing.





Map of Hill on Fage Map

Map of Battle of Rhode Island from Black Regiment Memorial at Patriots' Park



1. Late 1776-British Army occupies Newport.
2. August 8, 1778 - French fleet forces past Newport harbor.
3. August 9, 1778-American army moves onto Aquidneck Island.
4. August 10, 1778-British fleet lures French fleet and troops away from Newport.
5. August 28, 1778-American army begins retreat north.
6. August 29, 1778-British troops pursue retreating American army northward.
7. August 29, 1778-Hessian troops march north on West Road in pursuit of American army.
8. August 29, 1778-British regulars advance to Quaker Hill.
9. August 29, 1778-Hessian mercenaries attack but are repulsed by the 1st Rhode Island Regiment.
10. August 30, 1778-American army withdraws onto mainland.



East Side of Patriots' Park



Image of Black Regiment from plate

Patriots Park

East Side:

On February 14, 1778, the Rhode Island Assembly voted to allow “every able-bodied Negro, mulatto, or Indian slave in this state to enlist into either of the Continental Battalions being raised.” The Assembly specified that: “...every slave so enlightening shall, upon the passing muster before Colonel Greene, be immediately discharged from the service of his master or mistress and be absolutely free.” Owners of the slaves enlisted were to be compensated by the Assembly for the market value of the slave.

Before 1778 Blacks had not been allowed to serve in the Continental Army. Rhode Island had trouble meeting its recruitment quotas with just white men, so General Varnum wrote to George Washington with the idea of allowing the ranks to be filled with Black and Native Americans. He asked Washington to send soldiers from Valley Forge to recruit these men.

Rhode Island slave owners opposed the idea of the new regiment. In June of 1778 the Rhode Island Assembly repealed the decree, but those four months that it was in effect, 100 free and formerly enslaved African Americans enlisted. Forty-four slaves enlisted even after this repeal. The First Rhode Island Regiment had 225 men, 140 of them were African Americans. This was the largest percentage of blacks in an integrated military unit during the American Revolution. At first the African Americans comprised a separate company, but slowly the regiment was integrated.

For over sixty years the Newport Chapter of the National Associate of Colored People (NAACP) has been calling attention to the valor of the soldiers of the First Rhode Island Regiment (called the Black Regiment). Members researched where the redoubt would have been that the Black Regiment had defended so valiantly. Through the years small monuments were added, a stone and a flagpole. In 2006 the Memorial to the Black Regiment was dedicated. The story of the valiant efforts of the 1st Rhode Island Regiment (the Black Regiment) is engraved for all to see and the names of these soldiers are remembered.

The efforts to tell the story of the Black Regiment are not over. The cause continues because the Memorial is in need of repairs and funds must be raised to do the required work.

West Side:

The British had constructed a redoubt (temporary fortification) right by the West (Main) Road. This redoubt became a focal spot for American defenses and British attacks. During the Battle of Rhode Island this thick walled redoubt became the strong position of the Rhode Island First Regiment (aka.the Black Regiment). Normally led by Christopher Greene, it was led at this time by Major Samuel Ward. Around 10 AM the British allied forces, led by von der Malsburg, charged this position.

From the diary of Samuel Ward (First Rhode Island Regiment):

“Early yesterday morning, the enemy moved out after us, expecting that we were leaving the island, and took possession of the Heights in our front. They sent out parties in their front, and we made detachments to drive them back again. After a skirmish of three or four hours, with

various success, in which each party gave way three or four times, and were reinforced, we drove them quite back to the ground they first took in the morning, and have continued there ever since. Two ships and a couple of small vessels beat up opposite our lines, and fired several shots, but being pretty briskly fired upon from our heavy pieces, they fell down, and now lay opposite the enemy's lines. Our loss was not very great, it has not been ascertained yet; and I can hardly make a tolerable conjecture. Several officers fell, and several are badly wounded. I am so happy to have only one captain slightly wounded in the hand. I believe that a couple of the blacks were killed and four or five wounded, but none badly. Previous to this, I should have told you our pickets and light corps engaged their advance, and found them with bravery."

From the diary of Israel Angell (Second Rhode Island Regiment):

August 29th, 1778. "A Clear morning and Very Cool. Recd orders last evening to Strike their tents and march to the north end of the island; the advanced piquet was to come off at 12 o'clock the enemy finding that we had left our ground pursued with all possible speed. Come up with our piquet about sunrise and a smart firing begun, the piquet repulsed the British troops 2 or 3 times but was finally obliged to retreat as the Enemy brought a number of field pieces against them. The Enemy was soon check't by our Cannon in coming up to our main body and they formed on Quaker Hill and we took possession of Buttses Hill. The left wing of the British army was Composed of the Hessians who Attackt our right wing and a Sevear engagement Ensued in which the Hessians was put to flight and beat of the ground with a Considerable loss. Our loss was not very great but I cannot ascertain the number. I was ordered with my Regt to a Redoubt on a Small hill which the Enemy was a trying for and it was with Difficulty that we got there before the Enemy. I had 3 or 4 men kill'd and wounded today at night I was ordered with my Reg to lie on the lines. I had not Slept then in two nights more than two or three hours. The Regt had eat nothing during the whole Day. This was our situation to goe on guard, but we marched off Chearfully and took our post."



Rhode Island First Regiment
Seal

Stop 4: Lehigh/Durfee/Burrington Hill - Lehigh Grove

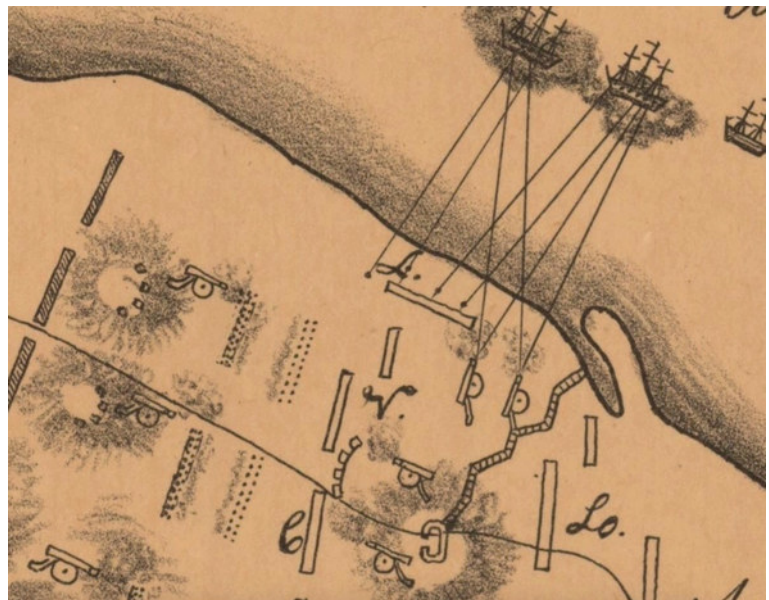
At noontime on August 29th, German commander Lossberg tried again to dislodge the American forces on the West side of the island. He worked with a small group of British ships including the HMS Vulture and the HMS Sphinx. They were led by the HMS Vigilant that carried fourteen 24 pound canons, but Vigilant did little damage. General Nathanael Greene was in charge and he positioned an 18 pound artillery piece at the beach to damage the Vulture. These ships had hoped to harass the retreating Americans and cut off their retreat at Bristol Ferry, but the waters proved to shallow for the British vessels to operate.

At this point the Americans were being flushed out of the area in the valley north of Turkey Hill and some of the British soldiers had moved beyond the redoubt. General Nathanael Greene saw an opening to attack a vulnerable spot in the Hessian lines. He sent in Sherburne's and Jackson's Continentals. The American line included 1600 soldiers (Varnum's Brigade of 2nd RI, Livingston's 1st Canadian, Sherburne's, and Webbs) as well as 1st RI, Lauren's Guard and Jackson's men. A bayonet charge by Jackson's troops helped turn the tide. Greene sent in Lovell's brigade with John Trumbull in charge to attack the Hessians. The British forces began to retreat to Turkey Hill. By 3:30 PM the fighting on the west side had ended.

In his August 31st letter to Congress, General Sullivan would write"

"The firing of artillery continued through the day, and the (?) with intermission six hours. The heat of the action continued near an hour, which must have ended in the ruin of the British army, had not their redoubts on the hill covered them from further pursuit. We were about to attack them in their lines, but the men's having had no rest the night before, and nothing to eat either that night or the day of the action, and having been in constant action through most of the day, it was not thought advisable, especially as their position was exceedingly strong, and their numbers fully equal, if not superior to ours."

Dennison Map showing ship bombardment





Stop 5: Quaker Hill
In Front of Quaker Meeting House.
Before 9 AM, August 29, 1778

This meeting house was constructed around 1700 and it saw the action in the Battle of Rhode Island. Some of the heaviest fighting was here where East Main, Hedly and Middle Roads all meet. When the British occupied our island in 1776 the meetinghouse was used by English and Hessian troops for barracks and ammunition storage. It may have served as a field hospital during the battle itself.

After a skirmish with Wade's American forces, British General Smith and the 43rd Regiment pushed up Middle Road while the 22nd Regiment proceeded up East Main Road. The diversity of colors of the troop coats created confusion during the fight. British soldiers mistook Continentals with blue coats for Germans with blue coats, so American soldiers got within easy firing range of the Red Coats.

American units (Wiggleworth's Regiment, Livingston's advanced guard and Wade's pickets) were waiting at the junction of Middle Road, East Road and Hedly Street near where the Quaker Meeting House was located. American General Sullivan saw his troops retreating, so he sent in Shepard's Regiment of Massachusetts Continentals. General Sullivan's "Life Guards" were sent in as well. For a while the Americans had an advantage.

A private from Jackson's attachment described the action:

"We began to attack. The action began to be warm when we were reinforced by Col. Shepard's Regiment under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Sprout. The action then commenced hot. We plied them so briskly that they began to give way. Our

troops seeing this, gave three cheers and advanced. The enemy then gave way and left one piece of cannon but poorly supported. A party of our men then advanced, drove the artillerymen and took possession of the cannon. The enemy then rallied and being reinforced, advanced and gave our men so heavy a fire that they obliged them to quit their prize, the cannon.” (From: Diary of a soldier in the RI Expedition - Massachusetts Historical Society. Quoted in McBurney.)

Sullivan sent an aide, John Trumbull, to order Wigglesworth to retreat. “Reminiscences of his own Times” by John Trumbull describes events on August 29th, 1778:

“Soon after daybreak the next morning, the rear-guard, commanded by that excellent officer, Colonel Wigglesworth, was attacked on Quaker, otherwise called Windmill Hill {actually it was Butts Hill that was called Windmill Hill} and General Sullivan, wishing to avoid a serious action on that ground, sent me with orders to commanding officer to withdraw the guard.

Nothing can be more trying to the nerves, than to advance deliberately and alone into danger. At first I saw a round shot or two drop near me, and pass bounding on. I met poor Colonel Tousard, who had just lost one arm, blown off by the discharge of a field piece, for the possession of which there was an ardent struggle. He was led off by a small party. Soon after, I saw Captain Walker, of H. Jackson’s regiment, who had received a musket ball through his body, mounted behind a person on horseback. He bid me a melancholy farewell, and died before night. Next, grape shot began to sprinkle around me, and soon after musket balls fell in my path like hailstones. This was not to be borne. I spurred on my horse to the summit of the hill, and found myself in the midst of the melee. ‘Don’t say a word, Trumbull;’ cried the gallant commander, ‘I know your errand, but don’t speak; we will beat them in a moment.’

‘Col. Wigglesworth, do you see those troops crossing obliquely from the west road towards your rear?’

‘Yes, they are Americans, coming to our support.’

‘No sir, those are Germans; mark, their dress is blue and yellow, not buff; they are moving to fell late your rear, and intercept your retreat. Retreat instantly — don’t lose a moment, or you will be cut off.’

The gallant man obeyed, reluctantly, and withdrew the guard in fine style, slowly, but safely.”

The heavy action lasted for almost a hour. Some American writers called it an orderly



Photo by Paul Murphy

retreat, but British writers recorded that the Americans retreated at a run. As the British came within range of the six 18 pound cannons fired from Butts Hill, the British regrouped. From Quaker Hill British General Smith could see the strength of Sullivan's lines. By 9:30 AM Smith decided against an assault and he withdrew back to the top of Quaker Hill. Almost half the casualties of the battle came from the skirmishes on East Main Road.

At Legion Park

The Flora was a 698 ton, 32-gun Royal Navy frigate. Its original name was LaVestale and it was built by the French Navy in 1757. Once a ship was captured in those days, it was common practice for the vessel to be used in the navy of its captor. In 1761 the ship was captured by the British and was renamed the Flora. By 1776 the Flora was being used as a troop transport.

When the French fleet arrived in Newport

in July of 1778, the British did not want the French to capture their ships. The British scuttled seven of their vessels and 13 of their transports were scuttled in the outer harbor. In Washington's Wolfpack, the Navy before there was a Navy, author Edgar Maclay wrote that the Flora was heaved over on its side and beached for cleaning. It lay between Goat Island and Long Wharf in Newport until April of 1779 when she was raised again. The British used eight 12 pounders from the Flora on the newly outfitted HMS Pigot. The British sank (and burned) the Flora again when they left Rhode Island in December of 1779. She was passed back and forth. 1784 – named "Reconnaissance" (French), 1787 back to "Flora" (French), "Citoyenne Francaise" (a French pirate). By 1798 she was later captured by HMS Phaeton and sent to the scrap heap. Flora was not down at the bottom of the harbor, but at least one of her cannons was. In 1940 workmen repairing Long Wharf came across the cannon and the cannon is now displayed at Legion Park in Portsmouth.

Butts Hill

Point 1. South Side by Athletic Fields

The fortifications at Butts Hill had been left by the British when they retreated to the south part of Aquidneck Island in early August of 1778. When American soldiers first arrived, Butts Hill served as their camp area. The British had left military works and a barracks toward the north of Butts Hill where they could view the ferries to Bristol and Tiverton. The Americans began to work on defenses on the south side with a view of the East and West Main Roads. They could also see the action on Turkey Hill, and Quaker Hill. Butts Hill served as the American headquarters and the site of a "flying" field type hospital. From his command center on Butts Hill, General Sullivan directed the action down East Main and West Main Road. Sullivan ordered the units fighting on Quaker Hill to retreat back to the mainline around the Fort. The British attempted to attack Butts Hill Fort but the 18 pound cannons from the fort kept the British from advancing.

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 29: 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 9: 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 11 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.

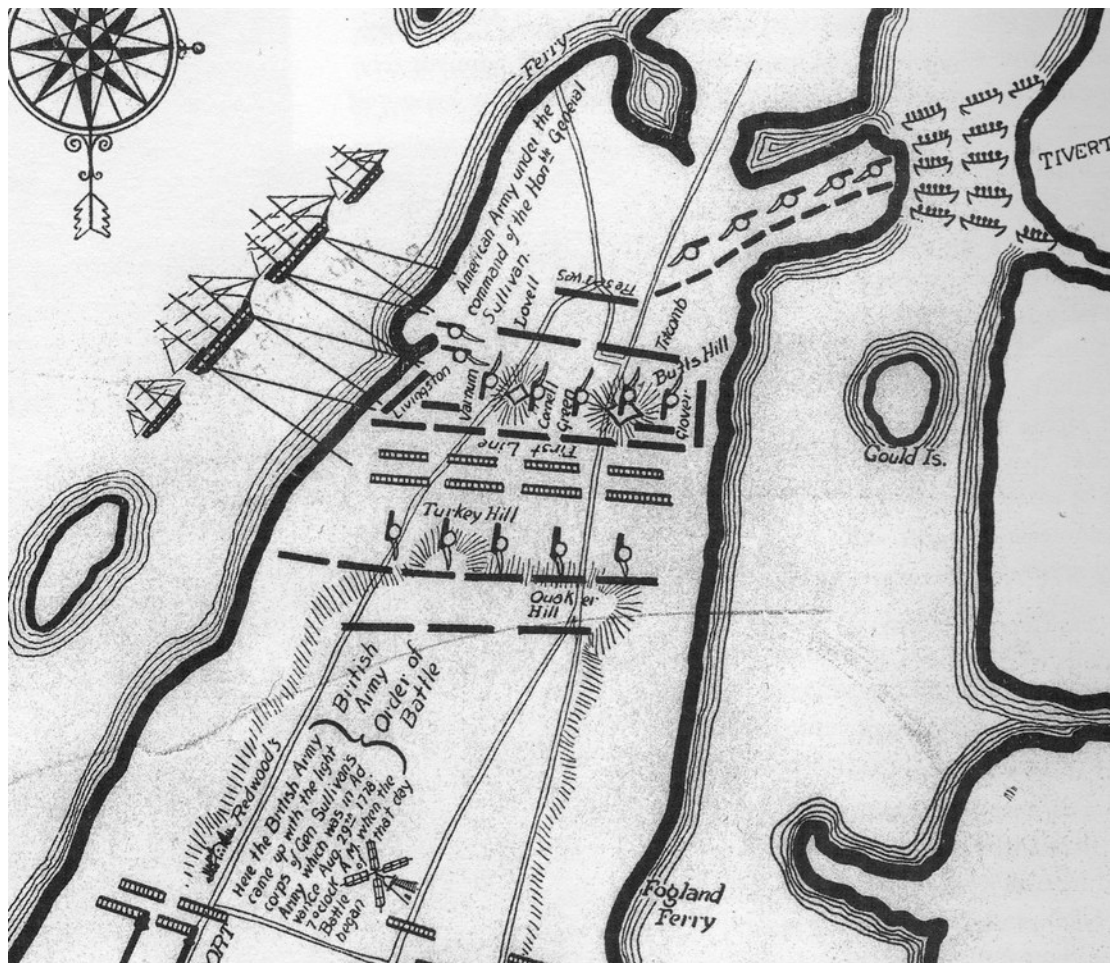
August 16: As the Americans built earthworks and dug trenches toward Newport, American reserves and the sick who were healthy enough to do garrison work remained at Butts Hill which served as Sullivan's headquarters.

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 24, "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 26 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.



Commonwealth Insurance Map of Battle.



Left: Lidar map of Butts Hill
Right: Berthier Map of Butts Hill 1781

Point 2: Parade Grounds

At the parade grounds: Butts Hill in French and American hands. While the Americans held Butts Hill in 1778, the area served as a field hospital. The very sick were sent to Providence, but those who were well enough took part in guarding Butts Hill.

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.” With the help of the French in 1780 the Americans connected the redoubt and the into one fort structure that we see today.

With the help of the French in 1780 the Americans connected the redoubt and the into one fort structure that we see today. 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. 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 were building a “sally port” which is a secure, controlled entry way to an enclosure like a fort.. Members of the Black Regiment continued the “works” at Butts Hill Fort once the Massachusetts



Point 3: 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 defensive location, the NE ramparts, we could begin to discuss the British fortifications. The Huntington map of North Portsmouth (pictured top) places the date of the first construction to be 1776. The Americans might have built a small battery at Butts Hill because of its strategic location with views of both Bristol Ferry and Howland Ferry. In December of that 1776, the British occupied Aquidneck Island and took control of the fortifications. In September of 1777 American troops under the command of General Spencer were camped on the mainland opposite the north end of Aquidneck Island. In response to this threat, British General Pigot ordered the construction of various local earthworks.

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."

Sept 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).

Sept 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.

Sept. 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 overlayed on today's terrain 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.

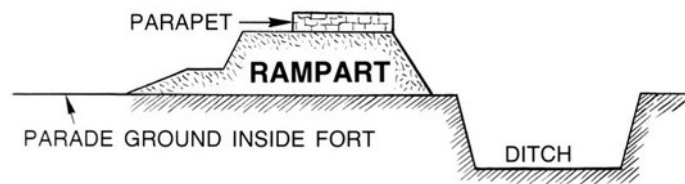


Diagram of Rampart Construction - R. Schmidt

Point 4: 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.”

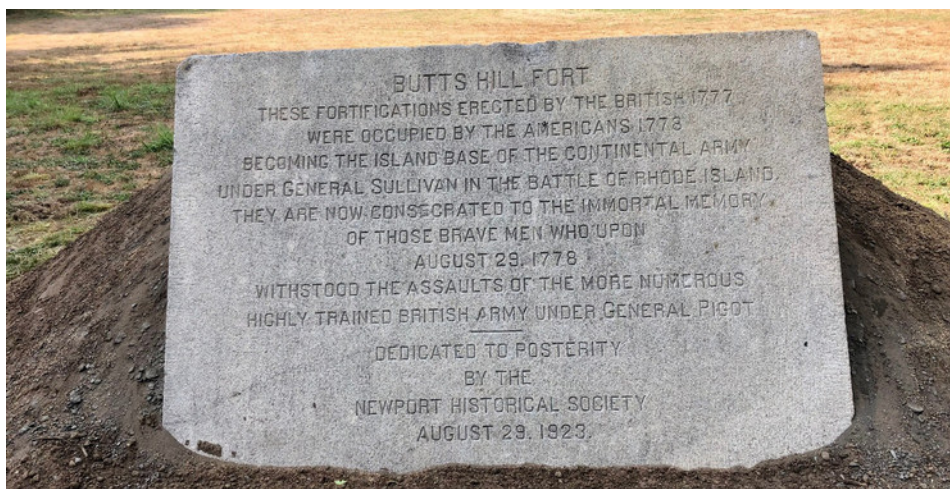
This memorial stone was dedicated with some fanfare. There were speeches and battle reenactments, marching bands and the blast of cannons. This sacred piece of land was saved from being a housing development by the then President of the Newport Historical Society, Rev. Roderick Terry. He personally bought 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 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.





Butts Hill Stops:

1. Southern Rampart View from high school athletics fields.
2. Parade grounds
3. N.E. Ramparts from road (Butts St.)
4. Memorial

Compiled for the Battle of Rhode Island Association and the Butts Hill Fort Restoration Committee

