

# **A WALKING TOUR OF BUTTS HILL FORT**

**BY GLORIA H. SCHMIDT**



**2025**



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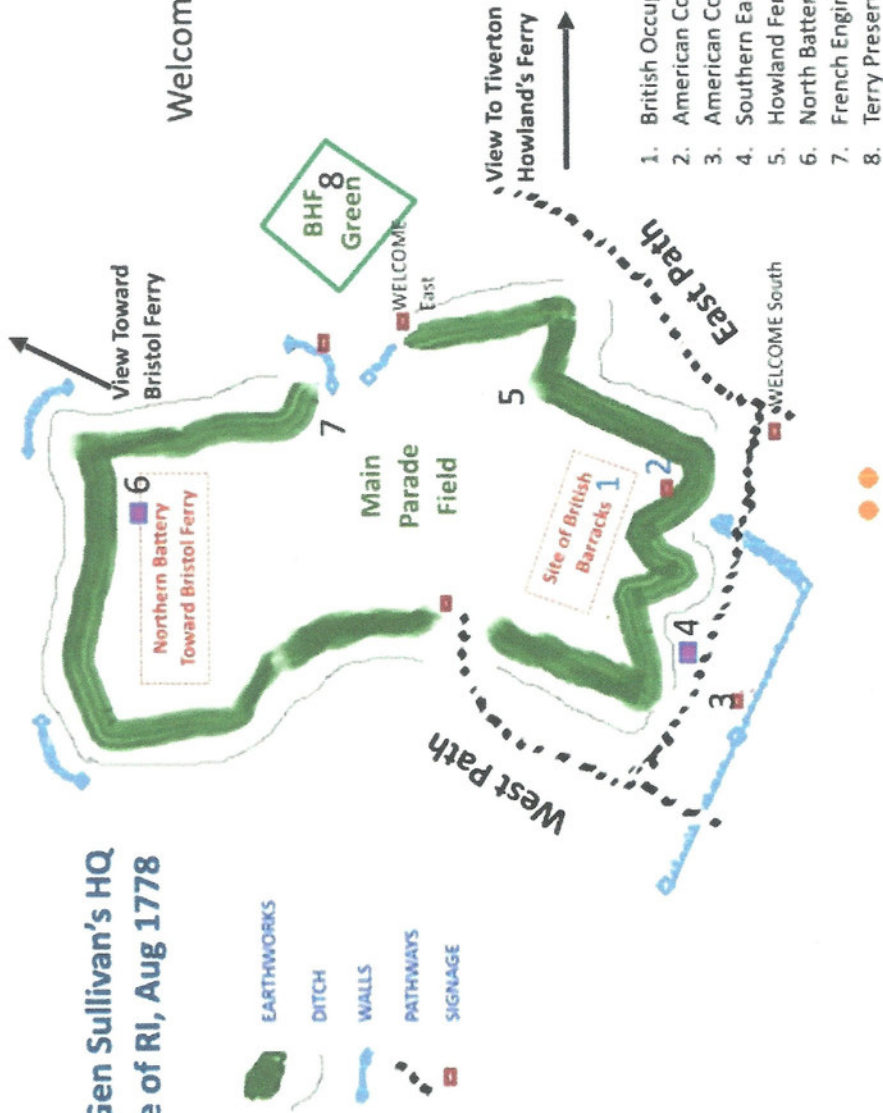




# ● BUTTS HILL FORT 1776-1782 ●

Maj Gen Sullivan's HQ  
Battle of RI, Aug 1778

Welcome Signs South and East





# Site 1 : The Barracks

## British Occupation

The Huntington map of North Portsmouth places the date of the first construction to be 1776. In December 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 fortifications 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).

What did the barracks look like?  
Ground penetrating techniques



## Huntington Map of Northern Portsmouth

suggest a pole supported structure. They would have been used as winter quarters to block out the wind and provide a fireplace for warming. The barracks were probably just one story in height.

In April of 1780, a committee was named to dispose of the barracks at Butts Hill. The committee consigned one barrack in the north fort to William Cooke of Portsmouth. Cooke sold the barrack to the Portsmouth town council, which converted it into an almshouse. The following September the structure was reclaimed by order of General Heath, commandant of Butts Hill, and demolished. Its material was used in the repair of other barracks at the fort. The Portsmouth town council petitioned the Rhode Island General Assembly for relief, and was compensated to the sum of 54 pounds in March, 1781.

# Site 2: Southwest Corner

## American Command: Siege of Newport

Site 2: Rhode Island Campaign - Siege of Newport

The Rhode Island Campaign was a plan for American and French Cooperation in driving the British out of Aquidneck Island. On February 6, 1778 the French signed a treaty with the Americans and by April of 1778 French Admiral d'Estaing began his journey with his troops to North America. On July 29, 1778 French Commander d'Estaing met with American Commanders when he arrived at Point Judith, Rhode Island. 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. At General Washington's direction, General Sullivan had gathered an army at Tiverton, Rhode Island.

This is a brief time line of events during the Rhode Island Campaign and the Siege of Newport.

\* 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. 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.

\* 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 24: A militia man writes in his diary. "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.”

\* 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. General Sullivan began to prepare for a 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.

# Site 3: South Green: American Command

## Battle of Rhode Island

We pick up our battle time line with preparations for a retreat. General Sullivan details the advanced positions of his forces on the evening of August 28, 1778. Three miles ahead of the front, one regiment was posted on East Main Road under Col. Livingston and Jackson. Another group under command of Col. Laurens and Major Talbot was stationed on West Main Road. In the rear of these was a picquet commanded by Col. Wade. Sullivan reports to Congress:

"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."

Early morning on August 29, 1778 the British realized that the Americans had left their positions. They pursued the Americans up West Main and East Main Roads.

The first engagement was around West Main and Union Street at 7 AM between Hessian Chasseurs [rapid

movement soldiers] and Americans led by Laurens and Talbot. The Hessians would eventually break the American line with Artillery and continue to chase them through Lawton's Valley. 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.

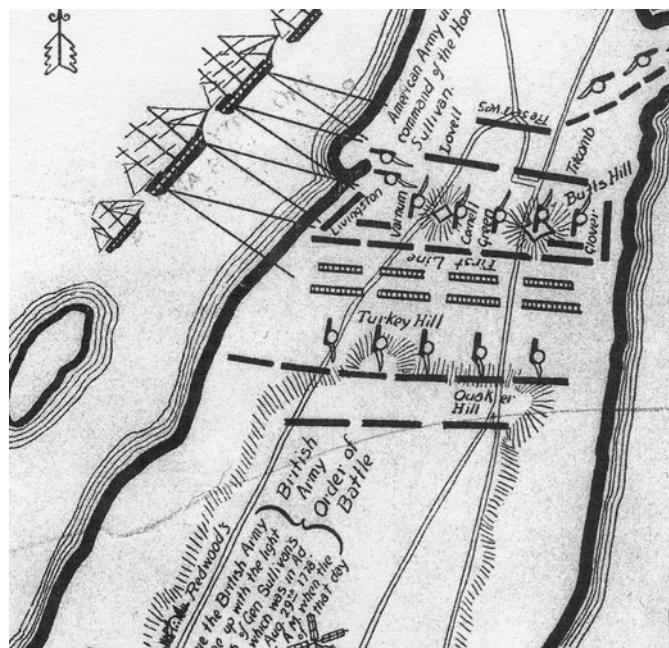
German Captain Von Malburg pursued Col. Laurens Regiment up West Main to Turkey Hill. Laurens men took up a strong defensive position on top of Turkey Hill. General Sullivan sent Webb's Connecticut Regiment to support Laurens' retreat however by 8:30 AM the Hessians had secured Turkey Hill.

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. Sullivan ordered the units fighting on Quaker Hill to retreat back to the mainline around Butts Hill Fort. The British attempted to attack Butts Hill Fort but the 18-pound cannons from there kept the British from advancing

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. The Hessians then 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 bayonets and charged into the Hessian line, turning the tide of the battle.

The Battle was over by 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."





# Site 4: Southern Earthworks: Building Earthen work Forts.

Looking at the earthworks, it is hard to imagine how they were constructed. Some of the techniques are still used today by armies. The basic building blocks were gabions and fascines. Fascines are bundles of sticks bound together to strengthen the sides of embankments, ditches, or trenches. Gabions are baskets made of sticks that hold dirt to support the construction of embankments.

When the Americans arrived at Butts Hill they had to fortify the South with defensive works. They also had to prepare to create quick fortifications towards Newport for the Rhode Island Campaign to force the British out of Aquidneck Island. Orderly books of American units report that they began making the fascines and gabions even before they arrived on the island.

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 man made slope incorporated into the defenses of a fortification. The slopes were initially designed as steep man-made slopes to deter attack on foot.

**Ditch:** 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.

**Bastion:** A projecting part of a fortification built at an angle to the line of a wall, so as to allow defensive fire in several directions.

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

**North battery ramparts:** 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 ditch 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.

On the South facing fortification we can see the **bastions** or projecting points

**Ravelins:** A "V" shaped part of the fortification that extends off the bastions.



# Site 5: Howland Ferry View

## British View and Retreat of Americans

What we call East Main Road was known as the Path to Howland's Ferry. This site is one of the narrowest points on the Sakonnet River between Tiverton and Portsmouth. Butts Hill has a view of both the Bristol Ferry and the Howland Ferry to Tiverton. These two crossings were the most likely routes for an American invasion, so this observation post on Butts Hill was important to the British. When the French arrived in 1780 they took the effort to complete Butts Hill as a fort because they considered this observation post to be essential for communication with the mainland.

A French Colonel wrote this about the value of Butts Hill Fort.: "It was also necessary to provide the means of being rescued by ensuring communication with the mainland. With this in mind at the far end (northern-most point) [...] a fort called Bootshill was built on the height which dominates (overlooking) the space between the two passes or ferry crossings of Bristol and of Howlands. Assistance can assemble under its protection. This good work is of a high elevation, well flanked, preceded by a ditch as wide and deep, dug partly in the rock. It was sufficiently stocked with artillery and could hold 500 men..."

Howland's Ferry played an important part during the Battle of Rhode Island. American forces used the location to pour

onto Aquidneck Island to fight the British who occupied it. When they were forced to retreat, many of the American forces used that route to make their escape.

Arranging for transportation for thousands of soldiers from Tiverton to Portsmouth was a major undertaking. The British knew an American invasion would be coming, so they had already destroyed many of the flatboat boats the Americans had constructed in the Fall River area. The Americans had to secure the wood mills in Fall River and Tiverton to rebuild the flatboats that would be needed. Silas Talbot oversaw the building of 85 flatboats. Every carpenter in the army was put to work and every piece of boards and plankings in the area were used to make the transport boats. General Sullivan called out to New England mariners to come and operate the flatboats. On August 9, 1778 Howland Ferry was teeming with boats shuttling Americans to Portsmouth.

The path to Howland's Ferry was the escape route when the Americans had to evacuate on August 29th and 30th because the French had left. According to Christian McBurney, Captain Samuel Flagg of Salem and the boatmen from Salem, Marblehead and other New England towns worked day and night to ferry equipment and men off the island. William Whipple and Jeremiah Olney of the 2nd Rhode Island oversaw the embarkation. After the retreat John





Laurens wrote – “.we had a water passage of 1/4 mile to cross from the island to the main – a vast quantity of stores, heavy baggage, ammunition and cannon to transport. You will be filled with admiration at learning that the retreat was effected without the loss of a single man or even an entrenching tool”. Silas Talbot and John Laurens were among those holding off the British to give the Americans more time to retreat. At 11 PM Lafayette arrived from meeting with the French in Boston. He had taken the 70 mile journey and was disappointed that he had missed the action. Lafayette did have a role in bringing the piquets (unit of soldiers).



# Site 6: North Battery - Bristol ferry and Marine Aspects

When the French arrived the fortifications at Butts Hill were in poor shape and there was concern that the British may come back and invade Aquidneck Island again.

General Rochambeau, Lafayette and others saw the fort as a key communications point if the British returned.

One of the French leaders commented:

“ For its construction, we took advantage of two older, very imperfect, redoubts, whose mutually supporting fronts were shaved off, and which were joined together by two branches with breaks and redans, to make a single piece of good defence and capacity.” (Quoted in Blondet, *Jeux de Guerre*, p. 239. Blondet dates the letter to 9 December 1780.)

Prior to the arrival of Rochambeau's forces in Rhode Island in mid-July 1780, Butts Hill was the only major fortifications active on the north end of the island. As Rochambeau set up defenses against the anticipated and feared British attack, he sought to strengthen Butts Fort to block any access from the north - through Bristol Ferry. The older Earthworks had been set up by the British and Americans earlier in the war. Completing Butts Hill as a true fort required repairs and additions that

were made by Massachusetts State troops. The French engineers almost immediately provided the expertise that the Americans lacked.

On the 9th of July 1780, British ships were seen near Newport Harbor. This impending attack spurred the French interest in constructing a true fort on Butts Hill.

On July 22, Rochambeau accelerated the construction of defensive works, not only around Newport but at Butts Hill Fort as well. An entry in the journal of Major Marius de Palys's *Journal de Campagne*, mentions the redoubts at Howlands Ferry and Butts Hill Fort. " Eight days had elapsed since the commencement of the work, and no thought had yet been given to fortifying the point of the island which should have 1st thought of. This is the point of Howlands Ferry, and Monsieur de La Fayette decided to occupy it better than it was at the time. There were two bad redoubts, which were connected and formed into a respectable fort, which had not been finished, the fort and another in the shape of a star, which protected the ferry together with a battery on the mainland assured communication with the mainland, which was essential for relief or retreat in case of misfortune."

# Site 7: French Engineering with Black Regiment, and Militia Build Fort

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.

At this time the area was known as “Camp Butts Hill. ” The work of remodeling the fortifications into a fort was hard. Soldiers were hungry and stole from nearby homes and they

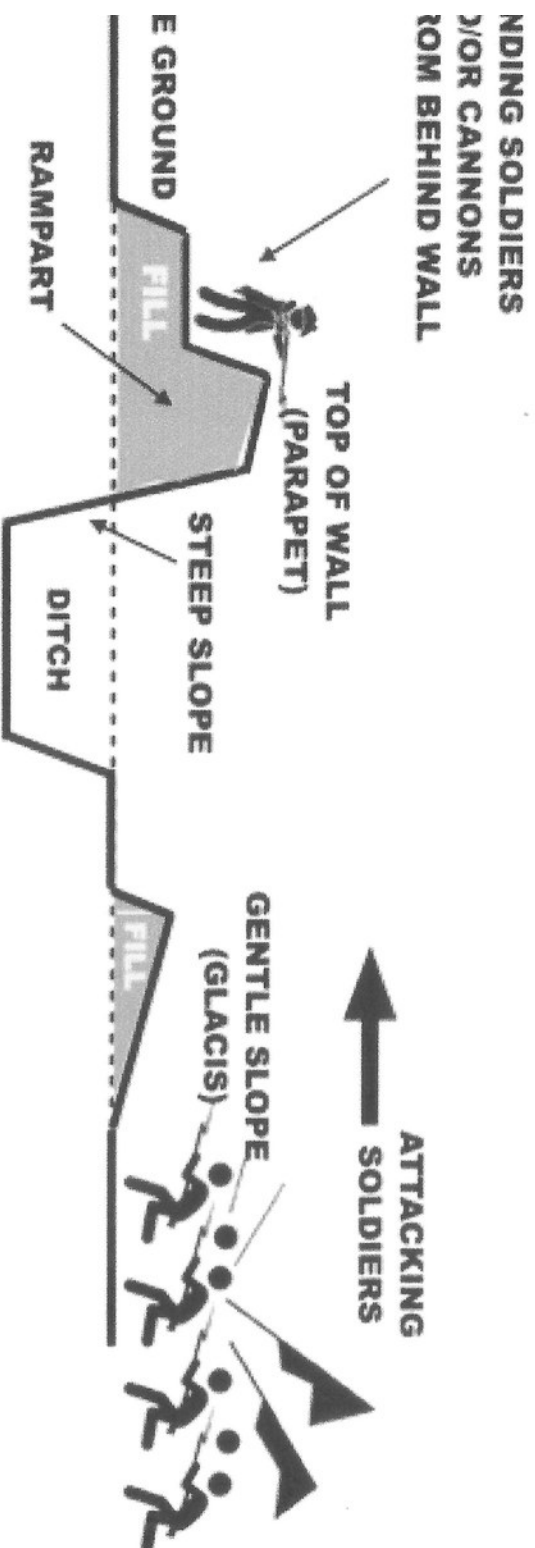
were disciplined for that. The officers had a hard time securing enough food to last a day so that they might be fit for duty. In an October 10, 1780 letter to friends in Boston, Major May of the Boston Regiment shares his experience.

“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”

One group that were assured of good provisions were those actively helping the French masons. One orderly book (daily account of orders of the day) entry reads :



## PARTS OF AN EARTHEN-WORK FORT





“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.

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. Members of the Rhode Island Regiment under Col. Christopher Greene continued the “works” at Butts Hill Fort once the Massachusetts militias departed.

# Site 8: Butt Hill Green - Roderick Terry Preservation.

“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 in August of 1923. 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 sign-age. 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.

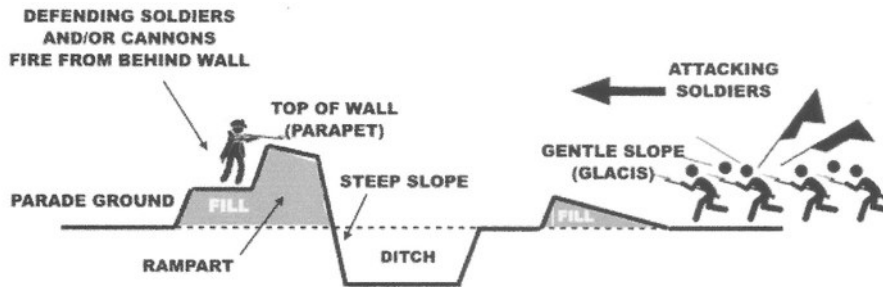
# Dedication 8/29/1923



THE FLAG RAISING



## PARTS OF AN EARTHEN-WORK FORT



### Earthenwork Glossary

**Artillery:** Artillery in the Revolutionary War was a collection of ranged weapons that included cannons, mortars, and howitzers. Artillery was used to destroy fortifications, buildings, and enemy troops

**Barracks:** Housing for the troops

**Bastion:** A projecting part of a fortification built at an angle to the line of a wall, so as to allow defensive fire in several directions.

**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.

**Ditch:** 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.

**Earthwork:** A field fortification constructed out of dirt. An earthwork could be a mound but typically consisted of a ditch and a parapet.

**Fascines:** a bundle of rods, sticks, or plastic pipes bound together, used in construction or military operations for filling in marshy ground or other obstacles and for strengthening the sides of embankments, ditches, or trenches.

**Gabion:** A cylindrical basket of woven sticks made in advance for quick use in building or repairing a parapet. Gabions were frequently filled with earth once placed into a fortification.

**Glacis:** A defensive feature which is simply a natural or man made slope incorporated

## Glossary

into the defenses of a fortification. The slopes were initially designed as steep man-made slopes to deter attack on foot.

Parade Ground: Place where soldiers practice or have parades.

Parapet: Top of the rampart.

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

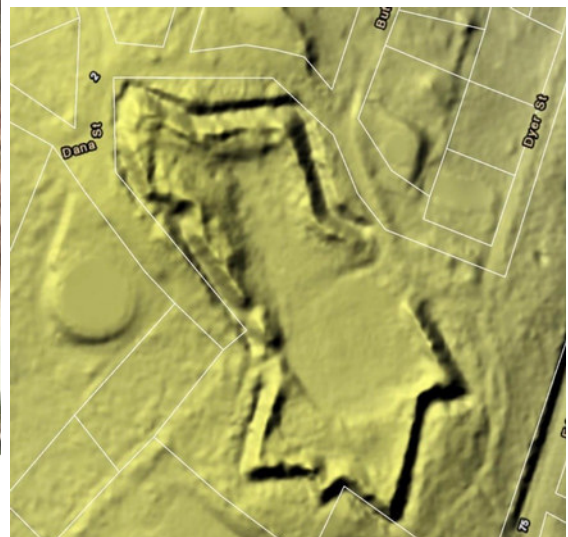
Ravelins: "V" shaped part of fortification attached to the bastion.

Redoubt: Redoubt: An enclosed fortification constructed to defend a position from attack from any direction.

**Definitions based on American Battlefield Trust glossary.**



**Lidar Image of fort**



## Butt Hill Fort Time line

1776 - 1779: British occupation of Island.

August 9, 1778: British troops retreat from Butts Hill (Windmill Hill).

August 11, 1778: American troops at Butts Hill.

August 29 - 30. 1778: Battle of Rhode Island Gen. Sullivan uses Butts Hill as headquarters.

August 31, 1778: British return to "Windmill Hill" (Butts Hill).

October 1779: Butts Hill returned to American control.

July 1780: Col. Greene's 1st RI Regiment as part of the "Rhode Island Six Months Continental Battalion," worked with French masons and Massachusetts militias to complete fort structure.

Nov. 1780: Col. Greene's RI 1st Regiment remained at Butts Hill to work on the fort after the remainder of the Continental Battalion joined French troops in marching to join Washington's army.

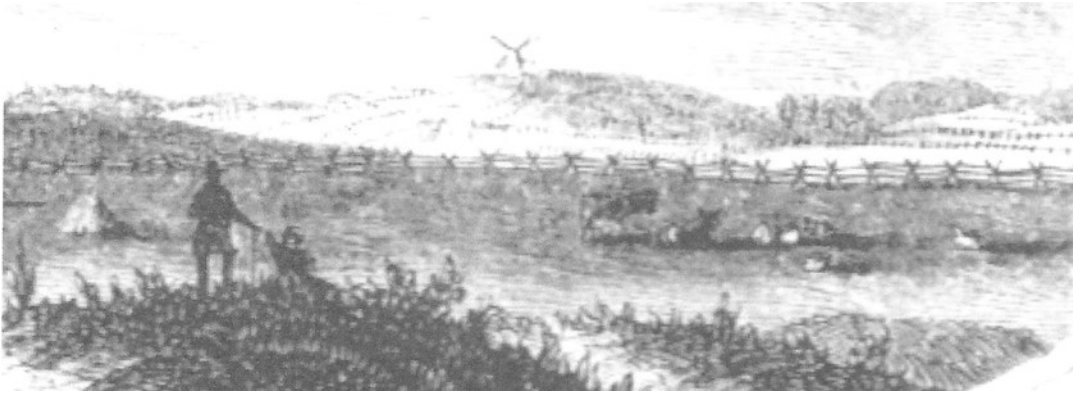
August 25, 1781: Proposal made to transfer cannons, carriages and ammunition from Butts Hill Fort to other Rhode Island fortifications.

1782 Butts Hill Fort was abandoned.

1900 House lots first offered for sale.

1920s -1930s. – Roderick Terry conveyed property to Newport Historical Society.

1968: Fort conveyed to Town of Portsmouth



View of Quaker Hill from Butts Hill: John Lossing

### Images:

Cover, front and back: Paul Murphy

Title: Gloria Schmidt

Page 2: Diagram collaboration - Paul Murphy and Gloria Schmidt

Page 4: Huntington Library map of North Portsmouth

Page 6: Battle of Rhode Island Map by A map of part of Rhode Island shewing the positions of the American and British armies at the Siege of Newport, and the subsequent action on the 29th of August 1778 - Leventhal Maps

Page 8: Commonwealth Insurance Map of Battle of Rhode Island

Page 10: Terrain diagram based on image in report by Dr. K. Abbass

Page 12: Both images Included in Our French Allies

Page 15: Diagram by Richard Schmidt.

Page 16: Berthier Brothers Map 1780-81

Page 18: Images from Newport History Magazine

Page 19: Diagram by Richard Schmidt

Page 20: Lidar image of Butts Hill today

### For Further Reading:

The most authoritative book on the Rhode Island Campaign is:

McBurney, Christian. **The Rhode Island Campaign**. Westholme Publishing, Yardley Pennsylvania, 2011.

**The Diary of Frederick Mackenzie** gives a comprehensive view of British Occupation.

For children, libraries may have copies of **The Black Regiment** by Linda Brennan.

**Revolutionary War Defenses in Rhode Island** by John K. Robertson is an excellent book on Revolutionary fortifications.

### Websites:

[battleofrhodeislandassociation.org](http://battleofrhodeislandassociation.org)

[portsmouthhistorynotes.com](http://portsmouthhistorynotes.com)









