The Hill's Story

Butts Hill, Portsmouth,RI

By Gloria Schmidt

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Table of Contents

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The Hill Before the Revolutionary War

There is a hill in the northern part of Portsmouth, Rhode Island. The rocky soil of the hill isn't good for farming, but it has been a useful hill. Its height made it an ideal spot for a mill to use wind power to grind corn. A wind turbine stands there today.   Some called it Durfee's Hill or Briggs Hill after the families that owned the land in colonial times. Around the time of the American Revolution in the mid 1700s, the people of Portsmouth called it Butts Hill after the family that owned it then. Because it was a high hill, it could be used to watch the boat traffic coming from Tiverton and Bristol. There are stories that the hill might have served as the location of a beacon so Aquidneck Islanders could send messages to the main land.
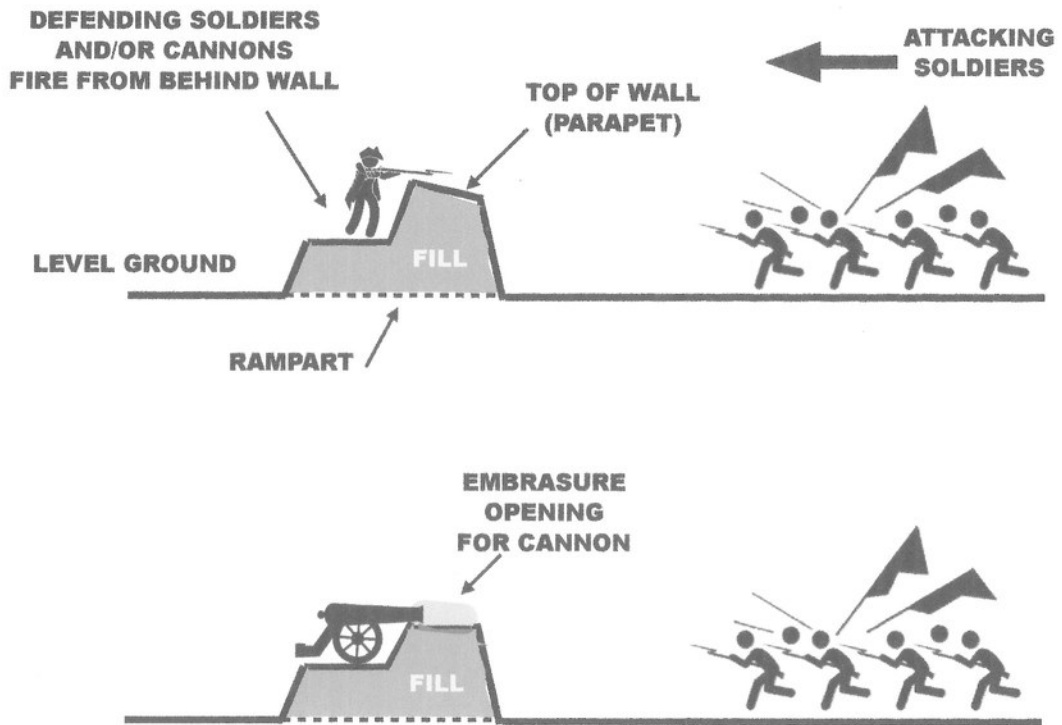
Photo from Jim Garman's Collection

British Occupation of Aquidneck Island

During the War for Independence, British troops invaded and occupied Aquidneck Island in December of 1776. They saw the hill as a spot where they could watch for Americans trying to sneak onto the island. The British only ruled Aquidneck Island and the mainland of the Rhode Island colony was in American hands. The British called the hill "Windmill Hill" because it was the site of wind powered mills in the past. In the spring of 1777, the British and **German (sometimes called Hessians)** troops who fought with them began to build a north facing **redoubt (An enclosed area built to defend a position from attack from any direction).** There were so many soldiers stationed at Windmill Hill that they needed a **barracks – a place for up to 200 soldiers to stay.** The British generals ordered Portsmouth residents to work building the barracks three days a week, but citizens who were Quakers refused to work because their faith prevented them from helping in war. Life was very difficult for people that lived on Aquidneck Island. The British cut down the trees for firewood, took the livestock from the farmers to feed the soldiers and even filled in the wells where the people got their water.

Map below is from the Huntington Library– North Portsmouth (1778)

PARTS OF AN EARTHEN-WORK REDOUBT

DEFENDING SOLDIERS
AND/OR CANNONS
FIRE FROM BEHIND WALL

TOP OF WALL
(PARAPET)

ATTACKING
SOLDIERS

LEVEL GROUND

FILL

RAMPART

EMBRASURE
OPENING
FOR CANNON

FILL

By December of 1777 the British had plans for a 6 gun **battery (a grouping of cannons),** a redoubt for 100 men and new barracks for 300 men. In May of 1778 the British 54 **Regiment (unit of soldiers)** constructed a redoubt around the barracks. Windmill Hill was an important fortifications with a thousand soldiers stationed there.

Diagram by Richard Schmidt

Rhode Island Campaign Begins

On August 9th, 1778 the British got word that the Americans were coming to drive them off Aquidneck Island. They left Windmill Hill (Butts) and all their **fortifications (defensive positions)** in Portsmouth and set up **trenches (deep ditches)** defenses in Middletown and Newport. American General Sullivan was waiting in Tiverton with his army and when he knew that the British had left the hill, his men crossed over to Portsmouth. Heavy canons were moved to the Hill the Americans called Butts Hill. By August 11 almost 10,000 American troops were camped around Butts Hill. That evening Sullivan's whole army marched by him with General Nathaniel Greene in charge of one side and the Marquis de Lafayette the other side.
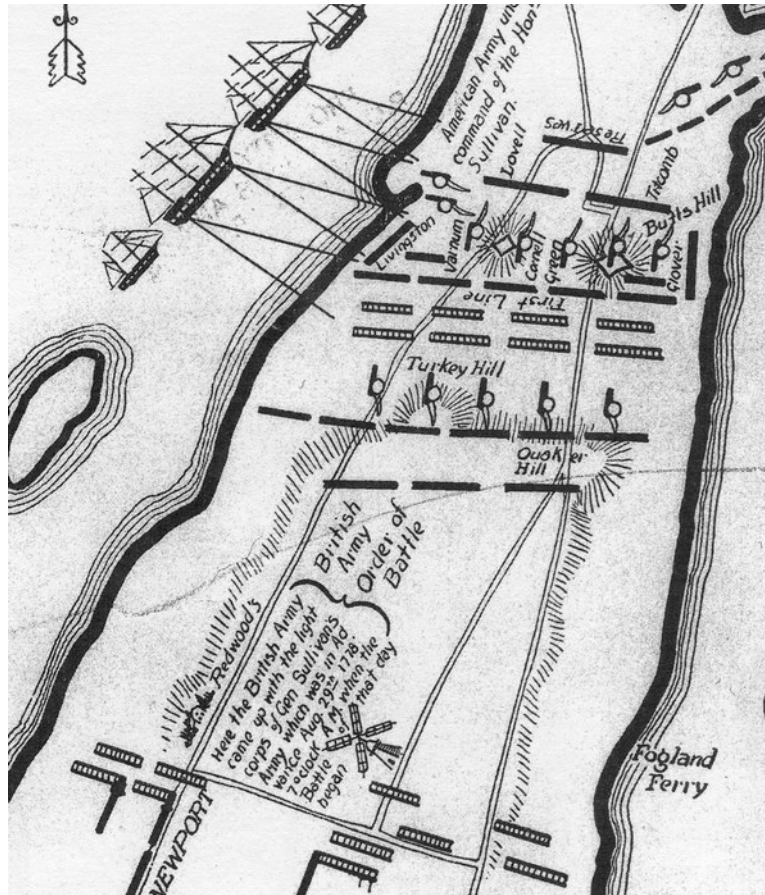
Map: Rochambeau Map of Aquidneck Island

Siege of Newport

Lafayette was there as part of a plan by the French and the Americans to drive the British out of Aquidneck Island. The plan was that the Americans would push the British and their German allies toward Newport. The French would bring their fleet to the shore off Newport and together they would force the British to give up control of the Island. A big storm which caused damage to French ships ruined the plan and as the French sailed away the Americans tried to push on. "The Siege of Newport" is a name we give to the American effort to drive the British out of Aquidneck Island.

Map: *Positions of British and American Armies on August 29, 1778*

Battle of Rhode Island

The French fleet had gone to Boston to make repairs on their ships but the Americans hoped they would come back to help. Americans made the decision to **retreat – to pull out of the fighting,** so that they might save men and equipment to fight again another day. In a final attempt, Lafayette rode to Boston on his horse. He could not persuade French General D'Estaing to return. "The Battle of Rhode Island" is what we call the retreat on August 29, 1778. Butts Hill became General Sullivan's headquarters during the battle to get the Americans out of Aquidneck Island safely

Map: Commonwealth Insurance Map 1929.

From Butts Hill General Sullivan could watch the battle action moving up East Main Road and West Main Road. He sent in extra troops where they were needed. The American goal was to hold back the British troops so that the Americans could successfully cross the **Sakonnet River** to Tiverton at **Howland Ferry.**

<center>First Action – Union Street</center>

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

By 8:00 AM on the corner of East Main and Union Street, American soldiers took British forces by surprise.   Americans retreated down Middle Road and East Main Road.

Monument to the first fighting in the Battle of Rhode Island – At Portsmouth Historical Society.

Battlegrounds – West Main Road

Turkey Hill– Heritage Park
At 8 AM the British forces chased Col. John Laurens and his American troops up West Main Road. A group of Americans hid in tall stalks of Indian corn and fired at the Hessians. When the German officers stopped to help an injured man, it gave the Americans a chance to make an escape. Lauren's men fought to keep their position on Turkey Hill but the British succeeded in capturing the hill.

The Black Regiment Defends a Redouts

The action moved up West Main Road to a small redoubt (an earthen defensive spot) on the way to Lehigh Hill. The First Rhode Island Regiment (also called the Black Regiment) held back three quick attacks of the British troops at this small redoubt by West Main Road. The Rhode Island Second Regiment was fighting close by. Samuel Ward was in charge of the First Rhode Island (Black Regiment) and he describes the action in his diary.

Diary of Samuel Ward: "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.."

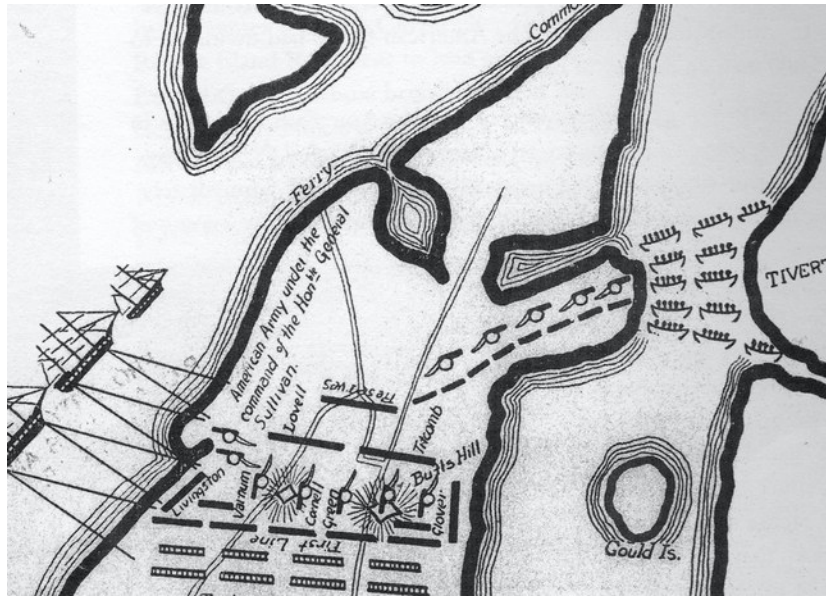Image of Black Regiment soldier (left) – Brown Univ.

The Battle Continues Up East Main Road

Battle at Quaker Hill

The British units marched up East Main Road and Middle Road and began to battle Americans on Quaker Hill. Americans were also stationed around the Quaker Meeting House at Hedly Street. General Sullivan ordered the units fighting on Quaker Hill to retreat back to Butts Hill Fort. The fighting on Quaker Hill lasted a full hour. The British attempted to attack Butts Hill but the 18 pound cannons from Butts Hill kept the British from moving to the hill. Shots were fired back and forth from the American and British lines, but the battle was over by 4 in the afternoon.

Map from Monument at Patriot's Park

The Americans Retreat Off Island

On the night of August 29th and during the day on August 30, soldiers on Butts Hill cared for the soldiers who were injured and prepared to move off the island. There were losses on both sides – American and British.   General Sullivan described what had happened at Butts Hill.

" To cover my design (plan) 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 (equipment) were falling back and crossing through the day; at dark, the tents were struck (packed away), the light baggage and troops passed at dawn, and before twelve o'clock the main army had crossed with the stores and baggage." Lafayette came back from Boston in time to lead the last of the soldiers off of Aquidneck Island.

Map: Commonwealth Insurance Map 1929

British Return to "Windmill Hill"

On August 31,1778 the British return to "Windmill Hill." It may be hard to imagine, but some British and German soldiers brought their families with them to war. The women took care of cooking, washing clothes and sewing uniforms.   The Hill became an area with family campsites. The writings of some of the German ministers who came with the Hessian soldiers list several births, baptisms and infant deaths recorded at the Windmill Hill encampment (Butts Hill). They remained at the hill until the British generals decided to leave the island in October of 1779.
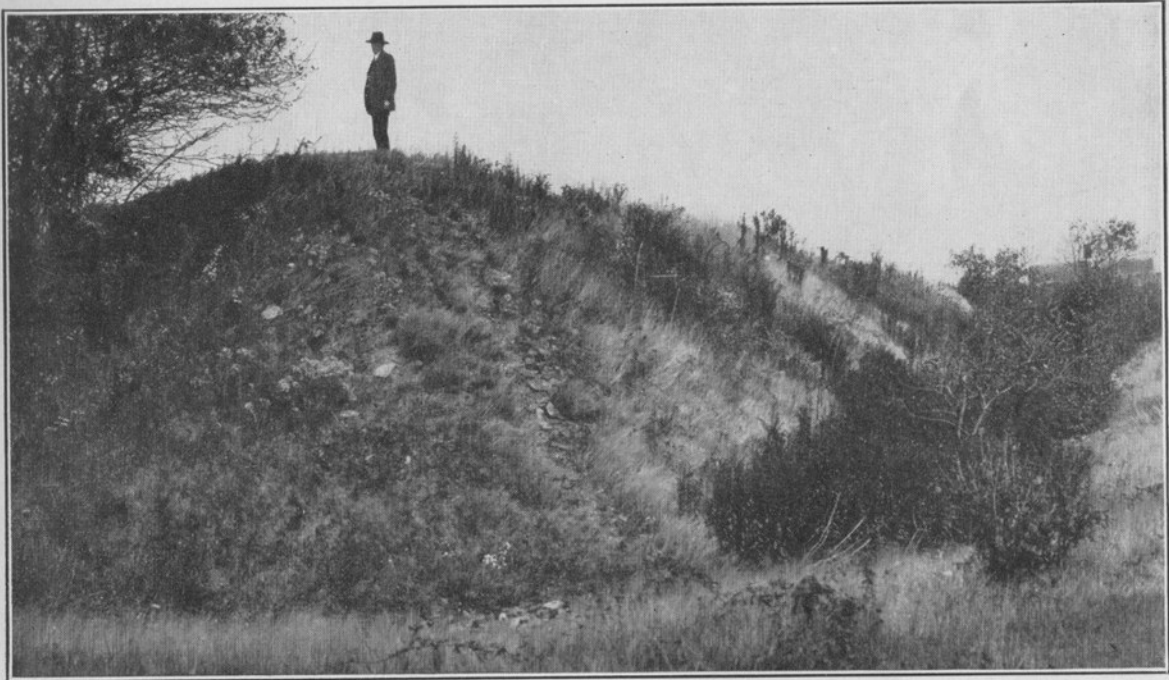
The French Create a True Fort

The French fleet sailed to Newport on July 11, 1780. Some French soldiers were stationed at Butts Hill. Through the Fall of 1780 American and French soldiers worked together to improve the defenses at Butts Hill. Up until this time Butts Hill was not a true fort because it wasn't enclosed. Through the summer and fall of 1780 Butts Hill was a busy place with **Continental** Soldiers (including the Rhode Island First Regiment), Massachusetts **militiamen** and French **masons (stone workers)** working on building Butts Hill Fort. French **General Rochambeau** and Lafayette thought the height of Butt Hill was the perfect place to set up signals between Aquidneck Island and the mainland. The French engineers were famous for fort building and the shape of Butts Hill Fort that we see today is from their designs.

Map by Berthier Brothers.

The Fort Closes

Butts Hill was home to a marvelous earthen work fort by the end of 1780, but the Revolutionary War moved toward the south of the American Colonies. By September of 1782 Rhode Island commanders began to move the cannons out to Providence. By June of 1783 the metal gates and timber at the fort were sold. Butts Hill and its fort were forgotten. The land was too rocky for farming, so the earthen work fort was left untouched.

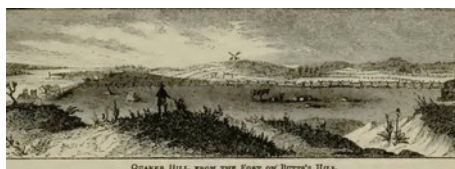Photo in Howard Preston's article 1926 Rhode Island History.

BUTTS HILL FORT, AT PORTSMOUTH, SCENE OF THE BATTLE OF RHODE ISLAND

A View from Butts Hill in 1850

In 1850 Benson Lossing visited the hill and described what he saw in **Pictorial Field-Book of the Revolution**,

"The remains of the old fort on Butts Hill, the **embankments (a wall of earth)** and **fossé (ditch or moat),** with traces of the hastily-constructed **ravelins** (triangular or V-shaped fortification structure located outside the main walls of a fort), are well preserved. Even the ruts made by the carriage-wheels of the cannons, at the **embrasures (places for guns to fire through."** The **banks (walls),** in some places, are twenty feet high, measuring from the bottom of the **fossé (ditch**). Fortunately for the **antiquary (someone who studies the past),** the works were constructed chiefly upon a rocky ledge, and the plow can win no treasure there; the banks were earth, and afford no quarry for wall builders, and so the elements alone have lowered the ramparts (top of the walls) and filled the ditches. Southward from this eminence, I had a fine view of Quaker and Turkey Hills – indeed, of the whole battle-ground."

Fort Saved

The hill was a peaceful place for seventy years after Lossing's visit. Although it was not good land for planting, farmers did use the old parade grounds (place where troops gathered) for grazing their animals. One even cut a hole through the earthen works to pasture his herd. In the 1920s the hill and fort were at risk of being bulldozed for 200 house lots. Newport Historical Society President Roderick Terry was dedicated to preserving historic areas. He gradually bought the lots on Butts Hill and with much celebration he gave the hill to the historical society. The gift was not without restrictions. The Society had to take care of the fort. When it was clear that the historical society did not have the money to take care of it, the ownership of the hill was put in the hands of the Town of Portsmouth.

Photos from Newport History Magazine 1923

The Hill Today

As we prepare for the 275th celebration of the Battle of Rhode Island, the hill is once again emerging from the shrubs and trees that have invaded the earthwork walls. The Butts Hill Fort Restoration Committee (part of the Battle of Rhode Island Association) is working to finish clearing the shrubs and dead trees. The aim is to create walking paths to help us learn our history.   The hill is already home to special programs featuring re-en-actors who bring that history to life. Butts Hill is history we can see today and a reminder of those who fought for American independence.

Butts Hill Walk

BUTTS HILL FORT 1776-1782

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

Northern Battery Toward Bristol Ferry

View Toward Bristol Ferry

Welcome Signs South and East

EARTHWORKS
DITCH
WALLS
PATHWAYS
SIGNAGE

Main Parade Field

West Path

Site of British Barracks

BHF Green

WELCOME East

View To Tiverton Howland's Ferry

East Path

WELCOME South

1. British Occupation
2. American Command —Rhode Island Campaign
3. American Command - Battle of Rhode Island
4. Southern Earthworks Explanation
5. Howland Ferry - British view/retreat of Americans
6. North Battery - Bristol Ferry/maritime aspects
7. French Engineering/Black Regiment/Militia
8. Terry Preservation

North Battery
Thin line - ditch
Parade
Bastion
Ravelins

Time-line

- 1776 – 1779: British occupation of Island and Butts Hill – Siege of Newport – British troops abandon "Windmill Hill."
- August 8, 1778: British troops retreat from Butts Hill (Windmill Hill).
- August 9, 1778: American troops at Butts Hill. August 9–14th: Butts Hill headquarters for Gen. Sullivan.
- August 29 – 30: Battle of Rhode Island Gen. Sullivan uses Butts Hill as headquarters.
- August 31, 1778: British return to "Windmill Hill" (Butts Hill).
- October 26, 1779: Butts Hill returned to American control.
- July 1780: Col. Greene's 1st R.I. Regiment and the Six Months Continental Battalion work with French masons and Massachusetts militias to complete fort structure.
- Nov. 1780: Col. Greene's 1st Rhode Island Regiment remained at Butts Hill to work on the fort. Mid Summer 1781 to November 1781: 500 Massachusetts State troops under Col. William Turner garrisoned the fort.
- 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 for sale
- 1920s –1930s. – Roderick Terry conveyed to Newport Historical Society, pieces of the land . In 1968 the state transfers the land to Town of Portsmouth.

Glossary of Some Words to Know

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

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.

Hessians: German soldiers fighting for Britain.

Parade Ground: Place where soldiers practice or have parades.

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

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

Regiment: Military unit.

Questions to Think About

1.   What do you imagine life was like for children during the British Occupation?

2. What are some words that might describe how the Americans on Aquidneck Island reacted to the American Army coming to the Island.

3. Why do you think American General Sullivan planned a retreat?

4. How did Samuel Ward describe the way the Black Regiment fought?

5. What do you think stopped the British from taking over Butts Hill (Windmill Hill) the day of the Battle?

6. What do you imagine life was like for a German child living on Butts Hill (Windmill Hiil) after the Battle of Rhode Island?

7. What signs of the Butts Hill Fort did Lossing find in 1850?