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History of Fort Hamilton

Jeroen van den Hurk Ph.D.

Salve Regina University, jeroen.vandenhurk@salve.edu

Emma D. Valade

Salve Regina University, emma.valade@salve.edu

Amanda Bentz

Salve Regina University, amanda.bentz@salve.edu

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**Narragansett Bay Interdisciplinary Undergraduate Research
Summer Field Program**

History of Fort Hamilton

Amanda M. Bentz ('22)
Emma D. Valade ('23)

Supervisor:
Jeroen van den Hurk, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Cultural and Historic Preservation
Coordinator, Noreen Stonor Drexel Cultural and Historic Preservation Program

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Salve Regina University & Rose Island Lighthouse and Fort Hamilton Trust

1) Why is it called Fort Hamilton:

In two letters from Fort Hamilton's architect, Lewis Tousard to Alexander Hamilton, then commanding general of the US army, in 1798 and 1799, Tousard requested permission to construct two forts in Newport. The letter indicates the intention to name one of these forts, Fort Adams, and the other Fort Hamilton, after Alexander Hamilton. This name was likely selected as a means of becoming in Hamilton's favor. The Fort to be called Fort Hamilton was constructed on Rose Island, expanding French fortifications on the Island from 1780 that included 40 pieces of heavy artillery. Tousard expanded upon this to construct a work with four bastions designed for sixty guns and bomb-proof barracks that could house 300 men. At this time, and up until 1878, at which time the War Department gave a general order that Forts were to be named only by regional officers, forts were typically named after an esteemed individual, as chosen by the local commander. However, the Fort on Rose Island was not finished and was therefore never used for military purposes. As the fort was not completed, it was likely never officially named Fort Hamilton, and instead became referred to as the fort on Rose Island on all ensuing reports and papers. Around the 1880s, the Fort began being referred to as Fort Hamilton and has since been known by this name. Two other forts in the United States were likewise named after Alexander Hamilton: Fort Hamilton in Ohio, constructed in 1791 by General Arthur St. Clair, which was in operation until 1796; and Fort Hamilton in Brooklyn, New York, constructed in 1825, which is still operational.

2) Ownership of the Land:

In 1675, Peleg Sanford, then major in command of the colony's militia and later governor of the colony of Rhode Island, purchased Rose Island (then called Conockonoquit) from the Native Americans. Likely around the 1740s, the Island became owned by Daniel Goddard. Daniel Goddard was a cabinet maker born in Jamestown RI and lived in Massachusetts. In the 1740s, his family moved to Newport, RI, and became esteemed cabinet makers. Daniel Goddard owned the island until his death in 1764, when he fell out of a window. As his death was sudden and unexpected, likely, he did not have a will, which may have led to difficulty in selling the island. The family held on to the island until 1766, when John Goddard, acting as executor, placed an ad in the paper to sell two-thirds of Rose Island. The ad remained in the papers until 1799, when John Adams, President of the United States, purchased the Island for use by the US government.

The history of Rose Island in terms of documentation begins in 1799, with the sale of Rose Island by the Goddard family to the President of the United States. How the Goddard family ended up in possession of the island is still not known, but at the time the Goddard family owned lots of properties in Newport, mostly in the Point neighborhood. At the time the start of Fort Hamilton was constructed, it is believed the family would have been leasing the island to the government. However, all work on the fort was stopped in 1801 as tensions in Europe cooled and underfunding became more of a problem. For the next 160 years, the government would hold ownership of the island. During this time the island was used mostly as ammunition and explosives storage, as it was far enough from shore that should it explode none of the town would be destroyed. In World War I and II explosives made at Goat Island would be shuttled out of the bay where the barracks of Fort Hamilton could provide an ideal storage system, as they were two feet thick brick walls. In the 1960s the government no longer had use of the island and

began to look to sell the island. Somewhere before then, the island was divided into two plots. Plot one was eleven and a half acres, where today the bird sanctuary is in place during the summer. The second plot is two and a half acres and includes the lighthouse.

The first plot was sold by the government in 1962 to the city of Newport but would be seized by the government six years later for violations of clauses in the deed. In 1969 the government sold the land to a private group of businessmen in Newport. They would own the land until 1999, during which time there is no record of any work done to the islands, in fact, it is believed the land was almost completely abandoned. However, in 1999 the group would sell the island to the Rose Island Lighthouse Foundation, which owns it to this day. Now the eleven and a half acres are predominantly overgrown fauna, with the land being closed off in the summer as a bird sanctuary for nesting seasons.

The second plot, with the lighthouse on it, was sold again in 1976 to the University of Rhode Island (U.R.I.). It was given as a research station to the college, but it was short-lived and by the early 1980s the government reclaimed the land. Part was because the university never ended up using the land, the other had to do with the stipulation that whoever owned the plot made active restoration work to the lighthouse. When U.R.I. failed to do anything with the property the government decided to prevent further degradation of the lighthouse they would reclaim the land and try to sell again. In 1985 the government sold the land to the city of Newport, to which the city has leased the land to the Rose Island Lighthouse Foundation. Since then, the foundation has made active work to preserve the lighthouse. In 1987 the lighthouse was registered as a National Historic Landmark, a status it holds to this day.

Goddard Family:

Before being sold to John Adams, President of the United States, for use by the US Government, Rose Island was owned by Daniel Goddard. Daniel Goddard was a cabinet maker born in Jamestown RI. In the 1740s, his family moved to Newport, RI. His son John Goddard joined with Job Townsend to become the leading cabinet maker in Newport. John's son and Daniel's grandson, Thomas Goddard, took over the cabinet business, becoming one of the more prominent and influential citizens of Newport. Thomas became known for his furniture throughout New England. He became a prominent landowner, with several properties throughout Newport, specifically in the Point neighborhood. He also served Newport as captain of the Fire Company and Health Officer of the Port.

3) French and British Battery:

Despite still being under the ownership of the Goddard family in 1778, the British constructed a battery on Rose Island. The battery is believed to have been located in the location of a bastion that was added as part of Fort Hamilton. No evidence of this battery remains. In the 1780s, the French commander, General Lafayette, and the Rhode Island militia improved the fortifications of Narragansett Bay, fearing a potential attack by the British. The Fortification Improvements included the construction of a battery on Rose Island, which was armed with forty pieces of heavy artillery. This battery was constructed in the current location of the barracks of Fort Hamilton. No evidence of the French battery remains. It is unknown how these fortifications were constructed as the island was still owned by the Goddard family in the 1780s. However, as they had been trying to sell the land since 1766, they may have had an agreement with the government allowing them to begin construction before officially selling the land.

4) Bomb-Proof Barracks/ Uniqueness/ First System:

In 1799, the US government, under French architect Lewis Tousard began the construction of Fort Hamilton on Rose Island. The fortification was intended to be the largest of the defenses of Narragansett Bay. As this would be the first fort seen when sailing into the bay, it was likely intended as an intimidation factor. As it was to be the largest fort, it included bomb-proof barracks, the first fort in the US to do so. It was not until during the War of 1812 that other US forts were constructed with or remodeled to include bomb-proof barracks. Despite the early attention given to the fort, construction was halted in 1801, at which time it was only half completed, and the fort was never used for military purposes.

Fort Hamilton was built as a part of the first system of seacoast fortifications, which stretched from 1794-1808, and included the construction of twenty forts in thirteen states. This system was established in response to the need for stronger fortifications following US independence and unrest in Europe. The system also set a precedent that the US government would buy or lease all lands that were used for forts. This first system was largely underfunded, and fort design and construction were largely left to local and French military engineers. Wood and earthworks were primarily used, with bastions often constructed in a star layout. Fort Hamilton has two pentagonal bastions, as well as two circular bastions. These circular bastions stray from the conventional methods at this time, making Fort Hamilton very unique. The lack of funding for this first system and decreasing unrest in Europe may have contributed to the halt in the construction of Fort Hamilton in 1801. By the time construction of Forts was picked up again, with the War of 1812, military methods had evolved and there was no longer need for so many forts in the Narragansett Bay. Instead, the focus was placed on enlarging Fort Adams in Newport, leaving Fort Hamilton to no longer serve any military purpose.

5) Fortification/Quarantine:

Fort Hamilton was first commissioned in 1798, with the plan to be the largest fort in the Narragansett Bay. It was to be accompanied by three other forts, Fort Adams, Dumpling, and Greene, to protect the important port town of Newport. However, underfunding in the Artillerists and Engineers, the department instructed to build the fortification, as well as the cooling of tensions in Europe halted construction in 1801. With only two bastions, the barracks, and an earthwork wall having been built. By the time the war of 1812 came, technology and weaponry had become so much more advanced that Fort Hamilton was no longer needed. Fort Adams, at Brenton Point, was built on such a scale that it became the major fort of the area. In fact, by 1820 most Newport residents saw Fort Hamilton as irrelevant and worthless, further pushing any funding away from the fort. The only rumored use of the island before the end of the nineteenth century was as a quarantine hospital for cholera and yellow fever. But if it had been used no significant structural changes occurred. After this, the fort was used as storage for explosives from as early as 1888 to the end of World War II. What is standing today are the barracks, earthwork mound, and one of the bastions, though it has severely deteriorated. The barracks are the key element, as they are the nation's least altered first system fort, as well as the largest remaining construction of the period. They are two-foot thick brick walls, with vaulted ceilings of bricks to prevent bombings from overhead.

Additional Research Questions:

What were French/European forts like at the time that Fort Hamilton was constructed? Were they similar?

Why was construction stopped? Was the construction of other forts stopped at this time as well?

How did the French construct fortifications on the island in 1780 when it was owned by the Goddard family?

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