The Story of the Analysis of Green End Fort

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During the American Revolution, three groups of people built forts on Aquidneck Island. The colonials had forts in Newport which were abandoned when the English arrived in 1776. The English and their Hessian allies built fortifications throughout the island, some of which changed hands during the invasion of Gen. Sullivan in August of 1778. The third group were constructed by the French under Rochambeau with the aid of the colonial militia who fortified the island in 1780.

In the winter of 1976, a study was published in the *Bulletin of the Newport Historical Society* which went into a detailed analysis of map locations of the forts, based on recently available maps drawn by British and French forces that occupied the island. The result of this analysis indicated that the redoubt located on Vernon Avenue in Middletown was not an English fort but one built by the French in 1780, for the Regiment de St. Onge. Other researchers and investigations by the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission have indicated concurrence with this identification.

Since the study was published in 1976, a number of knowledgable and well intentioned people have expressed doubts about the location and identification of the redoubt on Vernon Avenue. The doubts are the result of the following considerations: first, Dr. Roderick Terry, former President of the Newport Historical Society, was a well known and respected historian, and it was he who wrote “The Story of Green End”, which described the Vernon Avenue redoubt as a British fort used by the British (English) to defend Newport in 1778.

Second, the French fortifications saw no significant action during the revolution and were therefore of less interest than those of the English.

Third, the distance between the Vernon Avenue redoubt and the location of Cards redoubt (Green End Redoubt) built by the English in 1778 was only about 850 feet.

Probably the best reason for the discrepancy (French vs.
Figure 1
Photocopy of Lt. Hage's Map — 1778
(Reference 7)
English) going unnoticed is that it is primarily an engineering problem with most of the clues provided by maps and geometry, rather than texts. The inconsistencies that started the study of the Vernon Avenue Redoubt would probably be shrugged off by the casual observer as a change in road locations or a shift in Easton’s Pond. However, in the same position an engineer would be bothered by discrepancies. This is how the study began.

In the spring of 1976, on the advice of William O’Brien, a local resident and retired school teacher, a copy was obtained of “The Diary of Frederick MacKenzie,” published six years after the Vernon Fort’s dedication. Frederick MacKenzie was a lieutenant in the Royal Welch Fusiliers stationed with the English forces on the Island during the events of 1778 and was an eye witness of those events. The credibility of MacKenzie’s writings came from the depth of the detail in the day-to-day account of that period. MacKenzie’s writings have maps that include such details as the shape of redoubts built in Portsmouth where MacKenzie was stationed until Gen. Sullivan arrived, the location of roads, paths walked by sentries, the number of men and guns in each redoubt, houses, windmills, etc.

It was with the book in hand and standing in the Vernon Avenue redoubt that the first inconsistencies appeared to the author. The intent of the visit in the spring of 1976 was to stand in Green End Redoubt, look out across the valley, and see the colonial positions on either side of the Green End Avenue as MacKenzie had drawn them. The map in MacKenzie’s book clearly showed Card’s Redoubt, which he alternately called Green End, Easton’s pond, and the road up Honeyman’s Hill (Green End Avenue) on the far side. The problem was, when standing in the Vernon Avenue redoubt, the road up Honeyman’s Hill is on the left. MacKenzie’s map indicates it should be on the right. The inconsistency was enough to raise the curiosity of an engineer, particularly one with an interest in maps and battles.

The next step was to examine the maps available at the Newport Historical Society. A photocopy of an English map drawn by Lew’nt Edward Hage was available. Hage’s map matched MacKenzie’s. The roads on Hage’s map closely matched the location of existing roads in the Green End area including the road up Honeyman’s Hill. Card’s redoubt was shown in detail. It was a flat front redoubt with two gunports (figure 1). Here was the
second inconsistency, as the redoubt on Vernon Avenue has a pronounced indentation in the forward wall, no gunports, and a wide area in the rear where one can walk into it (figure 2). These characteristics are also present in a photograph of the redoubt taken in 1896. At this point (summer of 1976), the question was, what was the redoubt on Vernon Avenue? If it wasn’t a British fort, and there were no British forts indicated on the very detailed maps for the Vernon Avenue area, what was this landmark and who put it there? The answer was provided by another made by the French in 1780 (figure 2). It shows a redoubt in the area of Vernon Avenue (9 of figure 2) with an indentation in the forward wall. It also shows a flat fronted redoubt in the location of Card’s redoubt (figure 2, 28) which is labeled as destroyed by Gen. Sullivan. At this point it was necessary to consider how the problem of identifying the redoubts could be accomplished without leaving room for reasonable doubt.

The only method practical at the time was to take an engineering approach, use geometry and correlation of map points and aerial photos to locate the two redoubts on the ground. The results of this approach was published (1) and it convinced a large number of engineers and a few historians (2). The problem was one of communication and background. People without a math or engineering background had difficulty understanding and therefore accepting the proofs offered in the study. This was especially true for those with knowledge of Dr. Terry’s paper (3).

After the first study was published and the discussions followed, more information was obtained to reinforce the fact that the Vernon Avenue redoubt was a French fort built in 1780 (4). The first and most obvious consideration is that it would be very unreasonable and unmilitary for the British, when they evacuated the island in 1779 (5), to leave behind a redoubt that the colonials and in this case the French could use against them a year later. A closer reading of MacKenzie indicated that the English redoubts were dismantled in September 1778. The following is a quote from MacKenzie (6):

10th Sep 1778 - clear fine weather, wind N.

The ships under Commodore Hotham sailed this morning for New York. A number of small vessels sailed at the same time for Martha’s Vineyard, for stock.

The Redoubts and Batteries from Green End to
Figure 2
Photocopy of French Map — 1780
Redoubt Corresponds to the Redoubt on Vernon Avenue
(Reference 9)
Figure 3
Fortifications for Defense of Newport in Revolutionary War
1981  

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Tonomy-hill have been dismantled and the guns brought to the Artillery park.

It was also important to determine the basis for Dr. Terry's assumptions about the Vernon Avenue redoubt. This began with an examination of the circumstances surrounding the dedication of the Vernon Avenue redoubt in 1924.

The Green End Fort was dedicated almost one year after the fort at Butts Hill was dedicated to the colonials in the Battle of Rhode Island. It may have been that the people were looking for a fort to represent the opposing side of the Battle of Rhode Island. Dr. Terry was aware that Brigadier-General Esek Hopkins began fortifications in this area in October 1776. Dr. Terry also describes the British fortifications as beginning at "this fort" and extending northward along the brow of the hill then turning westward, crossing the main road and extending to Tonomy Hill. The remains of a second fortification were pointed out on the property of G.J.S. White's "Old Fort Farm" (850 feet away and the actual remains of Card's Redoubt (8)). Dr. Terry recounts the details of the siege of August 1778. No mention is made of the French forts in the Green End area. A map titled "Fortifications for Defense of Newport in Revolutionary War," (figure 3) published at the same time as Dr. Terry's paper, shows a number of forts drawn roughly upon a map by Wm. H. Lawton civil engineer. The location of the forts correspond to forts 29, 6, 28, 5, 24, 2, 1, 3 and 23 of the French map (9). Of these redoubts, number 28 corresponds to the remains of Card's redoubt on G. White's "Old Fort Farm" and number 24 corresponds to the location of Irish's redoubt out by the main road, near where Howard Johnson's is now, numbers 3 and 23 were on Tonomy Hill and also correspond to British fort locations. Most of the fortifications built by the English and presented in detail on their maps are missing from this map. This is as expected if the English dismantled the defenses as MacKenzie described (10). It would have been virtually impossible in 1924 to distinguish French and English redoubts without the advantage provided by the currently available maps.

A search of the references available to Dr. Terry indicated three that might have information on the location of English forts during the siege. They were Gen. Pigott's official report columns, "Defenses of Narragansett Bay" by Cullum, and Field's "Defenses of Narragansett Bay". Of the three, Gen. Pigott's report without a
Figure 4
French (bottom) and English (top)
Maps Adjusted to Same Scale
map (12), could not be used to distinguish forts built one year and 850 feet apart. There was a map in Cullum but it was a diagram of opposing forces, and not to scale and did not have the correct number of forts on the English side (13).

A final comparison was accomplished with the help of J. Garman, a noted historian and photography expert. The French and English maps were printed so that the distance from Fort Fanning to the corner of Bliss Road was the same in both pictures (figure 4). Card’s Redoubt on the English map (figure 4, top) is directly over the Redoubt 28 on the French map (figure 4, bottom). There is no English redoubt lined up with Redoubt 6 of the French map. Redoubt 6 corresponds to the location of Vernon Avenue (figure 3).

The reasons that the true identity of the Vernon Avenue redoubt (Redoubt de St. Onge) was not discovered until 1976 are:

a. The maps needed by Dr. Terry to distinguish between redoubts built one year and 850 feet apart were not available at that time (October 1924).

b. Interest in the fort from 1924 to 1976 centered on preservation and maintenance of the redoubt rather than in-depth studies of its history.

The increased interest in history at the time of the Bicentennial, the availability of detailed information from MacKenzie’s Diary, and the French and British maps all stimulated an engineer to do a detailed analysis which demonstrated the identities of the redoubts.

FOOTNOTES


7. Edward Hage, Lew'nt of Artillery, "Plan of the Works which form the Exterior Lines of Defense, for the town of Newport, Rhode Island also the Butteries and Approaches made by the Rebels on Honeyman's Hill during their attack in August 1778", drawn by Lew'nt Hage at Newport in November 1778. Photostat held at the Newport Historical Society and the Middletown Historical Society.


