

## Chapter 6 Conclusions and Recommendations

### 6.1 Summary

There are a host of reasons the Siege failed. The lack of deception, bad timing, a rocky collaboration with the French, the unexpected hurricane, the geography, and the available technology, led to a “perfect storm” of events. These, combined with the impending arrival of British reinforcements, made for an insurmountable task and Sullivan knew it. Had some of these circumstances been different, the Americans could have possibly won and ended the Revolutionary War in Newport

There was a distinct lack of deception in the American approach to the attack. In the beginning, American generals wrote a letter to the General Pigot saying that they were coming to get him. This might have had some psychological impact on an unseasoned commander but in this case, with a 6,000-man regular army including veteran officers, it only provided warning. When the French arrived off Newport, the British had no trouble observing their position in Narragansett Bay or the American camp in Tiverton. The result of this openness was that the British were able to strategize and put a plan in place to avoid a pincer movement by the Americans and French. Sullivan and d’Estaing had planned to attack Aquidneck Island from two sides (east from Fogland and west from Dyer Island) to trap the British stationed in Portsmouth. When the French fleet entered the bay, exchanging cannon fire with the shore batteries, their plan was easily discernible and the British immediately withdrew from the north end and east side of the island into Newport, leaving no one to trap.

The Americans also did not act fast enough. In the time that it took them to plan their advance, the British had more than enough time to dig in and better fortify the outer line. Sullivan himself had wanted to act quickly and take the British by storm but his colleagues

wanted a more methodical approach. Unlike the British, whose typical foot soldier was used as cannon fodder, the Continental Army tended to err on the side of caution and avoided conflicts that racked up too many casualties. This mentality and the urging of the other generals resulted in wasted time and opportunity. If the Americans had made their way down the island before the hurricane hit, they could have crossed the top of Easton's Pond before it became flooded and before the British had time to dig in. The rains soaked gunpowder and other supplies, further delaying the Americans' advance. By the time they reached Honeyman Hill, the valley was nearly impenetrable, due to the overflowing brook, the defenses that looked down on it, and the absence of specialized troops in the American ranks to handle such a situation.

Despite any planning that happened prior to the operation, the lack of proper coordination and cooperation between the French and the Americans during it made the entire engagement a messy affair. Although both were fighting for the same cause, they did not operate as a team, which greatly weakened their strategies. Sullivan who initially wanted to act quickly, listened to his officers rather than d'Estaing, and chose to take more time. D'Estaing, fearful of being trapped by Admiral Howe's fleet, abandoned any plan to blockade Newport harbor and instead left to pursue the British on the open sea. Later when d'Estaing returned, battered from the storm, he almost agreed to lend troops and artillery to the Americans but decided against it at the behest of his adamant officers. For the Americans, this was cause for alarm. They were not only counting on the French but had based all their plans on a joint operation and soon American militiamen deserted in droves at the prospect of facing the British alone. This led to weakened morale in the American camp. It seems both Sullivan and d'Estaing were more easily swayed by their own officers than by each other. Despite all of the bad coordination between the two sides, it was d'Estaing's unavoidable abandonment of the operation, already in progress, that made the

biggest difference. Once the French were out of commission, it was no longer a question of how to win but of inflicting what damage they could and withdrawing unscathed.

Although the French often get the bulk of the blame for the campaign's failure, perhaps the single greatest hindrance the Americans faced on Rhode Island (whether they knew it or not) was the technology available to them and the role geography played in this. Newport's location on an island meant that all equipment had to be transported by boat. Cannons over a certain weight were too heavy to make the trip across the Sakonnet River (the eastern passage of Narragansett Bay) in the army's small boats. The cannons that did make the crossing (18 pounders) were not substantial enough to penetrate the earthen defenses of the British on Bliss Hill. When the French returned, badly damaged by the storm, Greene had hoped to secure cannons and men, at the very least but was turned down. Had the French agreed and delivered larger artillery by frigate, the outcome could have been different; 24-pound cannon would have been more useful and 36-pound cannon could have destroyed the British forts altogether.

The British were too dug in and fortified by the time the Americans arrived in Middletown. Without more substantial firepower and with a swamp between them and the enemy, the Americans did not stand a chance. They could not disarm the cannons because theirs were inadequate. They also could not storm the lines because the swampy terrain would slow them down too much, a deadly chance Sullivan was not willing to take. The French and their artillery were the Americans' only hope to turn things around but the hurricane and d'Estaing's choices forced a set of unforeseen circumstances on the operation that could not be avoided. With the Americans' morale shaken by French actions and with no hope of things changing, their only option was to damage the British as they could before safely retreating. The following

June, while reflecting on the battle, Major General Charles Grey of the British Army summed it all up perfectly,

The Americans showed us they were soldiers and not just farmers. They built redoubts all around us, except for the side facing the water, dug trenches, drove us out of our camps with their cannon fire and had the will to storm our lines. But, this was the one thing their volunteers wanted to avoid, and just as well, for they would have lost many men without a fleet to support them. Their retreat was well planned and executed orderly.<sup>247</sup>

## 6.2 Preservation Recommendations

By studying the battlefield, it has become clear that a number of features of the historic landscape still exist and are worth preserving. Of the earthen fortifications, only Card's Redoubt and Tonomy Hill Fort still have visible remnants. Traces of the defenses on Little Tonomy may also exist but the area is too overgrown to assess its condition properly. Card's Redoubt rests in a Middletown resident's backyard and thus is not accessible to the public, but the removal of brush and other overgrowth from its walls would greatly increase the chances of the fort's survival. Tonomy Hill Fort is part of a public park maintained in part by the Aquidneck Land Trust. Although the park is well cared for, the walls of the fort are overgrown. Continued maintenance at this site to reduce overgrowth is key. Additionally, the installation of appropriate signage detailing the hill's history and former use is highly recommended. This would place the area into historical context and provide visitors with an appreciation for the site's significance. Further still, archaeological evidence may also remain at Card's Redoubt and Tonomy Hill Fort and the use of non-invasive testing (such as GPR surveys), would be worth conducting.

---

<sup>247</sup> Grey, *Bayreuther Zietungen*, 1779, as quoted in Schroder, 166.

The Elder John Bliss House, which was used as the British field headquarters during the Siege, is not currently on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). It is located off Bliss Road in Newport, set back between the British 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> lines of defense. The house, which is generally regarded as the oldest in Newport, was used by the British during the Siege, and is one of few remaining examples of a uniquely-Rhode Island architectural style – the stone ender. The Bliss House would easily be eligible for the NRHP as it meets both criteria A (associated with events significant to the broad patterns of our history) and C (embodies distinctive characteristics of a method of style, period or construction). No plans currently exist for this property to be added to the NRHP but it is something the Middletown Historical Society Research Team highly recommends and hopes will happen in the future.

At the center of the battlefield, the area encompassing Bliss Hill, Honeyman Hill, and the valley and bodies of water between them is largely recognizable today. The hills are now developed into suburban neighborhoods with some commercial buildings, and the road crossing the top of Easton's Pond experiences a high volume of traffic, but the overall topography and geography is the same. Enough of the relevant features (both natural and man-made) exist, to maintain the area's historical integrity. Based on its condition and the significant events that occurred there, the heart of the battlefield is eligible for the NRHP. Additionally, the remaining features can be used to interpret the events of August 1778. The following section addresses this area and the plans the Middletown Historical Society has to preserve and interpret a small portion of the battlefield.

### 6.3 Future Plans

This project has paired historical research with scientific analysis to better understand the location, resources and outcome of the Battle of Rhode Island. It focused on the Siege of Newport in Middletown, where days of cannonading took place across the valley between Bliss Hill and Honeyman Hill, and where the Americans failed to penetrate the British lines. Through this process the Middletown Historical Society Research Team has gained a better understanding of the engagement, its setbacks, the sites associated with it, and the landscape of the battlefield. It was through this understanding, commitment to the topic and certain other circumstances, that a new a new project emerged.

Located at the heart of the battlefield between Bliss Hill and Honeyman Hill, and along the banks of Easton's Pond, sits an undeveloped parcel of land owned by the MHS. Bequeathed to the organization in 2008, a plan had not yet been fully realized for the site. Now, with the completion of this study, it is clear the site can be put to use to recover this forgotten history. The installation of a small museum, signage and programming on these grounds would be an opportunity to commemorate the past and educate the public while preserving a portion of the battlefield. The site's location, within the valley between the British and American lines and along the pond, would give visitors a more complete understanding of the geography that so greatly affected the operation. Visitors would learn of the importance of the French involvement in the war effort, both this unsuccessful attempt and Rochambeau's later presence on the island and victories in the war. It would provide greater context as well for the many historic sites tourists see on their visits to Newport. Most importantly, this project would preserve a portion of the battlefield from further development and protect it for future generations.