

## Introduction

On July 29, d’Estaing’s formidable fleet, which included twelve ships of the line, four frigates and several small crafts, was sighted off the Rhode Island coast.<sup>31</sup> Forming a line of battle in preparation to enter Narragansett Bay, d’Estaing anchored and awaited word from the Americans. He had originally planned to act quickly and take the British by surprise but held off at news that Sullivan’s force was still trickling into camp and his numbers small.<sup>32</sup> Eventually, Sullivan was taken out to the *Languedoc* to discuss plans for recapturing Newport.<sup>33</sup> Their original plan called for a pincer movement to divide British troops stationed at either end of the island, with American troops landing on the east side and French from the west.<sup>34</sup>

Meanwhile Sullivan’s army, which would eventually include 10,000 men from Continental Army units and various militias, had been gathering in Tiverton across the Sakonnet River<sup>35</sup> from Portsmouth where the British were positioned (See Appendix A for the full Order of Battle). From there, the Americans had been easily able to observe the British and had detailed information about the terrain and disposition of their forces. The closest point of transit between the mainland and Aquidneck Island was Howland’s Ferry, a narrow passage of the Sakonnet River between Tiverton and the eastern side of Portsmouth (Figure I.1). It was located not far from Tiverton’s Nannaquaket Pond, which would serve as a good mustering place for the large number of boats needed to invade the island.

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<sup>31</sup> *DFM*, 2: 319.

<sup>32</sup> McBurney, 83.

<sup>33</sup> Hattendorf, 15.

<sup>34</sup> McBurney, 87.

<sup>35</sup> The east passange of Narragansett Bay, running between Aquidneck Island to the west and the mainland towns of Tiverton and Little Compton to the east.

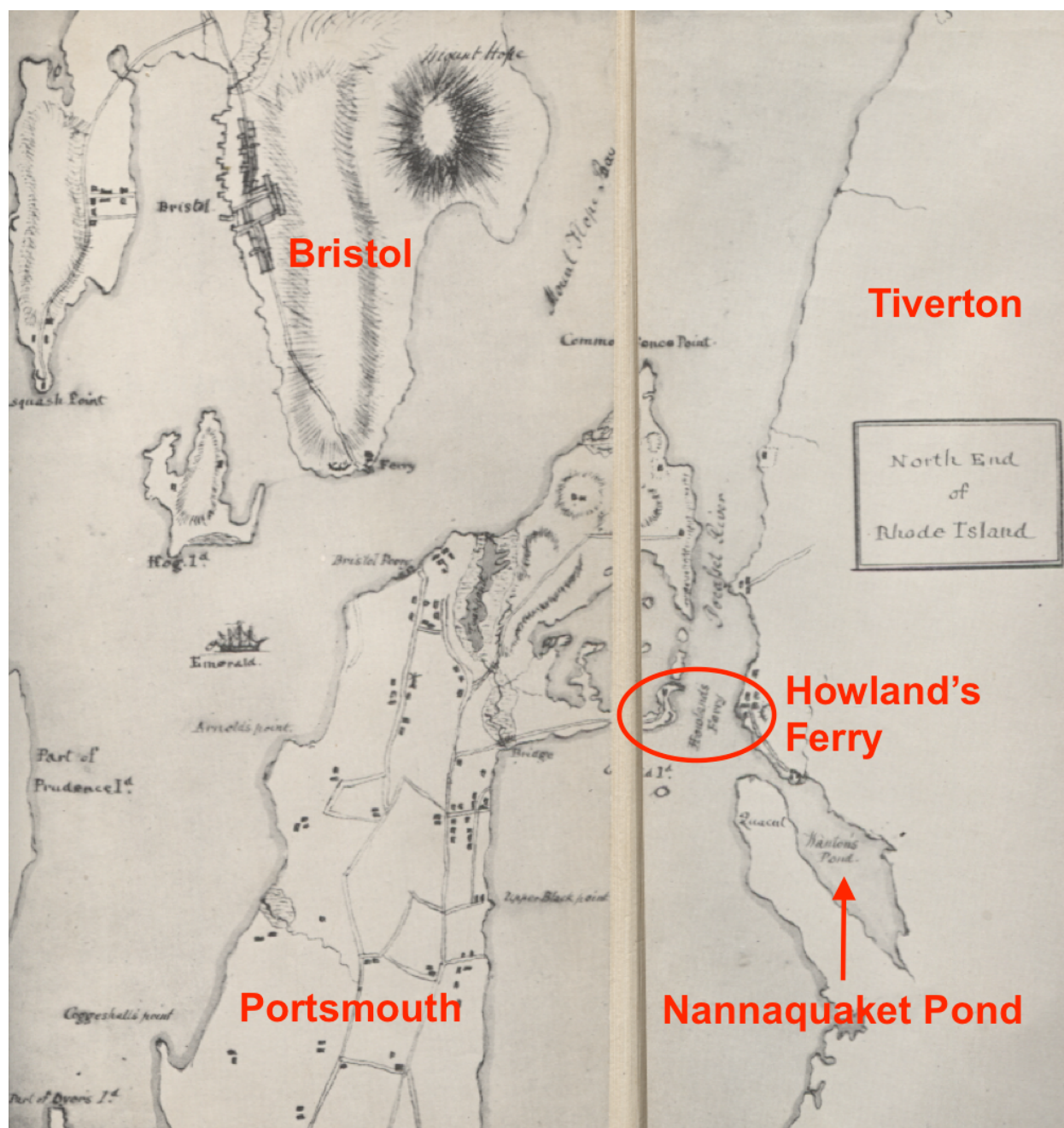


Figure I.1 Sketch by Lt. Frederick Mackenzie, as seen in his diary. The Americans gathered at Tiverton and would eventually cross by flatboat to Portsmouth at Howland's Ferry (circled in red).<sup>36</sup>

<sup>36</sup> DFM, 1: 133-134.

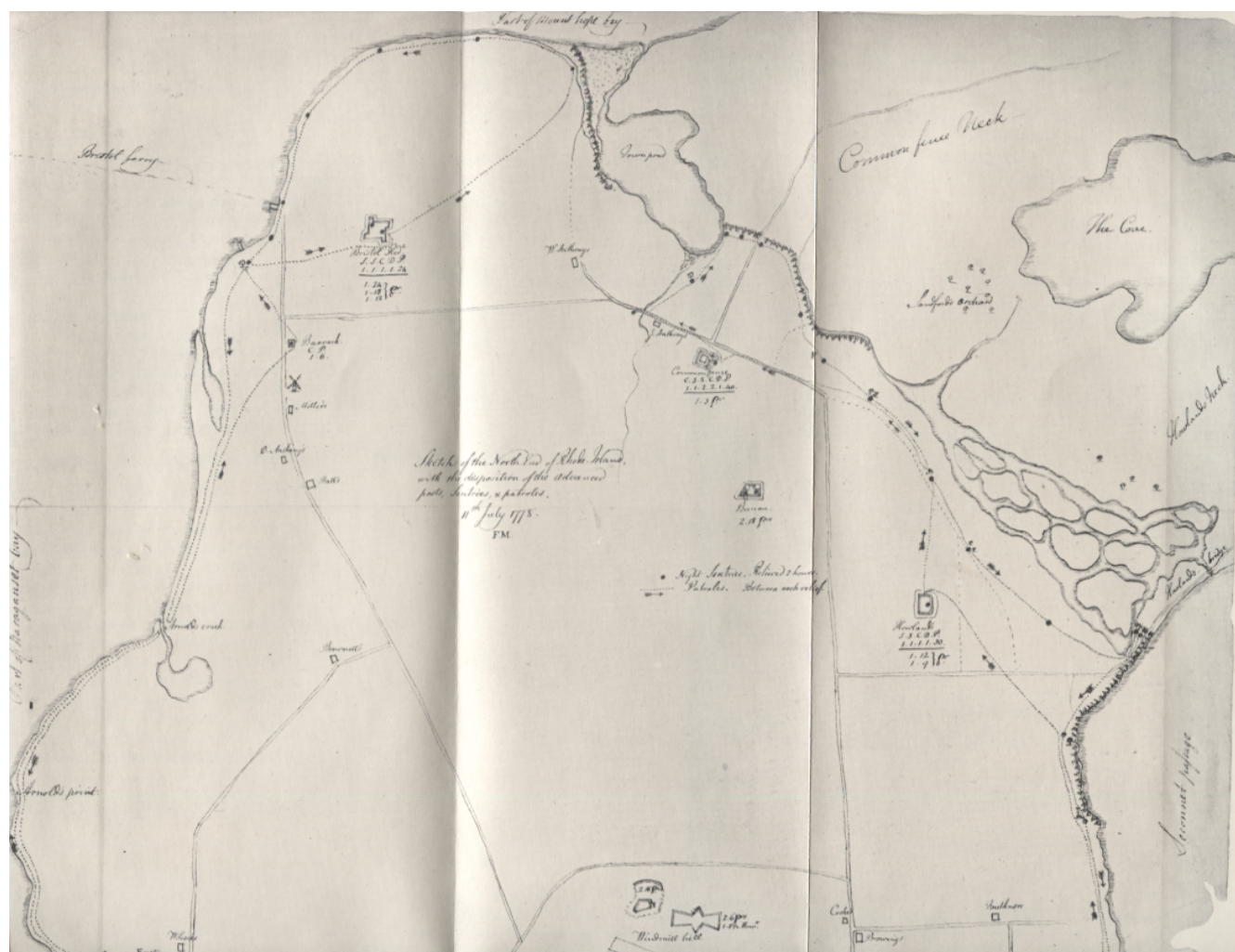


Figure 1.2 Sketch of forts on the north end of Aquidneck Island by Lt. Frederick Mackenzie, as seen in his diary. British fortification were built mainly on high ground, where they could monitor the Americans' activities in Tiverton.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>37</sup> DFM, 1: 172-173.



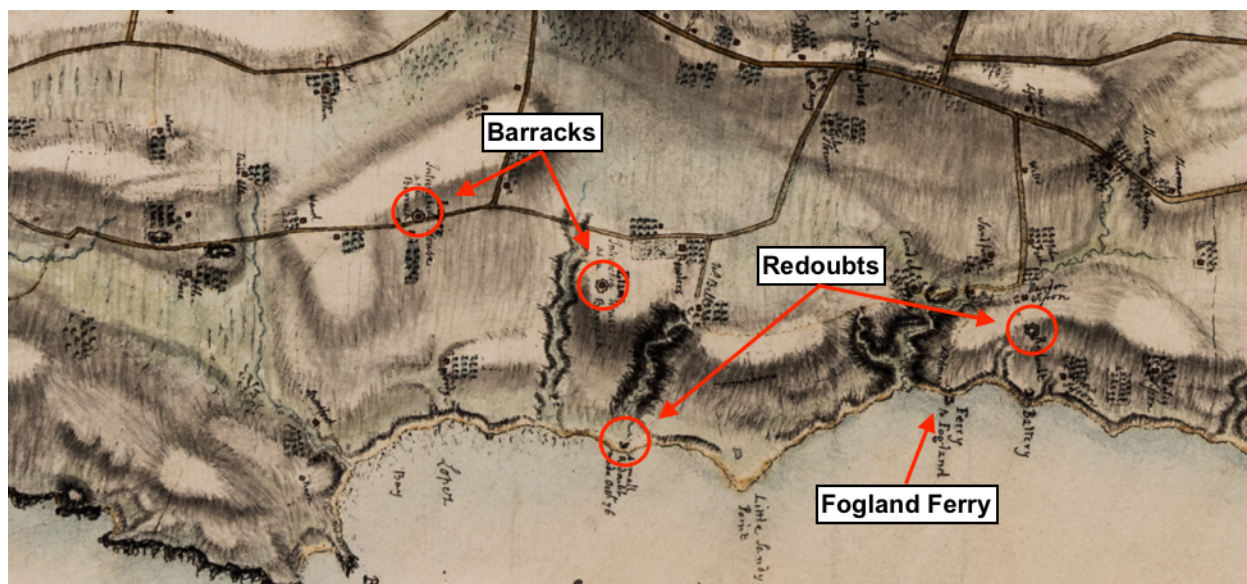


Figure I.3: British forts on east side of Aquidneck Island as seen on the “Plan of Rhode Island” map by Fage.<sup>38</sup>

With the arrival of the French in Rhode Island waters and Americans gathering across the river from Portsmouth, the British needed a plan. General Pigot knew the terrain of the island well. It had been mapped by Charles Blaskowitz and his team of surveyors in 1770 and Lieutenant Edward Fage kept the General’s maps current. Pigot had men stationed at the northern portion of the island with four strong earthen redoubts in Portsmouth (Figures I.2 and I.3), and additional forces on Conanicut Island,<sup>39</sup> but their main objective was to defend Newport, not all of Aquidneck Island. Controlling the entire island helped to maintain their foothold in Newport but Middletown and Portsmouth were mostly comprised of farmland, and had few useful resources left to offer. The port was the reason the British were there and Pigot grew concerned that with portions of his forces stationed to the north and elsewhere, his troops could be split up and beaten. He sent to New York for help but the French fleet jeopardized his

<sup>38</sup> Edward Fage, *Plan of Rhode-Island / Surveyed and drawn by Edw: Fage, captn. Royal Artillery, in the years 1777, 78 & 79. 1779.* William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>39</sup> Also known as Jamestown, RI, it is the second largest island in Narragansett Bay and is located between Aquidneck Island to the east and the mainland to the west.

supply line. The decision was finally made that all outlying British forces must withdraw from their positions and return to Newport should the French fleet enter the bay. The British objective now was to hold the port at Newport until reinforcements could arrive.

With a new strategy in place, the British hastily began making preparations for battle. More of an administrator than a campaigner, Pigot made his decisions in part based on intelligence from men he had recently interrogated, including one who claimed Sullivan had 20,000 American troops *en route* to invade the island.<sup>40</sup> This dwarfed Pigot's force of roughly 5,500 regulars and some Loyalist troops. The British had also captured two Jamestown residents that claimed Sullivan had 15,000 men, further fueling their belief that the American force was larger than it actually was.<sup>41</sup> As a result, the British troops were kept busy building an abbatis<sup>42</sup> for their defensive line around Newport and clearing fields in anticipation of an American attack.<sup>43</sup> Pigot ordered two battalions of Hessian and Brown's Regiment of Provincials to evacuate their guns and positions from Conanicut Island and return. With a shortage of oxen to move the artillery, the cannons were spiked and some pushed off the island into the water, rather than let them fall into enemy hands.<sup>44</sup> The 54th Regiment was recalled to Newport to thicken the parapet<sup>45</sup> of the harbor-facing North Battery. General Francis Smith, stationed in Portsmouth, sent baggage and all guns back to Newport.<sup>46</sup> To create further barriers for the French, the British scuttled four of their own supply ships (the *Cerberus*, *Orpheus*, *Lark*, and *Pigot Galley*, *with more to be scuttled later*) in the harbor by running them aground and setting them on fire.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> DFM, 2: 325. In actuality, there were about 10,000 American troops in Sullivan's army.

<sup>41</sup> DFM, 2: 345.

<sup>42</sup> A barrier of cut trees with sharpened branches toward the enemy.

<sup>43</sup> DFM, 2: 326.

<sup>44</sup> DFM, 2: 321.

<sup>45</sup> A protective wall or earth defense along the top of a trench or other place of concealment for troops.

<sup>46</sup> DFM, 2: 328.

<sup>47</sup> DFM, 2: 329-330.

The crews, organized into a battalion, would eventually be put to use in the gun batteries. By August 6, Admiral Richard Howe<sup>48</sup> was *en route* from Sandy Hook with thirty-five warships to defend Newport.<sup>49</sup>

The French fleet sat off shore, awaiting direction and d’Estaing pressured Sullivan to act. He had hoped to act quickly, before the British fleet could arrive, and was now growing impatient. Sullivan, did not disagree but was stuck awaiting the arrival of more militia and the construction of the boats needed to transport the Americans to the island.<sup>50</sup> Until his force was large enough and their transportation secured, he could not justify taking action. On August 3, word came via dispatch that a British fleet was on its way to attack the French. American officers were directed to prepare their men.<sup>51</sup> A day later, 100 oarsmen with officers moved boats to Tiverton.<sup>52</sup>

The next series of maneuvers, on both sides, set the stage for the battle to come. On August 8, d’Estaing’s warships entered Narragansett Bay via the east passage and engaged in a gun battle with British shore batteries.<sup>53</sup> When the fleet advanced, Pigot gave the order for all troops to withdraw from the north of the island and pull back to the British defensive line near the Newport-Middletown border.<sup>54</sup> The maneuver would take roughly three hours at standard marching conditions (30 inch steps, 100 steps to the minute). Both the east and west roads could

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<sup>48</sup> Commander of naval forces during the American Revolution and brother to General William Howe, who commanded the land forces.

<sup>49</sup> Hattendorf, 15.

<sup>50</sup> McBurney, 103, 108.

<sup>51</sup> Josiah Fletcher, *Order Book of the Revolution, Rhode Island, 1778*, ed. Ralph Weiss. (Newport, RI: The Redwood Press, 2015); 28.

<sup>52</sup> Fletcher, 29.

<sup>53</sup> *DFM*, 2: 339.

<sup>54</sup> *DFM*, 2: 339.

be used and the troops from the east defenses would evacuate via Bramans Lane to East Main Road then down East Main Road to Newport.<sup>55</sup>

As the British troops pulled back to Newport on August 8, American troops moved to occupy positions in Portsmouth. American scouts appeared near British lines and were fired upon by cannon at Irish's and Card's Redoubts. At this point the area east of the British front line, where Bailey's Brook meets Easton's Pond, was shallow and the north 400 feet were fordable.

In the meantime, d'Estaing had disembarked his troops on Conanicut Island, and went ashore to assess the situation.<sup>56</sup> After receiving a report that the British fleet was approaching the bay, he determined it was too dangerous to dismount his main artillery.<sup>57</sup> Sullivan sent word to d'Estaing of the shift in British forces and requested immediate support. Initially, he agreed and urgently made plans to land on Aquidneck. Then on August 9, Admiral Howe's fleet was spotted anchored off Point Judith,<sup>58</sup> leaving d'Estaing feeling vulnerable in the bay.<sup>59</sup> On August 10, the course of the battle changed dramatically. As the Americans, now in Portsmouth, prepared themselves for battle, d'Estaing made a fateful decision. Fearful of being outmaneuvered and trapped in a foreign harbor, he left Newport to pursue Howe on the open ocean.<sup>60</sup>

The Americans had largely been in good spirits since the arrival of their new ally, and d'Estaing's pursuit of Howe had not dampened Sullivan's outlook much. He assumed the

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<sup>55</sup> *DFM*, 2: 340.

<sup>56</sup> Hattendorf, 15.

<sup>57</sup> Hattendorf, 15.

<sup>58</sup> A small cape on the southwestern side of Narragansett Bay, where it opens out onto Rhode Island Sound.

<sup>59</sup> McBurney, 114; Hattendorf, 16.

<sup>60</sup> Hattendorf, 17.

French fleet would defeat Howe and return to finish off the bombardment of Newport. So plans were made to march closer and begin the Siege in Middletown, while they awaited d’Estaing’s return.<sup>61</sup> But on August 11, while the troops prepared to move out, rain started and over the coming days grew to gale force winds. Sullivan’s army of 10,000 now took cover wherever they could: some in abandoned British barracks, others in tents and some with no shelter at all.<sup>62</sup>

While the storm slowed Sullivan’s advance down the island, it would prove much more damaging to d’Estaing’s fleet. On August 12, the powerful fleet was seriously damaged; the *Tonnant* and the *Marseillais* each lost two of their masts, and the *Languedoc*, d’Estaing’s flagship, lost all three as well as its rudder.<sup>63</sup> “The skeleton of this beautiful vessel was drifting in silence at the mercy of the storm and the waves,” reported a soldier on another French ship.<sup>64</sup> D’Estaing’s fleet, now scattered and still under occasional enemy fire, limped back to Narragansett Bay where he would consult with Sullivan and determine how to proceed.

Meanwhile, Sullivan’s army had weathered the storm and was now recovering in Portsmouth. It had been a cold, violent, rain but luckily claimed few if any casualties.<sup>65</sup> As soggy soldiers attempted to dry themselves, fresh supplies of dry gunpowder began to arrive from Providence, Boston, and Connecticut.<sup>66</sup> Their plans to leave for Middletown on August 11 had been delayed by the gale but by the morning of August 14, the rain had stopped and soon orders came down to prepare to march.

Scouting parties had gone ahead to provide Sullivan with information about his options and he had decided on Honeyman Hill, which was east of and higher than the British position on

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<sup>61</sup> McBurney, 135.

<sup>62</sup> McBurney, 136.

<sup>63</sup> McBurney, 127.

<sup>64</sup> Quoted in McBurney, 127.

<sup>65</sup> McBurney, 137.

<sup>66</sup> McBurney, 138.



Bliss Hill. The troops stepped off at 6 am, making their way down the island in three separate columns (Figure I.4). Brigadier General James M. Varnum's Brigade came down West Main Road and Brigadier General John Glover's Brigade on East Main, with Brigadier General Ezekiel Cornell and Colonel Commandant Christopher Greene's Brigades between them. The lead units arrived at Honeyman Hill after roughly a 2.6 hour march at 8:36 am.<sup>67</sup> Although the French had not yet returned, Sullivan's army began to dig in and prepare to lay siege to the British on Bliss Hill.

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<sup>67</sup> The standard marching rate of the Continental Army was 30 inch steps and 100 steps per minute (equaling a speed of 2.84 miles per hour).

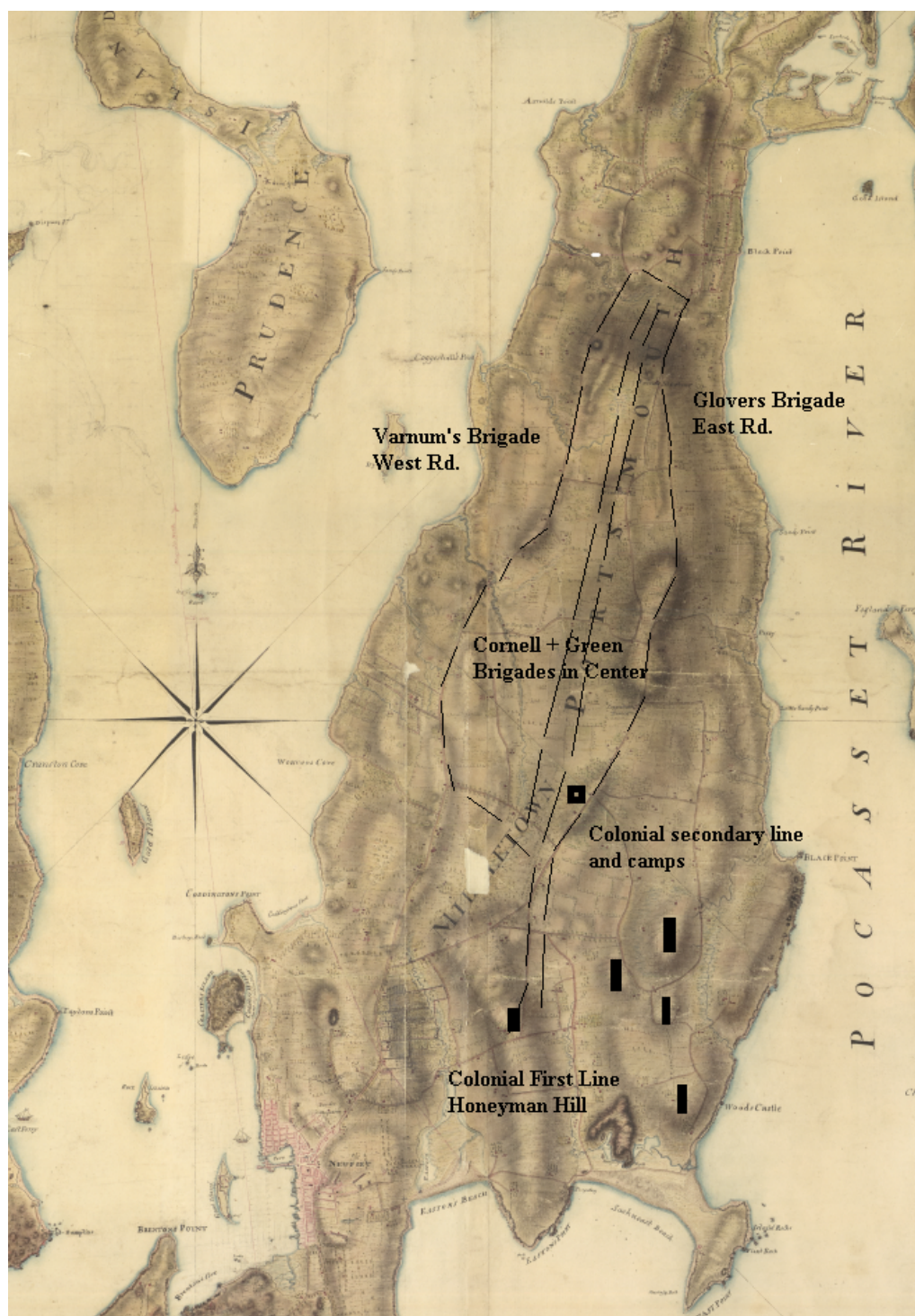


Figure I.4 Marching paths of Sullivan's army from their camp in Portsmouth to Honeyman Hill.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Fage, *Plan of Rhode-Island, 1779*. William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.