

Project Background

The origins of this project, focusing on Middletown's role in the Rhode Island Campaign, center around a Revolutionary War era earthen fortification on Vernon Avenue in Middletown wrongly associated with the British occupation and the Siege of Newport, and misidentified as Green End Fort (Figure PB.1). The site was actually constructed as a French fort after the arrival of comte de Rochambeau in 1780. Its proximity to another fortified position on the British front lines, Card's Redoubt, had led to confusion about its origins. The misidentification fueled further historical research and scientific analysis in an effort to correct this mistake, which in turn renewed interest in the battlefield as a whole.



Figure PB.1 The fort on Vernon Avenue as it appears today. Photo by author.

Situated amidst farmland, high on Bliss Hill, the site was acquired in 1894 by William Watts Sherman, John Nicholas Brown, Harold Brown, Francis S. Barker and Stephen P. Barker

in an effort to preserve it.²⁶ Two years later, it was included in Edward Field's *Revolutionary Defenses in Rhode Island*, where it was identified as the fort at Green End and described as having been built by British forces.²⁷ It was eventually deeded to the Newport Historical Society (NHS), which (following Field's example) wrongly identified it, again as a British fort, on a 1919 map of Revolutionary War sites. After a celebration of the American use of the fort at Butts Hill in Portsmouth in 1923, the NHS and its president, Roderick Terry, chose to hold a similar ceremony for the opposing side, dedicating the site on Vernon Avenue with a stone marker (Figure PB.2).

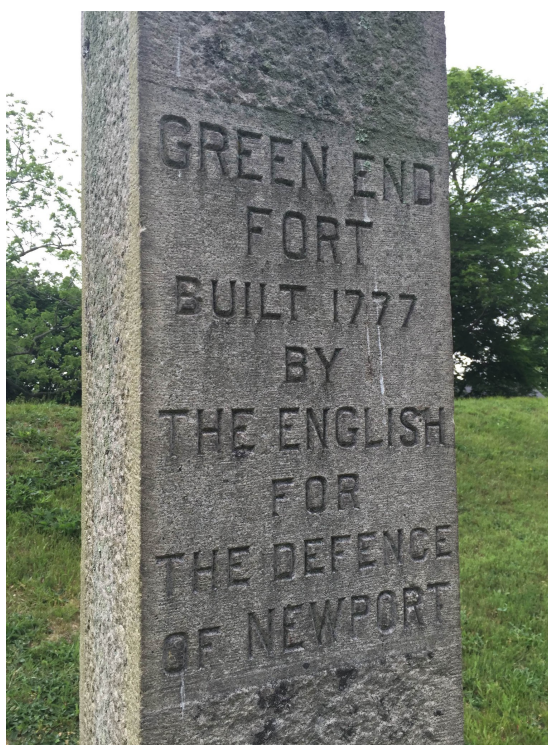


Figure PB.2 The marker placed in 1924 by the Newport Historical Society (NHS) at the fort on Vernon Avenue in Middletown, RI. Today, the site is still owned by the NHS. Photo by author.

²⁶ Roderick Terry, "The Story of Green End Fort," *Bulletin of Newport History* No. 51 (October 1924); 13.

²⁷ Edward Field, *Revolutionary Defenses in Rhode Island* (Providence: Preston and Rounds, 1896), 132.

Terry went on to publish an article covering the day's festivities and the history of the fort in an October 1924 issue of the NHS's *Bulletin of Newport History*.²⁸ This article reinforced the idea that the fort existed during the Siege of Newport, a belief that stood uncontested for over fifty years.

In 1976, engineer and historian Kenneth Walsh, submitted a paper to *Newport History*, the same bulletin Terry's article had appeared in. In it he argued that the earthen fortification was actually the Redoute de Saintonge, built by the French in 1780.²⁹ He had uncovered the mistake by accident but went on to support his theory using geometry, historic maps from the time and the diary of a British officer, Lieutenant Frederick Mackenzie, a source that had not been available to Terry in 1924. He hoped something could be done to rectify this and as a result, the Middletown Historical Society (MHS) came into being. A second article of Walsh's ran in 1981 addressing concerns of the skeptics and further explaining how the truth had gone unnoticed for so long.³⁰

In the intervening years, several notable works have been published concerning the Battle of Rhode Island and the State during the Revolutionary Era. Dr. D.K. Abbass of the Rhode Island Marine Archaeology Project (RIMAP) has produced a massive and indispensable four-volume report, *Rhode Island in the Revolution: Big Happenings in the Smallest Colony*. Another vital work on the subject is Christian M. McBurney's *The Rhode Island Campaign: The First French and American Operation in the Revolutionary War*. The book covers the entire scope of the "Americans" various campaigns and activities in their effort to reclaim Newport from the

²⁸ Terry, 3-5.

²⁹ Kenneth M. Walsh and David S. Walsh, "Memo on Location of 'Green End Fort,'" *Newport History* No. 161, Vol. 49, Part I (Winter 1976), 1-16

³⁰ K. Walsh, "The Story of the Analysis of Green End Fort," *Newport History* No. 184, Vol. 54, Part 4 (Fall 1981), 113-122.

British but mainly focuses on the Battle of Rhode Island. McBurney is also the author of *Revolutionary Spies of Rhode Island* and several articles on Rhode Island during the war. The works of both Abbass and McBurney are essential reading to anyone looking to study the Battle of Rhode Island in depth, and this study seeks to build upon their scholarship.

In 2008, the MHS received a parcel of land through a bequest of long time member Ray Durfee. The property was situated at the corner of Green End Avenue and Valley Road, right at the heart of the battlefield. Now with a sizable tract of land located in the valley between the British and American lines, the MHS took a renewed interest in the Siege of Newport and what remained of the battlefield. Hoping to tie the land, the area's history and its existing historic resources together, an attempt was made to create a historic district from the battlefield and surviving sites. The bid was unsuccessful and so the MHS decided a new approach was needed. It was determined that an in-depth study of the Siege of Newport battlefield was necessary and would provide an opportunity to clear up any remaining questions concerning the fortifications.

As the Siege was examined more closely it became clear that the report should not only identify the defenses but also address the accuracy of the cannons used against them and the overall feasibility of the operation. As with the identification of the Redoute de Saintonge, mathematical equations and scientific analysis have been paired with historic primary resources to determine how effective the cannonading actually was on the defenses given the distance, troops, materials and conditions. This paired with an analysis of a number of unfortunate events suffered by the Americans and the resulting actions taken by them, will ultimately tell whether they ever really had a chance to dislodge the British from Newport.

This project, the culmination of many earlier events and works, will be the first in-depth analysis of the battlefield from the Siege of Newport, in Middletown, Rhode Island. Using

historic resources and scientific analysis, the remnants of British and American defenses will be identified, the effectiveness of the cannons (both in range and power) will be studied, and the viability of the campaign will be analyzed. The aim is to create a resource for anyone going forward who wants to better understand where and how this significant portion of the battle played out, what physical evidence remains, and how likely victory would have been had circumstances been different. It will answer any lingering questions over the origins of remaining fortifications, give accurate context for any future discoveries, and provide a cannon study model that can be applied to other existing battlefields.