

Chapter 1 Detailed Description of the Battlefield at the Beginning of the Engagement

1.1 Position at the Start of the Siege

1.1.1 British Position

When the Americans were busy regrouping on the north end of the island, the British wasted no time in better fortifying Newport. They completed two lines of defense along the outskirts of town, to protect against attacks from the north (Figure 1.1). The first line was steep and would make infantry attack difficult. It was built along high ground in Middletown, west of Valley Road and Easton's Pond, known as Bliss Hill. Among the defenses facing east, were three redoubts,⁶⁹ Card's, Dudley's and Bannister's, and two sunken gun batteries (a 7-gun and a 10-gun battery) (Figure 1.2). From there, the line continued north toward Two Mile Corner, turning west at Irish's Redoubt and ending at Tonomy Hill (Figure 1.2). The dirt from the ditch, which connected the defenses, was piled on top to make a wall four feet high and six feet thick and an abbatis was constructed 40 yards in front of the line, providing an extra obstacle for anyone who tried to storm the area. The second defense was the inner line, constructed closer to town in Newport (Figure 1.1). It went from Easton's Beach, north along Easton's Pond, and to the junction of Bliss Road and West Main Road. It then turned toward the harbor and ended at the North Battery. The harbor also had additional protection from batteries at Brenton Point (where today's Fort Adams is located) and on Goat Island. (See Appendix B for additional maps of the battlefield).

⁶⁹ A small detached outwork as part of a larger defensive plan, usually square without defensive flanks. Could also be polygonal or hexagonal shapes.



Figure 1.1 Key terrain features and locations of the British 1st and 2nd lines of defense built in 1778, for the defense of Newport. The inner line was constructed in Newport and the majority of the outer line was in Middletown. Both lines included redoubts, trenches, gun batteries and abatis.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Abraham D'Aubant, *Plan of the town and environs of Newport, Rhode Island / Exhibiting its defenses*, 1779, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

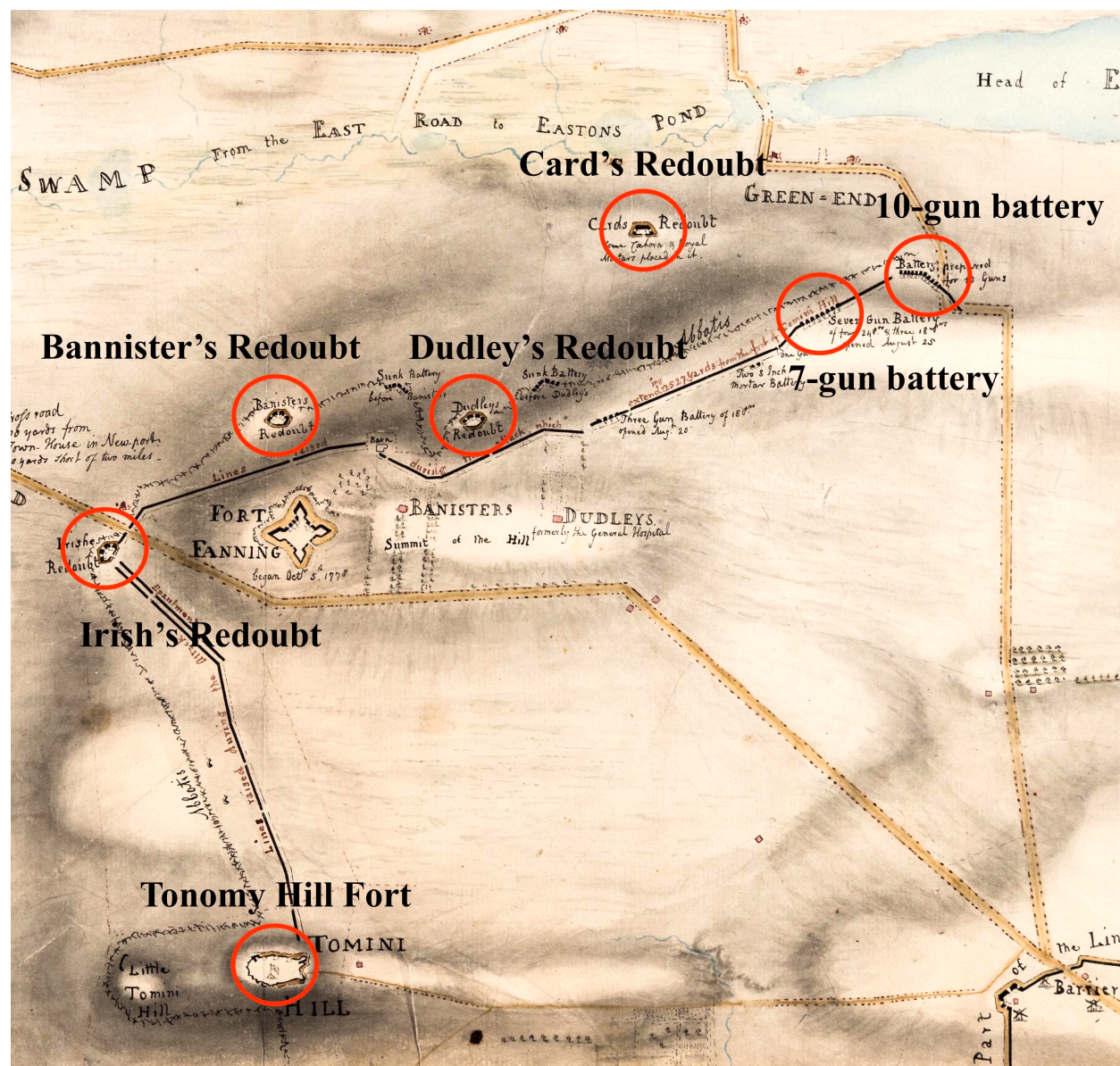


Figure 1.2 Key defensive features of the outer line (circled in red), built by the British for the defense of Newport. The outer line was the one primarily involved in the Siege of Newport. Note, this map details both works used during the Siege and those completed afterwards. This includes Fort Fanning, which was completed in December 1778, and was not in existence during the Siege but is visible here.⁷¹

⁷¹ Edward Fage, *Plan of the works, which form the exterior line of defence, for the town of New-Port in Rhode Island : Also of the batteries and approaches made by the rebels on Honeymans Hill during their attack in August 1778 / This plan surveyed and drawn by Edward Fage, lieutt of artillery, November 1778. 1778.* William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

1.1.2 American Position

Since the storm ended, Aquidneck Island had been trapped in a blanket of fog. Then, on the morning of August 18, as the fog cleared, British lookouts spotted American forces in Middletown. They were positioned on Honeyman Hill, east of Bailey's Brook and across the valley from the British on Bliss Hill, and were hard at work constructing a battery.⁷² At 176 feet high, their position overlooked the British outer line giving them altitude advantage (Figure 1.3). The Americans built their camp and a secondary line safely beyond the range of the British first line batteries on the east side of Honeyman Hill (Figure 1.4).



Figure 1.3 British (red) and American (blue) observation points at the start of the battle. The Americans' view was from the top of Honeyman Hill and the British observed from the rooftop a house on high ground behind their line.⁷³

At the beginning of the Siege, the Americans had few defenses constructed. Unlike the British who had had time to fortify, the Americans' position in Middletown developed over the course of the Siege (Figure 1.5 shows what it would eventually look like, by August 26, 1778). At the beginning, though, Americans and British were not close enough to one another to be truly effective. Smoothbore cannon had a maximum range of about 2,000 yards but was only

⁷² DFM, 2: 358.

⁷³ *Plan de Rhode Island et les differentes operations de la flotte-françoises et des troupes americaines commandées par le Major General Sullivan contre les forces de terre et de mer des Anglois depuis le 9 aoust jusqu'à la nuit du 30 au 31 du meme mois 1778 que les Americains ont fait leur retraits*, 1778, Library of Congress.

effective at ranges of less than 1,000 yards.⁷⁴ The Americans would need to get closer to do any real damage but this meant losing the altitude advantage. Any closer batteries they built would also be in the range of the British, who would be able to engage the new, closer gun emplacements.⁷⁵

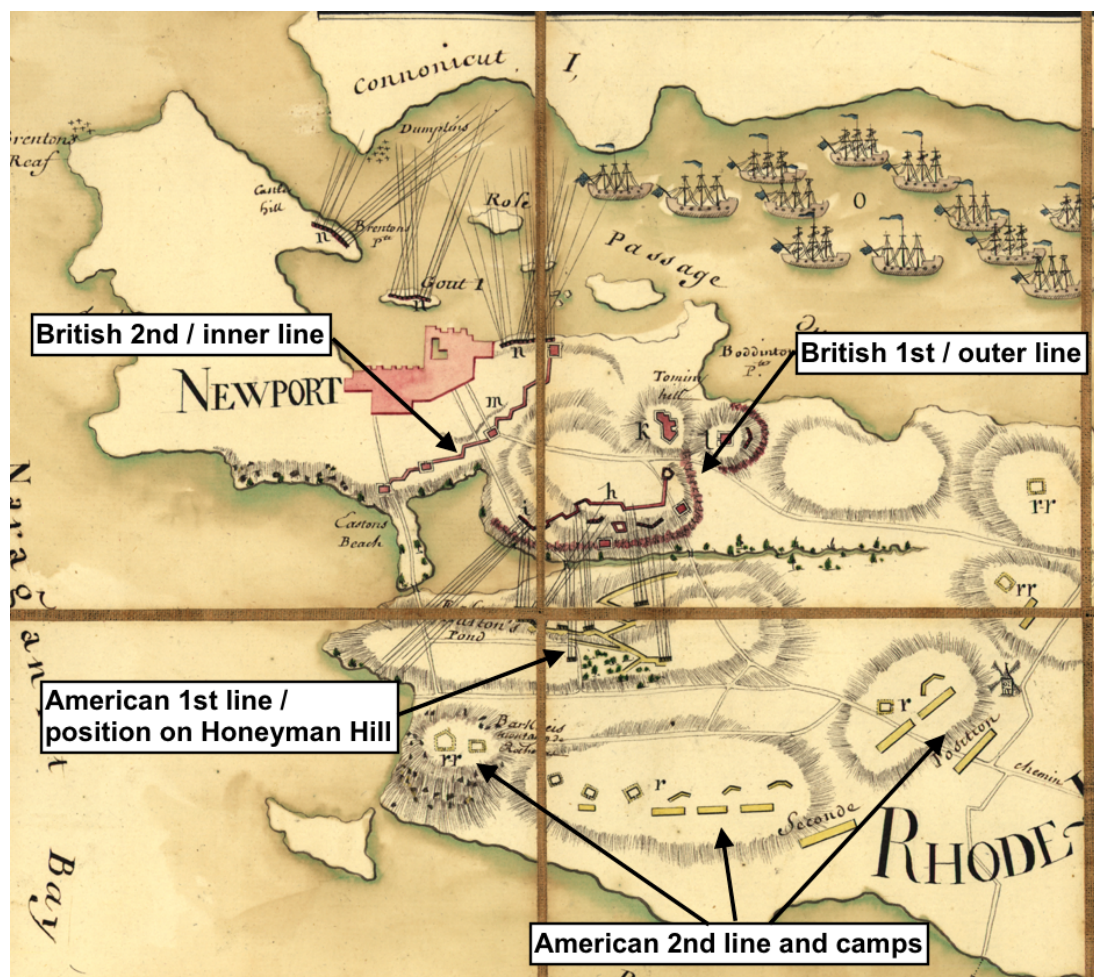


Figure 1.4 Positions of combatants during the Siege.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ David McConnell, *British Smooth-Bore Artillery: A Technological Study to Support Identification, Acquisition, Restoration, Reproduction, and Interpretation of Artillery at National Historic Parks in Canada*. (Ottawa: National Historic Parks and Sites Environment Canada – Parks, 1988).

⁷⁵ A military installation consisting of a prepared position for sitting a weapon.

⁷⁶ Capitaine Michel du Chesnoy, *Plan de Rhode Islande, les differentes operations de la flotte françoise et des troupes Américaines commandées par le major général Sullivan contre les forces de terre et de mer des Anglois depuis le 9 Aout jusqu'a la nuit du 30 au 31 du même mois que les Américains ont fait leur retraite 1778*. 1778. Library of Congress.

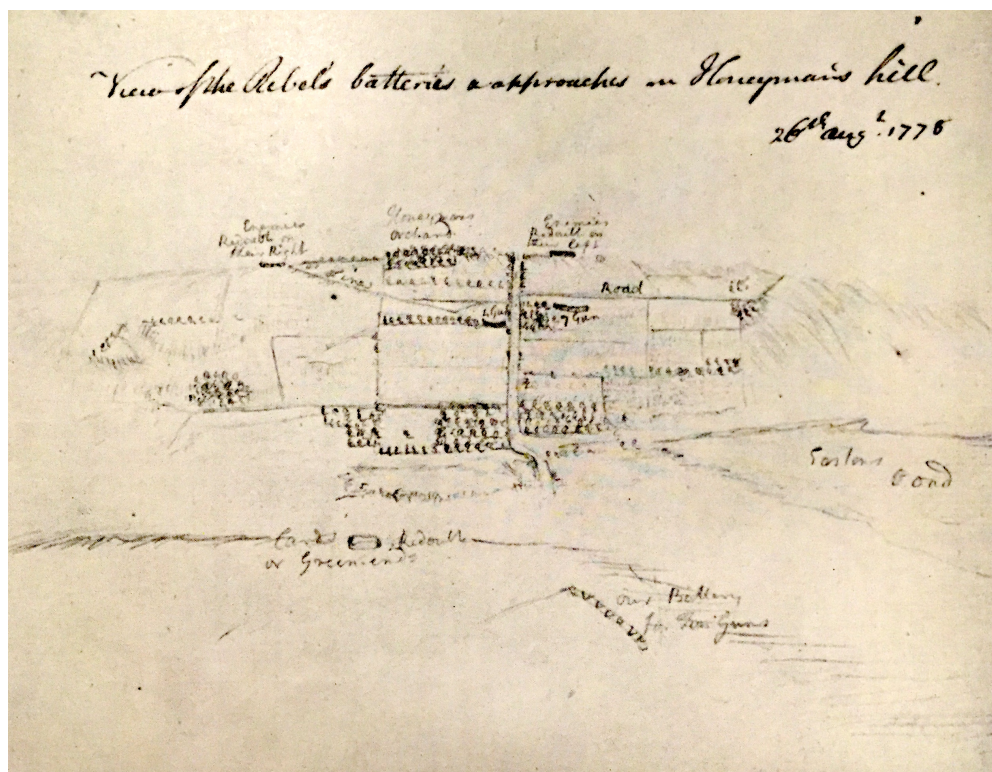


Figure 1.5 Sketch of the British view of Honeyman Hill from Bliss Hill, as seen in Mackenzie's Diary.⁷⁷

1.1.3 American Observations of the British Lines

The battlefield from the American viewpoint, which was on average about 83 feet higher than the British positions, showed Card's Redoubt (74 feet high as the closest British fort) at the edge of the first rise above the pond at a range of 1,500 yards.⁷⁸ The second feature was the line of redoubt fronted by an abatis at 1,700 yards, and at its southern end, a 10-gun battery (113 feet high) at a range of 1,800 yards.⁷⁹ The terrain between them, normally passable where Bailey's Brook meets Easton's Pond, was now overflowing with runoff from the storm.

⁷⁷ DMF, 2: 372-373.

⁷⁸ DMF, 2; Based on calculations as measured in Google Earth.

⁷⁹ DMF, 2; Based on calculations as measured in Google Earth.

1.2 Terrain Related Obstacles

1.2.1 Effects of the Storm on the Terrain

A number of obstacles thwarted the Americans' pursuit of the British. Between the positions on Bliss and Honeyman Hill, runoff from the hurricane had created two major barriers. The storm-swollen Easton's Pond (stretching from Easton's Beach to the crossing at Green End) was now wider and deeper, and Bailey's Brook had been transformed into a marshy wetland. Before the storm, which lasted August 11 – 13, the pond and brook were low and would have been easily passable (Figures 1.6, 1.7). After the rains, the valley was full beyond capacity, making it a serious obstacle (Figure 1.8).

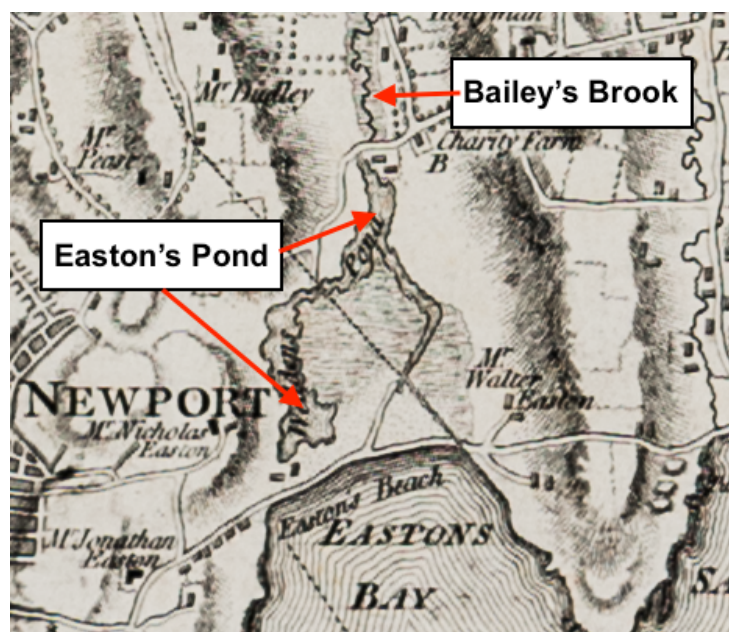


Figure 1.6 Easton's Pond and Bailey's Brook under normal conditions, from a map by C. Blaskowitz, 1770.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Charles Blaskowitz, *A topographic chart of the bay of Narragansett in the province of New England, with all the isles contained therein, among which Rhode Island and Connonicut have been particularly surveyed, shewing the true positions & bearings of the banks, shoals, rocks &c. as likewise the soundings, to which have been added the several works & batteries raised by the Americans: Taken by order of the principal farmers on Rhode Island.* (London: Wm. Faden, Caring Cross, 1777). William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.



Figure 1.7 Bailey's Brook, at the top of Easton's Pond, in August 2015. Photo by author.



Figure 1.8 Easton's Pond after the rains, when the valley between the hills became a swamp.⁸¹

1.2.2 Other Approaches

There were two alternate routes as well but they were well defended and would not be feasible. The west side of the approach to Newport, from Middletown, included a large expanse of open space to the north of the British defense line. The position from Tonomy Hill (152 feet

⁸¹ Chesnoy, 1778. William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

high) commanded this relatively flat terrain, where large formations could be engaged out to 2,000 yards, making an attack from this side nearly impossible. The Americans also controlled the eastern end of Easton's Beach but the west side proved formidable with a 1,300-yard stretch of sand in front of a British redoubt with cannon and abatis. These alternate routes were far too dangerous, and so the swamped valley, although not ideal, would be their only option.

1.2.3 Decisive Terrain

The decisive terrains in this conflict were:

- a. Howland's Ferry and associated land in Portsmouth: This area was needed by the Americans as a supply line and evacuation route. It was protected by the redoubts on the north end of the island and French frigates in the Sakonnet River.
- b. The road across the north end of Easton's Pond: This path was needed by the Americans as an avenue to attack if they were to go after the south end of the British defense line. The British needed to control it and the area north along Bailey's Brook to stop the Americans from getting across the valley and attacking the defense line.
- c. Easton's Beach: The Americans held the east end of Easton's Beach but if they could control the west side, they could attack the south end of the inner British defense line.
- d. The lower slope of Honeyman Hill: The Americans needed this area to get closer to the British lines. Both so that their cannon could be in effective range, and to get American troops in striking distance, should they disable the British artillery.

1.3 Cover and Concealment

1.3.1 American Position

As a position, Honeyman Hill was a double-edged sword, providing cover for the back end of the operation but nothing else. The west side, facing the British lines, had very little cover. Only a few trees remained from the hill's pre-war use as an orchard and the British had burned twenty houses to eliminate all other shelter.⁸² The area around Easton's Pond and Bailey's Brook was worse; it had been open farmland and had little to no cover. To remedy this shortcoming, most of the movements, scouting and repairs, were done under cover of darkness. Cannon, and the supplies needed for them, were moved in and out of their emplacements at night. During the day, trenches and batteries being dug doubled as cover for those doing the work. When there was a flash of British artillery the Americans dropped to the bottom of the trench until the sound of the cannonball reached them and when all was clear, they returned to their work.

Although their position on Honeyman Hill was not ideal, it is likely a decision made based on French involvement. Historian Christian McBurney explains, "Sullivan probably positioned his army as he did in order to accommodate d'Estaing's troops, on whose return and participation he still counted. He may have further expected the more experienced French to make the initial assault on Pigot's left, thereby eliminating the necessity of a more risky American attack to the east."⁸³ Given that Sullivan began the Siege under the assumption that the French would defeat Howe's fleet and rejoin them in time, McBurney's theory makes sense. It also may help explain Sullivan's frustration later when things did not go as planned.

What the Americans lacked in cover and concealment on the front lines, they made up for on the north and east sides of the hill, which they used to their advantage. These areas were out of sight of the British and out of range of their artillery, making it a strategically safe location for

⁸² McBurney, 110.

⁸³ McBurney, 141.

camp. The supply lines on East Main Road were also beyond the sight of the British, allowing the Americans to move troops, cannon, and supplies in and out of camp without risking observation.

1.3.2 British Position

Earlier, when the Americans were consolidating their forces at the north end of the island, the British (already in Middletown) had built a revetment⁸⁴ and a ditch that extended the entirety of their outer line. This provided cover for cannon and small arms fire. The wall was made of compacted dirt four feet high and six feet thick, and provided protection and concealment for troop movements along the top of the hill to and from the various redoubts and batteries.

1.3.3 Evaluation of Potential Dead Spaces

There were no dead spaces on the American side of the valley but this was not the case for the British. Positioned high atop a steep bank, there were several areas the British cannon could not fire on (Figure 1.9). If American troops could move across the top of the pond after dark to muster in the dead zone, they theoretically could have captured the 10-gun battery and Card's Redoubt. The cannon in the 10-gun battery could then have been turned to enfilade⁸⁵ the British line. This would open the line for a general attack. The Americans would have needed a regiment of grenadiers or other specialized assault troops to carry out this type of mission, but there is no indication they had any of these. This makes it less likely that such a maneuver would have been successful and could be the reason one was not attempted.

⁸⁴ A barricade of earth or sandbags set up to provide protection from blast, protecting a rampart, wall, etc.

⁸⁵ A volley of gunfire directed along a line from end to end.

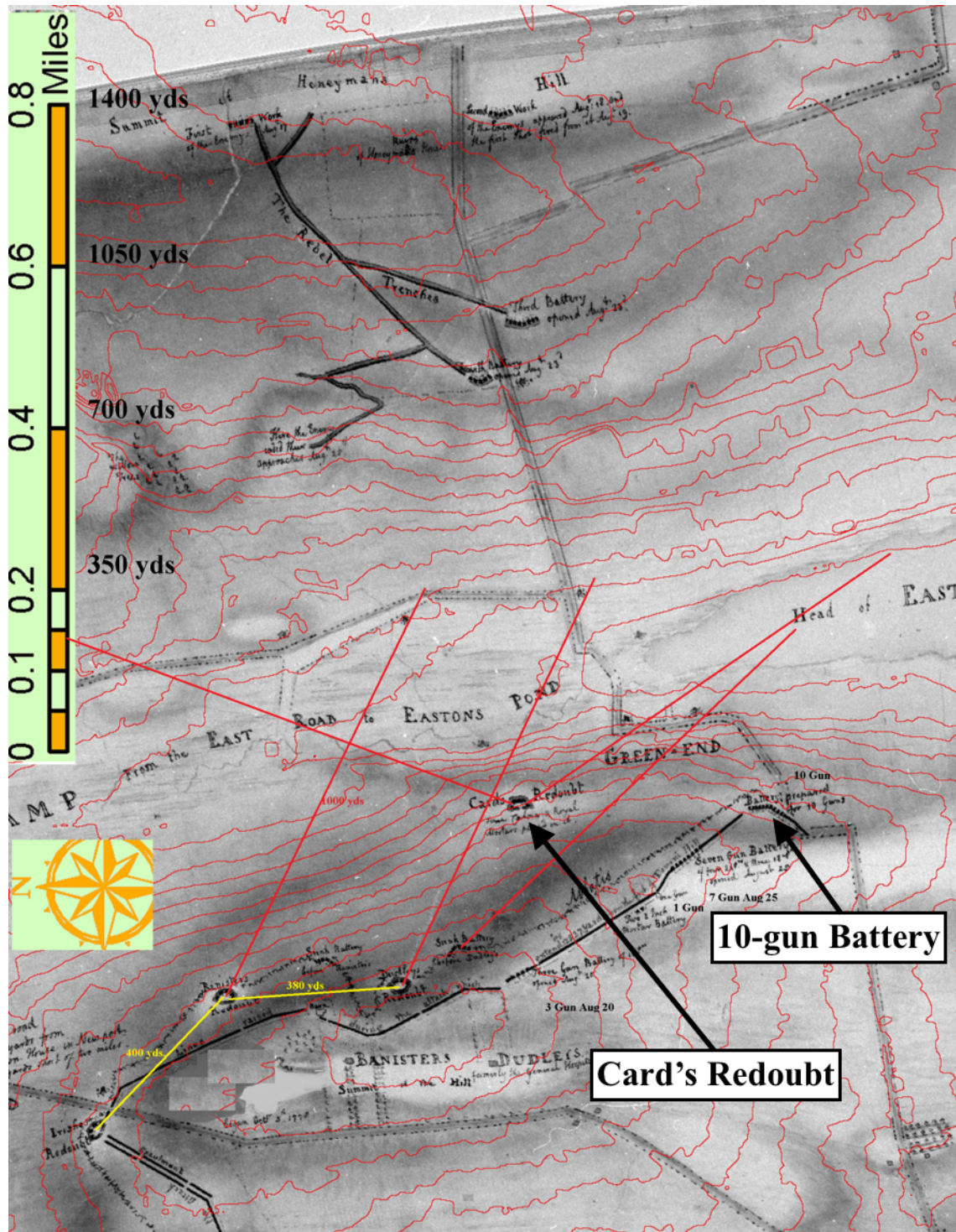


Figure 1.9 The 1778 Fage map has had topographic lines laid over it to show the hills and valley involved. To demonstrate where the potential dead spaces would have been on the battlefield, the straight red lines show the direction the cannons would have fired from each of the redoubts.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Fage, *Plan of the works*, 1778. William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.