

The Final Mission of Butts Hill Fort, 1782:

*“I would wish the works to be destroyed”*



Part of a January 1781 map showing the final phase of the construction of Butts Hill Fort

In June 1781, French forces left Butts Hill and the rest of Rhode Island (Aquidneck Island) to join Washington as they marched toward Yorktown. This departure came after nearly a year of preparation, including a mock battle on Rhode Island in 1780. It also came after much work to expand and enlarge the works on Butts Hill into the single Fort we see today. That expansion was accomplished by the labor of Continental forces, including the 1<sup>st</sup> RI Regiment, and the French troops garrisoned there. The Revolutionary War story of Butts Hill Fort usually ends at this point. The Fort was then said to be abandoned, stripped of all usable material, and all

but forgotten until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when Dr. Roderick Terry rescued it from being destroyed for a housing development. However, Butts Hill Fort continued to have significant importance after 1781. It also had its first brush with possible destruction as early as 1782.

It was on April 27, 1782, that George Washington penned a letter to Governor William Greene of Rhode Island. This is likely the only letter where Washington specifically mentioned the “works on Butts Hill”. More than just a side note, the letter is remarkable to Portsmouth history because the entire contents of it regards the fate of Butts Hill Fort. The “works” mentioned by Washington refer to the defenses constructed on Butts Hill, aka Windmill Hill, during the Revolutionary War from 1776 through 1780. He must not have been aware that the separate works had been combined into a single Fort a year before he wrote the letter.

Washington began the letter by expressing the possibility that the British may once again invade Rhode Island. He believed it,

highly imprudent...to leave any fortifications standing on Rhode Island, which may be of any use to them in such an event. The works round Newport can, under no circumstances, be of any advantage to us, and I must therefore request your Excellency to cause them to be levelled immediately.

However, concerning Butts Hill, Washington saw that high ground as important to secure in the event of another invasion. He asked the Governor if it were possible to keep a small guard there and, “at the first signal of the appearance of a fleet, such a number of militia might be thrown in as to keep possession of it”. Washington ultimately left the fate of the Fort to the discretion of Governor Greene, but he made it clear that if the Governor did not think it possible to properly man the Fort, then Washington *“would wish the works to be destroyed”*.

In hindsight, we now know that the Fort was of no more consequence to the war effort after the British defeat at Yorktown in 1781. The British did not re-invade Rhode Island.

However, that hindsight was not available to the Continental Army, and so the possibility of more battles was all too real.

On September 19, 1782, intelligence was “received that the enemy's fleet was moving to the eastward from New York, and that their design was against Newport”. The Rhode Island General Assembly convened. They voted, “for the immediate removal of the cannon and all other stores from Butts's Hill to the town of Providence”.

Apparently, they did not agree with General Washington concerning the importance of Butts Hill. Their vote was to safeguard Providence at the expense of Rhode Island. Since the General Assembly decided that Butts Hill would no longer be defended, why did they not order the Fort's destruction as Washington had urged? They likely had more pressing priorities, but it is evident that Butts Hill Fort may very well have been destroyed before the War even ended.

Source:

Babits, L.E. “Report on Preliminary Archaeological Investigation Fort Butts 1777-1781”. Brown University, Public Archaeology Lab, 1979a. In “Planning, Preservation and Management Plan for Butts Hill Fort, Portsmouth, RI: A Project of the Rhode Island Marine Archaeology Project”