Military History of Fort Constitution (Fort William and Mary)

A. If you had visited Portsmouth in 1632, you would have come by sea. Whether you came to stay, to fish, or even as an enemy to attack the town, you would have passed the very spot you are standing on now (Fort Constitution), and sailed along the shore towards Strawbery Banke.

Those were the days of Indians, pirates, and attacks by sea, and the townspeople would have felt dangerously unprotected without some kind of fort guarding the entrance to the harbor. They intended the principal fort to occupy the high rock you pass as you approach, where today the remains of a Second World War gun emplacement can be seen; but in the meantime they placed four great guns at the end of the point, which they named Fort Point.

The kind of fort they had in mind would have been familiar to Shakespeare, or even Henry the Fifth: an imposing, obvious structure like a warning frown at the harbor entrance – for those days it occurred to no one to hide fortifications, as was done in World War Two. For instance, as nearby as Rye, New Hampshire, there were invisible batteries sunk in the earth, many times more dangerous to invaders than a grand, minatory castle.

B. But seventeenth century war was still a kind of game, in which rival armies swapped forts and positions, and left it to the diplomats to settle the issue. Seventeenth century books on warfare were full of theoretical soldiers, like the ones you see in the Images section, drawn up in toy-soldier ranks. The idea of occupying a whole country and attacking its people was unheard of, at least in theory. So forts were a symbol of possession: if you controlled the country, you built a fort; if you lost the fort, you were supposed to take that as a serious blow, and think about making peace. This attitude survived a long time, and the occupation of seacoast forts was hotly contested in the Civil War, two hundred and thirty years after the colonists set their great guns on Fort Point.

Forts look impregnable, as of course they are supposed to, but there is one enemy who always manages to take a fort in the end: Time. When the threat of attack wanes people lose interest, no more money is voted for repairs, and the garrison of soldiers is underpaid or transferred. By 1661 the fort was in such a state that George Walton tried to claim the point and build on it. The selectmen stopped him and kept if for defense. (Although Captain Pendelton had been allowed to set up a windmill, a needed public utility in those days.) But Fort Point was not to be allowed to slip back into civilian hands, for the tides of history turned, and the wars that were to sweep Europe throughout the century ignited the combustible relations among the English and French colonists, and the Indians. Conflicts broke out up and down the coast, and hostile Indians and French roamed the interior. In the terrible winter of 1689-90, Indians attacked Durham, Stratham, and other towns around the harbor, and people watched the sea daily for the French Navy. These dangers persisted on and off until 1713, and during this time Fort Point came into its own.

C. From these days come the earliest pictures of the fort. The one in the images section shows the fort as though from a ship on its way out of the harbor, leaving the fort on the right. The wind is almost due north, and two other vessels have already cleared the point, headed out to sea. The forts largest guns are trained on the harbor entrance and the smaller guns on the landward side. A large bastion, the triangular bump under the flag, has been built to cover extreme angles not reached by the guns in the walls; there was another bastion on the other side, and the main gate between, where it is today.

The fort was made more important by Portsmouth politics, because the people of Great Island wanted their own town government, and the Lieutenant Governor, John Usher, took quite an interest in getting a charter as a separate town. The idea of governing the province from a town with its own fort appealed to him strongly, and the war could be relied on to provide impetus for building up the fort. He seems to have dreamed of living in a castle surrounded by his domain, like a medieval lord – and he gave the new town the name it bears today: New Castle. But when he tried to persuade the assembly to build a citadel in the fort they turned him down, and the eventual improvements were not quite what he had in mind: in 1694 some work was done on the walls, cabins and sentry-boxes were added for the garrison, and a flag was purchased; and in honor of England's (and New Hampshire's) new

rulers since 1689, the fort was named Fort William and Mary.

D. See the Images section for a view of the fort in 1705, new flag and all – from a point of land on the seaward side. The little sloop on the right has just passed the fort, heading out to sea, and from beneath the flag the smoke of a salute or a signal drifts down the south-east wind. The restless town of New Castle is to the left, beyond its namesake.

In fact, the fort seems to have been refurbished according to sound seventeenth-century practice. More attention was given to protecting the defenders with walls, or breastworks, as they were called, toppled with embrasures, the deep slots through which the cannons shoot. The cannons need a broad platform, for their recoil makes them leap backwards in their carriages; you can see in the plan above the cannon in a naval carriage, with four wheels. The plan also explains the deep triangular embrasures which protect the guns while allowing them to swing back and forth. A small group of men is needed to fire each gun.

An expert arrived from England to supervise construction, and a formidable defense was the result. The plan shows how the designers prepared for an attack from the south, over the island, as well as for a direct naval attack, by building new bastions on the southeast and northeast corners – the southeast bastion is there today, though differently constructed – and indeed, these preparations may have intimidated the enemy, for although the fort in Pemaquid, Maine, was twice overwhelmed by French commandoes, Fort William and Mary went unchallenged. Three quarters of a century later the fort would fall; but not to Frenchmen, or even Indians, but to Americans.

E. In the years before the revolution a deceptive calm fell over coastal fortifications. Vigilance was needed, but no combat, because the tide of war turned north and west, in the struggle that made Canada a British province. But in the early 1760s, now that the French were no longer England's rival on the North American continent, the differences between England and her North American colonies began to surface. While British regulars had protected the colonies from the French, and British ships guarded the coast from pirates and smugglers, the colonists had been restless, but loyal, subjects of the crown. But now that the French were defeated, their restlessness turned to defiance. The British Parliament insisted on its right to tax the colonies, and the colonies refused to pay taxes voted by legislators they hadn't elected; they saw no reason to support a remote government whose usefulness to them was slight, and share the burdens of a global empire. Their British heritage was a respect for the rights of individuals, and their puritan heritage a bent for stubborn independence; when these were combined with the patrimony of a whole continent, a rich land whose boundaries were only guessed and on which the map of England looked smaller than one of its hated stamps, they began to question the very foundations of colonial government. But the Parliament clung to its laws, making concession after concession, but never abandoning the principle of its right to tax. In 1773 colonists flung a cargo of tea into Boston Harbor rather than let it into the port and pay the duty on it (though they could have drunk it cheaper than before) and the British closed the port.

Boston wasn't the only port to refuse the tea. In Portsmouth the wily citizens allowed it to be unloaded and placed in a warehouse, but they guarded the warehouse themselves to make sure no one got at it, regardless of their opinions. Although they denied themselves the fame of the Boston colonists they missed the reprisals, too – or at least some of the reprisals. But British regulars were sent to seize military stores, and take over forts from the untrustworthy colonials. In October a fort in Rhode Island was seized, and in December the Committee of Safety in Boston, the revolutionary leadership, sent a rider north to warn Portsmouth of the danger to Fort William and Mary.

F. There were several men who carried messages between the centers of revolutionary action; it was an important and dangerous job. There were citizens, craftsmen and merchants for the most part and not necessarily men with military training, though many people could handle weapons in those days. They were couriers in an occupied country where a suspected rider might be stopped and questioned, so there were special qualities they required, and Paul Revere had them. He understood events well enough to answer questions and was tough enough not to be

made to talk; a committed patriot, a tireless horseman, and a persuasive advocate. He rode often to Philadelphia, to Hartford and New York, the fastest and most certain form of communication there was. In the years between the Tea Party and the Declaration he seemed to ride at the edge of every storm, and he certainly brought it with him this time.

The day after Revere had come and gone the little knots of men in taverns and on street corners had become a mob – but a mob with a certain discipline. They were determined that the British would find neither gun nor powder when they reached the fort, and they set out for New Castle, until there were almost 400 men in a motley flotilla of gundalows and scows, crawling across the harbor.

G. Now the fort was armed to the teeth, but the garrison was small. For years, John Wentworth, the Royal Governor, had struggled to increase it – to pay the soldiers and maintain the fort. He had done his best to keep it in repair ever since he had taken over from his uncle, Benning Wentworth, in 1767, and it was well for him he did so, as you shall see. But since the French had been defeated no naval attacks had been expected so only three men and their captain were on duty on the morning of December 14, the day after Revere rode out of town.

Governor Wentworth must have known something was afoot; in the afternoon he sent a message to Captain Cochran at the fort and urged him to prepare for trouble, and Captain Cochran engaged two extra men, all the more important since one of his men was sick. And with a force of 400 men coming from Portsmouth's taverns and struggling across the channel that separates Great Island from the mainland, he can scarcely have been taken by surprise – and his defense was stronger than it sounds – only six, but the fort was armed against an attack from all sides, there was cannon enough to more than decimate the townspeople, and Cochran was ready, and he fired – and no one was hit – not even a scratch.

We don't know if Captain Cochran was a New Hampshire boy, but his loyalties certainly were divided. He handed over his sword when his neighbors entered the fort, and people say he took a swipe at the nearest man when they handed it back to him, but would he have been proud, later, to have shed the first blood of the revolution? It seems unlikely. He did his duty, he avoided worse trouble, and he almost kept his temper – more than most of us could say if we were to be suddenly caught in history's spotlight – and he won a commendation from his superior, the Governor, who claimed that Cochran had been wounded. But we suspect Governor Wentworth of some pardonable exaggeration.

H. See Images section for two drawings by Howard Pyle showing Captain Cochran's surrender and removal of the powder.

I. Well, they didn't get quite all the powder, or the guns either, and next day a party of men rode in from the north, pretty substantial landowners, including an officer with a royal commission in the militia, John Sullivan. They went in a body to the governor and asked about these British Regulars and ships that were supposed to be coming, and the governor said he didn't know anything about that. Then the governor wanted to know about all this missing powder and shot, and they didn't know a thing about that. So it looked like a stand-off, and Sullivan & Co. retired to get a little refreshment. There must have been plenty of that, and some planning, too, because when they emerged it was just after midnight. Then they headed for the fort, a much smaller group this time, but more efficient – this time there was no resistance. The last of the powder was taken, along with the giant forty-two pounders, cannon too heavy to move without special equipment.

It was a struggle to get that powder to safety. The Piscataqua River was open, but the Oyster River, their route back to Durham, was frozen over, and Sullivan's party spent days cutting a way through the ice for its clumsy, flat-bottomed gundalows, but they reached Durham at last. The powder was scattered – Sullivan found places for some of it, Major Demerit took some, and some was hidden in the Durham Meeting House – and his majesty's gunpowder was secure in rebel hands.

J. The British never found the powder; it might have disappeared into the ground. The loss was serious, too, because Major Demerit's powder was fired against them at Bunker Hill, and some was used in the siege of Boston.

But that's another story, and this one isn't over yet. Governor Wentworth didn't let this outrage pass unnoticed. He summoned commissioned officers, and sent them in to the streets to beat the drums for volunteers, to raise a force to protect the King's property and keep the rabble in line. When those drums had sounded for volunteers against the Indians or the French, men had turned out in strength, but after a full afternoon of lonely drumming the officers gave up. They had to report to the governor that no one had showed up, not even the tax collectors. When the governor wrote to General Gage in Boston and asked for troops, they didn't come either, but the ships he asked for did: first the Canceaux, then the Scarborough clawed their way up the wintry coast and anchored in the harbor with eighty or so marines who had to live on the ships, and bring their own powder.

And the governor wasn't through. In a flurry of proclamations, he summoned his council and stripped the ringleaders of their commissions in the militia: Sullivan lost his, and John Langdon, a Portsmouth merchant who had been in the first raid lost his job as justice of the peace. The townspeople were so incensed that Wentworth formed a group of die-hard Tories, pledged to fight it out, if it came to that.

See a picture of His Excellency the Governor. John Wentworth in the Images Section.

K. But in fact it had gone past that. Sullivan rode into Durham at the head of a group of militia, where they lit a huge bonfire and made a fine show of burning their royal commissions, insignia, and uniforms. Even before Sullivan and Langdon were elected to the Continental Congress – in fact, two days before George Washington was appointed commander-in-chief of the Continental forces – the governor decided he was behind enemy lines, and moved into the fort.

Would Lieutenant Governor Usher have been pleased? Here at last his castle was residence of New Hampshire's royal governor. The governorship had been in the Wentworth family for two generations, and their business interests and political influence had given the Wentworths an almost feudal hold over the region. Well, they were living in the fort at last – fortunately it had been kept in good repair – and the governor had to hire six men out of his own pocket to guard it. Pretty soon he began to write the town selectmen asking for provisions; there were twenty in his family party and not enough to go round. The selectmen replied that they didn't have enough either, and complained of the behavior of the soldiers from the ships. Angry letters flew back and forth. Tempers always short, tensions high, everyone somehow restrained himself and no one was hurt. After all, Governor Wentworth had been born in New Hampshire.

But he didn't die there. Not even of starvation. After a summer of privation, futile proclamation, and a much longer visit than anyone would want to make to Fort William and Mary, he and Captain Cochran embarked for Boston, to join the band of distinguished refugees assembled under General Gage's protection.

Governor Wentworth saw his native land only once more. On the first day of autumn of 1775 he landed at Gosport, on the Isles of Shoals, to issue his final proclamation disbanding the assembly he had struggled with for so long. To be valid, the proclamation had to come from New Hampshire soil, and some of the Isles are part of the state, although more than ten miles out to sea. Out of harm's way, as far as the governor was concerned. On a clear day you can see them from the bastion, but the New Hampshire seacoast is hard to recognize from the islands, because it is so short. When you look across ten or twelve miles of water the edge of the continent is just a narrow blue line separating the sky from the sea – you have to know the coast pretty well to pick out New Hampshire from Massachusetts or Maine.

L. What do you do with a fort in peacetime? Aside from the routine of coastal defense, forts have other uses. They fire salutes to visiting dignitaries, and they make excellent picnic grounds.

George Washington visited Portsmouth in 1789, and as he fished from a boat in the harbor, serenaded by a band in a neighboring boat, one of his companions was John Sullivan, a retired general himself now, who had a wonderful

chance to tell the story of the capture of Fort William and Mary. He told it, too; it's in General Washington's journal.

M. After the war for Independence the fort was rebuilt and renamed as well, as public buildings tend to be at times of political change. Both its present name and appearance date from the early nineteenth century. The old fort earthworks were strengthened by brick walls you see today, and new batteries of guns installed. The gateway and portcullis are also of this date, with heavy oak doors through which muskets could be fired – rather an antique design even for 1808, but at this time the defenders worried most about naval attack. In fact, until the War of 1812 the fort was used principally to collect customs duties and clear ships in and out of the harbor.

N. The picnics and salutes got fatally confused on July 4, 1809, and here's the story from a history of Fort Constitution, published in 1865 by "a student of Dartmouth College".

"An explosion occurred at the Fort on the 4th of July, 1809, which threw a deep gloom over the community. A salute of several guns was given at noon to celebrate the day, and many of the citizens of New Castle with friends from the neighboring towns, were gathered there to enjoy the national holiday with music, dancing, and the like; and all 'seemed' merry as a marriage bell! At three, the hour of dinner, a gun was fired by Sergeant Allen, in honor of Walbach, the commanding officer, and his guests. Being customary in those days to dry powder in the open, a large quantity was placed in open boxes a few feet apart upon the terre-plein."

"In firing the gun, much carelessness was manifested by Allen in handling the port-fire and a spark from it dropped on the powder. The explosion being heard at great distance, people soon gathered from all directions to learn its cause."

"The number of casualties is know to exceed twelve; the precise number, however, is yet unknown. Were it not that many were attracted by sports taking place in some other part of the fort, the number would have been greatly increased. One of the ladies standing upon the parapet was never afterwards seen, supposed to have been blown to atoms. A leg from James Trefethen was taken off and thrown through a window, upon the table of Walbach, the glass cutting his lady while adjusting the tablecloth. The day was Tuesday. The site was near the northeast bastion, and the colonel with his guests was dining in the northwest room of the building destroyed by fire Sabbath evening, Nov. 4th, 1861. Belonging to the fort at that time was a band composed of pieces of music of every description. Then, as now, the parades were well attended, and when the company led by Walbach, accompanied by the band, marched upon the island and halted upon the "Shannon Ground" to have their dress parades, a general good time was expected by all."

O. During the War of 1812, Fort Point became the site of another piece of military architecture. The Walbach Tower, to the south of the fort, named for Colonel Walbach, a German tactician serving in the U.S. Army. He must have been something of a celebrity, because he was summoned to help repel the British invasion from Canada while his company remained at Fort Constitution, and he was decorated for gallantry at Williamsburg, in Canada. In 1814, after his return, a British landing was expected in the area, and Walbach, a knowledgeable European, prepared for it by building a Martello tower. This kind of fortification was patterned after a small tower at Martello Harbor, on Corsica, from which a handful of soldiers had successfully defended the harbor against a naval attack. Their success started a fashion for this type of defense, and there were many in Europe and America. The tower was built by the volunteer labor of citizens of the town, under the direction of Colonel Walbach, and was intended to repulse an attack from the south, in case the British tried to land on Sandy Beach.

In a war department document of 1814 the tower is called Castle Walbach – a late echo of medieval manner that had played a part in the naming of New Castle over a hundred years before.

P. In the years before the Civil War the new American army conducted a series of surveys of the coastal fortifications, and some celebrated officers found their way to Fort Constitution in the course of this duty. Robert

E. Lee must have visited the fort in 1850; he was working on fortifications in the area and General Isaac Stevens recorded that Lee stayed with him in Portsmouth. Major Robert Anderson, the defender of Fort Sumter, was garrisoned at Fort Constitution before the war, when the management of coastal forts was considered a specialty.

Changes in the design of forts were mainly in response to the increasing power of artillery, and more than power, accuracy. Robert Parker Parrott, an artillery officer from New Hampshire, was a designer of firearms who brought the accuracy of heavy guns to a new level by applying the principal of rifling to cannon. His cannon had a spiral groove running the length of the bore, so that the shell emerged spinning, keeping a truer trajectory than a shell fired from a smooth bore. He was at the fort in 1829, and his Parrott rifles are the guns in most nineteenth century photographs of the fort.

Q. No substantial changes were made in the fort before the Civil War, although repairs were made. In the forties the wooden gun carriages were replaced with iron, and a new magazine and hot-shot ovens were installed.

Before the Civil War a new fort was planned, and the construction between 1862 and 1867 is entirely visible, surrounding the old fort: a splendid comparison between different kinds of fortification. The granite wall that shuts this building off from the harbor is the first level of what was intended to be a massive, three-level structure, completely enclosing the old fort and independent of it. An example of the last fashion in massive seacoast fortifications, this design is typical of the third system, the methods of defense current until just after the Civil War. These forts were to match the heavy, armor-plated warships that were developed in mid-century, but it was discovered that armor protection was essential on shore as well, and the disappearing gun emplacement made masonry forts obsolete. The three-level fort was never completed, but the closely fitted blocks of hand-cut stone are an impressive monument to a long tradition.

R. Toward the end of the century a new kind of seacoast defense evolved: the mined harbor, whose defenses were only augmented by artillery. Explosive devices called mines were moored in the harbor, just below the surface of the water. A counter-float allowed them to rise and fall with the tide. When an enemy ship came near, the mines could be detonated from the shore by an electric signal conducted by a cable laid under water to the mine. Any plan of a harbor defended by mines shows miles of cables like a deadly spider-web across the channels deep enough for ships. Little of Portsmouth's installation survives, but the Harbor Defense Mines Building at Fort Constitution was built to store the mines, and the carts to carry them ran on the tracks on the floor.

S. Harbors protected by mines often had torpedo batteries as well – like the torpedoes on a submarine but differently propelled. They were powered by an enormous engine on shore that wound up a wire connected to the torpedo; when the wire was allowed to unwind, it caused the torpedo's propellers to turn, and drove it through the water. The torpedoes were fired through ports in the walls that opened up underwater, and in the picture in the images section you can see one torpedo already heading for an armored ship distinguished by some sinister foreign decoration on the bow; another torpedo is already on its way.

Mines and torpedoes were installed in Portsmouth harbor around the turn of the century; the fort had been garrisoned again since the Spanish-American War. New barracks and storerooms were built, as well as buildings servicing the defense installations. Except for the mines building, these have all been removed to make way for an archaeological examination of the site.

T. Good times were common at the end of the century as well, when between 1874 and 1896 there was no garrison at the fort, although a caretaker was retained. It became a popular picnic ground. Soldiers returned during the Spanish-American War.

The fort was lightly garrisoned in wartime during the twentieth century. In 1961 part of the site was returned to the state of New Hampshire by the federal government, the rest being retained as an active coast guard station. The fort was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1973. In 1974, on the anniversary of the capture

of the Fort William and Mary by the townspeople of Portsmouth and New Castle, the New Hampshire American Revolution Bicentennial Commission caused this exhibition to be installed to tell all who visit what has happened here.

This exhibit was prepared and designed by Laurence Channing and Albert Gregory of Boston, Massachusetts, with the generous help of Joseph P. Copley, Harriet S. Lacy, and Daniel Morris.

Officers of the New Hampshire American Revolution Bicentennial Commission:

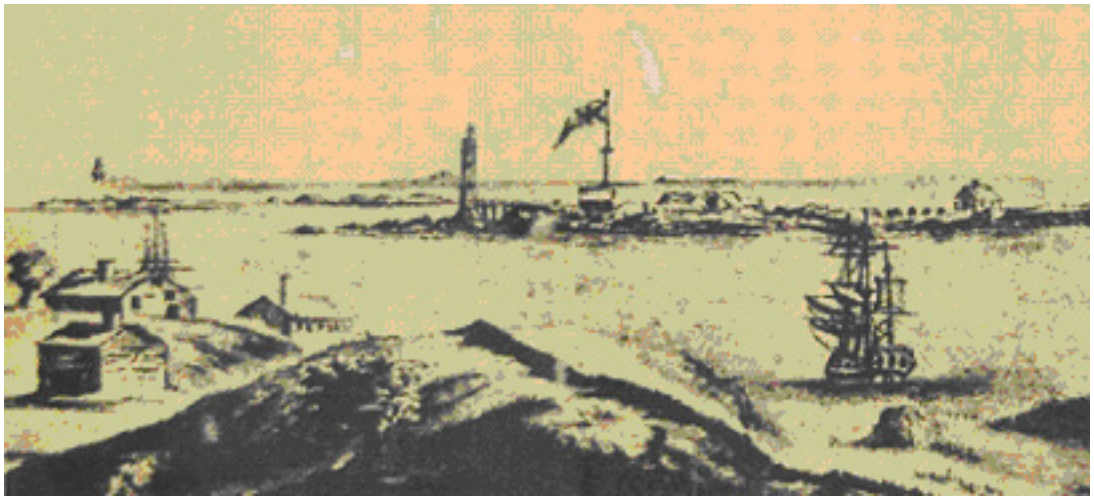
- J. Duane Squires, Chairman (New London)
- Richard F. Upton, Vice Chairman (Concord)
- Anne B. Gordon, Secretary (Jaffrey)
- Stanley A. Hamel, Treasurer (Seabrook)
- Gilbert S. Center, Executive Director (Laconia)

Fort William and Mary Committee, NHARBC:

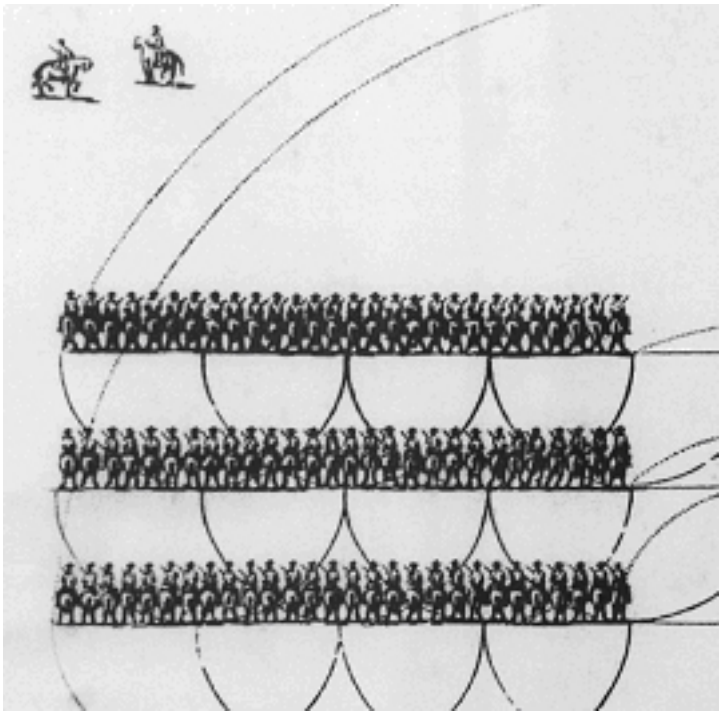
- Nancy C. Merrill, Chairman (Exeter)
- Anne B. Gordon (Jaffrey)
- Mildred P. Wood (North Hampton)

Images

A.

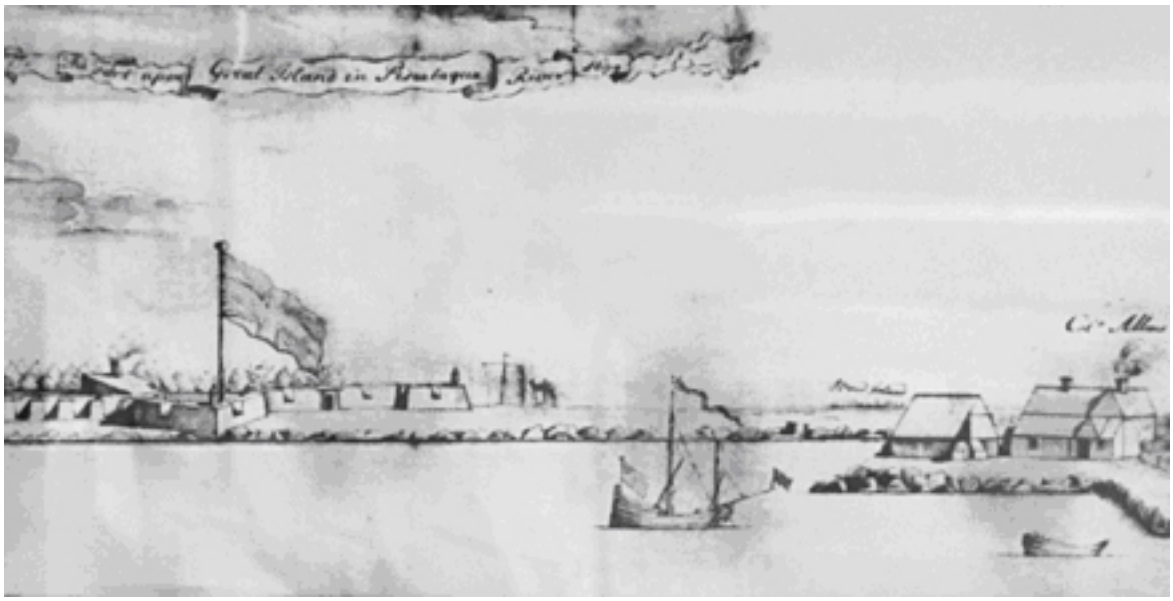


B.



Seventeenth Century Warfare

C.

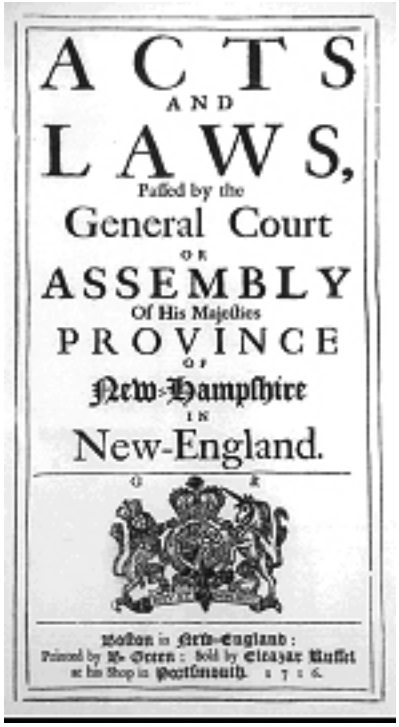


Early picture of Fort Point

D.

View of Fort William and Mary, 1705

E.



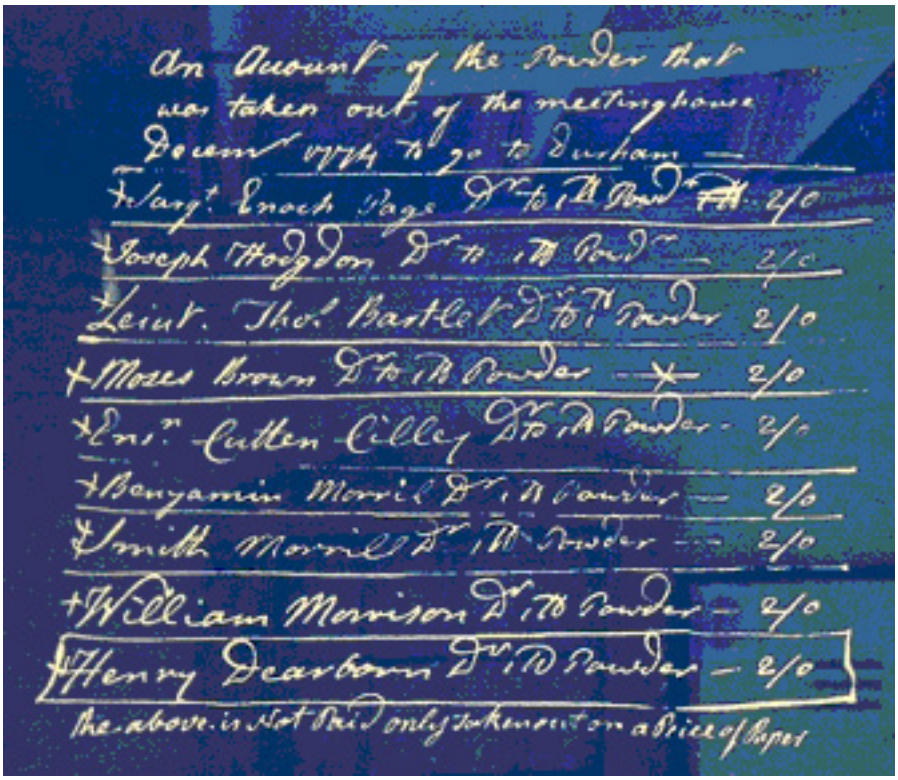
ACTS
AND
LAWS,
Paſſed by the
General Court
OR
ASSEMBLY
Of His Majeſties
PROVINCE
OF
New-Hampſhire
IN
New-England.

Boſton in New-England:
Printed by B. Green: Sold by Eleazar Moſſet
at his Shop in Portſmouth. 1716.

H.

Engraved from two drawings by Howard Pyle showing Captain Cochran's surrender and removal of the powder.

I.


An Account of the Powder that was taken out of the meetinghouse Decem^r 1774 to go to Durham —

Mary^l Enoch Page D^r to 1 lb Powder 2/0

Joseph Hodgdon D^r to 1 lb Powder — 2/0

Leiut. Thos Bartlet D^r to 1 Powder 2/0

Moses Brown D^r to 1 lb Powder — 2/0

Ens^n Cutten Cilley D^r to 1 lb Powder — 2/0

Benjamin Morril D^r to 1 lb Powder — 2/0

Smith Morriel D^r to 1 lb Powder — 2/0

William Morrison D^r to 1 lb Powder — 2/0

Henry Dearborn D^r to 1 lb Powder — 2/0

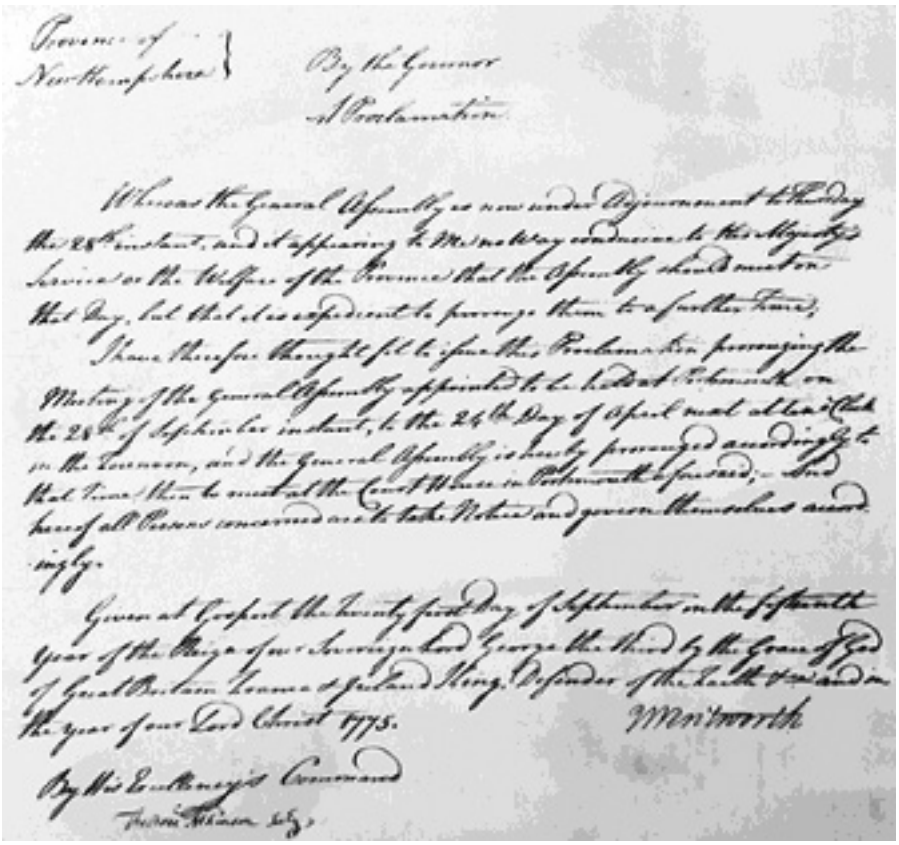
the above is Not Paid only taken out on a Piece of Paper

"Thomas Bartlett kept a record of powder removed from the meetinghouse and who took it."

J.

His Excellency Governor John Wentworth

K.



Province of
New Hampshire

By the Governor
A Proclamation

Whereas the General Assembly is now under Adjournment to this day
the 28th Instant, and it appearing to Me to be my indispensable
Service & the Welfare of the Province that the Assembly should meet on
that Day, but that is inconvenient to many of them to travel that
Road, I have therefore thought fit by & with the Advice & Consent of
the Council to Prorogue the General Assembly to the second Wednesday
of September instant, & the 27th Day of April next at the City
of Portsmouth, and the General Assembly is hereby Prorogued accordingly to
that Time & Place & all the Court Houses in Portsmouth & Exeter,
& all Persons concerned are to take Notice & govern themselves accord-
ingly.

Given at Gosport the twenty first Day of September in the fifteenth
Year of the Reign of our Sovereign Lord George the third by the Grace of God
of Great Britain France & Ireland King Defender of the Faith &c and in
the year of our Lord Christ 1775.

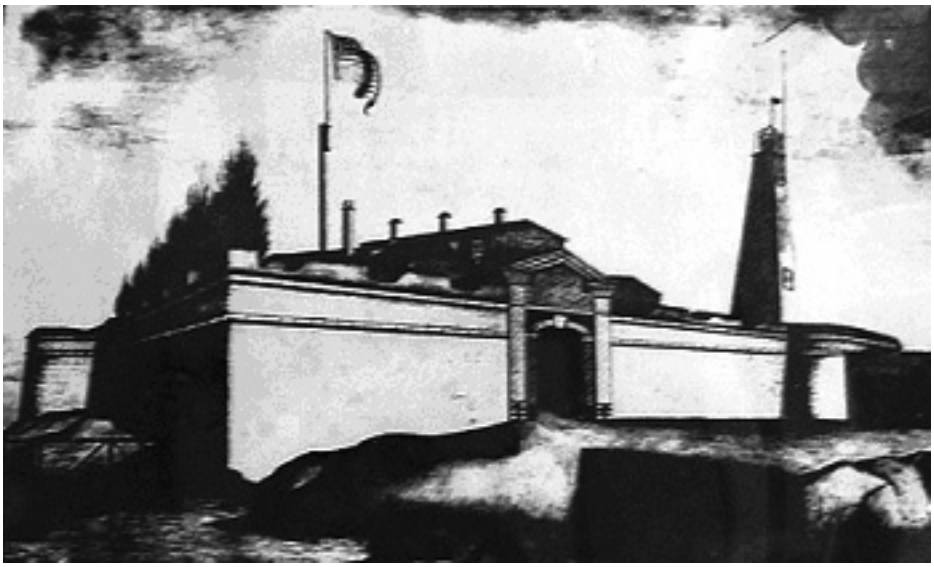
Wentworth

By His Excellency's Command
Theodore Atkinson Secy

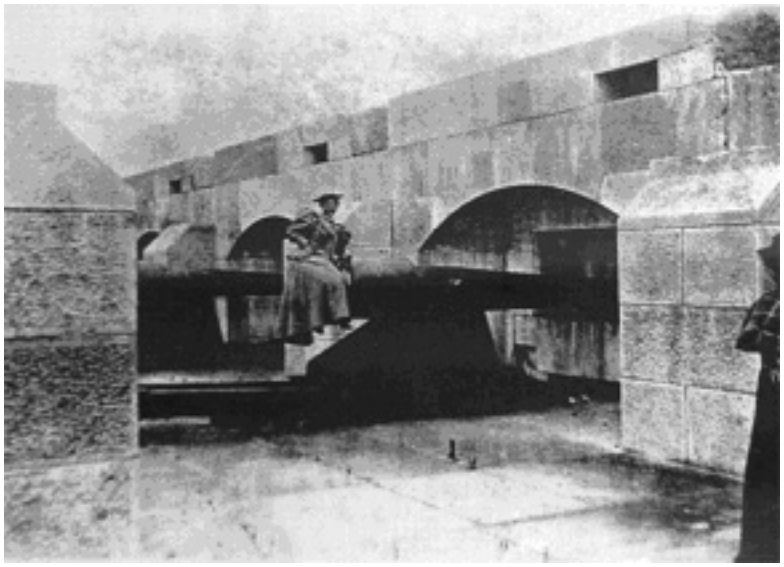
Proclamation from Gosport

L.

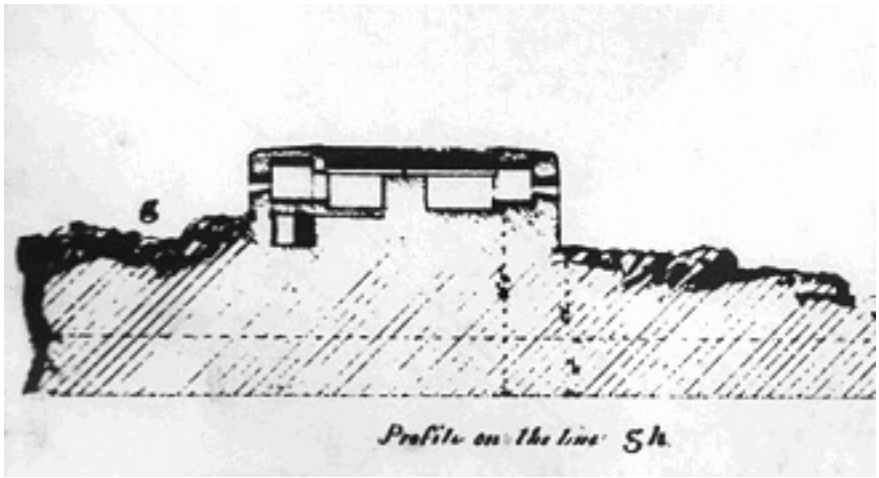
M.



N.

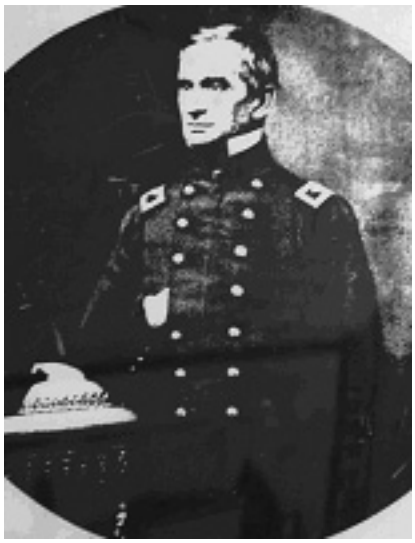


O.



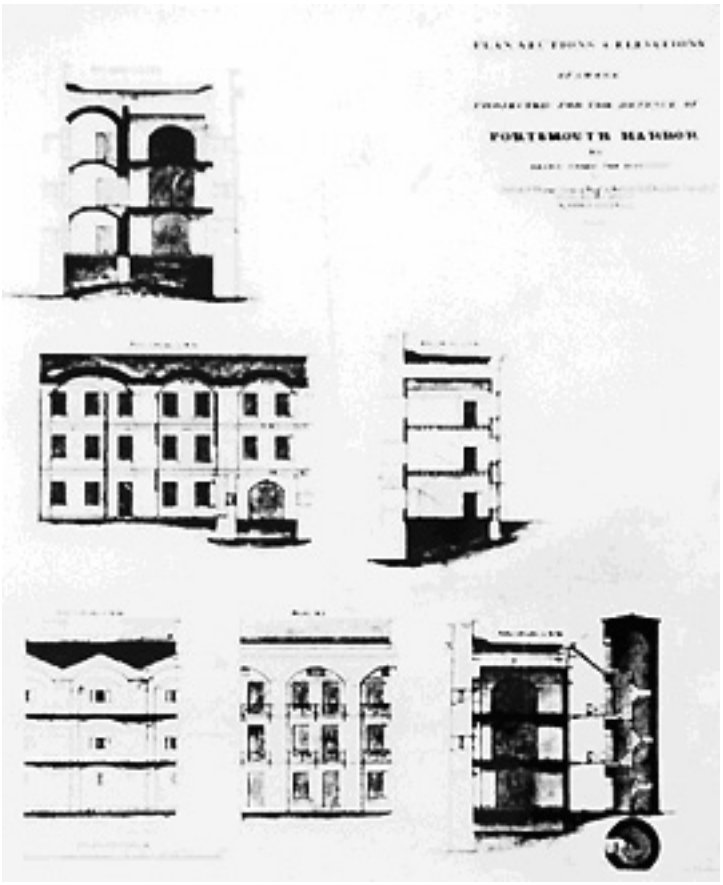
A drawing in cross section of the Walbach Tower

P.



Major-General Robert Anderson

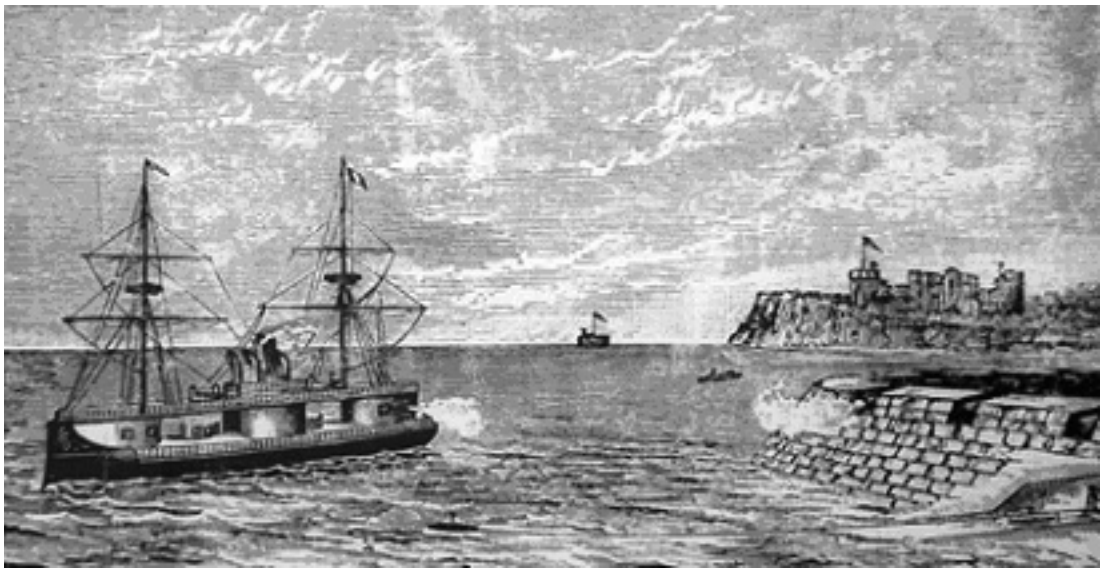
Q.



Plans, sections and elevations of a work projected for the defense of Portsmouth Harbor

R.

S.



T.