

REPORT ON FORT NONSENSE,  
MORRISTOWN NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK.

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Fort Nonsense Hill is the northwestern terminus of the chain of hills which extends to the south eastward from Morristown, and which includes Mt. Kemble, Tea Hill, Fort Hill, Blatchly's Hill, etc. The ridge projects like a wedge well into the present city.

On the high point of the hill nearest Morristown is the remain of an earth-work some fifty feet square. Its original character cannot now be determined with exactness due to attempts at restoration a few years ago by employees of the town of Morristown. Mr. Aldus Pierson, who supervised the work, has stated that little was done except to make the rampart more distinct, to restore one corner which had been leveled, and to grass over the entire work. The workmen followed a plan which has been preserved by the Washington Association of New Jersey in the Washington Headquarters collection. The curator of the museum is not informed as to the history of this plan or how it came into the possession of the Association. It was prepared by Major J. P. Farley, U.S.A., is a scaled pen and ink drawing, apparently based upon a study of the remains made in the latter part of the last century. (cf. Julia Keese Colles, Authors and Writers Associated with Morristown. Second Edition, Morristown, 1895. pp. 39,345.) A blueprint of a tracing of this drawing accompanies this report.

On the western corner of the redoubt stands a large granite monument bearing the following inscription: "This stone marks the site of Fort Nonsense, an earth work built by the Continental Army in the winter of 1779-80 ---- Erected by the Washington Association of New Jersey, 1888." On the flag pole which stands in the center of the redoubt is the following legend: "We olde Fort Nonsense. This earth work was erected and maintained by the Continental soldiers as one of the defenses of Morristown during the Revolutionary War." It also bears a brief statement of the importance of Morristown in the Revolution.

The origin of the name "Fort Nonsense" is unknown. The earliest known use of the term is in Dr. Lewis Condict's notes, made about 1832-1834, of an application for a pension by one Jonathan Ruckman, who stated that he "performed one month's duty near Morristown at Fort Nonsense." (The Condict Revolutionary Record Abstracts, "N. J. Hist. Soc. Proc., nr s., VI (1921), 175.) Lossing, who visited Morristown in 1848, gives the following account of Fort Nonsense. (B. J. Lossing, Pictorial Field Book of the Revolution, I, 306.): It was upon the southern slope of this mountain

(Kemble's) that the American Army was encamped during the winter of 1779-80; and upon the same ridge (which terminates abruptly at the village), half a mile from the green, are the remains of Fort Nonsense. It was nearly sunset when I ascended the hill, accompanied by Mr. Vogt, the editor of one of the village papers. The embankments and ditches, and the remains of the block-houses of Fort Nonsense, are very prominent, and the form of the embryo fortification may be distinctly traced among the trees. Its name was derived from the fact that all the labor bestowed upon it was intended merely to counteract the demoralizing effects of idleness . . . . Washington foresaw the evil tendency of idleness and discreetly ordered the construction of a fort upon a hill over-looking the town. There was no intention to complete it, and when the winter encampment broke up in the Spring the work was, of course, abandoned."

Dr. J. F. Tuttle (Washington in Morristown, Harpers Magazine, Feb., 1859, 297-298) gives the following account of the origin of the fort and its strange name: "Dr. Lewis Condict says there are two accounts given of this fort; one is, that Washington designed to plant cannon there, with which to command all the entrances to Morristown in case of an attack from the enemy; the other and more probable account is that Washington, finding his troops needed exercise, both for purposes of health and military subordination, set them to work at this fortification, as if it were a matter of the utmost importance in defending the stores, the people, and the army itself. Having answered its design, tradition says that Washington asked one of his friends what the useless fort should be named. The reply was, 'let it be called Fort Nonsense.'" The explanation that the fortification was built simply for disciplinary purposes is preposterous, inasmuch as a detail of two hundred men would not have been over-exercised in completing the work on the hill within a week or two.

There would seem to be no room to question the conclusion that the earth-work referred to was built by the Continental troops --- not in 1779-80, however, but in the spring of 1777. In an order dated Morristown, May 3, 1777, it is stated that "Major Painter (Gamaliel Painter(?) of Baldwin's Artillery Artificers regiment) is to superintend the Artificers, and works, in and about Morristown, until further orders." (Washington's Writings, ed. Fitzpatrick, VIII, 16.) On May 14, the commander-in-chief ordered the officer in command in Morristown "to have a Guard-house in the upper Redoubt, on the hill adjoining this place (Morristown), erected with dispatch and sufficient to contain 30 men --- . This building to be slight, and attended with little expense." (Ibid., 58) The reference here and later to the "upper Redoubt" would suggest that there was also a "Lower Redoubt". However, exploration to date has failed to reveal any remains that can definitely be identified as those of another fortification. A more

thorough search should be made when time permits. On May 27, 1777, "One Sub., one Sergt. and twenty privates, of Lieut. Col. Olney's detachment," were ordered "to do duty as artillery men, under Lieut. ----- in Morristown, till further orders." (Ibid., 130.)

On May 28, 1777, shortly before the army left winter quarters at Bottle Hill (now Madison), Lieut. Col. Olney was instructed as follows: "Your detachment is to remain at Morristown till further orders, with which, and the militia now here, you are to guard the stores of different kinds, in the most effectual manner you are able. Endeavor, as far as it is in your power, to strengthen the works already begun upon the Hill near this place, and erect such others as are necessary for the better defending it, that it may become a safe retreat in case of necessity. The Guard House in the upper Redoubt, should be immediately finished, and if you are not able to mount a guard in it, at present, you should nevertheless make it the Quarters of a trusty Sergeant and select party of men, otherwise, if the Enemy, or their Tory Assistants, should have any designs upon the Town or the Public Stores in it, their first attempt will be to seize the height and turn our own works against us." (Ibid., 135.) From Middle Brook, June 12, 1777, Washington ordered Lieut. Col. Zebulon Butler to "march the troops of your Regiment and the two Independent companies with you to Morris Town and there take Post in and about the fortifications upon the Hill. You will apply to Lieut. Col. Jere. Olney for the Orders <sup>1</sup> gave to him by which you will regulate your conduct." (Ibid., 236.)

These orders show conclusively, in Washington's own words, the purpose for which the fortifications were erected; namely as a safe place of refuge for the garrison left to defend Morristown and its valuable military stores, after the main army should have departed from the vicinity. The testimony of Ruckman, cited above, shows that a militia guard was kept in the fortifications in 1778. It would seem quite probable that there was a permanent guard, either of continentals or militia at Fort Nonsense for the remainder of the war.

The documents dealing with the encampment at Morristown in 1779-1780 contain no reference to the fort on the hill, but a "main guard" was regularly detailed for duty in Morristown in General Orders, and it is quite possible that it was posted at Fort Nonsense. (cf. Emory McClintock, Topography of Washington's Camp of 1780, a paper read before the Washington Association of New Jersey, 1894; 28; and the various Morristown Orderly Books.) The fort had no part in the plan of defense of the army's position in 1780, which was drawn up by Greene and Duportail. (Greene to Washington, Jan. 16, 1780, Washington MSS., Library of Congress.)

It is held by some of the local historians that Fort Nonsense was the site of an alarm beacon during the Revolution. There is no doubt that one of the beacons for alarming the New Jersey militia was located near Morristown. At a meeting of the New Jersey Council of Safety at Springfield, Jan. 7, 1778, it was "ordered, that in addition to the orders already given to Mr. Caldwell, with respect to the erection of Beacons for the purpose of

alarming the County in case of invasion, he be further desired to direct that one be set up at Morristown and another at Long hill and one or two to the northward of New Ark, and that he be requested to appoint proper persons to take care of and attend them and that the person so provided, shall be exempted, when known, from military duty." (Quoted in Andrew M. Sherman, Historic Morristown, 265-267). January 28, 1778, a report was printed in the New Jersey Gazette "That near Morris Town a beacon forty feet high has lately been erected in form of a block house (with a six-pounder on the top) filled with dry wood and other combustible stuff, for the purpose of catching fire soon, in order to the more quick discharge of the cannon, on the report of which, and the light from the building, the country is to take the alarm and those who do not turn out may, by their laws, be instantly put to death by their next neighbor, and escape with impunity. Buildings of a similar construction are also erected at Long Hill and on the heights at Bound Brook." (Ibid.)

No entirely dependable evidence has appeared to date sufficient to place definitely the location of this beacon. Sherman (op. cit., loc. cit.) contends that it was on Fort Nonsense. He states: "From a life-long resident of Morristown, the present writer learns that for many years he has understood from information derived from an aged person, that in Revolutionary days there was a beacon station on the summit of what is now popularly known as "Fort Nonsense." McClintock (op. Cit., 28) also assumes that there was a beacon on the hill, but cites no very definite tradition. He writes: "That they (the company of which Ruckman, above referred to, was a member) had business there followed from an order of the New Jersey Council of Safety in January, 1778 (this order is quoted above), directing a beacon station to be placed at Morristown, including, of course, a gun for day alarms. It is said that an old cannon which did duty at Fort Nonsense is still in existence." The writer has no other information regarding the gun referred to, than that here quoted. Joseph F. Tuttle ("Washington in Morris County, New Jersey" Annals of Morris County, 61-62) favors Fort Hill as the site of a beacon station, and suggests very vaguely that his view had the support of tradition. His statement follows: That there was a system of beacon-lights, there can be no doubt, although unfortunately, the most of those are dead who could give us information about it, and there are no documents describing the various points where these lights were kindled. Of one, we have some knowledge. Seven miles north of Morristown, near the present Railroad Depot, at Denville, is a mountain which rises abruptly to a considerable height, from which you can see the Short-hills. On this point, there was a beacon-light, managed by Captain Josiah Hall, whose descendants still reside in the vicinity. A fire from this point would be seen from the top of Green Pond Mountain, several miles farther north, and a fire on that mountain would probably reach the portion of Sussex County where the brave Colonel Seward, grandfather of Senator Seward, resided. Tradition says, that such was the case; and that, often, at night, the tongue of fire might be seen leaping into the air on the Short-hills, soon to be followed by brilliant lights on Fort Hill, on the Denville mountain,

Tuttle in  
same issue  
of N. J. report on  
beacon & gun

the Green Pond Mountain, and on the range of mountains on the Orange County line."

From this testimony, or rather, from these varying suppositions, no safe conclusion can be drawn as to the site of the beacon near Morristown. It may have been on Fort Nonsense Hill. It is conceivable that there were two. Unless further documentary evidence is discovered, the only thing remaining to do is to make a careful study, under favorable seasonable conditions, of the topography of the Morris County region, and the beacon system of northern New Jersey, and then assign the beacon station to the site which would appear best situated for the purposes for which the beacons were established. If it is desired to erect a beacon according to the description in the order previously quoted, no serious objection appears to placing it on Fort Nonsense, where it could be best exhibited to the public, or on Fort Hill in the Jockey Hollow area. It should be borne in mind, however, that these beacons were a part of the militia establishment, and should be carefully distinguished from those sites and remains in the park which pertain to the Continental Army. (Cf. the writer's report dated July 29, 1933.)

It is recommended that the following sign be erected near the earthwork:

#### Fort Nonsense

This redoubt was constructed on General Washington's order in the spring of 1777 as "a safe retreat in case of necessity" for the regiment detailed to guard the military stores in Morristown. A guard, either of regulars or militia, was probably stationed on this hill during the remainder of the war. The origin of the name of the fort is unknown.