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337/132162

THE BUILDING OF FORT NONSENSE

BY: SAVADGE, WESLEY R.

03/1940

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The Building of Fort Nonsense

by

Wesley R. Savadge
March 1940

HISTORICAL FILE
1. Dr. Savadge's note
2. Historical file
JWS 3/20
JWS 4/12

After the successful battles of Trenton and Princeton, General Washington led his weary army to the secluded hills of Morristown for winter quarters. While encamped there from January until May 1777, the Commander in Chief began the herculean task of accumulating the necessary military and commissary stores for the coming campaign. When these supplies were gathered together and stored in Morristown, some substantial means of protecting them was needed. Washington then ordered that a redoubt be constructed for this purpose. The first known reference to this redoubt is found in Washington's general orders of May 14, 1777:

"He [the Quarter Master General] is also to have a Guard-house in the upper Redoubt, on the hill adjoining this place, erected with dispatch, and sufficient to contain 30 Men -- This building to be slight, and attended with little expense."¹

This order indicates that the building of some fortifications had already begun. Some indication of the nature of these defenses is indicated in Washington's letter to Lieutenant Colonel Jeremiah Olney, on May 28, 1777, the day before Washington left Morristown for Middle Brook:

"Your detachment is to remain at Morris Town 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.

"Endeavour, 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 of 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 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."²

The hill in Morristown on which these defenses were erected was the northern terminus of Mount Kemble, which juts down almost into the town itself. From this position all approaches to Morristown could be defended.

How long Colonel Olney remained at Morristown with his detachment we do not know, but only two weeks after he had received his orders to remain there, Lieutenant Colonel Zebulon Butler was instructed to march to Morristown as an additional guard. Washington's orders to Colonel Butler were as follows:

"You will march the Troops of your Regiment, and the two Independent Companies with you to Morris Town and there take Post in and about the fortification upon the Hill. You are to Guard the Stores at that place until further Orders.

"You will apply to Lt. Col. Jere: Olney for the Orders I gave to him by which you will regulate your conduct."³

It is apparent from these orders that there must have been a considerable quantity of stores at Morristown if such a large force was sent to guard them.

In the late summer of 1777, when it was evident that the British were planning a campaign to take the city of Philadelphia, there was no longer the necessity of maintaining such a strong force at

Morristown. On September 14, from his headquarters near Germantown, Washington wrote to Major Francis Murray, in Morristown:⁴

"As I have ordered that a Detachment of the Troops march from Peeks Kill to join this Army, which I expect will very soon come thro' Morris Town or its Neighbourhood. It is my desire that you hold the men under your command in readiness immediately to join them and proceed with them to us, or to any place where it shall appear necessary to order them. If any Commissary to Quarter Masters Stores remain at Morris Town, you will order them back in the Country and give every Assistance in your power for executing it."⁵

During the remainder of the war there was never any actual engagement in which the fortifications were used, but a guard was constantly maintained there to protect the military stores. In May 1778, forage depots were established in Morristown,⁶ and during the summer months detachments were established in the redoubt.⁷ This guard was still kept in January 1779, for on the last day of that month Washington ordered that, "the Morristown guard ~~was~~ to be increased to a Captain's command and relieved monthly 'till further orders."⁸ In May 1779 the Morristown guard was again increased.⁹ During the winter encampment of the Continental Army at Jockey Hollow in 1779-1780, the Main Guard was stationed at Morristown. It may be that this guard was posted at the redoubt on the hill.

The earliest known use of the name "Fort Nonsense" for this redoubt is found in the Lewis Condict papers in the pension application of Jonathan Ruchman, in 1833. Ruchman said that he "performed one month's duty near Morristown, at Fort Nonsense, Captain Cory in May ~~1778~~ was very loth to go on account of planting corn. Before Monmouth Battle."¹⁰

Throughout the nineteenth century the site continued to be a

popular land mark but the purpose for the construction of the fortifications was obscured or forgotten. Bit by bit the tradition grew that it was built in the winter of 1779-1780 in order to keep the soldiers from being idle. It was intended to have no military value, and Washington himself suggested that it be called Fort Nonsense. In spite of the absurdities of this tradition and the complete absence of any documentary evidence to support the story, it has been widely printed in secondary sources.

In 1848 Benson J. Lossing visited Morristown in order to obtain information for his books about the Revolutionary War. He walked up to Fort Nonsense one evening and examined the spot. Later he wrote: "The embankments and ditches, and the remains of the block houses of Fort Nonsense, are very prominent, and the form of the embryo fortifications may be distinctly traced among the trees."¹¹

Toward the end of the century the remains of the defenses on the hill were examined by Major ^{Joseph Pearson} Farley, U.S.A., at the request of the Washington Association of New Jersey. The Association planned to erect a monument or boulder to designate the spot to future generations. Major Farley prepared a plan of the lines of the old fort and presented the plan to the Association.¹²

With the acquisition of Fort Nonsense by the Federal Government as a part of the Morristown National Historical Park, a much more careful investigation of the site was made. In 1937 the National Park Service began a reconstruction of the site based on extensive archaeological and documentary research.¹³ After careful work "the present redoubt is as nearly an exact reproduction of Fort Nonsense in its original form

as can be conceived." 4

Wesley R. Savadge
Wesley R. Savadge,
ERA Writer.

CC: Historical File - original ✓
General Park File
Park Historian's File
Chief, Research and Survey Section (Mr. Weig)
Chief, Publicity Section (Mr. Baker) 2 copies

NOTES

1. John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., The Writings of Washington, Vol. VIII, p. 58.
2. Ibid. p. 135.
3. Ibid. p. 236.
4. John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., Correspondence of Washington with the Officers, Vol. I, p. 417.
5. John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., The Writings of Washington, Vol. IX, p. 244.
6. Ibid. Vol. XI, pp. 404, 408.
7. A. M. Sherman, Historic Morristown, p. 267.
8. John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., The Writings of Washington, Vol. XIV, p. 58
9. Ibid. Vol. XV, p. 87.
10. Text quoted by Sherman, loc. cit.
11. The Pictorial Field-Book of the Revolution, Vol. I, p. 306.
12. See the Report of the Executive Committee of the Washington Association of New Jersey, June 29, 1887.
13. See the report of this work in the Historical Files at the Morristown National Historical Park, Research and Survey, Sites and Buildings, Fort Nonsense.
14. Ibid.

HISTORICAL FILE
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Dr. P. Pratas.
- Please note
Savard's comments.
This paper was not intended
as a study on the continental
subject of narrow towns, which
treatment deserves a special
the part of Savard's
with ~~no~~ in a footnote,
might amount to your
criticism.

2/4/5

HISTORICAL FILE

Mr. Whig

Do you want
to have the long hand
notes filed?

CSM

Yes
2/4/5

HISTORICAL FILE

Dr. Ronalds;

In Fitzpatrick's
Writings of Washington, Vols. XXI-
XXV, 1780-1783. there are
references to the Morristown
Guard, to stores at Morristown,
or to the presence of troops
there. Should these be in-
cluded and cited in this paper?

Except for fragmentary
data referring to stores, ~~the~~ the
guard, etc. I know of nothing
else available on Fort Mifflin
(excluding, of course, the many
erroneous accounts of its con-
struction and Thos. Barrison's
research report of the reconstruction
(redundant.) W.P. Swadze 4/3/46

~~Swadze~~ ~~W.P.~~
HISTORICAL FILE

What is the
for the statement that
"a guard was constantly
maintained" at Morristown
thru out the war? No
reference after 1780.

p 5 - reference should be 14 not 5.

Well done, but is
this all this is known
about FT Mifflin?

FSR