

"The inhabitants showed their appreciation of the work by the name which they bestowed on it, Fort Nonsense, the only name it ever received." **FRANCES MANWARING CAULKINS IN "HISTORY OF NEW LONDON"**

## Making sense of Fort Nonsense

Obscure fortification played a role in invasion by Benedict Arnold — but just where was it?

Story by **JOHN RUDDY**  
Graphics by **SCOTT RITTER**  
The Day

**Y**ou probably know about Fort Griswold. That's where British troops committed a massacre while their boss, Benedict Arnold, was busy lighting fires across the river.

You may also know about Fort Trumbull. Not the one that's there now, but the first one, whose defenders fled upon finding themselves outnumbered by the enemy.

But unless you've done some deep reading on local history, you may not be aware a third fort was in play on Sept. 6, 1781, when Arnold burned New London. And it had a funny name.

"Arnold and the British Army first attacked and took control of Fort Nonsense in New London," reader Bob Mish wrote to The Day's CuriousCT project. "... Fort Trumbull and Fort Griswold still exist, but exactly where in New London was Fort Nonsense located?"

Mish, who lives on Willetts Avenue near Ocean Avenue, says he's heard Fort Nonsense was near his home.

The oddly named fortification is well-documented, though its moment on the stage was brief. Some sources say it was in the general area of Willetts and Ocean. But Mish asked where it was *exactly*.

Let's see what we can figure out.

**W**hen the American Revolution began in 1775, New London's only defense was a fort on the Parade that dated back to 1691. This was soon replaced by two earthwork fortifications, one on each bank of the Thames River.

But Fort Trumbull, on the New London side, was built only to repel an invasion from the water. Its rear or westward end was open and vulnerable to an assault by land. So in 1779, militiamen constructed a third fort on high ground to its west. From there, troops approaching Fort Trumbull could be fired on.

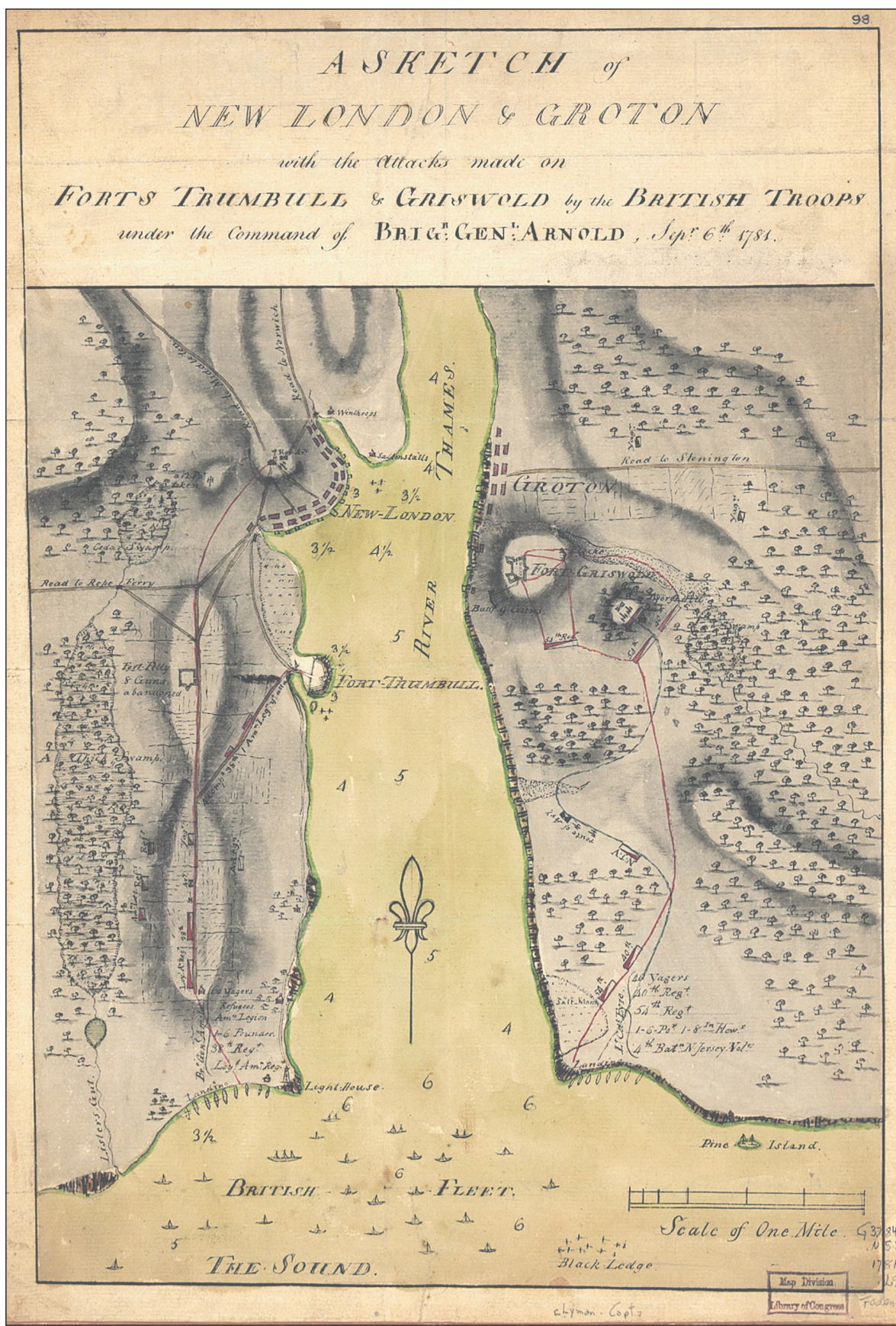
As forts go, this one was nothing special. Frances Manwaring Caulkins' "History of New London" says it was constructed of timber and sod.

"The inhabitants showed their appreciation of the work," she wrote, "by the name which they bestowed on it, Fort Nonsense, the only name it ever received."

Eric Lehman, whose 2014 book "Homegrown Terror" is about Arnold's invasion, said Fort Nonsense had dubious military value, partly because its construction wasn't funded.

"There was no state or town funding in those days, so everything had to be funded by whoever wanted to help," Lehman said by email.

The man who helped most was William Ledyard, military commander of New London and Groton. The



This map of Benedict Arnold's invasion was drawn by Daniel Lyman, a loyalist from New Haven who fought under Arnold in New London. At least two other versions of it exist, and the location of Fort Nonsense is slightly different in all three.



building of Fort Nonsense, which took six months, was under his direction, and records show he billed the state legislature for the work.

When the invading British landed troops on both sides of the river in 1781, Arnold was in command in New London. Fort Nonsense was the first defense his troops encountered and the only one the traitor attacked himself.

Just before he reached it, Arnold detached four companies to secure Fort Trumbull, manned by only 23 men. After firing one volley, the defenders escaped across the river to Fort Griswold.

In his report, Arnold described Fort Nonsense as "a redoubt which had kept up a brisk fire on us for some time, but which the enemy evacuated on our approach." Eight cannons were left behind.

From this spot, Arnold dispatched a messenger to Groton, fatefully ordering an attack on Fort Griswold. That set in motion the massacre of 88 Americans, including Ledyard.

Arnold's troops continued north into New London, bringing one of the abandoned cannons with them.

**Editor's note:** In addition to sources cited, this story was drawn from "The Battle of Groton Heights" by William W. Harris, "Rosemary" by Mary E. Benjamin, and research by Mary Beth Baker and Tom Schuch.

He left two companies to occupy Forts Nonsense and Trumbull.

John Hempstead, who fought in New London, recalled that he had fallen in with a group of 40 armed men who harassed the British from a distance as they advanced from the shore. At one point he was caught in crossfire between Fort Nonsense and the British.

SEE MEMORY PAGE A4

## Biden faces foreign policy woes

Canada-India dispute, Menendez indictment, Ukraine funding flap all piling up at once

By **AAMER MADHANI**  
Associated Press

**Washington** — This probably wasn't how President Joe Biden envisioned his big foreign policy week ending.

Biden spent much of the time trying to make the case to world leaders at the U.N. General Assembly as well as to Democratic donors and voters that his decades of foreign policy experience and demonstrated moral clarity set him apart from Donald Trump, the early front-runner for the Republican presidential nomination.

But just as Biden is looking to spotlight his foreign policy chops with his 2024 reelection bid heating up, he is facing a growing list of national security headaches, several of which emerged in recent days.

SEE BIDEN PAGE A7

## Judicial Branch ponders major shakeup for New London's two courthouses

Plan would consolidate criminal matters at Huntington Street site

By **GREG SMITH**  
Day Staff Writer

**New London** — The Connecticut Judicial Branch is exploring the idea of consolidating criminal proceedings into one New London courthouse to address the shortcomings of an outdated courthouse built in 1891 as a girls' high school.

The idea, which is in the initial discussion phase, is to move all criminal matters from the 112 Broad St. building known as Geographical Area 10 into the New London Judicial District courthouse at 70 Huntington St., which is now home to civil court and Part A matters, the court where all serious crimes in New London County are heard.

Civil operations would move from Huntington Street to Broad Street. The GA court is the busier of the two in terms of the number of criminal

SEE BROAD PAGE A7

### WEATHER

Today, cloudy and breezy, afternoon showers. High 66. Monday, cloudy with showers. High 68. **E6**

### INDEX

Books/**F2** Police logs/**D2**  
Business/**B1** Public notices/**C3**  
Classified/**C3** Puzzles/**C5**  
Comics/**G2** Region/**D1**  
Daybreak/**F1** Sports/**E1**  
Editorials/**B4** Stocks/**B5**  
Nation/**A3** Television/**F3**  
Obits/**D3,5,6** World/**A3**

### CARTERS SURPRISE PLAINS WITH PEANUT FESTIVAL CAMEO

**Atlanta** — What is a peanut festival without the Carters?

Former President Jimmy Carter and former first lady Rosalynn Carter surprised their hometown of Plains on Saturday by riding through the town's annual peanut festival.

It is believed to be the first time that President Carter has been seen since in public at least since February, when his family announced that he was entering home hospice.

In May, the family revealed that 95-year-old Rosalynn Carter has dementia.

The appearance was unplanned and captured on X, formerly Twitter, by Erika William and her daughter Charleigh, who attend the Peanut Festival annually from their home in Warner Robins. Charleigh won her school's seventh-grade postcard competition.

— Atlanta Journal-Constitution

### PERU GAS WORKERS UNCOVER OLD CHILDREN'S BURIAL SITE

Gas workers were digging to lay a pipeline in a street on the outskirts of Peru's capital when they uncovered a burial site believed to be up to 1,000 years old with eight bundles of funeral belongings, most of them thought to have belonged to children.

The discovery of bones, alongside relics such as ceramics and wooden tools, in northern Lima's Carabayllo district suggests it may have been a site where the children were buried dating to pre-Hispanic times, although further lab analysis will be carried out to better understand the findings, according to Peruvian media.

An archaeologist at gas company Calidda, Jesus Bahamonde, told reporters Friday that among the eight bundles found so far were what the archaeologists believe to be the remains of six children and two adults.

— Washington Post

### We're new here



PAUL A. SMITH/MILWAUKEE JOURNAL-SENTINEL VIA AP  
**Flamingos stand by the water along a Lake Michigan beach on Friday in Port Washington, Wis., the first sighting of the species in Wisconsin state history.**





We georeferenced an 1848 map, titled "Harbor of New London," with current OpenStreetMap data to show where Fort Nonsense may have stood when British troops led by Benedict Arnold burned the city in 1781. The 1848 map, from the U.S. Coast Survey Depot, doesn't depict Fort Nonsense, but it does show topographical and man-made features of New London at the time the installation was fading from living memory.

MAP BY SCOTT RITTER AND JOHN RUDDY/THE DAY | SOURCES: U.S. COAST SURVEY VIA DAVID RUMSEY MAP COLLECTION, DAVID RUMSEY MAP CENTER, STANFORD LIBRARIES; OPENSTREETMAP CONTRIBUTORS

## Fort Nonsense

was likely located in the area of this circle

Ocean Avenue was known as Town Hill Road when Benedict Arnold's troops marched on New London in 1781. British troops were met with "brisk fire" as they reached Fort Nonsense, Arnold reported.

1. Somewhere near the corner of Ocean and Willetts avenues is often cited today as the approximate location of Fort Nonsense. This was mentioned as early as 1893 and also in a 1967 Historic American Buildings survey.
2. Richard F. Lynch of Greenville, R.I., compared a map of the battle with a contemporary map in 2018 and tentatively identified the location as between Squire and Linden streets on Ocean Avenue.
3. A digital comparison of the Daniel Lyman map and a current map placed the fort east of Montauk Avenue between Robinson Street and Denison Avenue.
4. In 1905, a cannonball was dug up on a new baseball field west of Ocean and Willetts that was subsequently named Cannonball Park. It might have been fired from Fort Griswold at British-occupied Fort Trumbull. The park is now called Mercer Field.
5. In 1931, Capt. David Conner, recalling his participation in the centennial "sham battle" 50 years earlier, said the reenactment of the fight at Fort Nonsense "was located near Bellevue Place."
6. In 1908, local historian R.B. Wall identified the site of Fort Nonsense as "opposite the dwelling of P. Leroy Harwood," who lived at 226 Ocean Ave.
7. The residence of Mrs. C.C. Alger, and later Fleming Smith, at 233 Ocean Ave. was most often cited in *The Day* between 1881 and 1920 as the location of the fort.
8. The Douglas Gardner house at 239 Ocean Ave. is an 1870 rebuild of a house destroyed by fire that was standing during the invasion and believed to be near Fort Nonsense.
9. In 1918, R.B. Wall cited a different and very specific location: "west side of Ocean avenue, west end of lot south of the Fleming Smith house," which would have been that of the Gardner house, which Smith owned.

# Memory of where Fort Nonsense stood has faded away

### FROM A1

He wrote that he retreated into the fort after its evacuation and was almost hit by fire as he left it. Then, as the British entered, they received a defiant greeting that Hempstead, who heard it, preserved for posterity with creative spelling.

From behind a tree, an American called out: "Wilkom God damyou to fort Non Sence!"

So where did all this happen?

According to Caulkins, the area around Fort Nonsense was notable for two things: a large windmill and the gallows used in New London's first public execution in 1738. By some accounts, the land had been seized from a British officer.

Arnold's troops landed west of the where the harbor light-house is, passed through a place called Brown's Gate and marched north on Town Hill Road, now Ocean Avenue.

A map drawn by loyalist Daniel Lyman shows the fort on the west side of Town Hill Road. It appears as a square with one south-facing bastion and is labeled "Fort Folly," another indication of its uselessness.

At least three versions of the map exist, and in each,

Fort Nonsense's position relative to Fort Trumbull is slightly different: due west in one, a little south of that in another, and farther south in the third.

Mish said a Rhode Island man he met a few years ago compared one of the maps to a present-day map and concluded Fort Nonsense was between Squire and Linden streets, north of Willetts Avenue.

Scott Ritter, *The Day's* graphics editor, digitally superimposed all three on a current map, though they probably weren't drawn to scale. In the two credited to Lyman, the fort somehow ends up east of Montauk Avenue, between Denison Avenue and Robinson Street. But in the third, by John Hills, a British surveyor and engineer, it's a couple of blocks south of Ocean and Willetts.

An intriguing bit of circumstantial evidence is also worth considering. In 1905, a baseball field was laid out west of Ocean and Willetts and called Cannonball Park.

"The name was suggested by the finding of a 17½ pound shot in the ground about six feet from the surface," *The Day* reported. What happened to it isn't known.

Cannonball Park is now Mercer Field. Is that where Fort Nonsense was? If not,

where did the cannonball come from? Here's one possibility.

Just before the British attacked Fort Griswold, but after Arnold's troops had seized Fort Trumbull, the Americans in Groton and the British in New London traded fire.

"We could heave a shot into Fort Trumbull among the enemy without difficulty," recalled Rufus Avery, a member of Fort Griswold's garrison.

Did a stray shot land on the future baseball diamond? We'll never know.

**T**he *Day* began publishing just in time to chronicle the centennial of Arnold's invasion, a major event that included a "sham battle" recreating the fight on both sides of the river.

On Sept. 6, 1881, Civil War veterans as the Americans and National Guardsmen as the British skirmished on Ocean Avenue at the site of Fort Nonsense, though even the reenactment location is unclear. *The Day* reported it was on the east side of the street and near the home of Mrs. C.C. Alger. Fifty years later, a participant recalled the site was near Bellevue Place. Those three descriptions appear to contradict one another.

For the next 40 years, writers in *The Day* regularly referred to Fort Nonsense's location with an air of certainty despite sometimes talking about different places.

But here's the thing: Those places were clustered in close proximity, all on or near the property of Mrs. Alger, which was later owned by Fleming Smith.

By the time Smith died in 1913, New London's streets had been renumbered as they are now, so we know where he lived: 233 Ocean Ave. If that's where the fort had been, as seems likely, there's irony in the fact that its location has been forgotten, because the site might have become a public park.

Smith's widow willed lifetime use of the property to a nephew, after which the city could have had it if it created what she wanted called "Helena Park." But in 1929 the place became embroiled in a tax dispute, and the next year a judge ordered it sold.

By then known as the New London West property, it was to be subdivided, but the plan stalled amid the Depression. For a few years, the land hosted home garden plots for public relief. Houses were finally built after World War II, and the spot where the Smith house had stood is now

right where Longview Street starts. That's on the west side of Ocean, two blocks south of Willetts, as on the Hills map.

Next door, at the corner of Ocean and Longview, is a Colonial Revival house built in 1870 by Douglas Gardner to replace his family homestead, which had burned down. In 1898 Fleming Smith bought the property, according to a New London Landmarks document.

Mish found a footnote in a 1903 booklet about Arnold's invasion that concerns Gardner's grandfather, Walter Harris, who had lived in the previous house "on Town Hill, near Fort Nonsense."

"When Arnold came by he recognized him, hailed him as a traitor, and further relieved his mind regarding his conduct," the note says, "for which he was taken prisoner and sent off with the rest."

A footnote in a different book links the Smith house to the fort. "The Battle of Groton Heights," published in 1870, says this about the house's construction at an unspecified date:

"When the excavation was being made for the cellar, several relics of its revolutionary history in the shape of round and grape shot, deeply eaten by rust, were exhumed."

The most specific reference to the fort's location is by *The*

*Day's* history writer R.B. Wall. In 1918 he said the fort was on the "west side of Ocean avenue, west end of lot south of the Fleming Smith house," which would put it on high ground behind the Gardner house.

No one was more surprised to hear that than Andrea Brooke, who bought the house in January. A native of England, she's new to the region and its history but eager to learn more about the fort.

"I can't stop talking about it to people," she said.

Barely a decade after Wall placed the fort behind what's now Brooke's home, reports about the tax dispute next door don't mention it once. By then it had apparently faded from public consciousness.

But if we assume the earlier consensus about the location was the heir of living memory, we can say, with a little more precision, that Fort Nonsense stood not at Ocean and Willetts, but somewhere near Ocean and Longview.

In 1908, Wall ventured a suggestion: "Some citizen, or the city, should mark the spot on which the fort stood while its exact location can still be pointed out."

Yes, that sure would have been a good idea. [jruddy@theday.com](mailto:jruddy@theday.com)

# FDNY's ground zero-related illness deaths reach 343, same as 9/11 death toll

By THOMAS TRACY  
New York Daily News

**New York** — The number of FDNY members who died of a 9/11 illness reached 343 on Saturday, the same number who died during the terror attack 22 years ago, officials said.

On Saturday morning, retired firefighter Robert Fulco died of pulmonary fibrosis that was linked to the toxic cloud swirling above Ground Zero in the days and weeks after the terror attacks.

Fulco was the 343rd retired and active FDNY member to die of a 9/11 illness, officials said. On Wednesday, retired EMT Hilda Vanatta died of a 9/11-related cancer, department officials said.

Vanatta, 67, joined EMS in 1988, eight years before its merger with the FDNY, colleagues said. She spent most of her career working at EMS Station 14 in the Bronx and served the FDNY for 27 years before retiring

in 2015, officials said. "We have long known this day was coming, yet its reality is astounding just the same," Fire Commissioner Laura Kavanaugh said Saturday. "With these deaths, we have reached a somber, remarkable milestone. We have now suffered the same number of deaths that day when the north and south towers fell."

Currently, 11,000 active and retired FDNY members have a

diagnosed World Trade Center disease. Out of that number 3,500 are suffering from cancer, officials said.

"Our commitment to their service and sacrifice must remain as unshakeable for the next two decades as it has been for the last two," Kavanaugh said.

Those suffering include FDNY Chaplain Msgr. John Delendick, who, despite suffering from an aggressive form of pancreatic cancer attend-

ed a special 9/11 anniversary ceremony earlier this month, where 43 more names were added to the department's FDNY World Trade Center Memorial Wall.

The 43 names added to the wall this year was the second-largest group since the memorial was created in 2011 when 55 names were put up, FDNY officials said.

"I've been burying all these people — I don't know how many," Delendick told the

Daily News at the time. "In a sense, my relationship with those that died after 9/11 has changed quite a bit. Because now, I'm one of them."

On the day of the Sept. 11 attacks, the death toll at the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and in the crash of United Flight 93 in Pennsylvania was 2,977 people. The World Trade Center attacks took the largest toll that day — 2,753 people died after two jetliners hit the twin towers.