

BLOODY BATTLE of RHODE ISLAND

Our Only Major Clash
in Revolutionary War,
down Newport Way, Is
All but Forgotten, and
the Site of It Poorly
Marked, Though It Was
Historically Important.

The **RHODE ISLANDER**
(Registered with U. S. Patent Office)
Providence Sunday Journal
MAGAZINE
DECEMBER 13, 1953



Battle of Rhode Island

Great Grandpa Anthony lost silver buckles off breeches but Hessians missed money

STORY BY ROBERT L. WHEELER
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IN 1849, John Benson Lossing, author, illustrator and antiquarian, went to Newport to make battlefield sketches for his projected work, *Field Book of the Revolution*. Hiring a light rockaway carriage, he started north for the scene of the only major engagement fought on the soil of this state in the War of Independence—the half-forgotten Battle of Rhode Island, a stubborn, bloody, seven-hour seesaw which climaxed the campaign of 1778, the great “might-have-been of the Revolutionary War.”

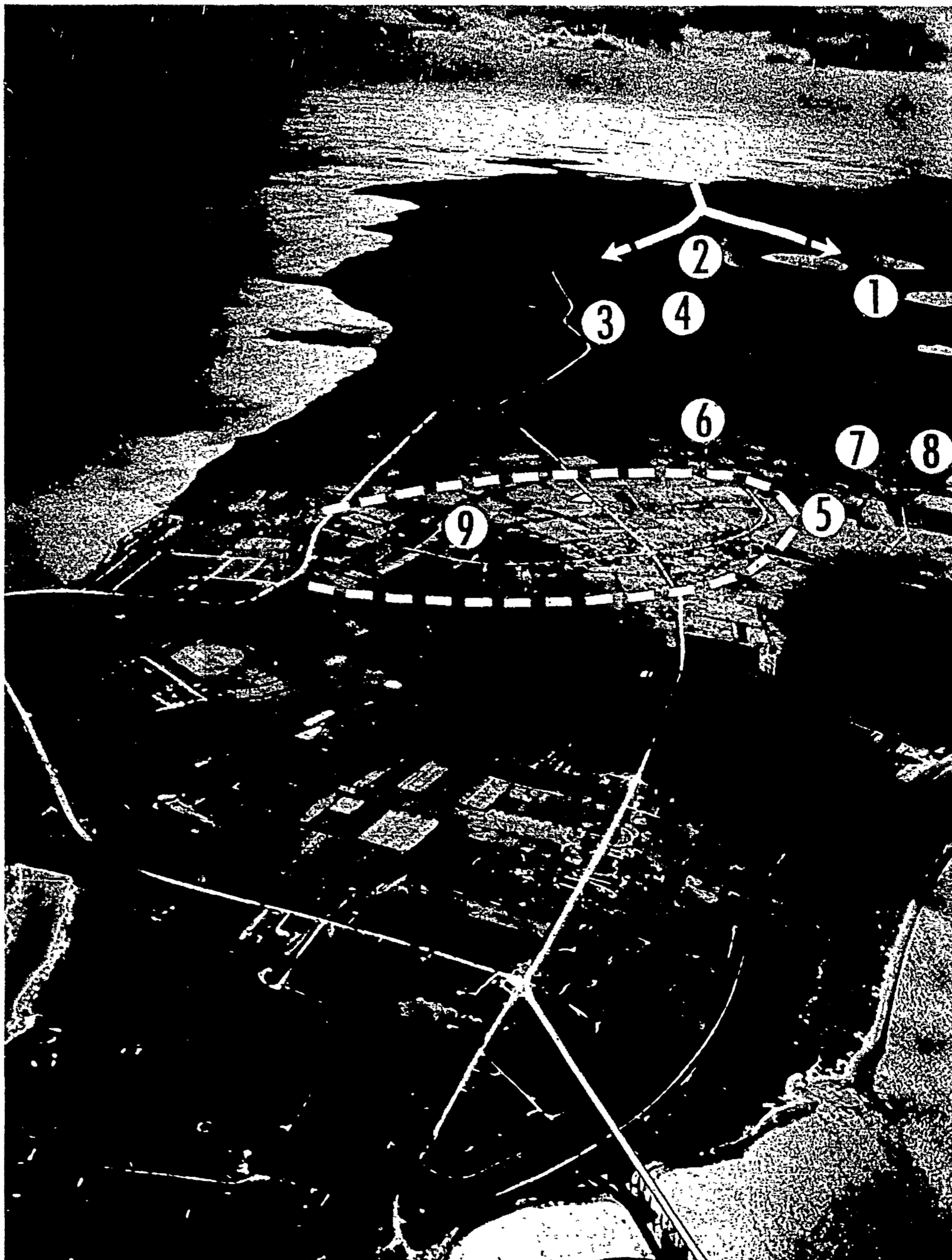
Today that battlefield, where the American soldier first demonstrated his quality as a fighting man to his new allies, the French, is the most poorly marked battleground in the United States.

Twelve miles above Newport, Lossing came to the residence of a Mr. Anthony, living in the vicinity of Butts Hill. “An introductory line from his brother, David Anthony, Esq., was the key to his generous hospitality; and after accompanying me to the top of Butts Hill, and pointing out the places of interest included in the view from its summit, he kindly invited me to dine with him when my sketching should be finished.”

This invitation Mr. Lossing heartily accepted. It was a cold and blustery day in early spring, ice covered the surface of the ponds and the ground was hard frozen. “The ride of 12 miles in the cold morning air,” he writes, “was a whetstone to my usually good appetite.”

One hundred and four years later, on a warm afternoon in 1953, a *Rhode Islander* reporter and photographer went to Portsmouth to take pictures of some of the key points which figured prominently in the Battle of Rhode Island, but which today are known only by tradition. Like John Benson Lossing, they were helped and guided by a Mr. Anthony.

Ralph H. Anthony is an active man in his 70's. He is a great grandson of the Anthony who was living on what are now the grounds of the Portsmouth Priory on Aug. 29, 1778, the day the Hessian Chas-



KEY TO AIR PHOTO of battlefield, looking south from Mount Hope Bridge. The “Y” at the top shows direction of two-pronged British advance up East and West Main Roads to harass American withdrawal from defense perimeter shown by the dotted line. 1. Battle begins; Hessian chasseurs run into American screen of light troops at or near junction of Union Street and West Road. 2. Oakland Farm, where redcoat detachment going to

seurs lunged across his acres at the American positions on Lehigh Hill and plundered his house and stole his silver knee buckles—the day Nathanael Greene's murderous enfilade took the Germans in flank and gave Bloody Brook its name.

Mr. Anthony lives on Dexter Street, Portsmouth, a paved lane connecting the East and West main roads into Newport. The back steps of his home are flanked by two 24-pound cannon balls. “We used to plow 'em up all the while. You know we used to be in the seed

Hessians' aid down Union Street was ambushed. 3. Quaker Hill. British checked here by Continentals. 4. Turkey Hill, starting-point of Hessian drive to turn American right on Lehigh Hill (5). 6. Hillock from which Greene's enfilade smashed Hessian charge across Bloody Brook (7). 8. Reinforced Americans counter-attacking across Anthony's Hill pushed the Hessians back to Turkey Hill. 9. Butts Hill — which saw no fighting.

business. Well, I've sent cannon balls all over the country to our customers, right along with the shipments of seed. They made real nice souvenirs.”

He took us around to the front of his house, and pointed south.

“You see that line of trees? All right, we'll get in the car and I'll show you something. Turn left at the yellow house on the West Road.” We did. About a half mile south of the crossroads, Mr. Anthony said to stop the car. He thumbed at a gap in the stone

Photo by Thomas D. Stevens



PILLAGED by Hessian soldiers during battle was this old house on Portsmouth Priory grounds. Headmaster Brady of Priory School lives there now.



BLOODY ANGLE. Middle Road and Union Street, where Livingstone's and Jackson's tough veterans wrecked Campbell's 22nd Infantry with two volleys.



BUTTS HILL FORT. Entrance to work erected by British early in war and used as supply base by Americans in 1778 campaign. Marker is seen at right.



POWDER HOLE on reverse slope of hillock seized by Maj. Gen. Nathanael Greene east of West Main Road. It fed guns that stopped a Hessian charge.

Battle continued

The little dog followed the captain into battle

fence on our left. It was crossed by a single wire. "Don't touch it," Mr. Anthony said, "it's charged. Any time you see a single wire in the country don't touch it. Crawl under it."

We crawled under the wire and climbed the hill. On its reverse slope was a fairly deep depression. "See that?" Mr. Anthony said, "That's a powder hole. They kept the powder for the cannon there. A kind of ammunition dump, I guess. There's another one on the hill over on the Priory grounds. Look, you can see Anthony's hill from here. It's where the green ends and the brown begins. Let's go over there."

We drove north a little way on the West Road and turned into the sunlit quiet of the Portsmouth Priory grounds. A narrow, bumpy road snaked around out-buildings and turned right. Mr. Anthony pointed to a gentle slope behind a stone wall. "We always called it Brownell's Hill. But probably it was called Anthony's Hill then. The Anthonys used to own most of the north end of the Island."

He led us across a field where a planting of wheat fought a losing battle with the wild mustard. We ascended Anthony's Hill. The powder hole had disappeared, been filled in, its edges tramped down by grazing cattle. From the summit of the hill, we looked

across the unmarked battlefield of Aug. 29, 1778, to the heights the Hessians needed to take in order to roll up Sullivan's right flank. There was a windmill on the hill then, as there is now. Not the same windmill but one like it.

The old Anthony homestead is in the hollow below Anthony's Hill. Mr. Ralph Anthony lived there the first 26 years of his life. Headmaster Brady of the Priory School lives there now. It is a sturdy 18th century house somewhat modernized, but inside it are hand-hewn timbers scarred with adz strokes. Its big central chimney is capped by two flat stones.

The Hessians who ripped the silver buckles off Great Grandpa Anthony's knee breeches were probably stragglers from the force that charged down Anthony's Hill and floundered across the swampy hollow. They roughed him up a little but they didn't get the \$2000 he had prudently buried under a stone wall when the battle started coming his way.

The Hessian soldier was always a great one for straggling and pillaging. On the morning of the battle, Major Silas J. Talbot of Providence jumped his horse over a stone wall and captured two of them munching carrots in a vegetable garden. All he had to do was swagger his sword at them a little. They thought he was a British officer.

Mr. Anthony said, "I'll show you the Hessian Hole." The fluffy green of willows marks its site. The Hessians lost heavily crossing the hollow and the brook. Rifles and muskets blazed from behind every stone wall. The American Revolutionary soldier was never so dangerous as when he had two feet of laid stone between his belly and a bayonet. Battle-wise Nathanael Greene ran two fieldpieces down to the hillock overlooking the swamp from the east side of the West road and plastered the Germans with flanking fire. The farmers who tidied up the battlefield next day buried 30 in one grave beside Bloody Brook. Captain von Malsburg, commanding the Hessian advance, lost the little dog that had been his companion since he left home to fight in a war that was none of his business. It followed him into battle and was killed running behind him.

The Hessians tried three times for Barrington's (now Lehigh) Hill. At Bunker Hill, the British tried three times and took the hill. The Hessians didn't make it. The grenadiers and chasseurs who slogged through the swamp and the enfilade from Greene's "grasshoppers" and up to the improvised redoubt from which they were being plastered found themselves facing "large bodies of troops behind the work and at its sides, chiefly wild looking men in their shirt-

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THE "HESSIAN HOLE". Line of trees marks creek and swampy ground German mercenaries had to cross in attempts to turn American right. Caught by Greene's murderous cross fire, they tried again and again, only to be driven back.



"WILD-LOOKING MEN," shirt-sleeved and powder-blackened, met disciplined Hessians here and flung them back in fight for key artillery position which saved Sullivan's army. A Rhode Island Negro battalion fought well on this hill.

sleeves and among them many Negroes." These uncivilized looking fellows (who included tough Continental infantrymen trained by the Germans' compatriot, Baron Steuben) not only flung back the assault but counterattacked with the bayonet, pushed the enemy off Anthony's acres and drove him back to Turkey Hill. The action broke off about 4 o'clock in the afternoon in a growl of cannon fire that kept up until sunset. That night, the American Army completed its planned withdrawal to Tiverton across Howland's Ferry. The Battle of Rhode Island was over. And with it the campaign of 1778.

We drove back to Mr. Anthony's home on Dexter Street and said goodbye.

He had done for us what his ancestor would probably have done for John Benson Lossing if it hadn't been so cold the day Lossing came up to sketch the battlefield—taken us to the places where the hottest fighting occurred.

Mr. Lossing came in from his morning sketching on Butts Hill with his fingers benumbed with the cold. He made no battlefield sketches west of the fort. Maybe the good dinner Mr. Anthony gave him is one reason why there are no plaques or markers for Bloody Brook or the Hessian Hole or Turkey Hill

or Anthony's Hill or the hill the Hessians tried to take and couldn't. And one can't help feeling that there ought to be some kind of marker on the house where Great Grandpa Anthony lost his silver knee buckles in the War of Independence.

The state's only Revolutionary battlefield is insufficiently marked. There are two large markers on Butts Hill, one erected by the Newport Historical Society, the other by the D.A.R. And there is another D.A.R. marker at the junction of the East Road and Union Street, commemorating the Americans who lost their lives in what the marker terms the "first skirmish" of the battle.

The "skirmish" was really quite an affair. The British advance on the morning of Aug. 29, 1778, started out as a reconnaissance in force by columns coming up the East and West Main Roads. The Americans had a screen of light troops on Union Street who were supposed to harass the British and pull back.

They did a little better than that. The British column on the East Road heard continued on page 8

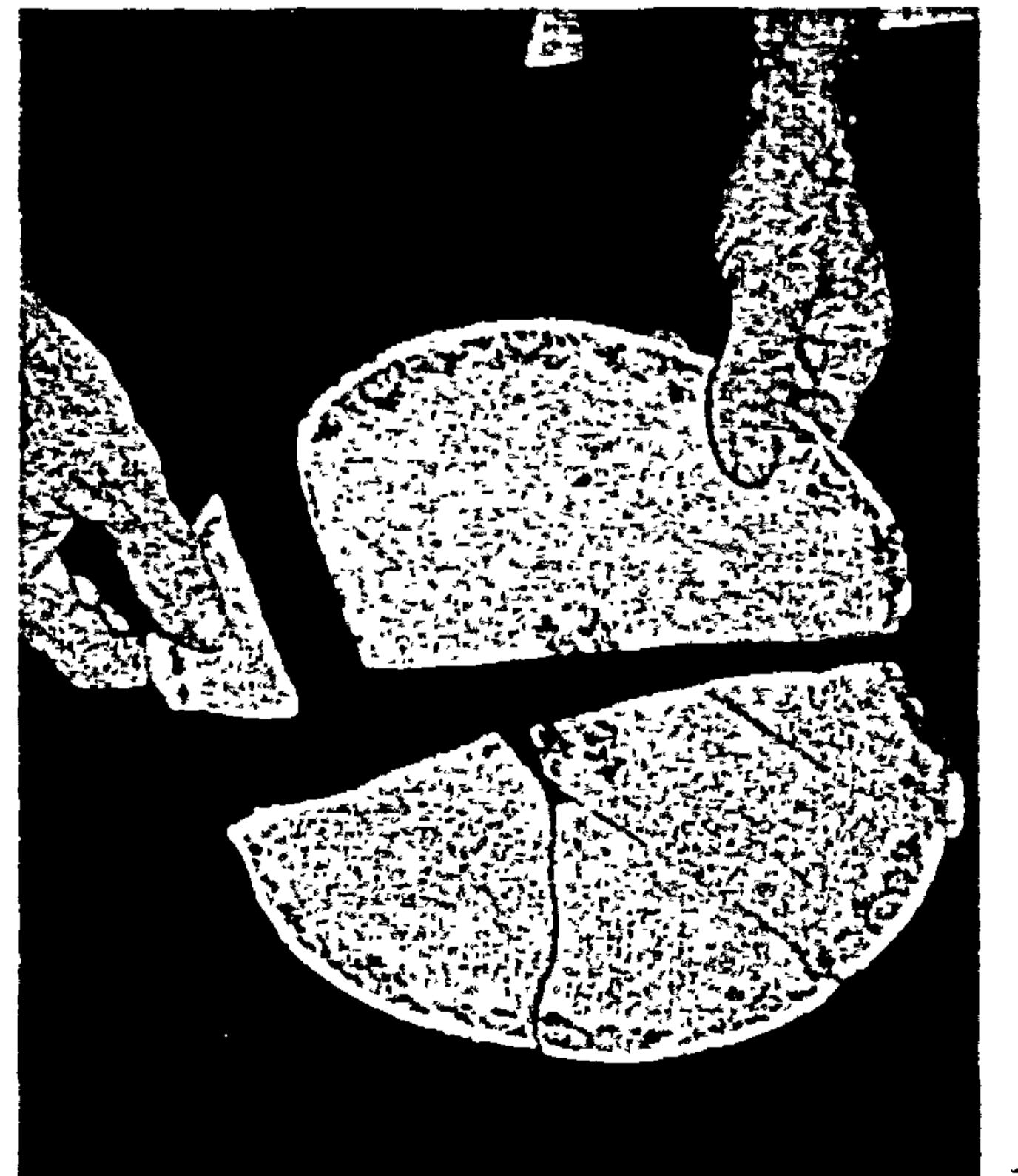


PLATE broken by Marquis de Lafayette while rehearsing sword for battle it missed.



ON LEHIGH HILL. Varnum's Continental Brigade held right of American line, stalled Hessians on its steep slope.



MEDAL struck by British for battle shows fleeing Americans. Curio owned by Erich A. O'D. Taylor, Newport.



AN ANTHONY points to Anthony's Hill, east of Priory. Old powder hole has gone but cannon balls still turn up.



DENNIS HOUSE in Portsmouth. Lafayette slept here—under bed, story goes, to avoid capture. His valet slept in it.



WHERE THE BRITISH MIGHT HAVE WON. Looking from Anthony's Hill toward Lehigh Hill (then Barrington's), Hessians' objective. Had they taken it, they could have rolled up Sullivan's whole army, turned toughly fought action into an American disaster.

Battle continued from page 5

Lafayette slept here (but under the bed)

firing on the West Road and the British General Smith sent a good half of Colonel Campbell's 22nd Foot over Union Street to help out. They didn't put out any flankers and the Continentals posted in a field just across from Oakland Farm got up behind one of those convenient stone walls and let them have it, two volleys.

After the second one Colonel Campbell's 22nd Foot was short about half its strength and the Colonel was remembering the promise the American General Varnum had made him, by messenger, to get even with him for burning the general's house in Bristol.

After that there was fighting all the morning from Union Street back and forth between Turkey and Quaker Hills. The closer the fighting got to Sullivan's beachhead, the better the Americans did.

In the afternoon, the British and Hessians threw the weight of their attack against the Americans' right flank in an attempt to turn it. They failed, and the Battle of Rhode Island ended in a draw.

Lafayette called it the best-fought action of the war. The Marquis, who was one of Sullivan's two major generals (the other, fortunately, being Greene), missed the battle completely. Sullivan had sent him to Boston on an errand—to get rid of him, possibly. He was a very enthusiastic, impulsive young man. While he had his headquarters in the Dennis house in Portsmouth, he broke a plate one day doing sword exercises. Mrs. Lillian Brayton, 87, whose family

lived in the Dennis house for years, still treasures the pieces. The women always did worship Lafayette.

Mrs. Brayton lives on Quaker Hill with her daughter, Mrs. Herman Holman. She says it's a Brayton tradition that Lafayette always slept under his bed, while his valet slept in it. The Marquis didn't want it to happen to him like it happened to the British General Prescott, who was taken in his shirt-tail by Brave Barton at Mr. Overing's house on the West Road.

* * *

The campaign of 1778 on Rhode Island came close to being a Yorktown. The French, now our allies, had sent a fleet under D'Estaing, which was to have co-operated in an assault on Newport.

D'Estaing anchored off Newport early in August and landed 4,000 marines on Conanicut. Almost simultaneously, Sullivan landed 10,000 troops on the north end of the island and moved south against the Newport defenses. It looked like a pushover, for the forces of King George in Newport numbered fewer than 7,000—five British line regiments, seven Hessian regiments, and four Loyalist volunteer corps, plus a few light dragoons and some sailors. Washington sent two good Continental brigades, and from all over New England the fire-breathing militiamen came a-marching. Even stately John Hancock of Boston came down for the kill.

The first combined operation of the American and

French arms was a fizzle. When the British Admiral Howe's sails appeared off Newport, D'Estaing sailed out to engage, taking his 4,000 marines with him. Before he could close with Howe, a terrific storm damaged the French fleet and he took it to Boston to refit.

That ended the American dream of capturing Newport and denying the port of New York to British troop and supply ships. Sullivan's sunshine soldiers melted away, 2,000 of them. With what he had left, he fought the rear-guard action called the Battle of Rhode Island, and about all the average Rhode Islander knows about it is that it was something that happened somewhere around Butts Hill, where the chilled Mr. Lossing did all his sketching.

COVER PICTURE shows Ralph H. Anthony, Dexter Street, Portsmouth, viewing just a few of the cannon balls which used to be bumper crop on Anthony land. There were Anthony's on battlefield long before battle was fought. In it, one lost his silver knee buckles. Photo by Harry A. Scheer.



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