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# Fort Ninigret

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## Fort Ninigret

IT is at the risk of being indicted for pure plagiarism that we undertake the story at hand. We admit that we shall merely attempt to paraphrase Mr. William B. Goodwin's excellent account of his research into the much disputed origin of Fort Ninigret, an account which appears in the current issue of the Rhode Island Historical Society Collections. However, Mr. Goodwin's story is interesting enough to be worthy of wider dissemination.

Tradition, which can become as stubborn and hide-bound as anything or anyone else, has built up the iron-bound belief that Fort Ninigret was erected on its point of land along Charlestown Pond by the Niantic chieftain known as Ninigret. To this belief Mr. Goodwin had previously taken exception, naming the Dutch as the early builders of the fort. While the results of his research into the matter and of his excavations in and around Fort Ninigret itself do not give his case absolute proof, they do establish a hypothesis that is fundamentally sound. It is that although Ninigret and a part of his tribe may have

occupied the fort and even re-built it slightly sometime after 1630 the Dutch first established the fort sometime between 1627 and 1630.

That the Dutch were settling, or attempting to establish permanent settlements along Long Island Sound and even as far east as Cape Cod is evident enough in extracts from documentary history of the first half of the seventeenth century. The eastern limit of the New Netherland territory they claimed was Cape Cod, while the southern was Cape Hindlopen. Long Island was included also. It was in a dispute between ambassadors of Holland and England in 1631 over the respective right of the two countries to the New Netherland territory that a pertinent reference to what might have been Fort Ninigret appears. In answering a letter of the English Ambassador the Dutch Ambassador wrote: "Before 1630 we had a fort and colony in the Narragansett Country which has been continuously occupied."

In 1637, the Dutch purchased a nearby island in Sloop Bay which they called "Queenis" after its Indian name but which has since been known as Dutch Island. Here they were able to set up a trading post with rea-

sonable assurance that they would not be troubled by Indian attacks, as they probably had been during the bitter hostilities between the Pequots and Narragansetts. The fact that the Dutch acquired the island and moved to it in 1637 accounts for the fact that Captain John Mason, who went into the Narragansett country in 1637 to secure allies for his attack upon the Pequots in Mystic, Connecticut, found no Dutch there, but Ninigret occupying the fort.

Now let us proceed to relate what Mr. Goodwin found on close examination of the fort itself. The remains showed a fortification of some two hundred square feet, with three unusual, five-sided bastions. There was no bastion on the side nearest Charlestown Pond. To quote from Mr. Goodwin's description we learn that "the builders first laid two parallel walls of glacial field stone about two feet apart. To the back of the inside walls of stone were then driven posts of unknown height, which could hardly be called palisadoes, the remains of which we found insitu in the earth. Of these decayed posts, which were circular, we found clear evidence that the grain of the wood ran in the perpendicular, proving them to be upright. Back of that, however, on the inside was the

evidence of planks laid transversely, whether to hold these posts together or to form a platform on the inside, it is hard to say."

Along a path, which led from the fort to a nearby spring, he found a number of both Dutch and Indian relics, particularly the former. Among these was a rusted Jew's harp (type of trinket the Dutch used frequently in trading with the Indians), and a pair of knitting needles. Within the fort itself the ground yielded up such odd items as a "badly eroded shovel, axes, and curious wedges, which must have been a very early form of tomahawk." None of these iron implements were anything like those found at Fort Ticonderoga, and, according to the best authority, were totally unlike any iron implements uncovered in the shell heaps along the shores of southern Rhode Island and Connecticut. In addition to the iron pieces, Mr. Goodwin and his party uncovered other things of even greater interest. There were a number of clay pipes, of various sizes and shapes, some cut with the initials of their maker, according to a custom in vogue among the early pipe makers of Holland. Then there were specimens of trading copper used by the Dutch

in their dealings with the Indians. A few of the soapstone pipes used by the Indians and fragments of what Mr. Goodwin believes to have been trading cloth all but completes the list. However there was one more item of great importance which deserves a paragraph for itself.

In the course of the digging within the fort the excavators discovered three pieces of what proved to be a platter and which, after a examination and trial, they were able to put together. On the top side of the plate, within a circle of blue and white, was the letter "R," about an inch and a quarter in size. This platter, or rather its fragments from which the whole could be ascertained, was the best find out of several other pieces of broken pottery and glassware. Goodwin attempts to make a slight connection between the initial "R" on the platter and the name Sieur de Roberval, a friend of Jaques Cartier, but his case is too slim for credence. He did take the platter to Mr. Hans Middlekoop of New York, an eminent authority on Delft, and the latter declared it to be without question a specimen of very early Dutch Delft. After comparing it with specimens in his own collection, Mr. Middlekoop stated positively

that it was made sometime during the first quarter of the seventeenth century. That is a good corollary to the supposed dates of the fort.

To gain some further evidence, Mr. Goodwin's party attempted to do some excavating under a house about three-quarters of a mile west of the fort. Here, at the time the foundation for the building was being dug, a cannon and a European sword had been found. Not being able to continue with further excavations under the house, Mr. Goodwin took photographs of the cannon and sword, picturing every detail, and then took them to New York for expert opinion. Upon showing them to Mr. Grancsay, the Curator of Armor at the Metropolitan Museum, he learned that the sword could date back as far as 1550 and that the cannon was one of the earliest breechblock types, and could be dated to the fifteenth century. Convinced that the sword and cannon both came from the original Naragansett burying ground, Mr. Goodwin would like to believe that they came from Fort Ninigret too, but wisely hesitates in making any dogmatic statement.

Taking it all in all, however, it seems as though Mr. Goodwin has gone a long way

in settling the origin of Fort Ninigret. At least the facts he brings to bear on the case are thoroughly plausible, while the actual specimens he uncovered during his excavations within and around the fort give some additional evidence that is too reasonable to be thrust aside lightly. He believes that there is a possibility of there having been two forts built on Dutch Neck, the second erected without disturbance to the first. If such is the case, the first would be one of America's very earliest fortifications, a choice discovery for any historian.

In conclusion, we must comment on the thoroughly scientific attitude Mr. Goodwin has adopted, presenting his case carefully and making no positive statements without proof. However, with his documentary evidence, taken from historical records dated in 1627, 1628, and 1647, and his findings through excavation, he offers a solution to the mystery of the origin of Fort Ninigret that can be accepted. However, in ending it would be best to quote his own cautious paragraph; he says:

"Summing up then, we have the quasi evidence that here in the vicinity of this fort, or within the fort itself, have been found a cannon, dating back to the fif-

teenth century, a sword, dating back to the middle of the sixteenth century, and pottery, dating back to the first quarter of the seventeenth century, together with iron implements, used evidently in trade, of such a nature as never have been dug up in the northeastern part of the United States."

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Proud of its own historical significance, "The Old Stone Bank" has adopted this method of educational advertising to bring to light much that is of value and significance in the colorful annals of Rhode Island and national history.

The sketches and vignettes of old-time Rhode Island and Rhode Islanders that are broadcast weekly and then printed in this form are selected from local historical records which are full of the picturesque, romantic, and adventurous. In the hope that these glimpses into the lives, customs, and environment of our progenitors may be both revealing and inspirational to young and old, this booklet is presented with the compliments of

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