

FORT McDONOUGH AND THE WAR OF 1812

*B*uilt in October 1814, the little known and short lived military fort, Ft. McDonough, was situated on “Squam Heights” just south of Clough Point. The 90’ elevation of the site gave commanding views of both the Sheepscot River and Back River, as well as approaches to Wiscasset Harbor. The fort was named in honor of Captain Thomas MacDonough, made famous by the Battle of Plattsburg on September 11, 1814.

The fort was a “star fort,” shaped as a five-pointed star, with six cannons arranged between the star points. It was an earthwork construction with logs and mounded soil providing defensive protection, with a *chevaus de frise*, a row of sharpened stakes,

across the island.

Although little is known about the details of the

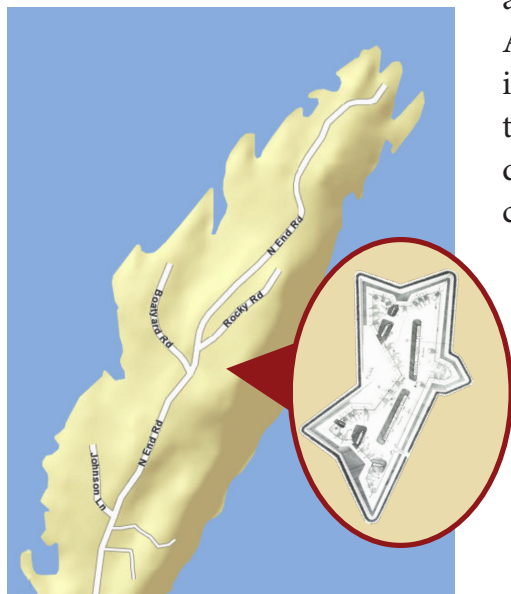
design, it was similar to other earthen star forts constructed during the War of 1812. Three of the star points faced towards the Sheepscot and two, the Back River.

*T*o provide an early warning of a pending attack, another small earthen gun emplacement was located at the tip of Fowles Point, hosting two small “6-pounder” cannons and an alarm bell to warn the forts upriver of British forces advancing.

Fort McDonough was an area landmark for many years, but is currently obscured by housing and on private property.



CAPTAIN THOMAS MACDONOUGH,
PAINTING BY GILBERT STUART,
NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART,
WASHINGTON, D.C.



APPROXIMATE LOCATION OF FORT
MCDONOUGH AT THE NORTH END OF
THE ISLAND. THE FORT IS THOUGHT
TO HAVE BEEN AN IRREGULAR STAR-
SHAPED FORT, SIMILAR TO THIS
SKETCH OF FT. WARD IN VIRGINIA.

War came to Westport Island in 1814 during the closing months of the War of 1812. British naval attacks on the town of Wiscasset resulted in the construction of Fort Edgecomb in 1809.

To provide further protection, a clear view, and a clear firing range down the Sheepscot River, General William King directed that a second earthen fort be built on Squam Heights at the north end of Westport Island: Fort McDonough.

Smuel Tarbox was tasked with recruiting a Westport Island company to man the new fort. He was named a captain and successfully recruited nearly all the able-bodied men on the island to serve with him.

CAPTAIN SAMUEL TARBOX COMPANY

LIEUTENANT COLONEL EZEKIEL CUTTER'S REGIMENT
SERVICE AT FORT McDONOUGH AND FORT EDGECOMB
SEPTEMBER 10-28, 1814

Samuel Tarbox, Captain

Benjamin Knight, Ensign
Samuel Dunton, Sergeant
James Thomas Jr., Sergeant
Jonathan Fowles, Sergeant
Benjamin Willis, Sergeant

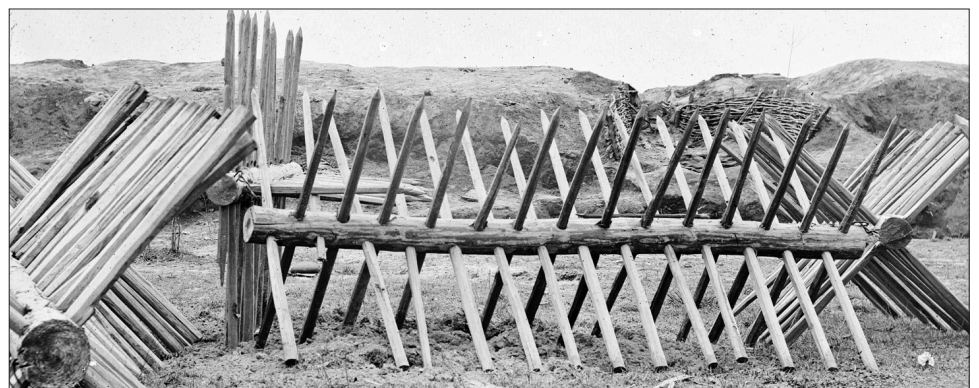
Privates:

Henry Colby Jr.	John Hodgdon Jr.
Moses Cromwell	Joseph Hodgdon
Spencer Decker Jr.	Joseph Hodgdon II
Andrew Dunton	Thomas Hodgdon
Daniel Dunton Jr.	Thomas Hodgdon Jr.
John Dunton Jr.	Moses Jewett
Simon Dunton	Stephen Knight
Stephen Dunton	Thomas Knight
Ebenezer Fowle	James McCarty
Westbrook Greenleaf	Jordon Tarbox
James Heal	William Thomas
Caleb Hodgdon	William Warden
John Hodgdon	John Webber

Westport is an island situated in Sheepscot River between Woolwich and Boothbay, in Lincoln County. It is eleven miles long, and about a mile wide. The surface is uneven, and the northern extremity terminates in a narrow headland called Squam Heights. The remains of an earth-work fortification are here to be seen by whoever is curious enough to climb the steep sides of the promontory. It was erected during the war of 1812, and bore the name Fort McDonough. At the time of the engagement between the Enterprise and Boxer, off the mouth of the river, this work was mounted by a star battery of six guns arranged to command the river with a plunging fire, and was protected by a *chevaux de frise*,—a barrier of fallen timber trees bristling with sharpened branches and pointed stakes, which ran across the island from shore to shore below the battery.

FROM THE 1882 GAZETTEER
OF THE STATE OF MAINE; BY
GEO. J. VARNEY

A CHEVAUX DE FRISE, SIMILAR TO
WHAT PROTECTED FT. MCDONOUGH



On the 20th of June, 1814 the *HMS Bulwark* sent “barges” to probe the defenses. Moses Davis, of Davis Island, Edgecomb, wrote in his diary:

On Monday morning last they attacked a small party of militia of this town stationed on Squam Island as sentinels, forced them to retreat, and spiked their cannon. They approached within a few miles of the fort, opposite this town, with the avoided intention of coming to the wharves and burning the shipping; but hearing our alarm guns and ringing of the bells, judged that we were prepared for them and retreated to their ships at the mouth of the river, after robbing a few houses. Our militia, who had gathered from this, and some of the neighboring towns, much regret their precipitous retreat, as they were ready to give them a warm reception. The militia are still under arms, and will probably remain so, while the British ships remain in our neighborhood.

The small militia party the British attacked were at Fowles Point located, 3.5 miles down the Sheepscot River from Fort McDonough. The two cannons there were thrown into the river, later to be retrieved and put back into service. The houses robbed by the British attackers were on Squam Island.

The first was Jonas Fowles’ home at Fowles Point:

With the coming force, the residents fled to the woods, carrying an elderly woman who was unable to walk. Jonas reported that there was “little looting” except for a jar of butter carried off by one of the British men. However, the officer in charge would not allow it to be placed in the barge. It was just left on the shore. The butter, sitting in the sun, spoiled before the returning families found it.

The second British landing occurred earlier at the “Woodbury Hodgdon house” on East Shore Road:

An enemy barge landed in “Muddy Cove” just south of the house. Most of the residents went into the woods behind the big ledge across the road, carrying their most cherished possessions. “Squire Joe” Hodgdon, only a small child at the time, took his kitten. One old lady remained in the house and gave the British sailors a good talking to for “coming around and stealing poor folks’ property.” The sailors did not take anything except a few fish from the fish house on the shore.



**LEFT: BRITISH “SHIP OF LINE” HMS BULWARK, 74 TOTAL CANONS
GUN DECK: 28 “32 POUNDER” GUNS
UPPER GUN DECK: 30 “24 POUNDER” GUNS
QUARTER DECK AND FORECASTLE: 16 “9 POUNDER” GUNS
(SISTER SHIP HMS HERCULES SHOWN)**

**BELOW: BRITISH “BARGE” OF TYPE USED BY
“BULWARK” TO LAND SAILORS FOR SHORE RAIDS
AND RECONNAISSANCE**

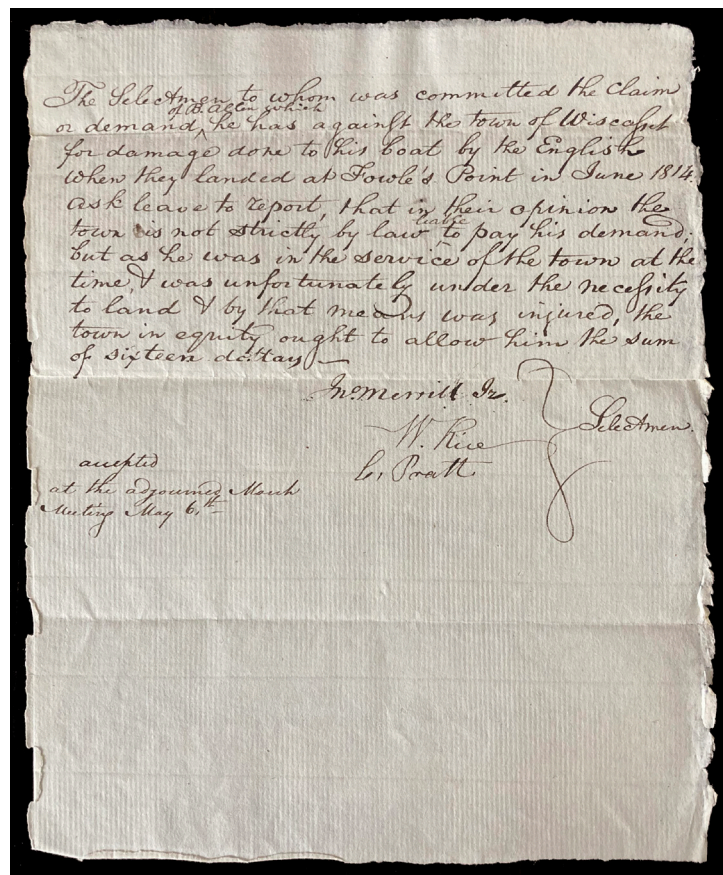


STATEMENT FROM WISCASSET SELECTMEN APPROVING THE PAYMENT OF \$16 TO B. ALLEN, WHOSE BOAT WAS DAMAGED WHEN FORCED TO LAND BY THE BRITISH AT FOWLES POINT IN 1814. (COURTESY WISCASSET LIBRARY)

TRANSCRIPTION:

The Selectmen to whom was committed this claim or demand of B. Allen which he has against the town of Wiscasset for damage done to his boat by the English when they landed at Fowle's Point in June 1814. Ask leave to report that in their opinion the town is not strictly by law liable to pay his demand, but as he was in the service of the town at the time, & was unfortunately under the necessity to land & by that means was injured, the town in equity ought to allow him the sum of sixteen dollars—

*John Merrett, Jr. }
W. Rice } Selectmen
C. Pratt }*



REMNANTS OF THE EARTHWORK FORTIFICATION OF FORT McDONOUGH, CA. 1920.

CA. 1910 POSTCARD SHOWING THE EARTHWORKS AT FORT EDGEComb AND THE VIEW ACROSS THE WATER TO WESTPORT ISLAND. FORT McDONOUGH WAS POSITIONED AT THE NORTH END OF WESTPORT TO PROVIDE A CLEAR VIEW DOWN THE SHEEPSHOT RIVER.



Wiscasset, Maine, Old Fort.