

Newsday

Llife

21



DAVID GRIFFIN
KEEPS ALIVE
THE MEMORY OF LI'S
BRITISH FORTS OF THE
REVOLUTIONARY WAR

E6

Reclaiming History

JOHNNY MILANO

act2 | 'Lockhorns' writer donates archives to Adelphi E25

Hidden history



Above: A drone photo shows the remnants of Fort St. George in Shirley that have been reduced to a faint outline. The cannon, placed there as replicas, lie within the defined area of where the fort once stood. Right: David Griffin, architect, historian and author, holds a cast-iron spike and remains from Fort Nonsense, a Revolutionary War fort in Jericho.



Defeat in the Revolutionary War meant doom for LI's **British forts**

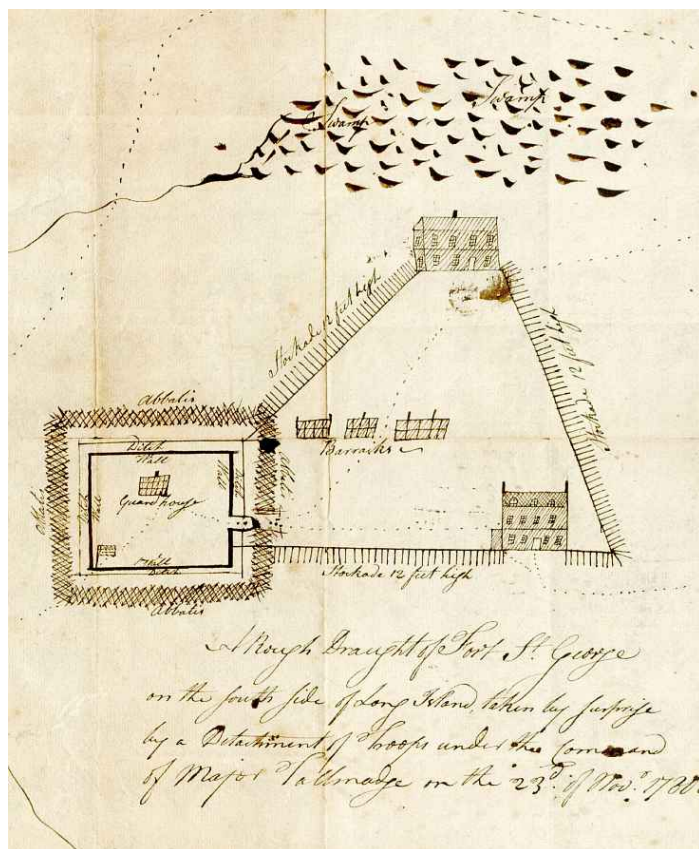
BY JOHN HANC
Special to Newsday

David Griffin stands on the corner of Prospect and Simcoe streets and gestures out to an expanse of water clearly visible over the rooftops of Oyster Bay. “You can still see the bay from here,” he says. “This was a good location for a fort.”

It takes a formidable imagination to stand on a street corner of modern Long Island and envision, rising up from the concrete sidewalks and manicured lawns, a massive earthen fort bristling with cannon, long, sharpened sticks to repel

attackers, and muskets wielded by red-coated soldiers.

Griffin, who lives in Rocky Point, possesses such an imagination — not to mention a detailed knowledge about a time when a series of such installations transformed what



A drawing by a Rebel informant, possibly William Booth, shows the position of Fort St. George. In 1780, it was attacked by American forces under the command of Setauket native Benjamin Tallmadge.

Grave markers at the Townsend Burying Ground, right. The Townsend family played a critical role in the Culper Spy Ring. The burial ground was also the site of Fort Hill.



CONNECTICUT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

JOHNNY MILANO



Griffin stands at the the corner of Prospect and Simcoe streets, former site of Fort Hill in Oyster Bay.

JOHNNY MILANO



ON THE COVER. David Griffin, author of "Lost British Forts of Long Island," walks on the burial ground at Fort Golgotha in Huntington.

is now Nassau and Suffolk counties into Fortress Long Island.

A Canadian by birth and an architect by training, Griffin, now 48, moved to the United States in 1997 and to Long Island in 2009. He became

fascinated with Long Island's role in the American Revolution and the time, from 1776 to 1782, when a dozen significant British defensive installations stretched from Jericho to Sag Harbor to protect this strategic piece of geography.

At the same time, Griffin (who claims to have Loyalist ancestors) was disturbed by the forts' obscurity and their seemingly nonexistent place in the lives of most Long Islanders. "There's a dire need to preserve what's left of these

forts," he said of this important chapter in the Island's past.

To that end, Griffin has spent five years studying maps and old military records — on Long Island and at the Library of Congress — and tramping through nooks and crannies to

discern the spectral presence of the long-ago fortifications. While most of them vanished in the decades after the war (destroyed in some cases by local citizens who wanted to eradicate any trace of the hated British occupiers), their remnants can still be seen, especially when guided by his sharp eye — as Griffin did during a recent tour of several sites.

Fort Hill, the British redoubt in Oyster Bay, was built in 1778 and occupied by the Queen's Rangers under the command of Col. John Graves Simcoe (a villain in the AMC Revolutionary War drama "Turn," and the namesake of the street that runs through what was once the middle of the fort).

You can see why Simcoe chose the spot, given its commanding view. But little else seems to remain of the fort — although Griffin points to the grassy lip of a curb on the northwest corner of Simcoe Street that sloped up a few feet to become the lawn of a house. "That could be a piece of one of the original walls," he speculates.

See COVER STORY on E8

Revolutionary LI history



ABOUT THE BOOK

"Lost British Forts of Long Island," by David Griffin, was published by The History Press in 2017. For more information, visit nwsdy.li/lostbritishforts.



A sign notes the British defeat by American forces in what is today Fort Salonga. Right, Elijah Churchill's, a bar in Northport, features the story of Churchill, the first Purple Heart recipient.



COVER STORY from E6

Or it could just be the natural contour of the hill. That's where the imagination comes in — as well as the patience and attention to detail, qualities Griffin marshaled in writing and researching his 2017 book, "Lost British Forts of Long Island" (The History Press). In the year after the book was published, Griffin spoke at many Long Island libraries and historical societies.

Griffin is poised to take the next step in his project to resurrect the vanished forts: In April, thanks to a grant from the National Park Service, he will be working with the Lamar Institute — a Savannah, Georgia-based archaeological research organization that has conducted other Revolutionary War battlefield investigations — to further study the Long Island forts and, in particular, the grounds around several that were attacked by the Americans during the war.

Of the battles on Long Island, none were as big as the 1776 engagement fought in Brooklyn, where George Washington and his green army were thoroughly whipped by a massive British force that went on to occupy New York City for the remainder of the war. But as the war dragged on, the importance of the forts — and Long Island itself — grew.

"Those forts provide a real security function for the British," explains historian Barnet Schecter of Manhattan, the author of "The Battle for New York: The City at the Heart of the American Revolution." "For the thousands of troops in New York City, Long Island is the breadbasket." In addition to food from local farms, he notes, "wagon loads of firewood are coming into the city from Long Island throughout the war to keep them from freezing in winter."

The forts helped protect that vital source of fuel and food for the British military, which also knew that Long Island Sound was buzzing with American spies relaying information back and forth from Connecticut, often on small, nimble whaleboats.

Perhaps the best-known Revolutionary War-era British fort on Long Island — if there

is such a thing — is Fort St. George in Shirley (one of the few on the South Shore). The fort is on the grounds of Brookhaven Town's Museum Manor of St. George and is open seasonally. In 1780, Fort St. George was successfully attacked by American forces under the command of Setauket native Benjamin Tallmadge (another "Turn" character). In a surprise, early morning assault Tallmadge's men axed their way through the gate, killed several defenders and took prisoners before setting the fortification afire and leaving.

The British forts on Long Island exist today as shadows — and in the case of Fort St. George, quite literally. "Nothing really remains except for the outline of the redoubt markings in the grass," Griffin says. "It's hard to tell it is the remains of a fort unless you know what you are looking at or it is pointed out to you."

LARGEST IN THE NETWORK

Another place the Patriots arrived in force (and again with Tallmadge in command) was about six miles east of Fort Hill, at what was the largest fort in the British network. At the very tip of Lloyd Neck in Huntington are the stunning remnants of Fort Franklin — named not for Benjamin Franklin, but his Loyalist son William. The works that once stood about 6 feet high have eroded, but the outlines of the old fort are clear and indeed seem woven into the landscape of the 19th century estate they are now a part of.

"They built the house right on the fort," Griffin explains. "But in doing so, they preserved it." (Modern owners have recognized the historic value of the fort's remnants and left it untouched.)

In the fields nearby, on the night of July 12, 1781, a combined force of about 800 American and French troops under the command of Setauket native Benjamin Tallmadge attacked Fort Franklin, which was garrisoned by several hundred British and Loyalist troops. Tallmadge's force was driven back when the British hit the attackers' lines with artillery. Aside from Brooklyn, Griffin explained, "it was the biggest battle of the war fought

JOHNNY MILANO

JOHNNY MILANO



Grave markers at the burial ground at Fort Golgotha in Huntington. The British desecrated more than 100 tombstones during construction.

JOHNNY MILANO



JOHNNY MILANO

A sign at the Townsend Burying Ground.

Building a defense

While little is left of them today, the dozen fortifications erected by the British for the defense of Long Island were state of the art for their time.

“These were constructed by professional engineers of the British army,” says historian David Griffin, author of “Lost British Forts of Long Island.” “They were built soundly.”

Griffin says that a typical Revolutionary War-era fort consisted of a square-shaped, 6-foot-high, earthen exterior called an embankment, around which sharpened wooden poles were aligned horizontally and pointing outward to further deter attackers.

A 6-foot-deep ditch surrounded the redoubt. Around that was another line of defense: a ring of felled trees with their branches entwined as an additional obstacle. Many of the Long Island redoubts were also fortified with a blockhouse — a two-story wooden structure inside the fort encircled with apertures that would allow soldiers to fire out from within. A cannon could sometimes be placed in the blockhouse as well.

Given the multiple layers of defense, it's no wonder that one of the few times American troops were able to capture a British installation on Long Island, it was because of “human error” — as was the case in the Battle of Fort Slongo, when the main gate to the fort was accidentally left open by the British.

— JOHN HANC



JOHNNY MILANO



GETTY IMAGES / UNIVERSAL HISTORY ARCHIVE



WIKIMEDIA

Left, the pronounced berms at the site of Fort Franklin in Lloyd Neck. Above left, Benjamin Tallmadge was spy master for George Washington in the war. Above right, William Franklin, son of Benjamin Franklin, was a Loyalist for whom Fort Franklin was named.

on Long Island.”

Fort Franklin's remnants, located on a private road, are difficult to reach. But a few miles south, another one of the British fortifications hides in plain sight. The British built Fort Golgotha on Huntington's burial ground, which was on a hill in the middle of the village (the burial ground's northern end abuts modern Route 25A). Golgotha was built late in the war, November 1782 — more

than a year after the decisive Battle of Yorktown (in Virginia) all but ensured American victory. By that time any pretense of civility between the British and the colonists had vanished.

While constructing the fort in Huntington, Griffin writes, the British desecrated more than 100 tombstones, cut down 114 trees and ripped apart a church and meetinghouse for their wooden boards.

At the crest of the hill today, Griffin walks the perimeter of the fort's walls, the outlines of which can clearly be seen amid the headstones, as can old bricks that may have been a passage to the notorious trench surrounding the fort. Town histories record the trench as an almost literal den of inequity, in which British troops drank and cavorted with prostitutes as officers looked the other way.

Notorious Fort Golgotha remained alive in Huntington's memory for decades.

Not so for the major British fortification just east of Golgotha. That fort had dropped into such obscurity that when a 20th century suburban development was laid out north of Route 25A, its vestiges ended up in someone's backyard.

Tom Canino says he was

See COVER STORY on E10



feedmetv
a Newsday experience

SEASON 5
ODE TO DINERS

What does the future hold for these legendary Long Island eateries?



Watch full episodes at
newsday.com/feedmetv

Also available on Apple TV®, Roku TV™, Fire TV® and the Newsday app

Apple TV® is a trademark of Apple Inc. Roku TV™ is a registered trademark of Roku, Inc. in the United States and other countries. Fire TV® and all related logos are registered trademarks of Amazon.com, Inc.

SPONSORED BY



Siena Women's Health
St. Catherine of Siena
Medical Center
At the heart of health



Malcolm House in Jericho sits near the likely location of Fort Nonsense.

JOHNNY MILANO

Island's lost British forts

COVER STORY from E8

informed that the conspicuous bulge in his backyard had been a Revolutionary War fort when he and wife, Catherine, were looking to buy their ranch house 11 years ago. "I said, 'That's a great place for a pool,'" he says with a laugh. "Kidding. It was a selling point. It's kind of cool to have in our backyard."

Says Catherine, "Some people are nice and ask if they can come see it; some people just show up in our backyard."

THE GATE WAS OPEN

During the Revolution it was called Fort Slongo. The name of the modern community that eventually grew in the area, Fort Salonga, is a corruption of that name. The original redoubt was a substantial one that included a fortified blockhouse with cannon.

"You had to do a lot to get into the fort," Griffin says wryly. "Unless the gate was open."

Which was supposedly the case on the night of Oct. 2, 1781, when Fort Slongo was attacked by an American force that had crossed the Sound to land on a nearby beach. The attackers burst through the main gate, which — legend has it — had been left open by its mostly inebriated defenders. An American sergeant from Connecticut named Elijah Churchill was wounded in the attack, and became one of the first recipients of the medal now known as the Purple Heart. (A nearby pub is named in Churchill's honor: It features a Patriot Burger on its menu, and on its wall, a reproduction of a hand-drawn map of the fort supposedly created by a local spy.)

The Caninos are proud of the fort in their backyard and of the larger struggle it represents. "We throw a big Fourth of July party here every year," Catherine says.

While traces of Fort Slongo remain, the same can't be said of the British fortification located farthest west, in

Jericho. Some speculate the fort never existed, leading to its odd nickname: Fort Nonsense. Griffin disagrees, thinking that the idea of a fort here made perfect sense. "Jericho was a major stopping point for British troops on their way from Jamaica to Huntington," Griffin says.

They would have wanted to defend that position from attacks coming from the north. The logical place? A position just north of Whole Foods and Starbucks on North Broadway, or Route 106/107. Of course, the modern shopping plaza wasn't there in the late 1700s — but the Malcolm House was. Built in 1757 and now owned by Nassau County, the house on Old Jericho Turnpike would have commanded views of the road north to Oyster Bay.

A metal-detecting survey and use of ground-penetrating radar on the site have found signs of a military encampment, but not a fort.

"I have to use my imagination," Griffin says. "As well as logic. What would be the high point of land . . . what would have made the most sense in terms of military tactics?"

His conclusion is that Fortress Long Island extended to Jericho, but Griffin says he will continue his investigation into the Island's elusive Revolutionary past — with a goal of making that past more tangible for Long Islanders in time for the 250th anniversary of the Revolution in 2026. His idea is to have, by that date (and with the assistance of grants and public support), a reconstruction of one of the British forts, done "precisely and accurately."

Since the remnants of many forts are on private property or land that serves other functions, such a re-creation could be located in a park or a public place, accompanied by interpretive signage and tours.

"It would be a site where kids could go to learn, where you could hold re-enactments," Griffin says. "It would be a sort of living museum for all the forts."