

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY - NOMINATION FORM

(Type all entries - complete applicable sections)

STATE:	Rhode Island
COUNTY:	Newport
FOR NPS USE ONLY	
ENTRY DATE	

1. NAME

COMMON:
Battle of Rhode Island Historic District

AND/OR HISTORIC:
Battle of Rhode Island Site

2. LOCATION

STREET AND NUMBER:
see section 7 - Description and maps

CITY OR TOWN:
Portsmouth

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT:

STATE: Rhode Island CODE: 44 COUNTY: Newport CODE: 005

3. CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY (Check One)	OWNERSHIP	STATUS	ACCESSIBLE TO THE PUBLIC
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> District <input type="checkbox"/> Building <input type="checkbox"/> Site <input type="checkbox"/> Structure <input type="checkbox"/> Object	<input type="checkbox"/> Public <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Private <input type="checkbox"/> Both	Public Acquisition: <input type="checkbox"/> In Process <input type="checkbox"/> Being Considered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Occupied <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Unoccupied <input type="checkbox"/> Preservation work in progress
PRESENT USE (Check One or More as Appropriate)			
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agricultural <input type="checkbox"/> Commercial <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Educational <input type="checkbox"/> Entertainment	<input type="checkbox"/> Government <input type="checkbox"/> Industrial <input type="checkbox"/> Military <input type="checkbox"/> Museum	<input type="checkbox"/> Park <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Private Residence <input type="checkbox"/> Religious <input type="checkbox"/> Scientific	<input type="checkbox"/> Transportation <input type="checkbox"/> Other (Specify) _____ _____ _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Comments _____ _____ _____			

4. OWNER OF PROPERTY

OWNER'S NAME:
Multiple

STREET AND NUMBER:

CITY OR TOWN: STATE: CODE:

5. LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE, REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.:
Portsmouth Town Hall

STREET AND NUMBER:
East Main Road

CITY OR TOWN: STATE: Rhode Island CODE: 44

6. REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE OF SURVEY:

DATE OF SURVEY: Federal State County Local

DEPOSITORY FOR SURVEY RECORDS:

STREET AND NUMBER:

CITY OR TOWN: STATE: CODE:

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7. DESCRIPTION

CONDITION	(Check One)					
	<input type="checkbox"/> Excellent	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Good	<input type="checkbox"/> Fair	<input type="checkbox"/> Deteriorated	<input type="checkbox"/> Ruins	<input type="checkbox"/> Unexposed
	(Check One)			(Check One)		
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Altered	<input type="checkbox"/> Unaltered	<input type="checkbox"/> Moved	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Original Site		

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (if known) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The Battle of Rhode Island was fought in Portsmouth, Rhode Island, in a valley between three hills, Lehigh Hill to the north and Turkey and Almy Hills to the south. These hills define the battlefield and together with Butts Hill Fort, located one half mile northeast of this area, are the major features of the Historic District. The battlefield encompasses an area of about 365 acres and the fort 34 acres. The area between the battlefield proper and Butts Hill Fort was of no importance in the battle and is therefore not included in the district.

Both roads and topography are here used to outline the battlefield. The western boundary is about 580 yards west of and parallel to West Main Road and is partially defined by a nameless dirt road. To the south Cory Lane, West Main Road, and about 250 yards of Hedley Avenue serve as the boundary. The eastern boundary runs to the east of Turkey Hill and then northward around the marshland of Barker Brook. At no point is this boundary within 250 feet of East Main Road. The boundary then crosses Freeborn and Dexter Streets in order to include the southern most rise of Lehigh Hill and then turns southward to join with the westward dirt extension of Freeborn Street. The Butts Hill Fort portion of the district is Butts Hill down to the 170 feet level of elevation.

The district includes 36 houses and one large barn, all of which are in the battlefield area. None of these structures was standing at the time of the battle, and only six of the houses are of any architectural interest. There are a late eighteenth century house with some alterations at 252 Freeborn Street; a Greek Revival house at 717 West Main Road; three mid-nineteenth century houses with Greek Revival doorways at 553 West Main Road, 265 Freeborn Street, and on Cory Lane; and a mid-nineteenth century house with bracketed cornice at 515 West Main Road.

Turkey Hill, which was the key point on the British left flank, is 220 feet in elevation and today used primarily for grazing. West Main Road, running along the west side of the hill, has been enlarged over the years but has not substantially infringed on the hill. On the southern slope a country road known as Hedley Avenue runs in the east-west direction 750 feet below the crest of the hill. This road provides easy access to the crest of Turkey Hill without disturbing the topography. Almy Hill, the anchor of the British left flank, is about 1500 yards northwest of Turkey Hill and 170 feet in elevation at its summit.

At the low point of the valley runs Barker Brook, called Bloody Brook after the battle as it was exactly half-way between the opposing armies and said to have run red during the battle. Today, due to the construction of Route 24, the main access road to Newport, the brook has been diverted and largely obscured.

From this low point of 90 feet the terrain again slopes upward, at first gradually and then to 160 feet about 670 yards north of the brook. Here is where the main American line formed. Its right flank was anchored to the south on Lehigh Hill, the

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6. SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD (Check One or More as Appropriate)

- | | | | |
|--|---------------------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pre-Columbian | <input type="checkbox"/> 16th Century | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 18th Century | <input type="checkbox"/> 20th Century |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 15th Century | <input type="checkbox"/> 17th Century | <input type="checkbox"/> 19th Century | |

SPECIFIC DATE(S) (If Applicable and Known)

AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE (Check One or More as Appropriate)

- | | | | |
|---|---|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Aboriginal | <input type="checkbox"/> Education | <input type="checkbox"/> Political | <input type="checkbox"/> Urban Planning |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Prehistoric | <input type="checkbox"/> Engineering | <input type="checkbox"/> Religion/Philosophy | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Other (Specify) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Historic | <input type="checkbox"/> Industry | <input type="checkbox"/> Science | <u>Afro-Am. History</u> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Agriculture | <input type="checkbox"/> Invention | <input type="checkbox"/> Sculpture | _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Architecture | <input type="checkbox"/> Landscape Architecture | <input type="checkbox"/> Social/Humanitarian | _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Art | <input type="checkbox"/> Literature | <input type="checkbox"/> Theater | _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Commerce | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Military | <input type="checkbox"/> Transportation | _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Communications | <input type="checkbox"/> Music | | _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Conservation | | | _____ |

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Battle of Rhode Island is unique in the history of the Revolutionary War. This battle was the only engagement fought during the war in which black Americans participated as a distinct racial group. The unit was the First Rhode Island Regiment, an all black unit raised and trained in Rhode Island in the early months of 1778. Since December of 1776 the British had been occupying Newport, depriving Rhode Island of its largest and richest city and seriously curtailing the state's active sea trade. To combat the enemy threat in their midst Rhode Island had to keep five full regiments in the field. Therefore, by 1778 Rhode Island with a white population of only 54,535 was finding it increasingly difficult to meet her quotas for the continental line. It was only a matter of time before the state turned to her black population of 3,761 to meet the manpower requirement.

During the February 1778 session of the Rhode Island General Assembly a law was passed to allow "every able bodied negro, mulatto or Indian man slave," to enlist in the Rhode Island line for the duration of the war. The new enlistee would receive "all bounties, wages, and encourages," as any other soldier, and after passing muster he would be "absolutely FREE, as though he had never been encumbered with any kind of servitude or slavery."

At the end of July 1778, after less than three months training, the Black Regiment joined Major-General John Sullivan's army in Providence. Sullivan hoped that with the cooperation of the French fleet his growing army could capture the British garrison of 6,000 in Newport. On August 6th, the American Army of 10,000 men, the vast majority of which were untrained militia, began the march to Newport.

The Battle of Rhode Island was fought on August 29, 1778. On the night of August 28th Sullivan's army was forced to abandon its seige of British occupied Newport. It had lost the vital support of the French fleet, which after suffering severe storm damage, sailed to Boston to refit. Realizing their danger in the event of the arrival of an expected British relief fleet, Sullivan began a general retreat to the north end of the island so that he would not be trapped.

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9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Hammond, Otis G. Letters and Papers of Major-General John Sullivan. Concord, New Hampshire: New Hampshire Historical Society, 1931.
 Mackenzie, Fredrick. The Diary of Fredrick Mackenzie. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1930.
 Rhode Island. Christopher Greene Papers. Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence.
 Von Elking, Max. "Military Operations in Rhode Island." Rhode Island Historical Tracts, 6 (1878), 4-65.

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

LATITUDE AND LONGITUDE COORDINATES DEFINING A RECTANGLE LOCATING THE PROPERTY			O R	LATITUDE AND LONGITUDE COORDINATES DEFINING THE CENTER POINT OF A PROPERTY OF LESS THAN TEN ACRES		
CORNER	LATITUDE	LONGITUDE		LATITUDE	LONGITUDE	
	Degrees Minutes Seconds	Degrees Minutes Seconds		Degrees Minutes Seconds	Degrees Minutes Seconds	
NW	° ' "	° ' "		° ' "	° ' "	
NE	(See continuation sheet)			° ' "	° ' "	
SE	° ' "	° ' "		° ' "	° ' "	
SW	° ' "	° ' "		° ' "	° ' "	

APPROXIMATE ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY: 399 acres

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE:	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
STATE:	CODE	COUNTY:	CODE
STATE:	CODE	COUNTY:	CODE
STATE:	CODE	COUNTY:	CODE

11. FORM PREPARED BY

NAME AND TITLE:
Marcia M. Greenlee, Historical Projects Director

ORGANIZATION: Afro-American Bicentennial Corporation DATE: December 1973

STREET AND NUMBER:
1420 N Street, N. W., Suite 101

CITY OR TOWN: Washington, D. C. 20005 STATE: _____ CODE: _____

12. STATE LIAISON OFFICER CERTIFICATION NATIONAL REGISTER VERIFICATION

<p>As the designated State Liaison Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service. The recommended level of significance of this nomination is:</p> <p>National <input type="checkbox"/> State <input type="checkbox"/> Local <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Name _____</p> <p>Title _____</p> <p>Date _____</p>	<p>I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register.</p> <p>_____ <i>Director, Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation</i></p> <p>Date _____</p> <p>ATTEST:</p> <p>_____ <i>Keeper of The National Register</i></p> <p>Date _____</p>
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7. DESCRIPTION - page two

center of the line on what are now mounds of earth following the contours of the land for about 200 feet, and the left flank in an area obliterated by Route 24 and surrounding houses. It is possible that these mounds of earth could be original earth works, the shale ledge in the area being responsible for their survival. Between the Lehigh Hill complex and Turkey Hill the actual fighting took place.

Route 24 is the only major road which at present invades the battlefield. It terminates in the vicinity of Barker Brook, where with an interchange it merges into West Main Road. On a high, grassy point amid this interchange the State chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People has erected a largely ignored marker and flag pole to commemorate the role which black troops played in the battle. Other roads in the district are Route 114, West Main Road, Dexter Street, and Freeborn Street. All of these roads now serve residential uses.

To the northeast stands Butts Hill Fort on Butts Hill, elevation 200 feet. Although it was not directly involved in the fighting, it served the colonists as a supply and communications center as well as a possible point of retreat. The earthen fort is oval in form, measures 500 feet by 250 feet, and is in remarkably good condition. The earthen walls have not sunk back into the earth because they are resting on a shale ledge, and some of the gaps where cannons once protruded can even still be seen. Modern development largely surrounds the fort today. No more than 200 yards to the south lies the Portsmouth High School plant while house lots and a water tower border the fort to the north and east. Despite this close proximity the fort remains intact and has not suffered irreparable harm.

All of the major physical features which figures significantly in the battle are still in existence and relatively undeveloped. That this battlefield should be marked is of the utmost importance. Proper marking would prevent the further encroachment of roads and building as well as make the citizens of this State and others aware of the part Rhode Islanders played in the American Revolution.

NOTE: Although used by the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, this material was originally prepared under contract to the Afro-American Bicentennial Corporation.

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8. SIGNIFICANCE - page two

The American army were ordered in three lines, the first in the area of Lehigh Hill, the second behind Butts Hill, and the third a half mile beyond. In pursuit, the British army advanced northward encountering minor patriot resistance until they arrived on Quaker, Turkey and Almy Hills. Between these hills and Lehigh Hill extended a mile wide valley which was to serve as the battlefield.

General Pigot, the British commander, having been previously unsuccessful in his attack on the American left flank, turned his attention on the American right. From ten in the morning until four in the afternoon on August 29 the British made three assaults on this flank. Each time they were checked by the American defenders of the right flank of which the First Rhode Island Regiment was a part. At the time of the battle the regiment consisted of 138 black Americans who competently defended a key redoubt. The third and heaviest assault marked the high point of the battle and only the arrival of reinforcements from the rear enabled Greene to blunt this final assault. Now exhausted, both sides contented themselves with cannonading enemy works until dusk. With the arrival of the following day came news of a British fleet standing off Block Island. This necessitated an immediate retreat by the American army. At dark General Sullivan led his forces to the mainland without hindrance and thereby ended the Battle of Rhode Island.

American losses in the engagement were thirty killed, 137 wounded, and 44 missing. The ratio of casualties to numbers involved for both sides was less than five percent, not a very great percentage for a battle of this size. The First Rhode Island Regiment's casualties were one killed and no more than ten wounded; the ratio of casualties to numbers involved was seven percent, slightly more than the army as a whole. It must be noted that the casualties the Black Regiment suffered are low considering their strategic role in the battle. Stationed in and around the redoubt, the Black Regiment was in an excellent defensive position, able to inflict heavy losses while keeping their own to a relative minimum.

After the Battle of Rhode Island the regiment was stationed in East Greenwich, Rhode Island, for a little over a year protecting the west coast of Narragansett Bay as they had done in the months before the battle. Then after the British evacuated Newport the Black Regiment occupied quarters in that city. Here the First Rhode Island Regiment ceased to be composed entirely of black Americans. With the repeal on June 10, 1778, of the law allowing blacks to enlist in Colonel Greene's Regiment the losses to the Regiment through combat and normal attrition could not be made up, and their numbers began to dwindle. The unit was combined with Rhode Island's other continental regiment in January 1780 to make one full strength regiment under the command of Christopher Greene.

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8. SIGNIFICANCE - page three

In the spring of 1781 after almost three years in continental service, the First Rhode Island Regiment left the state of Rhode Island for the first time. They joined Washington's army in New York and while stationed at Points Bridge on the Groton River a body of two hundred and sixty British cavalry made a surprise night attack on the First Rhode Island Regiment. In the attack Colonel Greene was killed and forty men from the regiment were killed or captured. From New York the regiment marched with Washington and Rochambeau in their descent on Cornwallis at Yorktown and took an active part in the seige.

In the early winter of 1782-1783 Colonel Olney and his regiment went into winter quarters at Saratoga, New York. While at Saratoga all the black members of the regiment were detached to take part in a special expedition against the British at Fort Oswego. After missing the fort in the dark and the snow they became lost in a large beaver swamp where many froze and those lucky enough to survive limped back to camp crippled for life. This is the only instance so far found of discrimination against the blacks of the regiment, either before or after their incorporation with white troops. On June 13, 1783, the First Rhode Island Regiment was disbanded at Saratoga, New York, without pay and left to straggle home the best they could.

The Battle of Rhode Island was the only battle in which the First Rhode Island Regiment fought as an all black unit. Although the regiment was small in number in comparison to the entire American Army, these 138 black Americans took an anctive part in the battle. The Black Regiment was by chance positioned on the American right flank, where the heaviest fighting of the battle occurred. Without question they proved themselves a cohesive and effective fighting unit of loyal soldiers.

Unfortunately, accounts of the Battle of Rhode Island did not encourage the formation of similar black units in Rhode Island or the other northern states. In Rhode Island the law against enlisting blacks was never repealed for the slave holding members of the General Assembly were in the majority and the critical situation of early 1778 was alleviated by the Battle of Rhode Island. As the war moved south the states above the Potomac no longer felt threatened to take the radical step of raising all black units.

The First Rhode Island Regiment stands alone in the history of the Revolution as an example of what might have been if black Americans were allowed to fight for their country and in so doing free all men.

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10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Latitude and Longitude Coordinates Defining a Rectangle Locating the Property:

A. Main Battlefield

<u>Corner</u>	<u>Latitude</u>	<u>Longitude</u>
NW	41° 36' 39.63" N	71° 15' 50.37" W
NE	41° 36' 18.13" N	71° 14' 55.27" W
SE	41° 35' 27.03" N	71° 15' 21.99" W
SW	41° 35' 42.20" N	71° 16' 16.54" W

B. Fort Butts and Butts Hill

<u>Corner</u>	<u>Latitude</u>	<u>Longitude</u>
NW	41° 37' 1.98" N	71° 15' 7.48" W
NE	41° 36' 50.77" N	71° 14' 52.26" W
SE	41° 36' 43.85" N	71° 15' 1.76" W
SW	41° 36' 54.73" N	71° 15' 16.72" W

Approximate Acreage of Nominated Property:

A. Main Battlefield: 365 acres.

B. Fort Butts and Butts Hill: 34 acres.