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THE NEWPORT ARTILLERY COMPANY

The Newport Artillery Company was organized in 1741 to protect the town against naval attack, and since that time it has participated in many of the Nation's military campaigns. As its membership has been largely from a seafaring town, the company's contribution to defense efforts has frequently been maritime in nature. Today the company is an important part of local tradition with a record of many important accomplishments.

An article prepared

by

Ensign Donald G. White, U.S. Naval Reserve

The Newport area has a long and interesting local history which has seen the passing of many important people and events across its stage. Since 1741 the town's tradition has included the Newport Artillery Company, which is acknowledged to be the oldest continuous commissioned military unit in the United States.

The company was formed under the terms of a charter granted by King George II of England, who was at that time aligned against the French in Europe in the War of Austrian Succession. The formation of the company was in keeping with the colonial pattern of local defense forces, an expedient made necessary by the initial British policy of "salutory neglect" of the colonies. The original company consisted of 18 of the prominent land-owners and merchants of the town, commanded by the wealthy Jahleel Brenton.

The Brenton family was a prominent one in Rhode Island. Its founder,

William Brenton, emigrated from England to Boston in 1633 with a commission to survey land for Charles I. Finding Boston's religious atmosphere too intolerant, Brenton continued on to Providence, where he purchased the Island of Rhodes (Aquidneck) from the Indians through the agency of Roger Williams. Brenton established the town of Newport, which soon became a prosperous trading community. His grandson, Jahleel, who held 2,000 acres of land on Brenton's Neck and who participated extensively in Newport's profitable commercial enterprises, was one of its most prominent citizens. The Brenton family estate was named Hammersmith, recalling the original Brenton estate in Hammersmith, England. This estate is presently owned and occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Hugh Auchincloss, Mrs. Auchincloss being the mother of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis.

Jahleel Brenton remained with the Newport Artillery Company for 7 years. During that time the company

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expanded its activities to include a watch on Castle Hill to warn the town and fort (Fort George on Goat Island) of approaching enemy vessels. This watch commenced in 1746, at the height of the War of Austrian Succession.

The commencement of the French and Indian War in the colonies, which was fought in concurrence with the Seven Years' War in Europe, resulted in the Newport Artillery Company being requisitioned to furnish men for the attack on Crown Point. Eleven members of the company, which comprised about a quarter of its membership at that time, participated in the campaign and acquitted themselves well.

Between the close of the French and Indian War and the Declaration of Independence, Rhode Island was sharply divided into Royalist and Radical blocs. The division originated over the British desire to solidify their colonial administration by assessing taxes and stationing permanent garrisons in the colonies. Some of the colonists, accustomed to local rule and relieved of the French threat, desired neither. In general, the prominent landowners, especially those whose holdings were based on royal charters, remained loyal to the King, while the merchants and small farmers gathered in the opposite camp. This division extended into the ranks of the Newport Artillery Company, itself a product of a royal charter.

The Rhode Islanders were especially irritated by the British customs laws and the efforts to enforce them. The British Government stationed the sloop *Gaspee* in Newport harbor, and this vessel proceeded to collect the allotted taxes at gunpoint from every vessel which entered the harbor. Thoroughly aroused, the townspeople attacked and burned the ship in 1772. The British responded by stationing still other warships in the harbor and initiating the practice of requisitioning supplies without compensation. Their sailors kept the towns-

people in continual alarm with their foraging and other indignities.

The Newport Artillery Company was caught in the middle of this conflict. Its membership divided over the issue of loyalty to the king, the company dismissed its clerk in 1775, and discontinued its meetings. According to the records, there is no evidence of another meeting until 1792, although persistent local tradition credits them with escorting General Washington during his visit to Newport in 1790. Their activities during these years can only be conjectured, but the fact that they held a royal charter was doubtless an embarrassment during these revolutionary years.

In 1792 the Newport Artillery Company moved to solve the problem of their charter by asking the State legislature to ratify the old charter, and in that year the company's meetings and records began again, to proceed uninterrupted down to the present day. Two years after this important date in its history, the company obtained the most important document presently contained in its museum. In 1794 a letter was written to President George Washington, congratulating him on his birthday. No reply was expected, but Washington, apparently remembering his trip in 1790, did in fact reply, and his letter is today on display at the old gunhouse.

No further military service was required of the company until the War of 1812, when they were called upon to contribute to an expedition being organized by Oliver Hazard Perry to gain control of Lake Erie. The volunteers for this enterprise included one William V. Taylor, who was the sailing master of Perry's flagship, the *Lawrence*. Taylor continued in the naval service after the end of the war, eventually reaching flag rank. A second volunteer was Daniel Turner, who commanded the sloop *Caledonia* in the battle, and a third was Thomas Breese, who is reputed to have been the last man to have fired a cannon

on Perry's disabled flagship. These and other volunteers assisted Perry in his successful attempt to gain control of Lake Erie.

The War of 1812 provided no further opportunities of service for the Newport Artillery Company, but it remained a very active force during the first half of the century. In 1842 the State of Rhode Island was disturbed by a conflict between two gubernatorial aspirants, known in the State as the Dorr Rebellion. In that year Thomas Wilson Dorr contested the incumbent's claim to the gubernatorial chair, and, to enforce his claim, he and his supporters raided an armory in Providence and set up their own government in another building. The incumbent governor responded by calling up the militia, which included the Newport Artillery Company. The militia had little difficulty in dealing with Dorr's party, as they had neglected to take ammunition for their guns when they raided the armory. Dorr himself fled to New Hampshire, where he was captured and arrested. Sentenced to life imprisonment for treason by a Providence court, Dorr was pardoned by the succeeding governor.

During the Civil War the Newport Artillery Company became part of the First Rhode Island Regiment, which was commanded by Ambrose E. Burnside. Burnside later became commander of the Army of the Potomac, but he relinquished that post after his disastrous defeat at the hands of General Lee at Fredericksburg in 1862. Later he became the governor of the State of Rhode Island. During the Civil War the gunhouse of the Newport Artillery Company was used as a recruiting station for the Federal forces, and over 400 men were dispatched for duty from within its walls during the latter years of the war.

After the Civil War the company became part of the large and powerful veterans bloc which influenced Congress in many of its reconstruction policies. It

did not see action again, however, until the time of the Spanish-American War. Early in that conflict a panic spread on the Atlantic coast because of the rumor that Admiral Cervara's Spanish Fleet, its whereabouts unknown, was on its way to ravage the American coastline. This fleet, while it remained unobserved, caused a large number of U.S. military units to be retained in coastal areas for maritime defense.

In Newport the excitement was especially intense. The Spanish Minister had visited the town the previous summer for recreational purposes, and this gave rise to a variety of sinister explanations for his presence. In this situation the company was mobilized and sent to Fort Adams to man the defenses there until Federal troops arrived. The entrance to the harbor was mined and new redoubts were excavated, but the Spanish Fleet never appeared. Its detection and subsequent defeat at Santiago in Cuba ended the threat to the Atlantic coast.

The advent of World War I ushered in a lean period in the history of the Newport Artillery Company. The company, in that conflict, offered to join the Federal forces en masse, but the Government refused to accept an organization which had already elected its own officers. Many of the members then joined the American forces on an individual basis, later to return to the company and present it with souvenirs and trophies won in the war. When the war ended the National Guard organization absorbed most of the local militia organizations that still remained, but the Newport Artillery Company was, for some reason, not included. Since it was not a recognized reserve organization, it became difficult to gain new members. The company survived, however, and its members continued to serve their country in wartime on an individual basis. Members of the Newport Artillery Company served in World War II, Korea, and, most recently, in

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Vietnam. Today the active membership of the company includes 42 men, which comprise Battery A. The company's colonel and commanding officer is Mr. John Lauth.

The company's present location on Clark Street has had a long and interesting history. From its inception to the year 1798 the company met in private homes to conduct its business. In 1798 it initiated the practice of meeting in the Colony House, but according to the records the members did not feel "at ease" there. They then constructed a gunhouse behind the Colony House, where they might store the guns of their battery. When meetings were planned, the guns would be removed to make room for the members and placed on the lawn of the Colony House.

In 1830 the construction of a street through the land on which their gunhouse was located forced a temporary move to Lakes Corners. In 1833 their present property was presented to the company by Audley Clark, a descendant of Walter Clark, who surveyed the street in 1699. This property the company has retained to the present day.

The stone for the first gunhouse on the new property was donated by Dr. Enoch Hazard, and with this help it was completed on 29 April 1836. In the late 1870's the present eagle front was added, this front having been salvaged from the New York steamer *Metropolis* which was then being broken up in the Newport yards. The building remained standing intact for the rest of the century, and the company today holds the first photographs taken of it.

In the 20th century two fires destroyed many of the possessions of the

company. In 1906 a major fire engulfed the building, sparing only a few of its most precious artifacts. The company utilized this opportunity to add a second story to the building, so that it appeared then much as it does today. In 1931 a second fire damaged the interior, and again the house was repaired. In 1960 the building was converted into a museum, and the relics which the members of the company have brought back from the Nation's wars are now displayed there.

The town of Newport has a long and interesting past. An important part of that past is preserved by the Newport Artillery Company, which today serves to recall the times when the town was open to bombardment by brass cannon from the sea. Today the Navy has usurped the company's role as protector of the town of Newport, but it can never fully replace the great tradition which the company represents.

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



Ensign Donald G. White, U.S. Naval Reserve, holds a B.A. degree from Kentucky Southern College and a master's degree in military and naval history from Duke University. At Duke he prepared his thesis

under the guidance of Dr. Theodore Ropp, who held the Ernest J. King Chair of Maritime History at the Naval War College during the 1962-1963 academic year. Ensign White is presently assigned as Research Editor of the *Naval War College Review*.

