

THE FORT HILL BLUFF SITE

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At a sharp bend in the Taunton River just beyond the head of tidewater from Narragansett Bay appears a prominent table-top boulder at the river's edge. For many years it has been known as Sentinel Rock, and colonial records mention it in use as a platform by Indians of those days, when fishing the swirling water at its base. The river's bank rises precipitously behind it to a height of some 35 feet. Here is a commanding view of the surrounding low lands to the north. It was here that a comparatively small palisaded fort was built by Nemasket Indians in Contact days, as a defense against attack from their Indian enemies. The fort's existence is verified by memoranda from early times in the Bennett family, reported as follows: "The Nemasket Indians and the neighboring tribes built this Fort for their own protection. They had two doors to the Fort, one next to the river and one on the opposite side." (Weston 1906:398 note 2).

On the basis of this information, and a statement handed down in the Dunham family from past generations that the fort stood on the hill above Sentinel Rock, excavation was undertaken in 1952. The Cohannet Chapter of the Society, after exploratory testing, uncovered four lines of post molds in the palisaded structure. It was found to have a rectangular shape of approximately 35 x 41 feet, with a protected opening in its walls of posts both in front and in back (Fig. 1). One important natural feature was a never-failing spring only a stone's-throw from the fort, that would have contributed toward a successful defense of long duration. However, no significant artifacts were recovered from within the structure to show extended occupancy. A few post molds in an interior front corner of the fort suggest the possible existence of a lookout platform as a means of peering over the palisaded walls; or perhaps it was some kind of a shelter for a few people. This was all that remained to tell what may have taken place within the stockade.

Outside the structure, casual excavating nearby was more successful. Here, evidence was exposed in the loam to indicate the possible presence of fort defenders in early colonial days. The finds consisted of 3 musket balls, a copper cutout arrow point, a steel knife blade, and various objects such as a glass mirror, kaolin pipe fragments, flat rolled copper pieces—probable remains from the making of copper cutout points—and a small tubular glass bead, as reported by Karl Dodge (1953:81). Also recovered by surface hunting were 6 gun flints.

After the fort excavation had been completed, the excavators and others believed that there might have existed a camp close by, where the people may have lived, the fort being used only as a place to retreat to in the event of an attack. With this thought in mind, during the following year and for six succeeding years William H. Taylor and the writer, with the help of other Society members, carried on further excavations back of the fort. Here seemed to be the most likely living area, as the land in front of the fort fell off sharply to the river below, while that to the rear was relatively level, with a gentle slope away from the structure.

At first a 4 foot wide trench was dug skirting a large growth of trees, which defied a less obstructed plan of operation. Eventually, an area 200 x 350 feet was excavated, commencing at the rear of the fort and extending some distance up stream. Soil depths varied somewhat throughout the dig due to natural surface erosion. None the less, four periods of occupation have been defined by the types of recovered projectile points—depth measurements were not recorded—when compared to similar types at other well stratified sites. This comparison provides a culture sequence that is generally accepted as a standard to be expected at sites being excavated. Here at Fort Hill—the earliest occupation of the site—Early Archaic—may be identified by Bifurcated, and Corner-removed#5,8,9 points. Following this comes the next period—Late Archaic—with Corner-removed#7, Tapered Stem, Eared, Small Stem, and Small Triangular#4 points. The third period—Ceramic-Woodland—is represented by Large Triangular, Small Triangular#5, Corner-notched, and Small Stem points. Finally, the fourth period—Contact—may be identified by such recovered items as copper arrow points, musket balls, gun flints—probably related to the Indian occupation at the time of the fort, fragmented kaolin pipes, and the bowl of a pewter spoon that appeared with the handle broken off.

Along with these objects other implements were uncovered, which likewise lacked definite recorded depths at which they were found. They consist of a Wing atlatl weight preform with its drilling only just started, a Clumsy plummet, Celt, Plain gouge, 2 Sinewstones, scrapers, drills, knives, a pestle, and Hammerstones. Some of these, along with representative projectile points from the site—typologically arranged, in the case of the points, as to the respective cultures to which they belong—are included in two groups of illustrations (Figs. 2&3).