

Marked in stone

New slate marker is unveiled at Fort Barton in Tiverton

By Marcia Pobzeznik

Correspondent

TIVERTON - A stone marker for Fort Barton was unveiled Sunday afternoon before a large crowd that was treated to a history lesson about the significance of the fort on Highland Road where thousands of American forces gathered nearly 250 years ago in continued attempts to help drive the British from Aquidneck Island.

The cleft slate marker was installed on a ledge close to the entrance road to the fort, across from Town Hall.

A red, white and blue bunting covered the marker until late Sunday afternoon, when it was unveiled by Garry Plunkett of the Open Space Commission and Martin Van Hof of the Open Space Commission and the Tiverton Land Trust, who both raised their fists in the air and proclaimed, "Huzzahs!" The term was used by soldiers long ago, meaning "hooray."

Moments earlier, the crowd had been inside Town Hall listening to a talk by historian and Salve Regina University adjunct professor Fred Zilian.

"Hear the carts, hear the wagons, the trash talk by the soldiers, smell the horses," Zilian said, setting the scene of the activity around the fort on at least two occasions in 1777 and 1778, when American forces gathered in the thousands in attempts to upend the British occupation.

The fort was named after Lt. Col. William Barton, who led a midnight raid on the British headquarters at Prescott Farm in Portsmouth and captured British Gen. Richard Prescott on July 10, 1777. Prescott was the British commander for Rhode Island.

"Twice within a year the town was an armed encampment," Zilian said of Tiverton.

He asked the crowd to imagine some 130 craft "squeezed into Nanaquaket Pond."

About 8,000 troops who came from Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Connecticut and New Hampshire paraded near Fort Barton on Oct. 15, 1777. But there were problems with boats and coordinating the operation across the water to Aquidneck Island.

"Think of the sacrifice a farmer would have to make to leave for a few weeks or a year," Van Hof said of the men who comprised the American contingent.

The British occupation ended after the Battle of Rhode Island on Aug. 29, 1778. It was the last significant battle in the north, Zilian said.

Highland Road resident Renee Jones said she has found shards of old pottery in her garden and wonders if they were left by the American forces centuries ago.

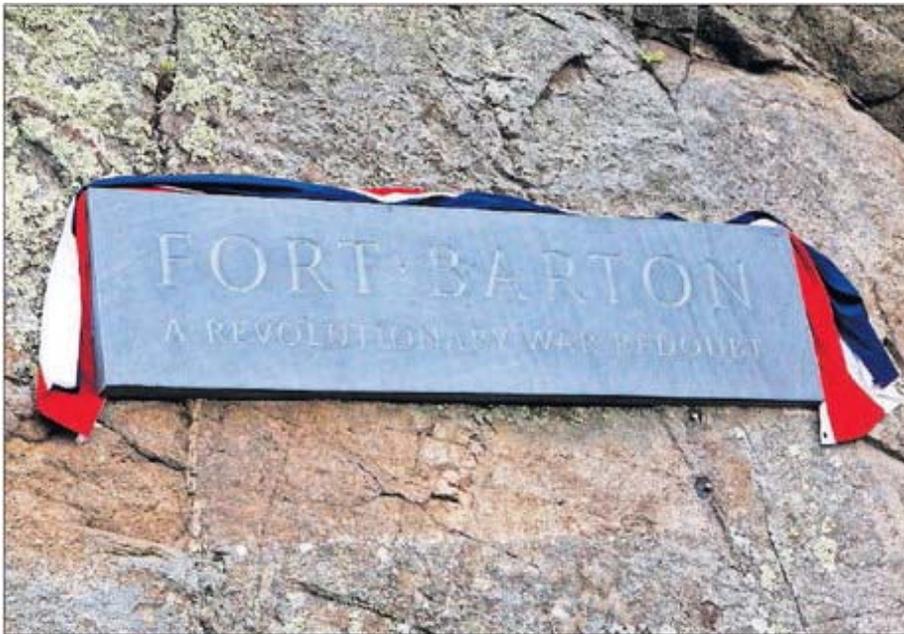
Zilian suggested she contact the Newport Historical Society about her finds.

Funding for the marker came from The Pocassetlands Stewardship Foundation endowment with the Rhode Island Foundation; a legislative grant from Rep. John

Edwards, D-Tiverton, Rep. Dennis Canario, D-Portsmouth, and Sen. Walter Felag, D-Warren; and donations from Open Space Commission members and other community members.

The 400-pound marker, made out of a 6-foot by 1½-foot piece of stone, was carved at the John Stevens Shop on Thames Street in Newport. The shop was opened in 1705. In 1927, it was purchased by John Howard Benson, whose grandson Nicholas continues to operate it today.

The event Sunday was not only held to remember the Battle of Rhode Island, the program stated, but "to celebrate the unveiling of a stone tablet that marks a place where people of New England stood together for independence." mpobzeznik@newportri.com



The new stone marker at Fort Barton in Tiverton was carved at the John Stevens Shop on Thames Street in Newport. [MEREDITH BROWER PHOTOGRAPHY]



Garry Plunkett, left, and Martin Van Hof wait to unveil the new stone marker Sunday at Fort Barton in Tiverton. [MEREDITH BROWER PHOTOGRAPHY]