

Quarterly Bulletin



Publication of the
Archeological Society of Virginia
Since 1942

Volume 76
Number 2
June 2021

THE ARSENAL AT NEW LONDON: FROM THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION TO THE SECURING OF THE NORTHWEST TERRITORY¹

By Stephanie M. Wright

Abstract

The arsenal at New London played a vital role in both the American Revolution and the securing of the Northwest Territory. However, when the National Arsenals were established by an act of Congress, this former Continental Army arsenal was slowly moved to Harper's Ferry. As a result, the arsenal fell out of use and memory. Through archaeology more has been discovered and continues to be discovered about the unique role the arsenal played in early American history. With the discovery of several 18th-century military and firearms-related artifacts under the porch at a nearby tavern, more information has been uncovered with regard to the arsenal's role after the American Revolution. In addition to the tavern assemblage, work on a Phase I archaeological survey on the likely original arsenal property is beginning to yield results. Several likely arsenal storage buildings have been identified along with a low density of firearms-related artifacts. As work progresses, the team hopes to locate the manufacturing and repair buildings where wasters and arsenal period middens may be found. The New London Arsenal was unfortunately for a time lost to history, but through archaeology and the interpretation of the artifacts discovered, more can be learned about the important role it played both during and after the American Revolution.

As with many places in history, they are often forgotten by time. People move on, buildings are torn down, and landscapes change. Such was the case with the arsenal in New London, Virginia. The arsenal at New London played a vital role in both the American Revolution and the securing of the Northwest Territory. The supplies stored and manufactured at the arsenal were used both in General Nathanael Greene's southern campaign against General Cornwallis and General "Mad" Anthony Wayne's campaign in the Northwest Territory. The arsenal was slowly moved to Harper's Ferry when the National Arsenals were established by an act of Congress. As a result, the arsenal fell out of use and memory. Through archaeology more has been discovered and continues to be discovered about the unique role the arsenal played in early American history. New London, Virginia was the first county seat of Bedford County, and its establishment is due in large part to Colonel William Callaway (1714-1777). The history of New London is inseparable from William Callaway. He divided his own property into lots and sold them individually. This part of New London became known as "Callaway's Town" (Lichtenberger 2020a). These lots would trade owners frequently with both John Hook owning some of the lots as well as Callaway's son, James. Due to Scottish merchant John Hook's loyalty to England along with others in the town, many left New London and several buildings and lots were left empty. James Callaway (1735-1809), like his father, was a prominent local businessman. James Callaway seized this opportunity to rent the now empty buildings to the Continental Congress. His land is a prime candidate for the location of the arsenal because of his patriotic leanings and his knowledge of war-related industries (Pezzoni 2019:5)

The New London Arsenal played a vital role during the American Revolution. It was one of only five colonial arsenals to serve the Continental Army (Lichtenberger 2018:3). In addition to storing arms and other supplies, several armorers were employed at the arsenal (Lewis 1794). The presence of armorers indicates

¹ This paper won the Martha and Julian Williams award for Best Historical Archaeology Paper (student) at the virtual ASV Annual Meeting in October 2020.

some manufacturing was completed at the arsenal. Operations at the arsenal began around 1780, and the arsenal was an integral supply source for General Nathaniel Greene's campaign against the invasion of the South by General Cornwallis in April 1780 (Leckie 1992:528). After Cornwallis's defeat at Yorktown in October 1781, captured arms were stored at the arsenal in New London (Leckie 1992:654).

After the end of the American Revolution, the arsenal would slowly fade out of use. In 1793, Secretary of War Henry Knox stated in a letter to President George Washington requesting the establishment of federal arsenals (Knox 1793). In the letter he noted that "New London is a poor location; perhaps James River with access to sea would be better." Also included in the letter was Knox's opinion that the only reason New London was chosen was due to "the casual circumstances of the War for Independence." On April 2, 1794, the Third Congress passed "An Act to provide for the erecting and repairing of Arsenals and Magazines, and for other purposes" (U.S. Third Congress, 1794). Two federal arsenals were established in Springfield, Massachusetts and Harper's Ferry, Virginia. Superintendent Joseph Perkins oversaw the arsenal's slow relocation to Harper's Ferry starting in 1798. Records of the War Department indicate the arsenal in New London was mostly used for storage (Holt 1799). All operations seemed to have ceased including storing weapons by 1812 (Lichtenberger 2020a). The building that housed the War Department records burned down in 1800, and while some records regarding the arsenal were saved, many were lost (War Department Office 2021). Although the written record is sparse regarding the arsenal, the historian can use other tools to discover more about the arsenal and the unique role it played in early American history.

Archaeology and material studies play an important role with regard to the New London Arsenal because the buildings are no longer standing and the written record is incomplete. The New London Arsenal was an integral part of the fight for American independence from Britain and securing peace on the frontier. The artifacts discovered by archaeologists have helped build the understanding of the role of the arsenal within the context of both the American Revolution and the new American Republic.

Through interpretation of the artifacts, along with the anticipated discovery of the buildings that housed the arsenal, more can be understood about the arsenal and the men who were stationed there. With the discovery of several artifacts under the porch at Mead's Tavern, more information has been discovered with regard to the arsenal and the role it played after the American Revolution. Mead's Tavern, originally constructed in 1763, is located near the possible arsenal location. An excavation of the porch was needed to investigate the foundation walls of the tavern. This was a complete archaeological excavation which revealed several key artifacts that help confirm the location of a nearby arsenal. Two of the artifacts discovered point

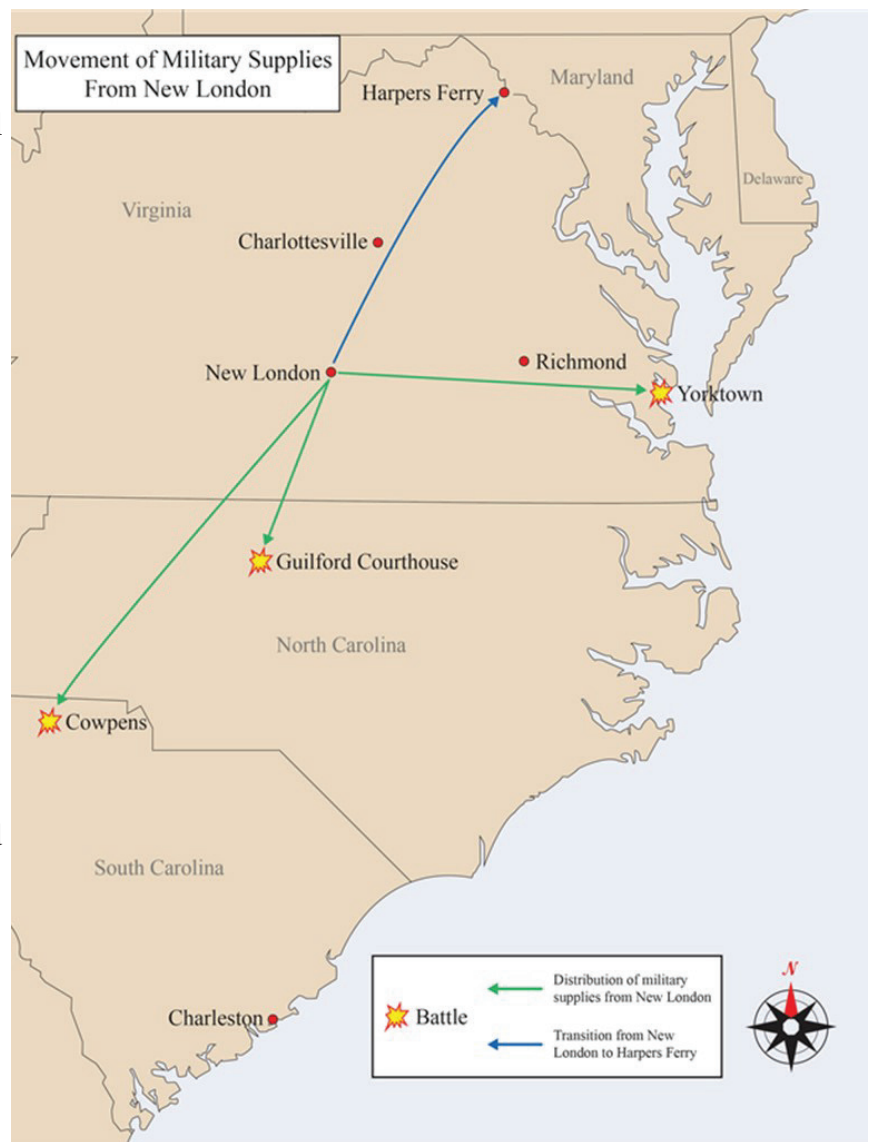


Figure 1. Location of New London Arsenal (<https://liberty.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p17184coll2/id/174/rec/11>).

directly to the arsenal: a scabbard hook and a button from Wayne's Legion.

A scabbard hook was an essential part of the colonial soldier's uniform. Its main function was to hold a bladed weapon on a belt allowing the user to easily attach and remove the weapon from the belt. In this case, it is likely that this scabbard hook was used for a bayonet. This artifact is less ornate compared to other scabbard hooks which may suggest it was common issue for regular soldiers (Figure 3). This scabbard hook allowed soldiers, both British and American militia forces to attach their bayonets on their belt (Scabbard Hardware). Scabbard hooks of this style were common during the French and Indian War along with the American Revolution. Due to where it was found, Mead's Tavern, it is likely this scabbard hook dates back to the American Revolution and the arsenal. It is unlikely that this bayonet scabbard hook belonged to a frontiersman, but it was a part of the colonial soldier's kit. It may have been carried by some of the soldiers in General Anthony Wayne's Legion whose button was also discovered under the porch at Mead's Tavern.

Perhaps the most important discovery was the button from Wayne's Legion (Figure 4). The Legion of the United States was formed by an act of President George Washington on December 27, 1792, and Major General "Mad Anthony" Wayne was appointed commander (Kochan 2001:5). In addition to appointing Wayne, Washington gave General Wayne plenary power over the Legion of the United States. Plenary power meant that Wayne had unprecedented control of the army, and he answered only to President Washington and Secretary of War Henry Knox. The Legion of the United States later became known as Wayne's Legion.

This legion was composed of three sub-legions with each sub-legion distinguished by a different color plume on their hats. The first sub-legion had a red plume, the second a white plume, and the third sub-legion was distinguished by a yellow plume. General Wayne formed and trained the first U.S. Army in Legionville, Pennsylvania, near modern day Pittsburg (Kochan 2001:13, 26). Units of the sub legions, especially new recruits, were ordered to stay behind at each of the series of forts and supply depots as General Wayne and the Army moved farther west into the Northwest Territory. New London's location at a key crossroads on the



Figure 2. Tools of the trade (Photo by Stephanie Wright, April 2020).



Figure 3. Scabbard Hook discovered under the Porch of Mead's Tavern (Photo by Jessica Gantzert, Hurt and Proffitt).



Figure 4. Button from Wayne's Legion (Photo by Jessica Gantzert, Hurt and Proffitt).



Figure 5. Various caliber musket and shotgun/pistol rounds (Photo by Stephanie Wright, September 2020).

frontier of Virginia would have made it ideal for the start of a supply train. The Legion needed to be fully supplied and not hampered by overstretched supply lines like previous campaigns in the Northwest Territory. In addition to its strategic location, the arsenal at New London had manufacturing capabilities.

Wayne's Legion was formed in order to subdue the native population and secure peace on the frontier of the Northwest Territory, which would become the modern Midwest U.S. states. After the Treaty of Paris in 1783, the British refused to abandon their forts, and the Native Americans "emboldened by British provisions, arms, ammunition, and encouragement, . . . waged a bitter war against American settlers on the Ohio River frontier." The previous two generals failed to subdue the Northwest Territory because of a misunderstanding of the nature of war on the frontier and a lack of supplies (Gaff 2004:xvii).

Wayne recognized the reasons for the failures of the previous leaders, and he rebuilt the army to blend European and frontier tactics. The campaign involved a series of skirmishes which culminated in the Battle of Fallen Timbers on August 20, 1794 (Gaff 2004:xvii). Wayne achieved victory by combining the use of infantry, cavalry, and artillery with light infantry tactics to overwhelm and outflank the Indian forces. On August 3, 1795, the Indian Alliance signed the Treaty of Greenville in which they ceded lands that became parts of the state of Ohio and eastern Indiana (Kochan 2001:5).

This defeat opened the Northwest Territories for American settlers. Theodore Roosevelt later stated, "It was one of the most striking and weighty feats in the winning of the West." Far from being "Mad," General Wayne was a "thoughtful, resolute, prudent, and diplomatic officer whose successful campaign brought an end to forty years of border war and a final conclusion of the Revolutionary War" (Gaff 2004:xvii). As evidenced by archaeology, one of Wayne's sub-legions was stationed at the arsenal in New London for a short period. It is not known how many were stationed at the arsenal, but the supplies and manufactured arms from the arsenal in New London were used in the securing the Northwest Territory and its subsequent settlement. The War Department documents some continued work at the New London Arsenal into the early 1800s (Holt 1801). However, with the conclusion of the war along the frontier combined with the establishment of the Federal Arsenals, the arsenal at New London fell into disuse, and all operations were eventually moved to Harper's Ferry.

Other artifacts that were discovered during the excavation of the porch at Mead's Tavern were firearm related. Although not a direct link to the arsenal, the presence of these artifacts sheds light on the frontier aspects of life in New London. The musket balls discovered both under the porch at Mead's Tavern and on the

Bedford Alum Springs Hotel property are common military caliber, and it is likely but not conclusive that these musket balls came from the arsenal (Figure 5). One of the important functions of the arsenal was to supply and store munitions for the Continental Army and eventually the U.S. Army. Most colonists carried personal firearms, and New London's location on the frontier would make carrying a firearm a necessity (Kyle 2013:3, 6). Unlike modern firearm production with its standard calibers, the cottage industry nature of musket and rifle production in colonial America resulted in a variety of calibers ranging from .25 to .75 in. in diameter. Although musket balls were likely manufactured at the arsenal, their discovery through archaeology does not directly link to the arsenal like the previous artifacts due to the frontier nature of life in the town of New London.

The site that most likely housed the arsenal is part of the Bedford Alum Springs Hotel property. Currently archaeologists are using a grid of two foot square tests units at 20-foot intervals to study the property to discover the buildings that housed the arsenal (Figure 6). Due to the sheer size of the property, when the survey is complete, 600 test units will have been investigated. Several likely arsenal storage buildings have been identified along with a low density of firearm related artifacts. The firearm artifacts discovered so far include a pistol/shotgun round and a flint. However, a recent discovery has revealed more about the manufacturing nature of the arsenal.

A gun bridle was recovered in a test unit on the east side of the property. A gun bridle is a part of the gun lock mechanism of a rifle. Dating this part of the gun is difficult due to the bridle mechanism being used in both flintlocks and percussion locks which were common into the 1840s (Lichtenberger 2020b). Once the artifact is conserved, it may be easier to determine a potential date. A bridle could also point to the manufacturing nature of operations at the arsenal. Recent



Figure 6. Example of a test unit at Bedford Alum Springs Hotel Property (Photo by Stephanie Wright, April 2020).



Figure 7. Musket Ball Mold used to create musket rounds (Photo by Jessica Gantzert, Hurt and Proffitt).



Figure 8. Musket Ball Mold showing both halves (Photo by Jessica Gantzert, Hurt and Proffitt).

discoveries also include a musket ball mold which directly points to some type of firearm manufacturing on the Bedford Alum Springs Hotel property (Figures 7 and 8). Several flints including a possible one for a French gun have also been discovered (Figure 9). It is clear there was at one point in time some type of firearms industry located on the property, if not the arsenal itself.

The New London Arsenal was unfortunately for a time lost to history, but through archaeology and the interpretation of the artifacts discovered, more can be learned about the important role it played both during the American Revolution and the securing of the Northwest Territory. As more artifacts are discovered, the history of the arsenal at New London can be understood in a more complete context of both the Virginia frontier, the southern campaign of General Greene, the securing of the Northwest Territory, and the transition to Harper's Ferry.



Figure 9. Firearm Flint (Photo by Jessica Gantzert, Hurt and Proffitt).

Contact:

Stephanie Wright began work on the New London Arsenal as part of the new Public History courses at Liberty University. Her focus is military history which will continue as she enters the Master's program at Liberty. She can be reached at smwright3@liberty.edu.

References Cited

Gaff, Alan D.

2008 *Bayonets in the Wilderness: Anthony Wayne's Legion in the Old Northwest*. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.

Holt, Thomas

1799 "Estimate of Expenditures at New London, Virginia." Papers of the War Department 1784-1800. Accessed at <https://wardepartmentpapers.org/s/home/item/72227>.

1801 "Statement of the Rents of Houses for Public Service at New London Virginia for the Year 1801." Papers of the War Department 1784-1800. Accessed at <http://wardepartmentpapers.org/s/home/item/77040>

General Anthony Wayne

2021 General Anthony Wayne. Biographical information, Historic Valley Forge. Independence Hall Association, accessed at <http://www.ushistory.org/valleyforge>.

Knox, Henry

1793 "Henry Knox to President of United States George Washington: recommendations on locations of arsenals and magazines, development of a national arms industry, and return of ordnance, arms and military stores in possession of United States." Paper of the War Department 1784-1800. Accessed at <https://wardepartmentpapers.org/s/home/item/45728>.

Kochan, James

2001 *The United States Army 1783-1811*. Osprey Publishing, Oxford, U.K.

Kyle, Chris

2013 *American Gun: A History of the U. S. In Ten Firearms*. Harper Collins Publishers, New York.

-
- Leckie, Robert
1992 *George Washington's War: The Saga of the American Revolution*. Harper Collins Publishers, New York.
- Lewis, John James
1794 "Letter from the Armorers at New London with pay grievances." Letter, accessed at <https://wardepartmentpapers.org/s/home/item/47479>.
- Lichtenburger, Randy
2018 The Alum Springs Hotel Property at New London: An Historical Overview. April, 2018.
2020a "History of New London." Lecture, March 24, 2020.
2020b "Gun Bridle Discovery." Email correspondence, April 29, 2020.
- Maass, John
2013 *Defending a New Nation: 1783-1811*. Center of Military History, Washington, D.C.
- Pezzoni, J. Daniel
2019 Bedford Alum Springs Hotel Preliminary Report. September 2019:1-14.
- Read, Daisy I.
1950 *New London Today and Yesterday*. J. P. Bell Company, Lynchburg, Virginia.
- Ross, Steven
1979 *From Flintlock to Rifle: Infantry Tactics, 1740-1866*. Associated Presses, Inc., Cranbury, New Jersey.
- Scabbard Hardware
n.d. "Scabbard Hardware," Explore the Artifacts of Outlander, <https://apps.jefpat.maryland.gov/outlander/Artifacts/ButtonsBucklesBlades/ScabbardHardware.html>
- Stockwell, Mary
2018 *Unlikely General: Mad Anthony Wayne and the Battle for America*. Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut.
- Tucker, Glenn
1973 *Mad Anthony Wayne and the New Nation*. Stackpole Books, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.
- U.S. Third Congress
1794 An Act to provide for the erecting and repairing of Arsenals and Magazines, and for Other Purposes. HR Rep. 1, pt.14,16.
- Uttridge, Sarah
2011 *Military Uniforms: Visual Encyclopedia*. Amber Books, London, UK.
- Von Steuben, Frederick William
1985 Baron Von Steuben's Revolutionary War Drill Manual: A Facsimile Reprint of the 1794 Edition. Dover Publications, New York.
- War Department Office
2021 "About" page. Papers of the War Department 1784-1800. Accessed online at <https://wardepartmentpapers.org/s/home/page/about>
- Winkler, John F.
2013 *Fallen Timbers 1794: The US Army's First Victory*. Osprey Publishing, Oxford, UK.