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Edward S. Rutsch

Sally Skinner

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RESEARCH DONE IN 1971 ON FORT NONSENSE

Morristown National Historic Park, Morristown, New Jersey

by

Edward S. Rutsch and Sally Skinner

In preparing for archaeological excavation of the reconstructed Fort Nonsense, we found that much documentary research had already been done. This very important phase of exploring any historical site had been accomplished and reported in 1956 by National Park Service historian Melvin Weig. Entitled *Historical Report on the Fort Nonsense Area, Morristown National Historical Park*, the work includes all documents and orders in which the "fortifications on the hill," or Fort Nonsense, were mentioned. Two such documents are the General Orders given by General Washington on his arrival in Morristown in 1777, in which he says,

He [the Quartermaster General] is also, to have a Guard-house, in the upper Redoubt, on the hill adjoining this place, erected with dispatch, and sufficient to contain 30 men — This building to be slight, and attended with little expense. (Fitzpatrick 1933:58; Weig 1956:2)

Your detachment is to remain at Morris Town till further orders, with which and, the Militia now here, you are to Guard the Stores of different kinds, in the most effectual manner you are able.

Endeavour, as far as it is in your power, to Strengthen the Works already begun upon the Hill near this place, and erect such others as are necessary for the better defending of it, that it may become a safe retreat in case of Necessity. (Fitzpatrick 1933:135; Weig 1956:2)

Later reference was made to Fort Nonsense in a book by Benson J. Lossing called *The Pictorial Field-Book of the Revolution*, in which he speaks of visiting the hill in 1848: "The embankments and ditches, and the remains of the blockhouses of Fort Nonsense, are very prominent, and the form of the embryo fortification may be distinctly traced among the trees." (Weig 1956:15)

Weig also mentions the possible use of Fort Nonsense as a beacon alarm post, a very feasible idea because of the hill's strategic location. Weig's report should be consulted for a detailed record of other pertinent material obtainable through the National Park Service. (Weig 1956)

Other useful tools in locating the reconstructed fort were maps. One was

drafted by a Major J. P. Farley, U.S.A., after he visited the site in 1887. At that time, he is said to have studied the then still discernible remains of the fortifications and to have drawn a plan of the fort (fig. 12). Another map of Fort Nonsense pertinent to our study was completed by Thor Borreson and park personnel prior to its reconstruction. This map, dated 1936, is entitled "Survey of Fort Nonsense." In making this survey, Borreson mentions Farley's work, saying that "in general Farley's measurements are correct but there appears to be a big difference in the bearing of the north and south sides from the course given by Farley." (Weig 1956:23)

The survey led to excavations undertaken by the Civilian Conservation Corps, Project No. 51, which was started in October 1937 and completed in August 1938. Junior Historian Borreson's report was entitled "Report on Proposed Restoration of Fort Nonsense" and contained a summary of archaeological evidence as well as his own findings. It forms Appendix H of Weig's 1956 report, and is reprinted here in its entirety:

The physical remains of the so-called Fort Nonsense have been studied and mapped in order to make possible the restoration of this fort. In the present memorandum no attempt is being made to review the history of the fort, nor to comment on recent interpretations, but only to comment on the actual remains in the ground and on the surface, expanding on these in some cases by showing precedents, as taken from similar forts elsewhere.

Archaeological investigations, made under the supervision [of] E. C. W. Junior Historian Russell Baker, and the maps prepared by Mr. Deats have been used as a base, of which the completed drawing is an expansion.

The trench or ditch running around the outside of the *parapet*, was clearly outlined (see dotted line of plan, sheet no. 1). The average width of the ditch proved to be six feet and the depth, two feet, the *scarp* and *counterscarp* having an equal *talus*. The narrow *banquette*, placed before the *fleches*, of which there is physical evidence remaining, appears to have been not more than twenty inches wide. The *fleches*, of which there is some indication, was placed only on the two sides on which the contour of the hill would permit an enemy to lie concealed (see cross section of hill— scale 1" equals 100'). This *fleches* was, of neces-

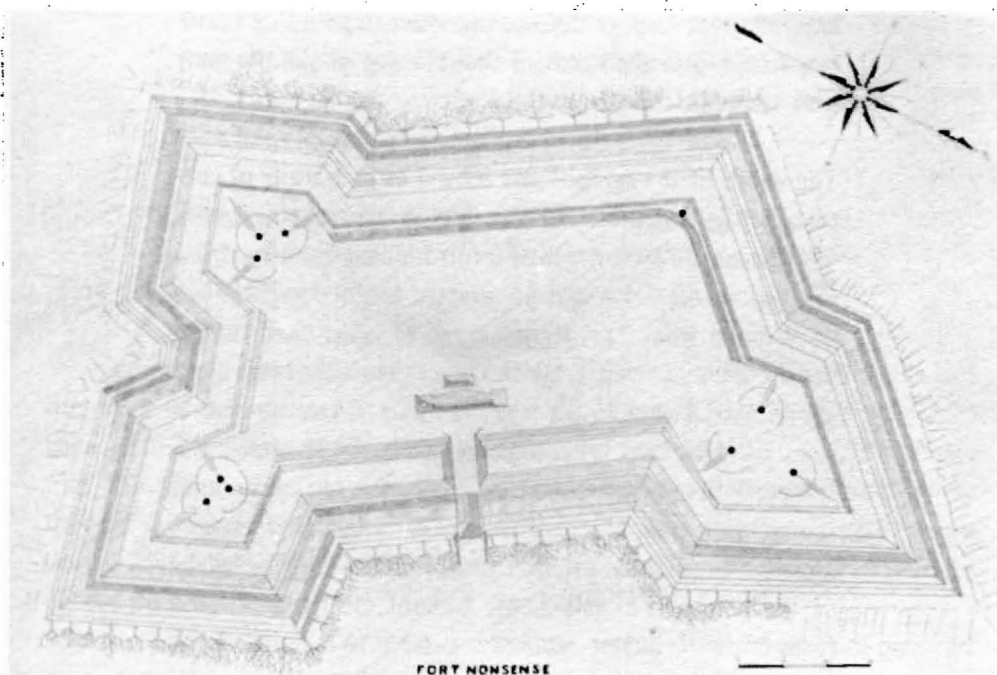
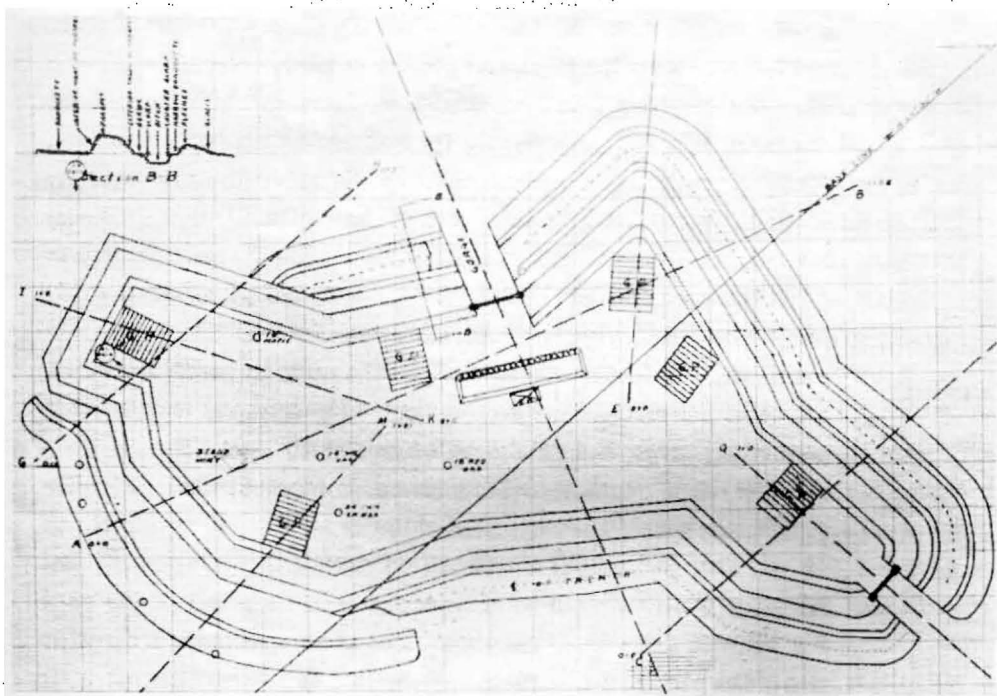


Fig. 12— Map drawn by Major J. P. Farley, U.S.A., for the Washington Association in 1887. —*National Park Service Archives, Morristown, New Jersey.*

Fig. 13— Borreson's 1936 "Survey of Fort Nonsense." —*National Park Service Archives, Morristown, New Jersey.*



sity, two feet high, at the most, in order to permit the artillery to fire over the heads of the infantry who at the same time would be firing from the ditch over the *fleches*.

The width of the *parapet* was arrived at by a study of contour maps. (See cross section of drawing, sheet no. 2, scale 1" equals 100') in which the surrounding country, from which a hostile fire might be directed, and the angle of fire as returned from Fort Nonsense; all of which leads to the conclusion that the average height of the *parapet* was 3' 6" [*sic*]. As all guns in the fort fired *en barbette* no embrasures were needed. Photograph no. 57-0425 shows the *parapet* in its present condition. Indications in the ground, found after cross ditching, show that when the town of Morristown made an attempt to restore the fort the height of the parapet was raised, the amount of change varying from 6" to 1', but no attempt was made to restore it to its original height.

Section P*Q (see sheet no. 1-2 and photograph no. 57-04250) indicates that no parapet or ditch was ever built at this point (the dotted line on sheet no. 2 is the original grade). This leads to the conclusion that a passage was left at that end for troops to pass to the higher level in rear of the fort. This passage was probably guarded by a gate. (See sheets no. 1-3. See also Louis De Tousard's *American Artillerist's Companion*, volume 1, pp. 483-84; also Hector Straith's *Vignette Illustrations of Fortifications*, Plate I, Figure 24). This type of gate would also be used at the main gorge (see cross section N*O). The gates should be four feet high with loop holes to permit a man in a kneeling position to fire through the openings. The posts on which the gates are hinged should be of logs. The *traverse*, to protect the *gorge*, should also be of logs of 10" and 12" diameter, with loop holes. (See sheet no. 3 of Detail.) The guard house should be constructed of timber.

All gun platforms should be of wood; each platform to be 9 x 12' with a rise of 6" from the inside of parapet to the rear of the platform.

From indications, and from measurement of the interior of Fort Nonsense, there was no room for any large building to contain a sufficient personnel. A building of that size must have been located at some other place.

However, there is an indication of a small Guard House, or Sentry Box about 2' x 6' inside dimension. This will be rebuilt of logs placed vertically in the ground. (Weig 1956: Appendix H)

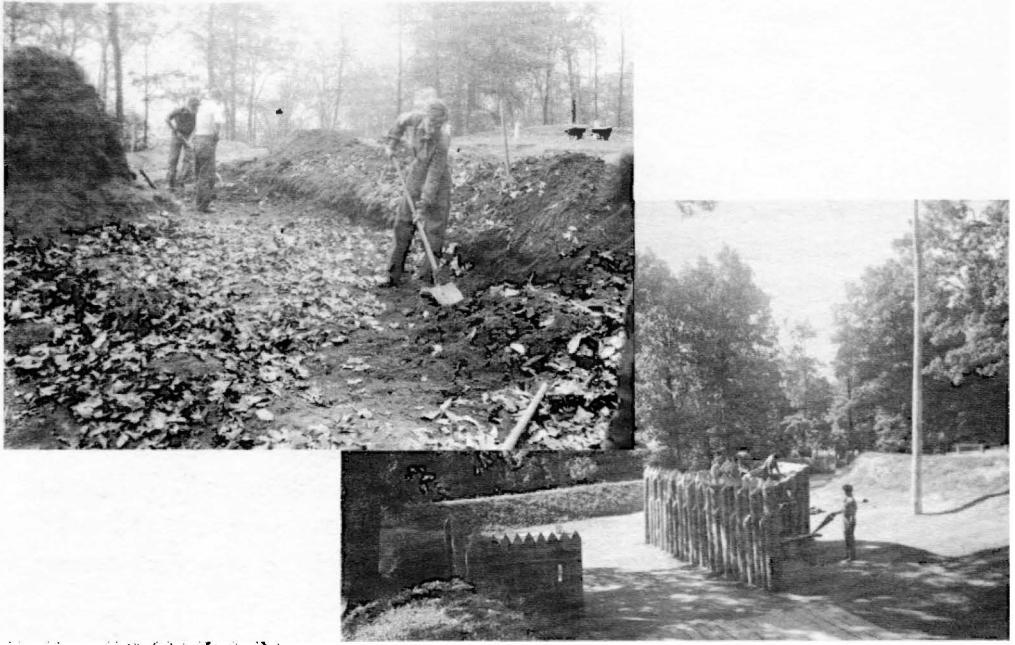
Borreson's report and several base maps all give oblique testimony to the fact that excavations were made at Fort Nonsense. We also have some photographs showing Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) boys at work on the project. Borreson's map, showing a plan view and several profiles, is our fig. 13. It was from this map that the fort was reconstructed, and it was for these reconstructions in part that we were looking in 1971. The reconstruction is pictured in National Park Service photos (figs. 14 and 15).

In 1965, a contract was let to clear the fort area of some out-of-date rest rooms, remove a small picnic area, reduce brush, clear vistas from the fort, and curb and safety-rail the road to the site. During this constructive destruction, a Park Service employee mistakenly ordered the earthen walls of the reconstructed fort leveled by a bulldozer working at the site. This was unfortunately accomplished all too readily, reducing Fort Nonsense to grade. (See fig. 16, a map prepared in planning for these improvements.)

In a contract to Fairleigh Dickinson University, which we have undertaken, the National Park Service expressed their wish to relocate the walls of the fort from original features if possible, or from the traces of the razed reconstruction. Before we began excavation, we proceeded in our own research, which included some new material. One source was Mr. Ken Absalon of the Park Service maintenance crew, who sketched a map of his recollection of the reconstruction (fig. 17). A second new source is a 16-millimeter motion picture made in February 1951 by the family of Fairleigh Dickinson University student Ronald Thatcher. The film shows a panoramic sweep of the entire fort reconstruction and has been donated to the National Park Service Archives in Morristown.

It would seem easy to locate such a big feature with such accurate maps at hand, but, unfortunately, each map was tied to datum points that have succumbed to the ravages of time. An example is the stone monument placed on the site in the late 19th century. It appears on Borreson's 1936 survey map (fig. 13), but it has been moved since then, as witnessed by its not being on a permanent base today although it appears on one in pictures taken in the 1930's.

On the first day of excavations, we set up a NS-EW base line using the United



Figs. 14, 15— Civilian Conservation Corps crew engaged in the restoration of Fort Nonsense in late 1936 and in August of 1937. (NPS Neg. nos. 1475, 0601) —*Courtesy, National Park Service, Morristown Historical Park, Morristown, New Jersey.*

Fig. 16— National Park Service map of Fort Nonsense area, 1961, with planned renovations. —National Park Service Archives, Morristown, New Jersey.

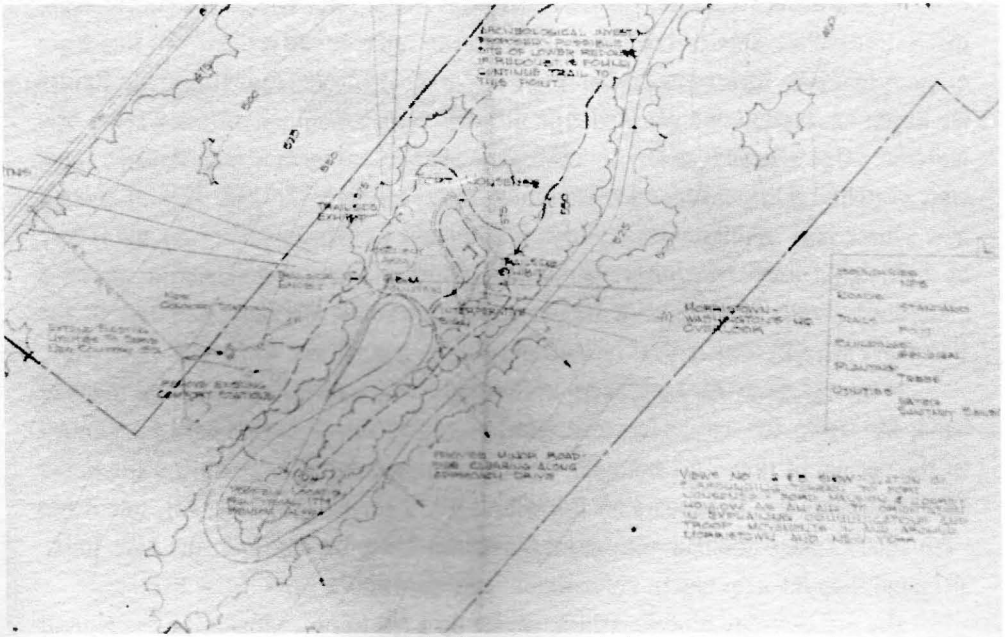


Fig. 17— Map of the reconstruction done from memory by Ken Absalon of the National Park Service in 1971.

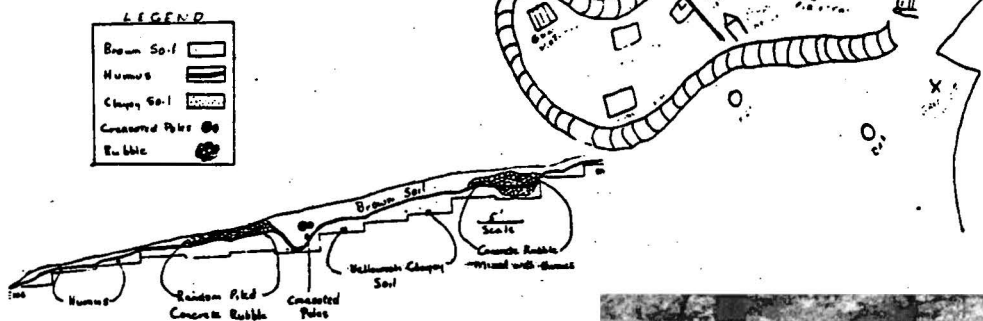
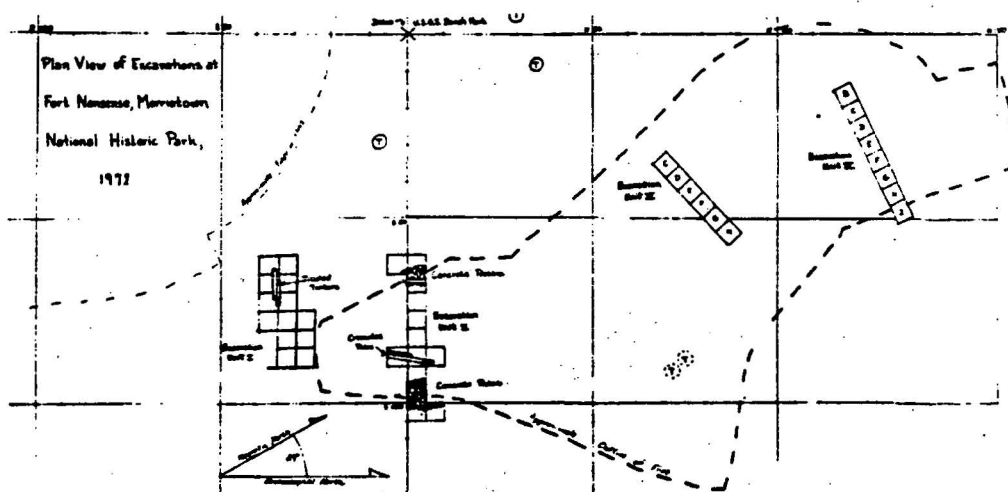


Fig. 18- Profile of Excavation Unit II at the Fort Nonsense site, 1971.



Fig. 19—' Excavation Unit II half-way completed showing creasoted poles.

Fig. 20.



States Coast and Geodetic Survey bench mark as a datum point. Our archaeological north line was 29° east of magnetic north. To start our excavations, we had to clear away the grass and knotweed (*Polygonum aviculare*) that had grown over the site. When this was done, we could recognize definite bands of knotweed and sod. We estimated that the sod bands followed the contours of the earthen walls and that the knotweed in between had grown over the filled trenches— a classic case of flora revealing underground features, usually termed “crop marks” in archaeological jargon.

Using this surface evidence in addition to our documentary findings, we opened up Excavation Unit I: 13 5-foot squares (see fig. 20, the plan view of 1971 excavations). Digging here uncovered several beams from the gate of the reconstructed fort. We exposed the beams and excavated the rest of the squares to depths of 3 and 4 inches, hoping to find more features; none appeared. A deeper test around the beams to a depth of 24 inches showed only a thin 4- to 6-inch stratum of humus.

Excavation Unit II was a trench between E60 and E105; its sides were the E-W base line and a parallel E-W line at N5. Here we used Absalon's map and the crop marks to place the trench, which bisected both earthen walls of the reconstruction. Two telephone pble-like creasoted logs between 8 and 9 inches in diameter were found in the square at N5 E90. (Whenever squares are referred to by a single set of compass coordinates in this report, the coordinates signify the NE corner of the square and the square is 5 feet on each side.) They ran from S, SW to N, NE; later, we followed them to their termination in squares N15 E90 and S15 E90. In Excavation Unit II, we found a brown soil stratum and below it an old line of dark humus, probably the surface of the ground during the period when the reconstruction stood.

We found many large rocks scattered all over the site, but in a few places in Excavation Unit II they seemed to form a definite pattern, indicating placement by man. These rocks were found concentrated in the humus layer in two rock-and-concrete rubble sections between E60 and E100. We believe these to be the support and foundations of the earthen walls as they were reconstructed in the late 1930's (see profile in fig. 18). Eventually, the trench was extended 10 feet to E50; it reached a maximum depth of 5 feet (fig. 19).

Excavation Units III and IV were laid diagonally on the grid, thereby enabling us to follow the contour of the fort and make a bisection of the walls. Another concentration of rock rubble similar to that found in Excavation Unit II was uncovered in Excavation Unit IV in squares D and E. There were large amounts of small rocks all over the trench at Excavation Unit III, but no feature was discernible.

Figure 20 shows the extent of our archaeological investigations at Fort Non-

sense. We did not find any artifacts from the Colonial Period, which did not come as any great surprise because of previous excavations described. A collection of artifacts attributed to the CCC's excavation is located at the National Park Service Headquarters in Morristown. As no report of these artifacts was made, we feel we should add the following inventory to show a sample of the material culture found at the site. Note that we have no knowledge of the sampling procedures of these earlier researchers, nor do we know that this list is the entire original collection.

Inventory of Artifacts Found at the Fort Nonsense Site During 1930's Excavations

ITEM	QUANTITY
Friction primer (Civil War Period)	12
Nails (square)	3
Nails (round)	1
Clay pipes	
Bowls ¹	8
Stems ²	10
Hinge (half; brass?; has abbrev. F-92; probably from Ft. Nonsense)	1
Metal ring	1
Unknown piece of metal	1

1— Two were from Louisbourg, but they were unlabeled.

2— All were from Fort Nonsense.



Fig. 21— 1971 Excavations near Fort Michilimackinac. —Michigan State University photo.



Fig. 22— Exposed portion of 1745-1765 period French structure near Fort Michilimackinac. Note the clearly defined wall trenches and two boulder masonry fireplaces. —Michigan State University photo.