

RESEARCH BULLETIN

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The Myth of the Existence of Queen's Battery Before 1796

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In a previous work, the author established 1796 as the construction date of Queen's Battery, today part of Signal Hill National Historic Park.¹ Yet it was noted that the Newfoundland Tourist and Publicity Commission, which "restored" the battery in the 1920s, promoted it first as having been built in 1763. Photographic evidence indicates that a construction date of "around 1705" was also used. (Fig. 1) The author attributed the origin of the 1763 date to H.W. LeMessurier, whose article "Forts and Places about St. John's of Historic Interest" was found in the Tourist and Publicity Commission's files. LeMessurier had this to say about the battery:

QUEEN'S BATTERY - Situated on the plateau over the Narrows at an elevation of about 420 feet. It was begun in 1763 and made stronger in 1809.²

So far the author has been unable to locate anything that would substantiate LeMessurier's claim (the battery is also only 350 ft. above sea level). But a more careful reading of Prowse has produced the apparent source of the 1705 date. In the Appendices to chapter 10, Prowse reproduces as Appendix H a translation of a French account of the capture of St. John's in 1705.³ The translation was made by Archbishop Michael Howley, and first appeared in the Evening Telegram of 13 December 1893. Howley gave as his source Collection de Documents Relatifs a l'Histoire de la Nouvelle France (Quebec, 1883). The correct title of the source is Collection de Manuscrits contenant Lettres, Mémoires, et autres Documents Historiques Relatifs à la Nouvelle-France, recueillis aux Archives de la Province de Québec, ou copiés a l'Etranger mis en ordre et édités sous les auspices de la Législature de Québec avec table, etc. (Quebec, 1883), Vol. I.

An anonymous account of the destruction of St. John's in 1705 occurs on pages 608-14. It includes, after a report on the main fortification,



Fort William, the following information on the remaining St. John's defences:

Vis à vis de l'aultre costé du port estoit le chasteau clos de bonnes et fortes murailles partie arrosez de la haute mer pour battre les vaisseaux en entrant ou en descendant, il y avoit deux batteries l'une sur l'aultre, la première, bien voutée battant à fleur d'eau avec du canon de trente six; celle d'en haut de douze, les batteries faictes en figure d'un fer à cheval.

This must be compared with Howley's translation:

Vis-a-vis on the other side of the harbor was the castle, enclosed by good and strong walls, partly wet at high tide, to attack vessels either entering or going out; (qu. Chain Rock Battery? - M.F.H.) There were two other batteries, one above the other, the first well vaulted and ranging at water level (battant a fleur de l'eau), with cannon of 36 (qu. lbs.) The one above of 12; the batteries made in form of horse-shoe; (qu. Waldegrave and Queen's batteries?).

To begin with, Howley was only guessing at the identity of the batteries, as indicated by his use of the abbreviation qu., short for query. His guesses, unfortunately, were way off the mark. His first mistake lay in supposing that Chain Rock Battery was the castle on the south side. Chain Rock, like Fort William, is on the north side. The south side castle was built in 1697, along with a smaller work at Chain Rock, after the successful French attack of 1696. (Fig. 2) How Howley could have made such a mistake, and how Prowse could have accepted it, is difficult to comprehend, since the location of Chain Rock, a prominent landmark, was well known.

Howley's other mistaken assumptions proceed from this first one. He refers to two other batteries, which he speculates to be Queen's and Waldegrave Batteries. First of all, the French account does not mention what side of the narrows the two batteries were on. But let us suppose that they were on the north side. The first of the batteries is mentioned as being at water level. Howley imagined this one to be Waldegrave Battery and the other to be Queen's Battery. But Waldegrave Battery, even as it existed in Howley's day, was 135 ft. above sea level. Howley's water level battery therefore must have been the Chain Rock Battery of 1697, the one that he erroneously placed on the south side. The upper battery may have been Waldegrave Battery, but this cannot be proven owing to the paucity of detail in the French source.

Could Howley's upper battery have been Queen's Battery? Again, the lack of detail does not admit of such a conclusion. But let us at least examine the possibility. In the early 18th century Signal Hill was solely a signalling post.³ It was not accessible by road until 1796. This raises the question of how armament could have been emplaced in a 1705 version of Queen's Battery. In 1795, before the cutting of Signal Hill road, guns were transported to the hill by parbuckling them up the side of

Gibbet Hill. Might not guns have been parbuckled to Queen's Battery in 1705? It is highly unlikely. Because the site of Queen's Battery is 350 ft. above sea level, it would have been much easier to parbuckle guns at a more accessible point, perhaps in the vicinity of Waldegrave Battery.

If any other evidence is needed to refute Howley's suggestions, it lies in a century of British reports on the fortifications of St. John's, available in the War Office and Colonial Office papers. None of these reports mentions any work on the site of Queen's Battery, that is until 1796 when the battery came into existence as part of the military development of Signal Hill. Nor do 18th century maps show anything in the area. (Fig. 3) These final points, when added to the ones mentioned above, cast serious doubts on Archbishop Howley's tentative conclusions. In Howley's defence, he was not offering his conclusions as ironclad truths. Unfortunately, others took them as such, with the result that for many years the history of Queen's Battery was misrepresented to the public.

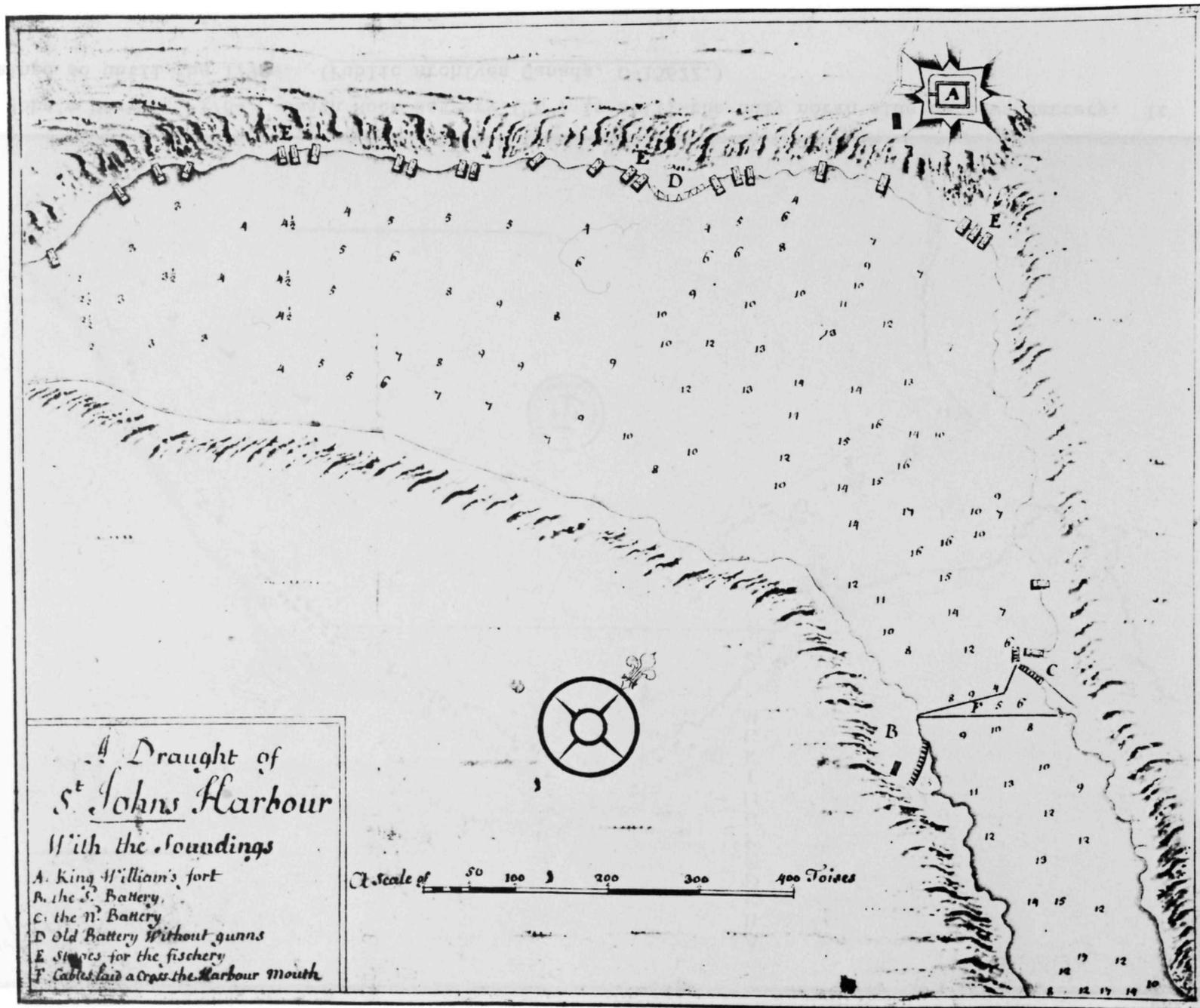
Endnotes

1. James E. Candow, A Structural and Narrative History of Queen's Battery, Signal Hill National Historic Park, Manuscript Report No. 343 (Ottawa: Parks Canada, 1980).
2. H.W. LeMessurier, "Forts and Places about St. John's of Historic Interest", The Veteran, Vol. 4, No. 2 (July 1924), p. 65.
3. On the history of Signal Hill, see the author's A Structural and Narrative History of Signal Hill National Historic Park and Area to 1945, Manuscript Report No. 348 (Ottawa: Parks Canada, 1979).

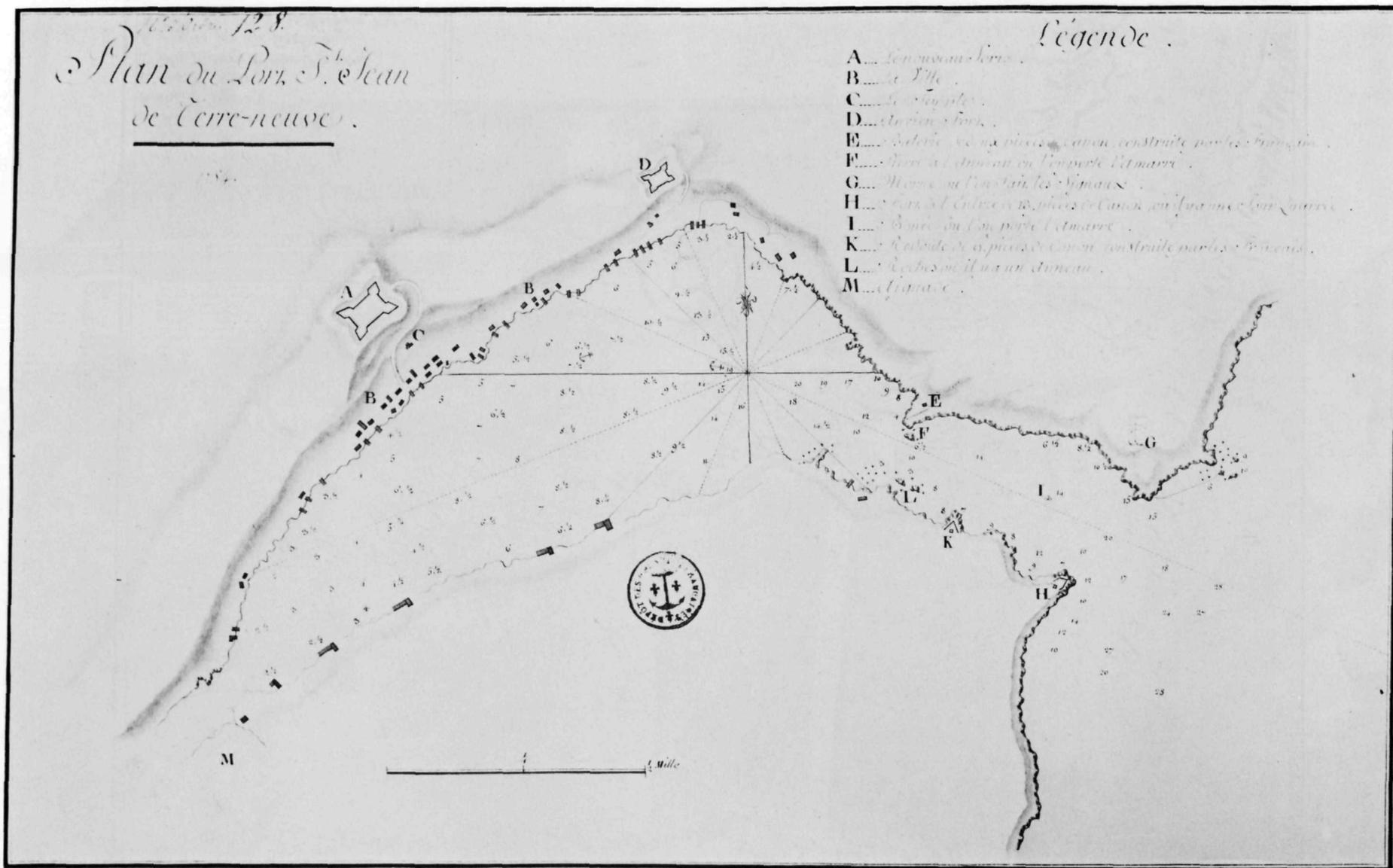
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1 Queen's Battery, 1959. (Parks Canada Photo.)



2 St. John's Harbour, 1698. "A" denotes Fort William, "B" the southside battery, or castle, "C" Chain Rock Battery, and "F" the narrows cables. (Public Archives Canada, C-93303)



3 St. John's Harbour, 1784. Chain Rock Battery ("E") is still the only north side narrows battery. It remained so until the 1790s. (Public Archives Canada, C-15622.)



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3 St. John's Harbour, 1784. Chain Rock Battery ("E") is still the only north side narrow battery. It remained so until the 1790s. (Public Archives Canada, C-15622.)