

Defending Halifax

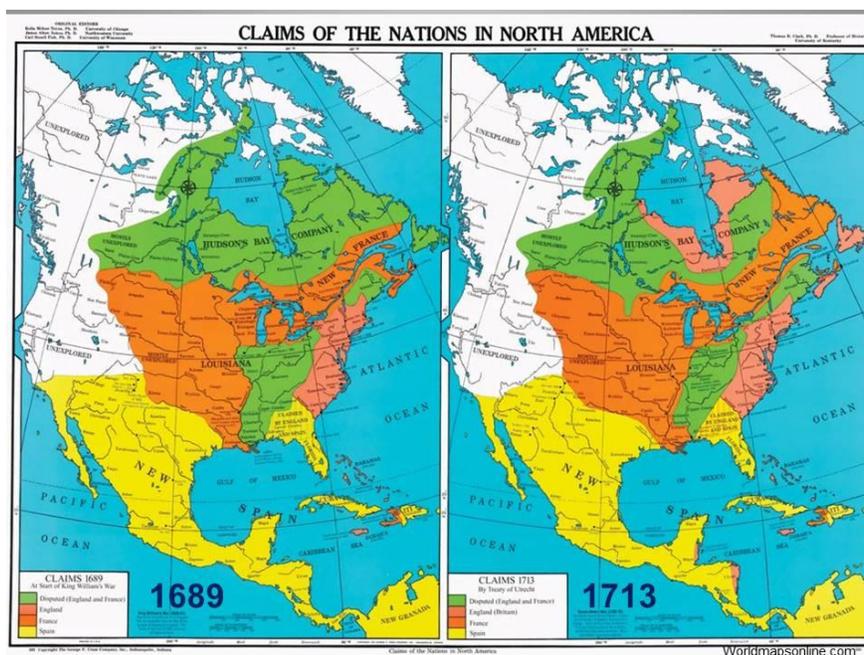


The Early Fortifications

Tom Tulloch

For the 200 years after Halifax was founded in 1749 as a British outpost, its fortifications were a reflection of the very fabric of its existence. Over these two centuries, Halifax's defences went through successive periods of intense construction activity, interspersed with periods where the fortifications were ignored and allowed to fall into disrepair. They reflected the cutting edge technology of their times as well as the geopolitical situation of the day.

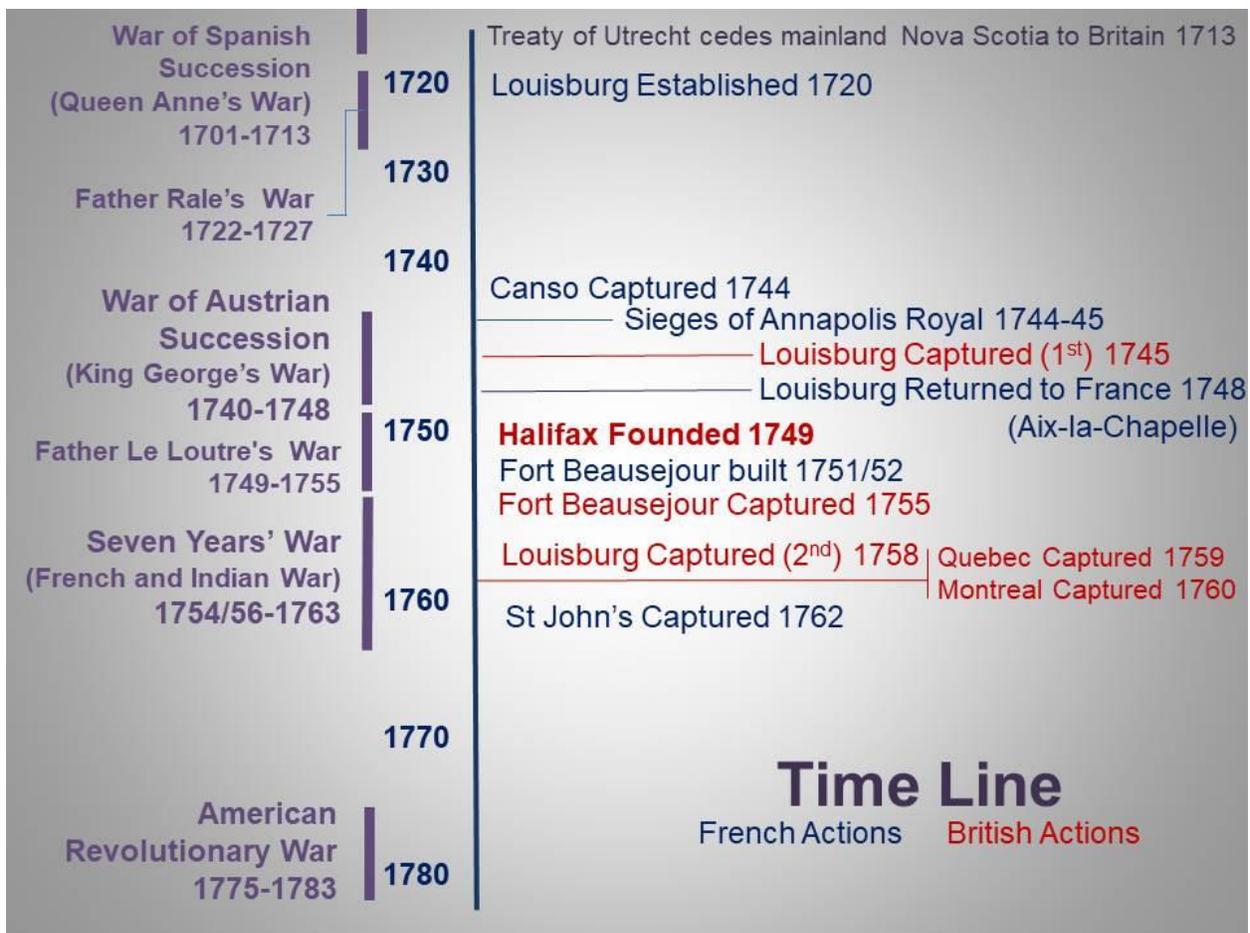
The period I will address spans Halifax's first 14 years, from the construction of the first fortifications in 1749, to the end of Britain's Seven Years War with France in 1763. Of these early structures very little remains, as they were of timber and earth construction which did not last for many years, and the city has largely been built over their original locations. However the ghosts of a few of them can still be seen.



Ongoing conflict in North America stretched back to the early 1600s, as Britain and France vied for supremacy in the new world. Britain established its American Colonies along the Atlantic seaboard, in pink on the map above, while France settled New France, shown here in orange. For a long time the frontier area in between – in green here - was a contested no-man’s land, fought over between Britain and France and their respective Indigenous allies. France controlled present day Nova Scotia and had established a presence, with numerous Acadian settlements throughout the region.

A series of large and small wars took place during the 18th century. However outside of these formal wars there was a constant, simmering hostility that regularly boiled over into open conflict. It is immensely complicated, and I will attempt only to touch on some relevant events to provide context for the establishment of Halifax and its early defences.

The time line here is to highlight some of the key conflicts and isolated events of the mid-1700s, particularly in relation to Halifax’s first 14 years.



Britain captured Port Royal in 1710 during Queen Anne's War (the North American theatre of the War of Spanish Succession). This they renamed Annapolis, and built Fort Anne to defend it.

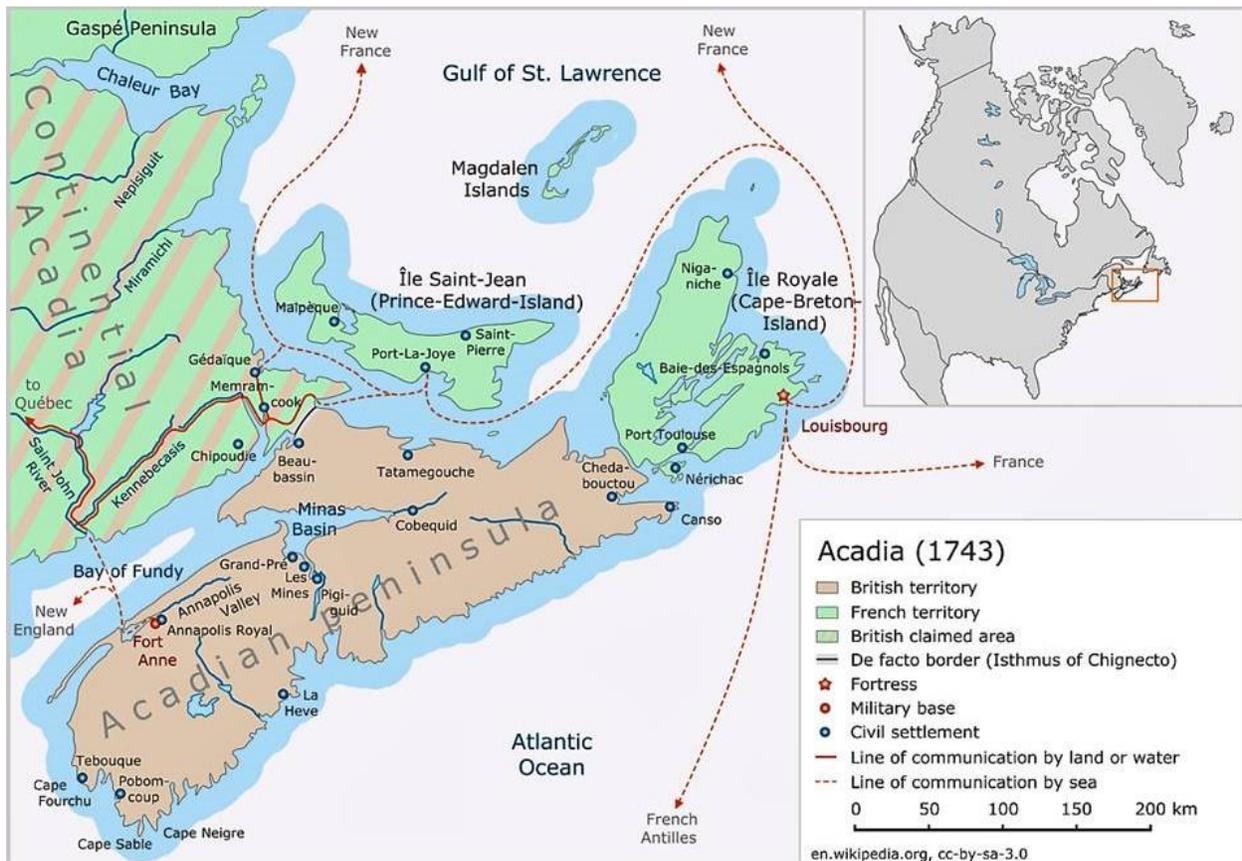


The Treaty of Utrecht was signed in 1713 at the end of the War of Spanish Succession. Here, France ceded control of mainland Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and portion of Hudson's Bay region to Britain, while retaining all of the islands in the Gulf of St Lawrence (including Cape Breton, PEI) and the right to dry fish on south shore of Newfoundland. New Brunswick remained disputed territory.

However, Acadians and Mi'kmaq in mainland Nova Scotia, encouraged and supported by France, continued to resist the British in the region – and skirmishes continued in NS as well as in New Brunswick/ Maine border area and in Newfoundland, a portion of this being known as Father Rale's War.

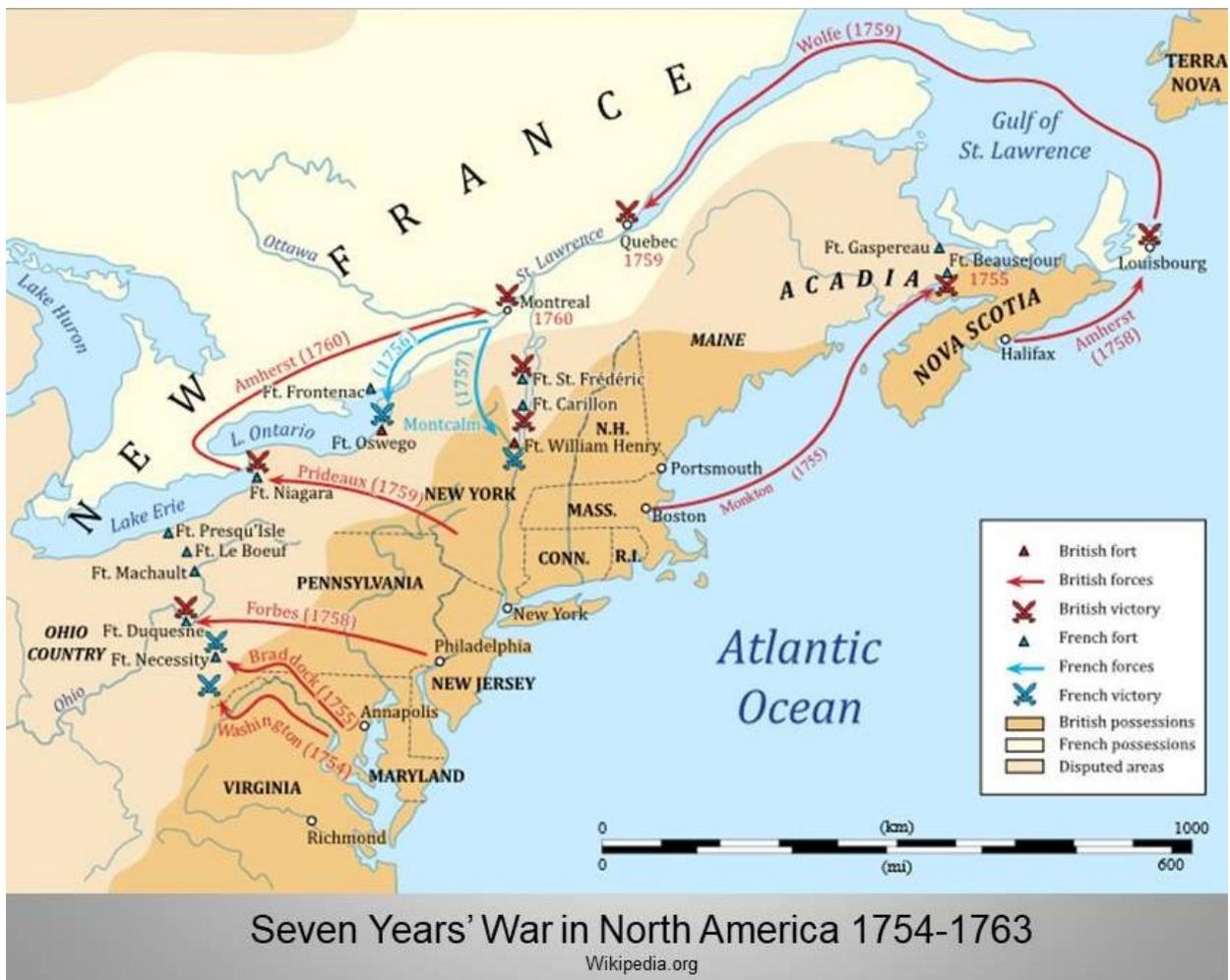
In 1720, during the period after giving up mainland Nova Scotia to Britain, France established Fortress Louisburg to exert control over the Atlantic approaches to New France up the St Lawrence River – the result of this (along with the Newfoundland fishing rights) was continued friction between Britain and France, and heightened

anxiety in Britain's American colonies over a French fortress presence on the Atlantic seaboard.



Ongoing attempts by French, Acadians and native forces to capture Annapolis and Canso (the two British footholds in NS at that point) continued, and in 1745 British and American colonial forces captured Louisburg. This occurred during King George's War, which was the North American theatre of the War of Austrian Succession, running 1740-1748; at the end of which, in the Treaty of Aix-la-Chappelle, Cape Breton with Fortress Louisburg was returned to France (in exchange for Madras in India to Britain) – this outraged the New Englanders, who had worked so hard to capture it 3 years previously.

Britain then established Halifax the following year, in 1749 to strengthen her position in Nova Scotia, and to counter the re-established French stronghold at Louisburg. This brought Britain into more direct confrontation with the French Acadians in mainland Nova Scotia and their Mi'kmaq allies, who continued to resist the British presence in Nova Scotia throughout the next decade.

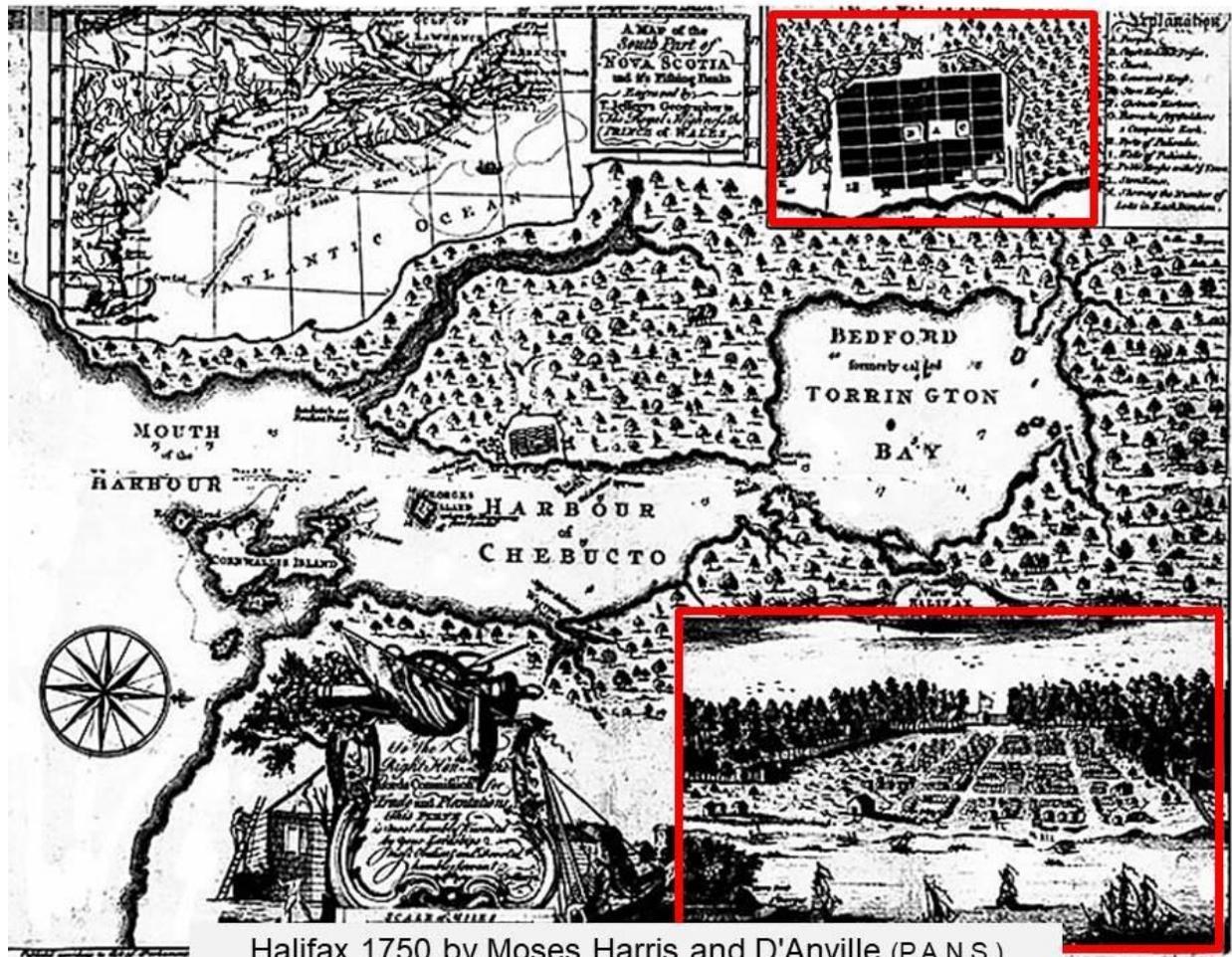


War in Europe again erupted in 1756 with the start of the Seven Years War, during which, in 1758 Britain recaptured Fortress Louisburg (leading to taking Quebec and Montreal, and Britain gaining control of French Canada by the 1763 Treaty of Paris)

So, on to Halifax's Early Defences

On his arrival in 1749, Edward Cornwallis' first concern was to secure the settlement from attacks from local native and Acadian forces (you will recall that Annapolis Royal and Canso had been subject to repeated attacks and sieges over the previous half-century, and there was still strong opposition to British expansion in the region)

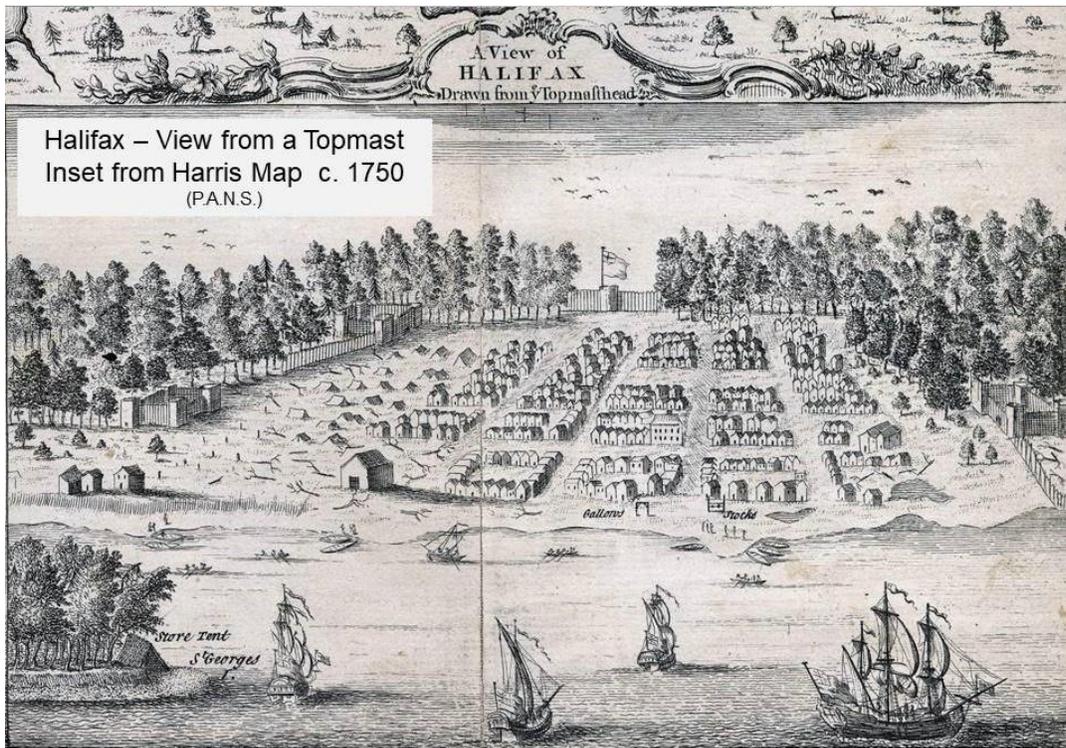
The initial plan was for 5 stockade forts connected by wooden palisades in a ring around the town. These would be built using round wooden timbers about 10 feet long and 6 inches diameter sunk into the ground to form a fence-type structure.



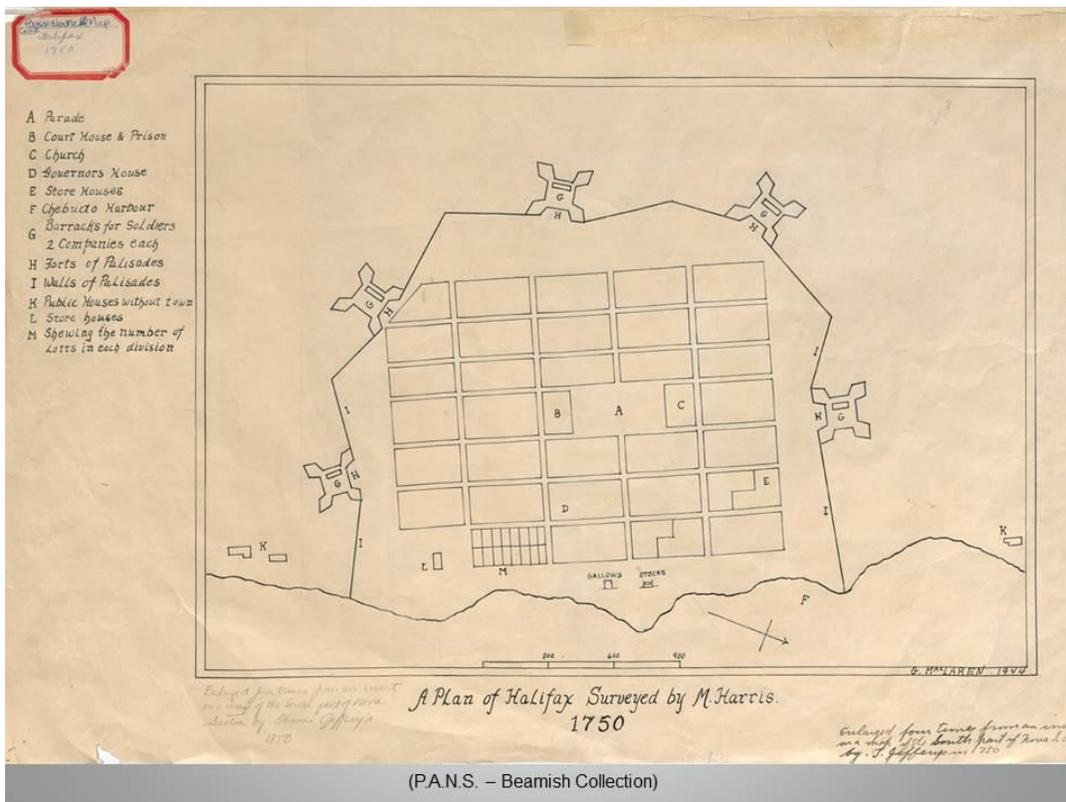
Halifax 1750 by Moses Harris and D'Anville (P.A.N.S.)

The map above from 1750 gives us two depictions of the settlement of Halifax – a plan (upper right) and an oblique view of the town as seen from the top of a mast of one of the ships anchored in the harbour (lower right). The masthead view offers an idea of the structure of the fortifications, while the plan gives us an idea of where they were located – although this map is believed to have been drawn before the forts were actually constructed, and is therefore not necessarily an accurate depiction of their locations.

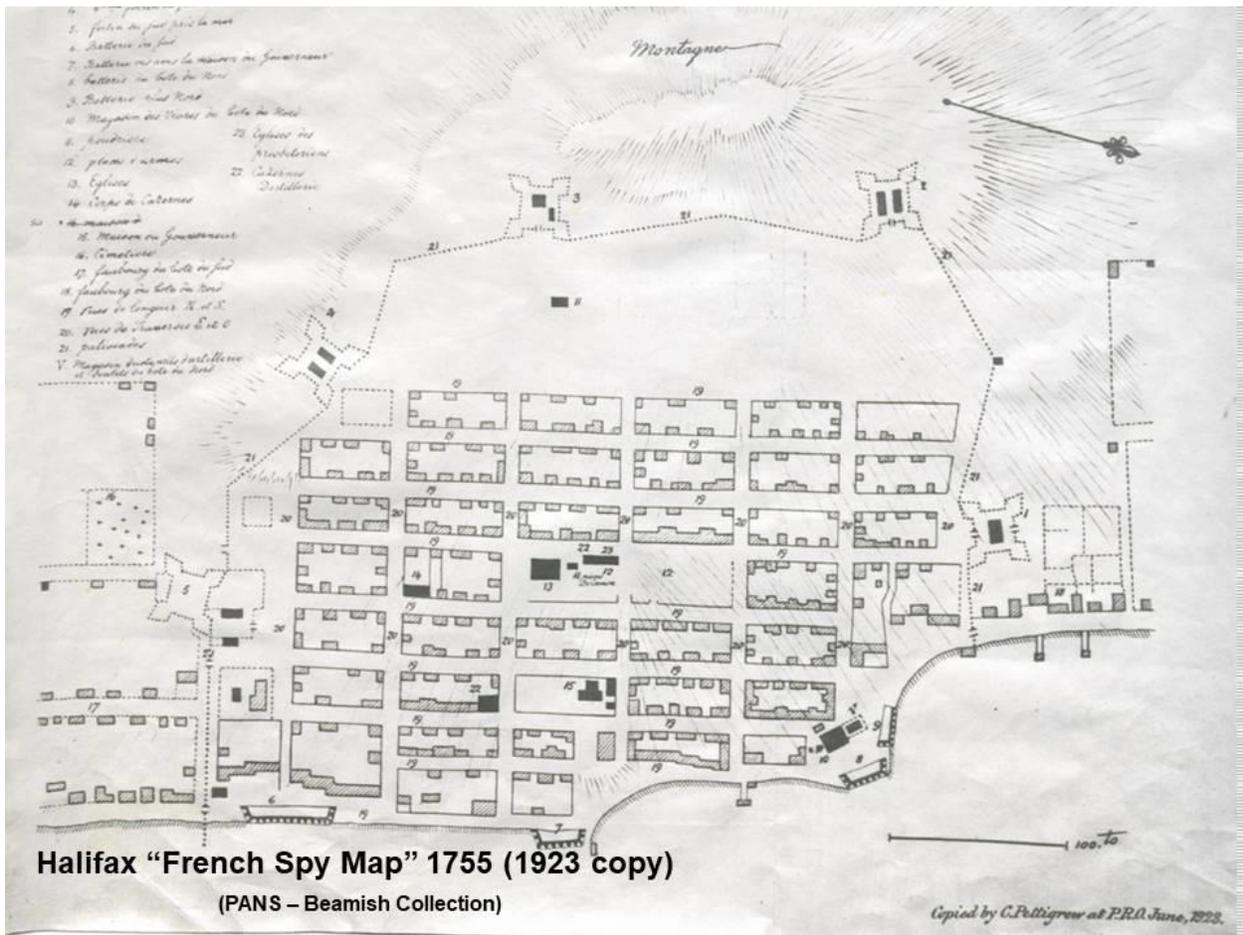
Below is a better look at the masthead view:



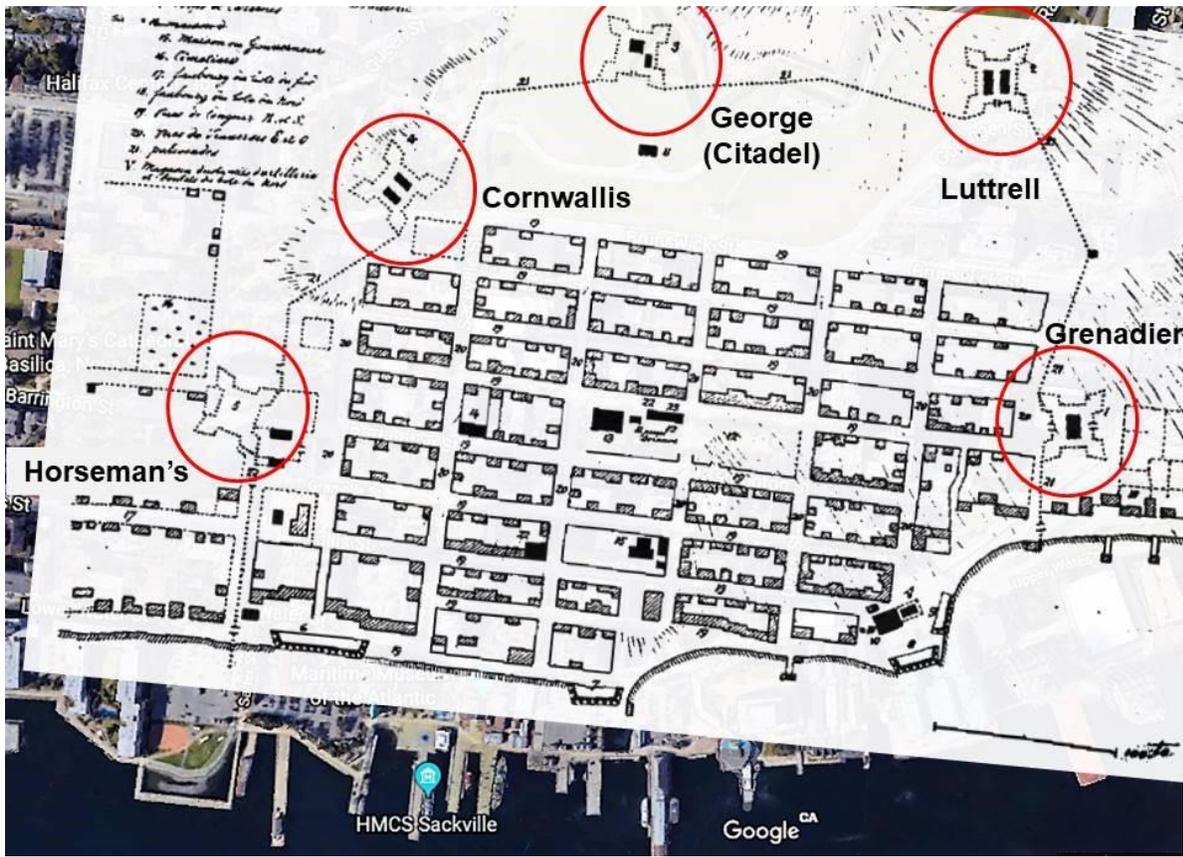
And here is a better look at the plan, from a 1944 reproduction:



This map (below), purported to be drawn by a French spy in 1755, is likely a better representation of the actual positions of fortifications.



Superimposed on a current aerial view of Halifax, we are able to establish where the forts were probably located:



By September 1749 the first fort near the top of Citadel Hill was completed, with another added the next month, along with a rough barricade of felled trees surrounding the settlement.

By July the following year the felled tree barricade had been replaced by the palisade wall and remaining forts.

The palisade ran from the water's edge, up Salter Street to Horseman's Fort (the present Maritime Centre) which served as South Gate to town.

Then to a salient just east of the old Memorial Library on Grafton Street, and across to join the Cornwallis Fort, about where the Brigadier's residence is at RA Park

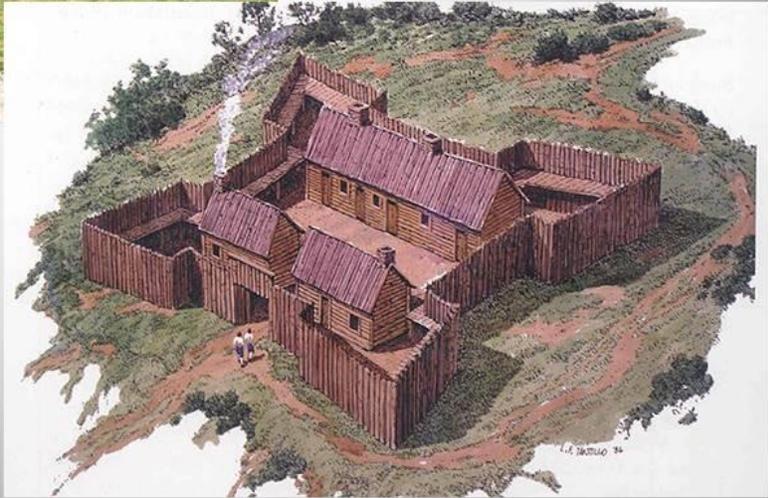
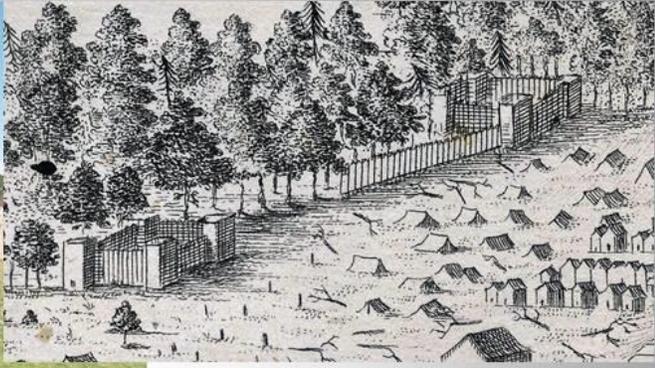
Then it ran uphill to meet the Citadel Fort, roughly where the southern ravelin of the current Citadel is located.

From there it ran across the eastern side of the current Citadel to meet Fort Luttrell, about where Rainnie Drive meets Gottingen Street (former Canadian Blood Services building).

And lastly downhill to Grenadier Fort, roughly at the junction of former Jacob Street and Poplar Grove, now where the Delta Marriott Hotel/ Cogswell Tower located. The remaining palisade wall ran from there down to the waterfront at the foot of Jacob Street (now the middle of Cogswell interchange).

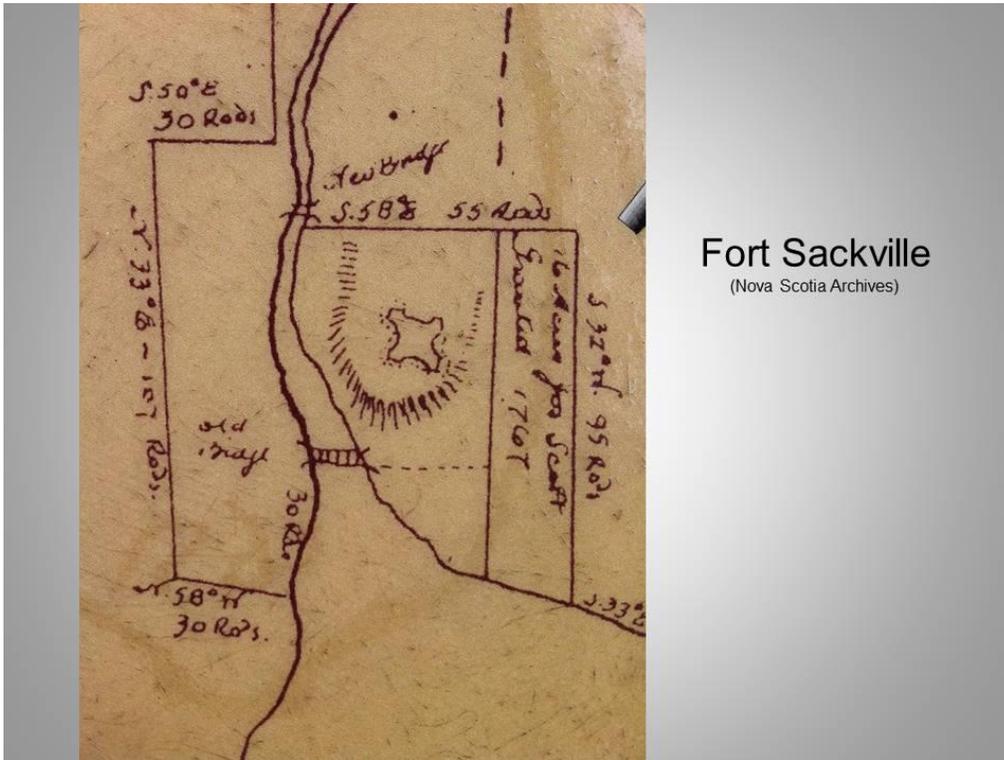


Palisade



Stockade
Fort

Above we have the image from the 1750 map view in the upper right, showing a depiction of the forts and palisades. The forts' walls would have consisted of a double row of palisades, with a square centre and a bastion at each corner to provide covering fire along the face of the forts and walls. Designed to withstand attacks from native and Acadian forces armed with hand weapons, they would have been about 200 x 200 feet overall, with musket loopholes in walls, and a barracks for 2 companies of soldiers (100 men). Trees and bushes were cleared for 30 feet outside the walls to offer a field of fire.



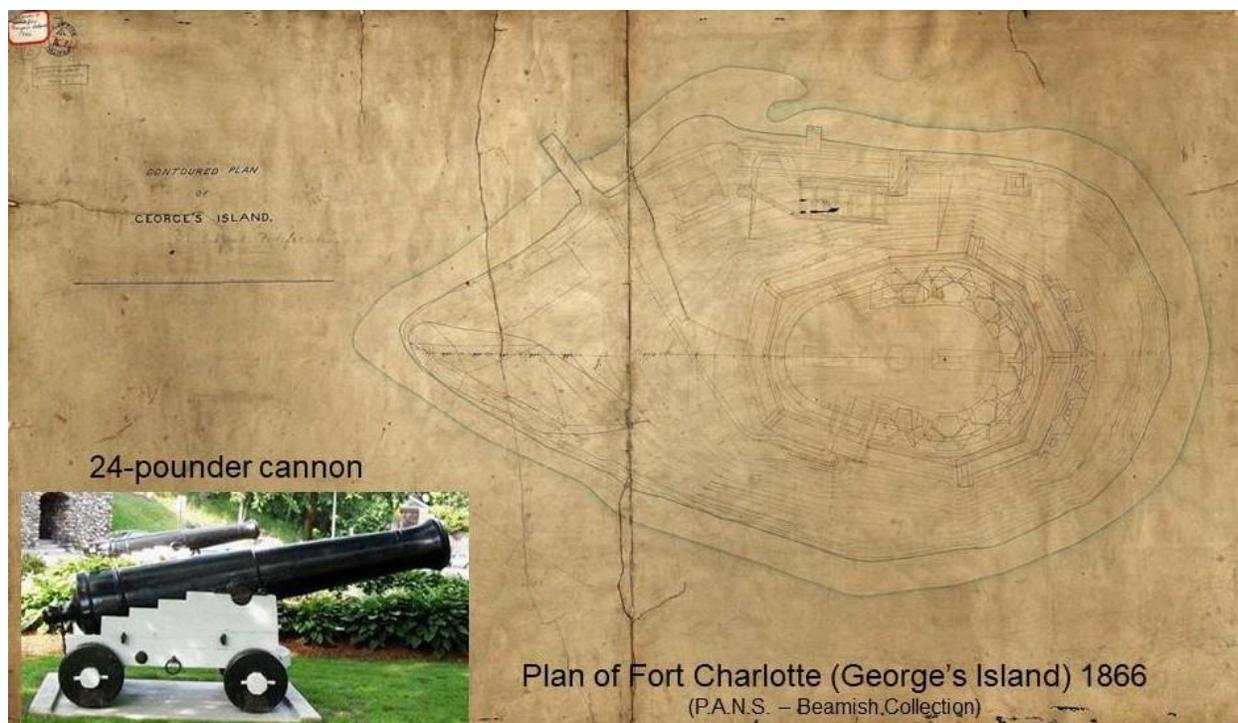
Fort Sackville
(Nova Scotia Archives)

Also, in 1749 a small outpost was established at head of Bedford Basin which would eventually be the site of a palisaded blockhouse named Fort Sackville – built to control the Basin and link land communications with the British settlement at Annapolis via connecting blockhouses at Fort Edward in Windsor and Fort Vieux Logis in Grand Pre.



Fort Sackville

Again, superimposing the early map on an aerial view of the head of the basin (above) shows us the location of Fort Sackville, just up from the Shore Drive bridge, next to the Scott Manor House. Additionally the following year (1750) Fort Lawrence was built at Chignecto (near present Amherst) to enhance British control over the peninsula.



Efforts to fortify **George's Island** began in the summer of 1750. I do not have a depiction of the early defences here – the drawing above comes from 1866, by which time it had been built into a massive fortification with many powerful gun batteries and connecting underground tunnels. The first fort here would have been a basic construction, initially with 7 smooth bore cannons installed and a palisade wall surrounding them.

By May 1751 an additional 9 guns were added, bringing the total to 16 x 24- and 32-pounders. They would have had a maximum range roughly 1,500 yards, but an effective or useful range of only about 800 yards. They covered a small part of southern portion of harbour, reaching perhaps mid-channel. This fortification on George's Island would eventually become Fort Charlotte.

The main difference between the George's Island fortifications and the stockade forts surrounding the town was that those on the Island were intended as a defence against attacks from the sea, by French naval forces armed with powerful cannons sailing into the harbour itself. Therefore they would have consisted of thicker earth and timber walls to withstand cannon fire, with openings or embrasures through which the guns fired.

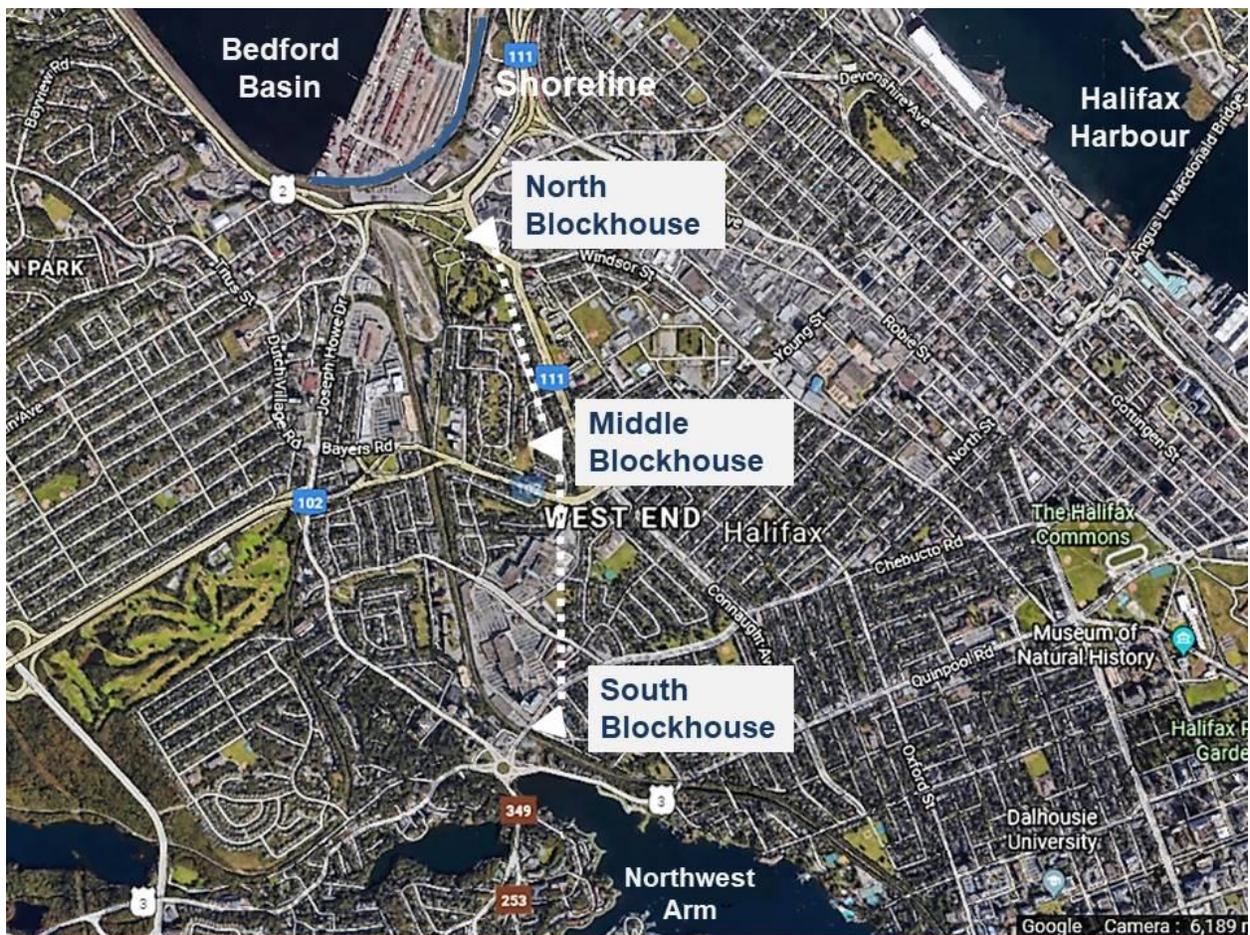
Dartmouth



Dartmouth was settled 1750, and a small blockhouse was erected for the defence of the settlement, roughly at north-west end of present King Street. The structure would have been likely something similar to the one pictured, which stands at Fort Edward in Windsor. In 1751 a line of pickets was added at the back of the settlement to further improve the defences.

Halifax Peninsula

In Halifax in the spring of 1751, the peninsula was laid out in 5-acre farm lots.

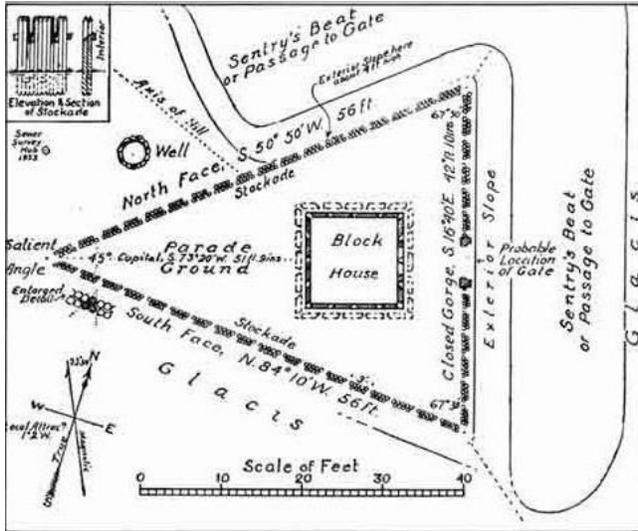


For protection, an advanced line of 3 small blockhouses, connected by a patrol road was established across the narrowest part of the isthmus between Bedford Basin and the Northwest Arm. These were known as the Peninsular Blockhouses (North, Middle, South) and the Peninsular Road.

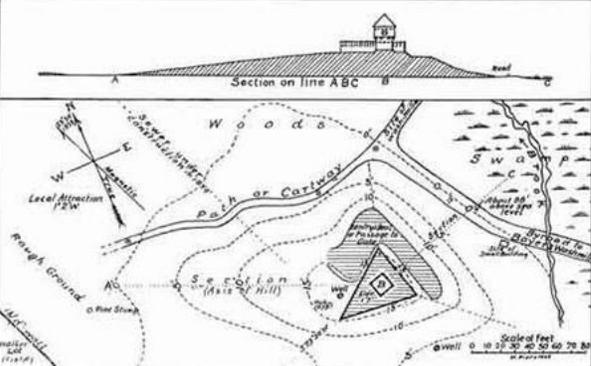
The North blockhouse was on an elevation near the current location of the gate to Fairview Cemetery;

The Middle blockhouse was built on a small hill just north of Bayer's Road near Westwood Park; and

The South blockhouse was positioned just east of the current railway bridge on Chebucto Road.



Middle Peninsular Blockhouse
(Sketches by Harry Piers)



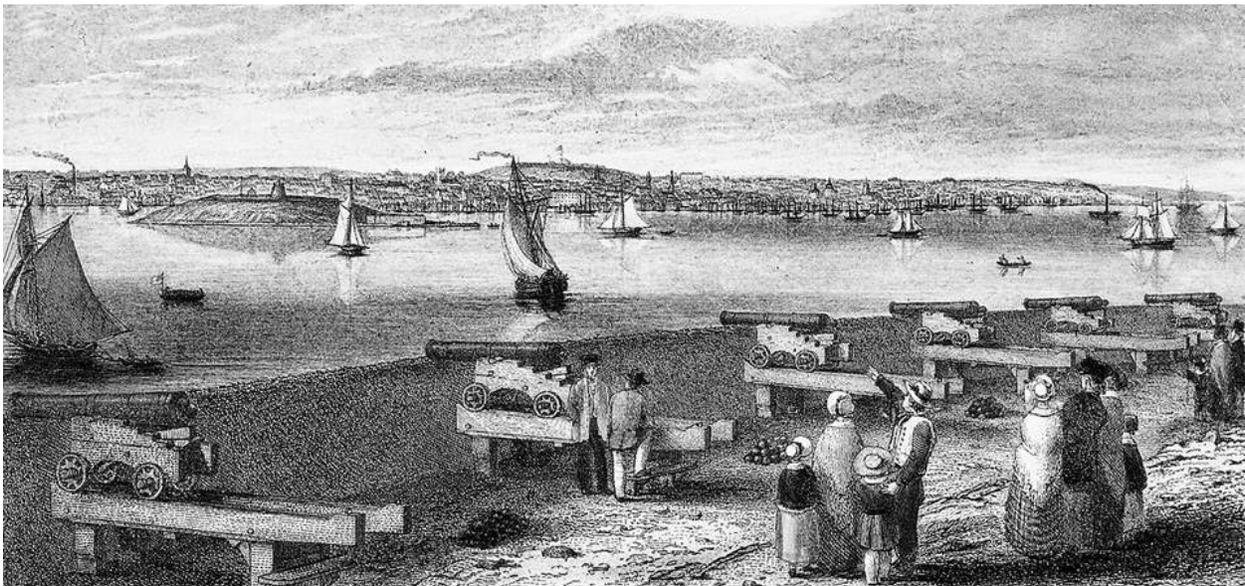
Each blockhouse would have been about 12 feet square, surrounded by a triangular palisade 60 feet long on the long sides and 45 feet long across the back. Each would have had a guard and a small cannon.

Seven Years War (1756-1763)

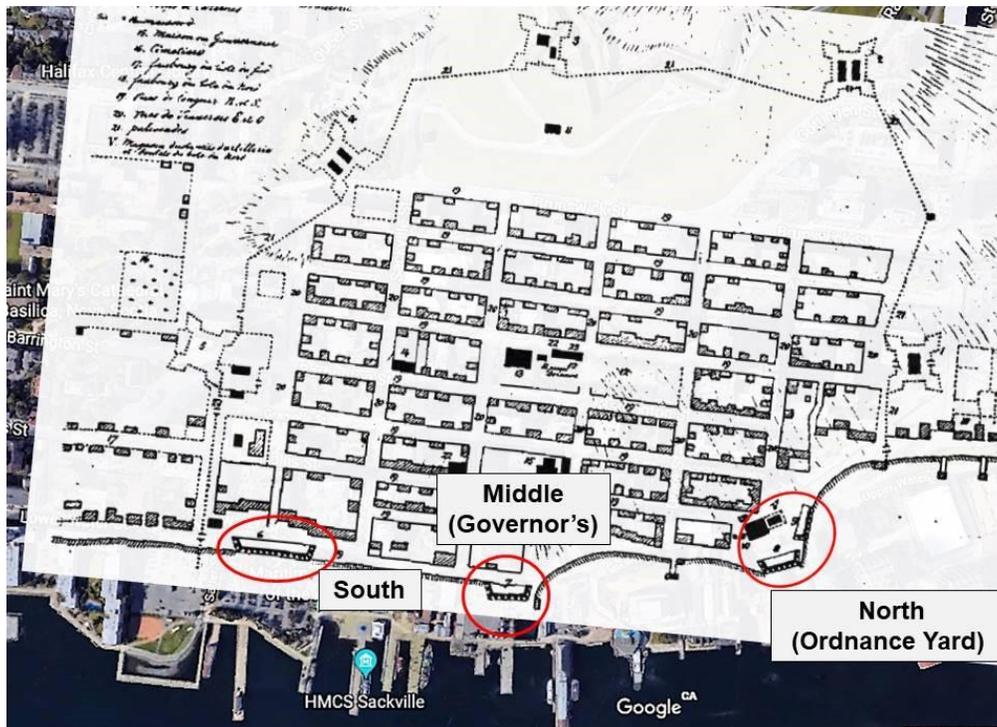
The next major European conflict of the Seven Years War provided the impetus for further increases to Halifax's defences, particularly those to defend it from attack from the sea.



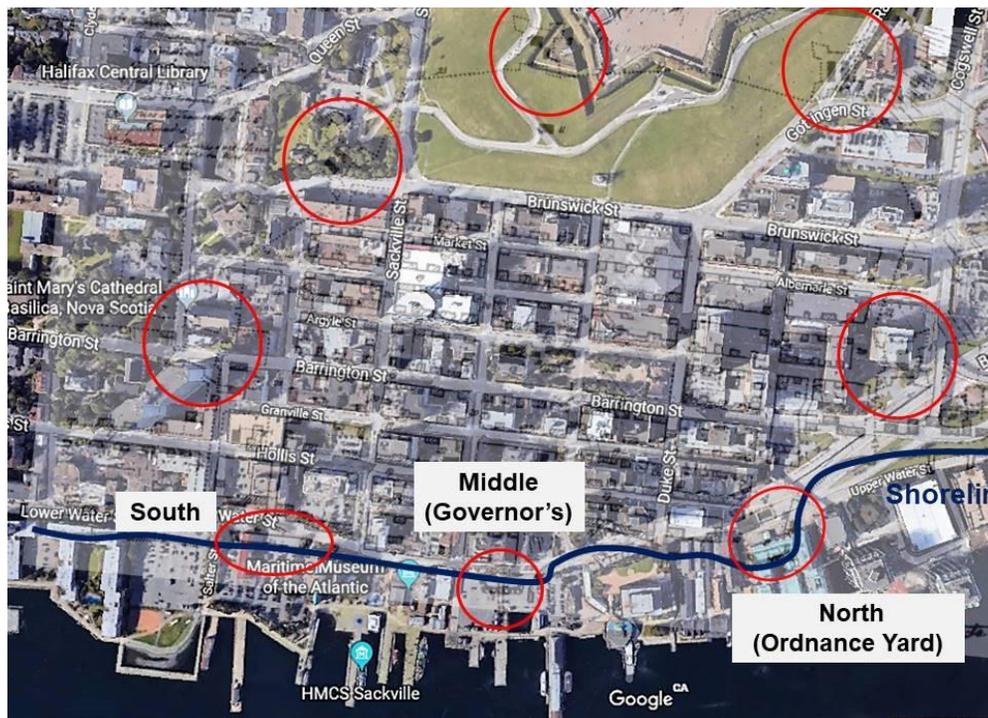
In 1754, with war on the horizon, Eastern Battery was established on the Dartmouth shore, at the site of the recent Imperial Oil Refinery, to defend eastern channel from naval attack.



Eastern Battery (later Fort Clarence) Dartmouth



We can see their locations again on the French Spy Map from that year, superimposed on today's Halifax. Around this time the Peninsular Forts and the palisade surrounding the town were dismantled, as the threat from Acadian and Indigenous attack diminished, and the threat from French naval invasion increased. The slide below shows their positions in relation to the earlier five stockade forts.

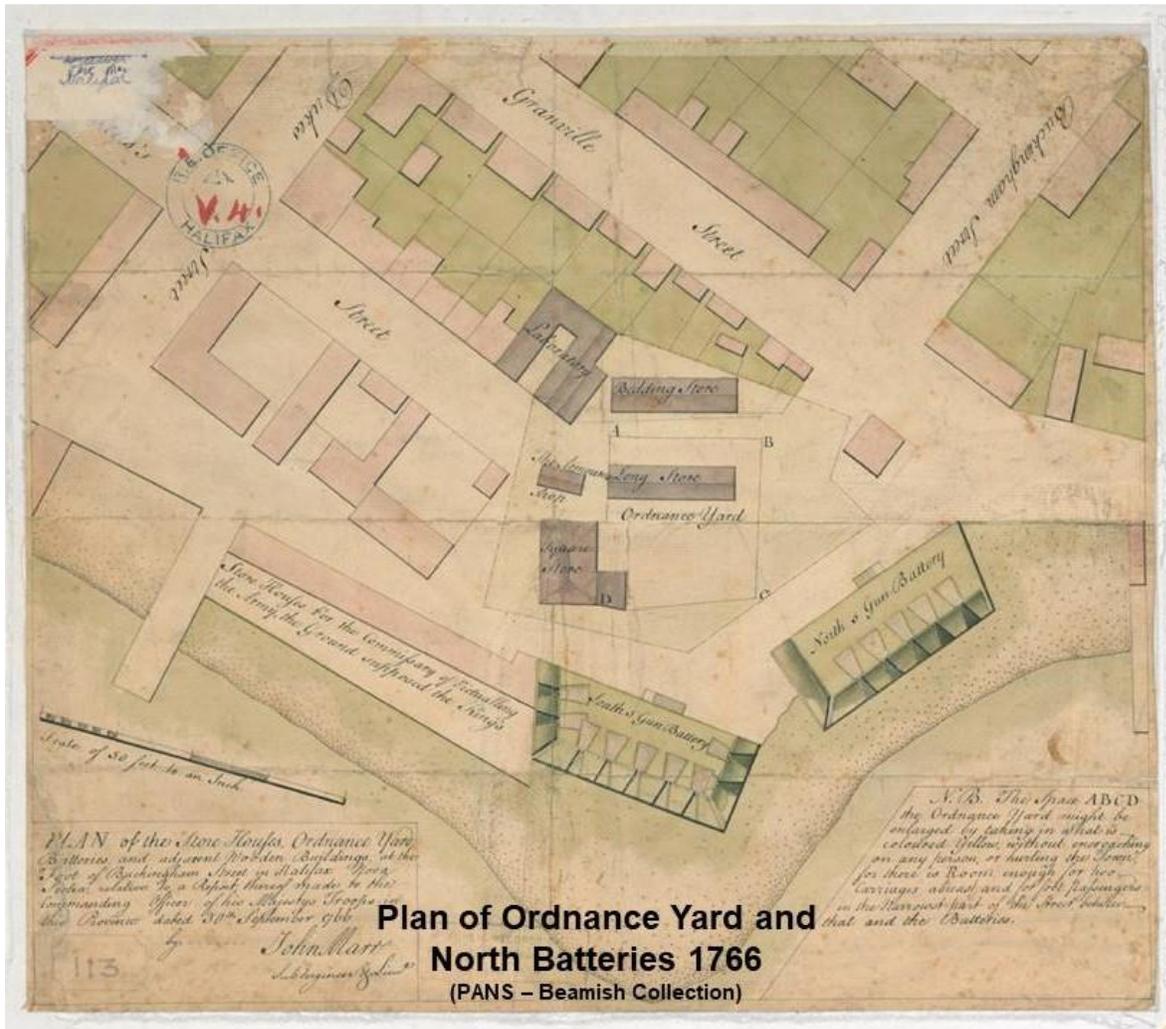


The North Battery consisted of two 130-foot long sections with a total of 12 guns, facing northeast and east. It was located at the Ordnance Yard, where the Marriott Harbourfront Hotel now sits.

The Middle Battery, also called the Governor's Battery from its proximity to the first Governor's residence, where Province House now stands, was 230 feet long and mounted 15 guns. It was located where the Queen's Marque development is currently being built.

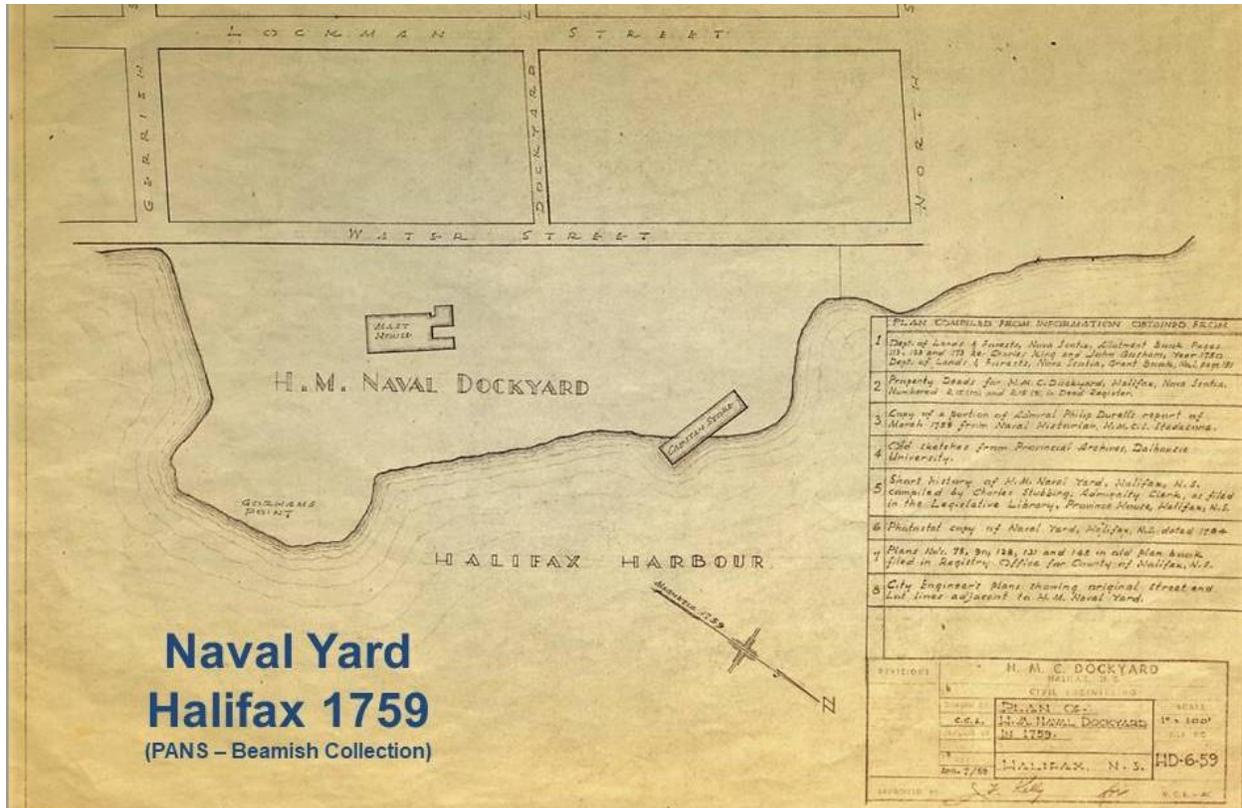
The South Battery, 280 feet long, with 15 guns, stood about where the Waterfront Warehouse is currently located.

Below is a plan drawing from 1766, 11 years after they were built, depicting the North Battery and the Ordnance Yard, again, where the Marriott Harbourfront Hotel now stands.

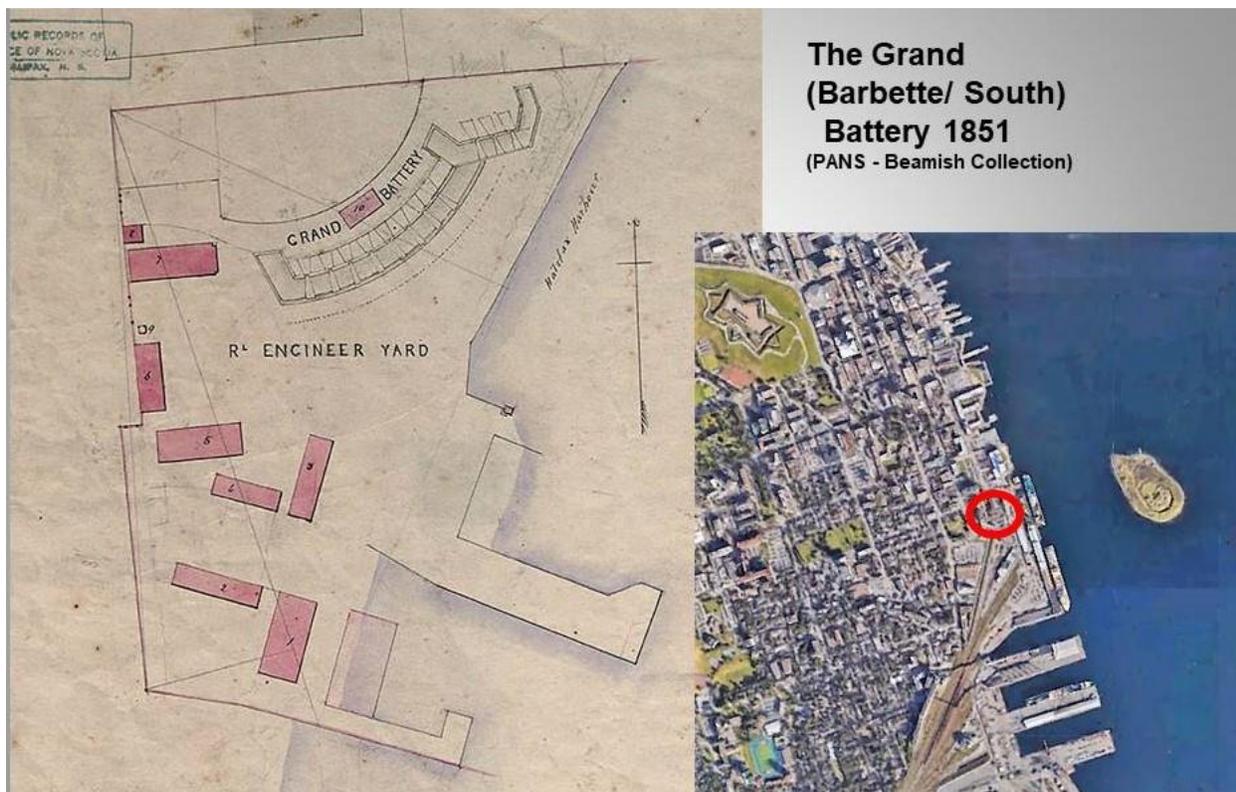


These batteries were built of logs, square timbers, earth, sand; they made a powerful defensive structure with a total of 42 x 24-pounder cannons, which could fire effectively about 800 yards into the harbour.

The Seven Years War started the year after the waterfront batteries were built, in 1756. As a result there was much additional military infrastructure built. Shortly afterwards, in 1758 Fortress Louisburg was taken again by the British, and the campaign moved up the St Lawrence River towards Quebec.

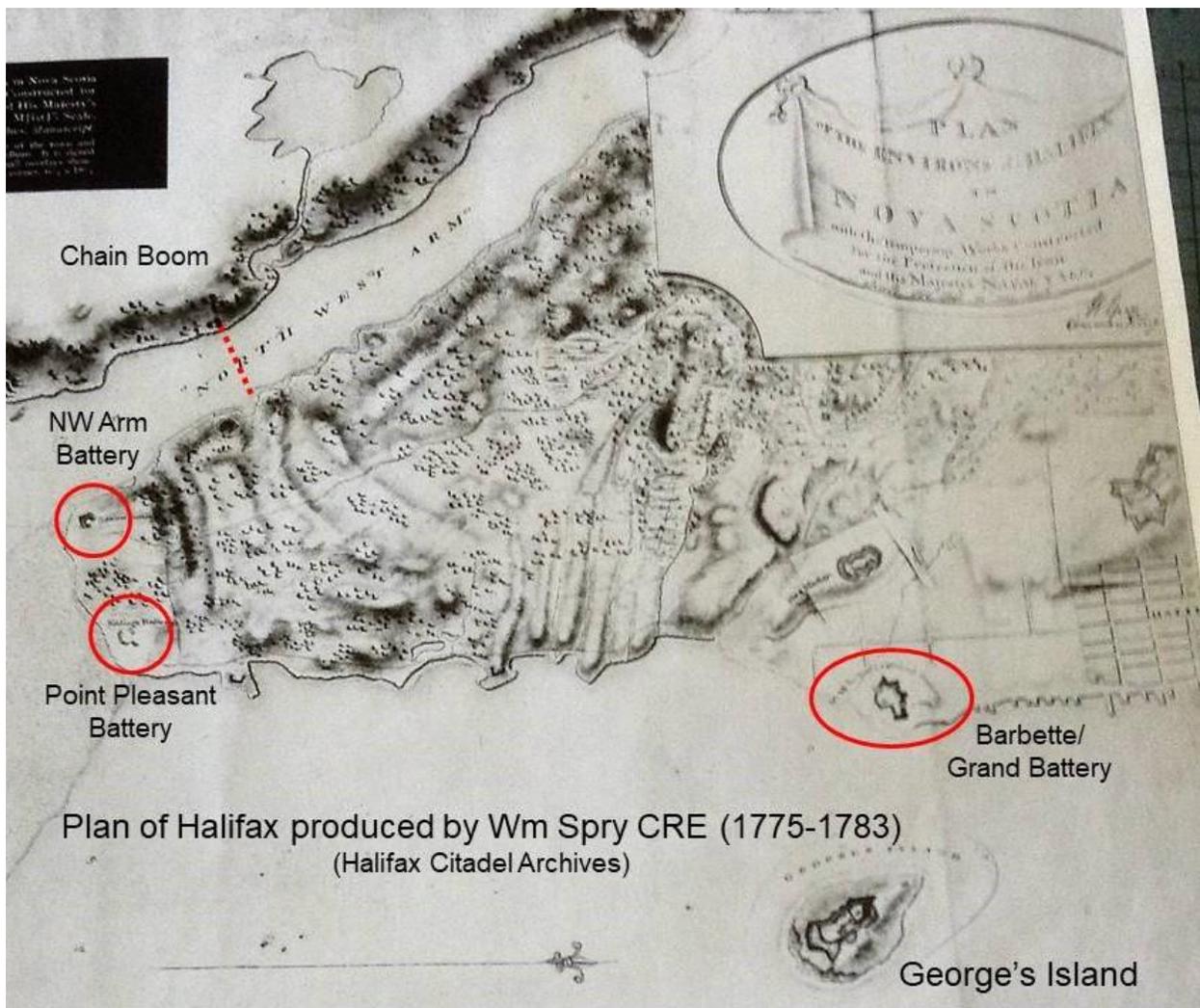


In 1759 a Naval Yard was established to the north of the town. It would have been located about where the large Fleet Maintenance Facility now located in the Naval Dockyard. This marked the beginnings of a naval support presence in Halifax that endures today.



In 1761 a small Barbette Battery of 3 x 24-pounders was built on the Halifax shoreline directly across from and in support of George's Island for defence of western channel (where the Westin Nova Scotian Hotel is now).

A major scare occurred towards the end of the Seven Years War in 1762 when French forces captured St John's Newfoundland – this triggered concern in Halifax and a flurry of work to strengthen the defences, in case an invasion of Halifax was to follow.



- The armament of the Barbette Battery on the Halifax shore across from George's Island increased to 7 x 24-pounders (from 3) (this emplacement is variously referred to as the South Battery, Maclean's Battery, Principal Battery, and finally the Grand Battery)
- Point Pleasant Battery was erected, with 8 x 24-pounders to defend main channel approach to the harbour; and
- Northwest Arm Battery, with 10 x 9-pounders was built to defend the Northwest Arm, along with a chain and timber boom stretched across the Arm to prevent enemy sailing up the arm and landing an invasion force on the western side of peninsula.

Royal Navy



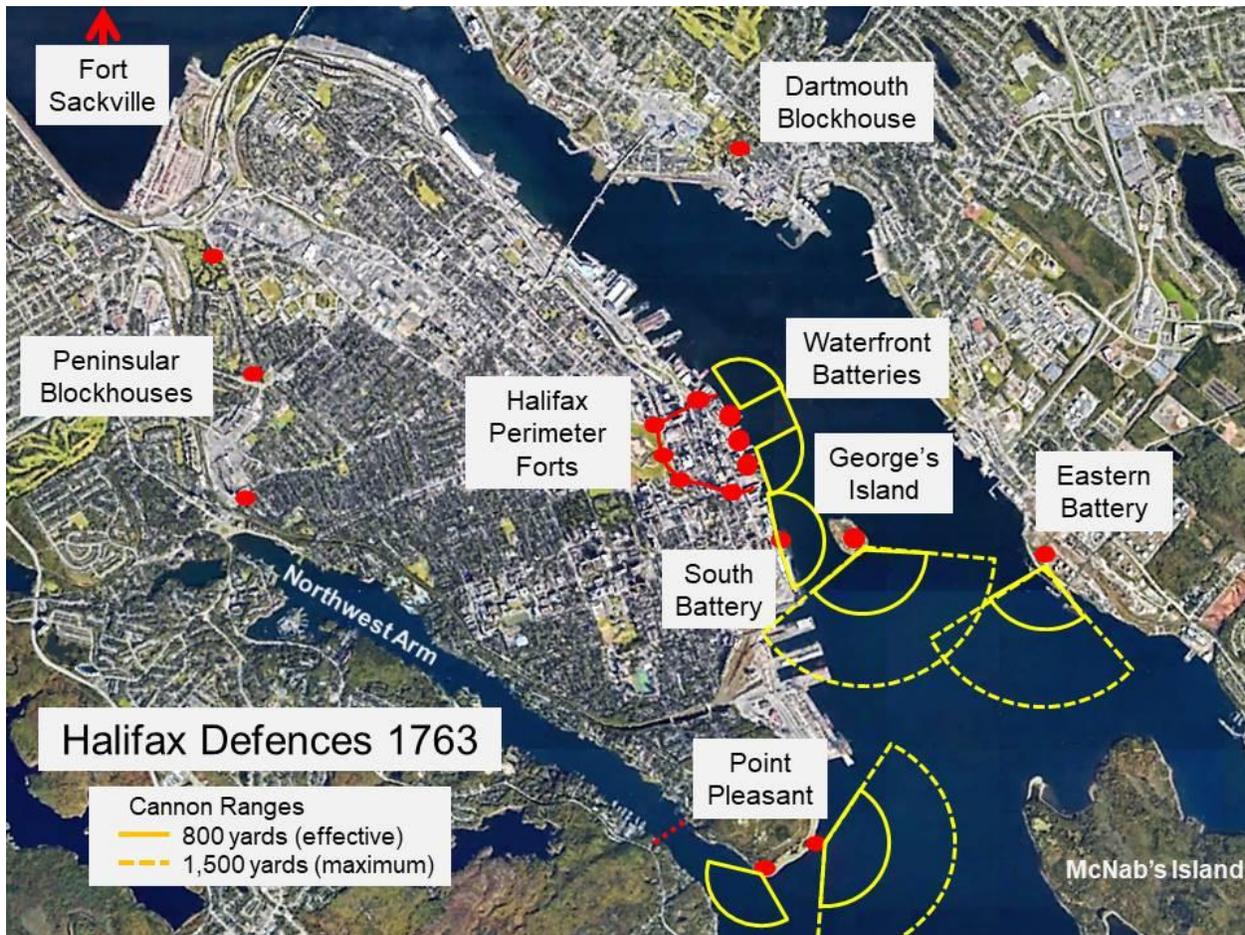
Sloop (8 guns)



Third Rate Ship of the Line
(70 guns)

- An armed sloop was positioned by the chain boom to defend it, while a second sloop was stationed in Eastern Passage to guard that entrance, and Admiral Colville's 70-gun flagship HMS *Northumberland* was anchored mid-channel between Point Pleasant and McNab's Island to guard the main channel along with Point Pleasant Battery.

Here therefore is a summary (below) of the Halifax defences built during the first 14 years after the first British settlers arrived in 1749. The yellow arcs show the range of the cannons in the shore batteries (dashed line represent maximum range, solid line effective)



In 1763, with the end of the Seven Years War and the elimination of the immediate French threat, further work on Halifax's defences halted. They were allowed to fall into disrepair for the next 12 years until the start of the American Revolution in 1775. With the loss of its American Colonies, Britain would transform Halifax into the main base and headquarters for the Royal Navy's North American and West Indies Squadron, with an accompanying massive effort over the next century to fortify the harbour against enemy attack.

Conclusion

As I mentioned earlier, due to their basic construction, subsequent neglect, and the growth of Halifax over the years, most of the early fortifications I have described did not last for long.

Some disappeared altogether as the town grew into a city on top of them, such as the forts and shore batteries surrounding the town core, and the Peninsular forts.

Others would be rebuilt many times, and their original locations would transform into the sites of more modern structures such as the Citadel itself, Fort Charlotte on George's Island, and the Point Pleasant Battery.

However, the remains of only one of the original forts can be still seen and visited today, as it remains in a very similar form to when it was first built in 1762.



Northwest Arm Battery



The next time you happen to find yourselves in Point Pleasant Park, search out the Northwest Arm Battery down at the Western tip of the point, set back from the shoreline and hidden behind the red roofed gazebo.

Here you will find a large cleared area, with earthen walls and gun embrasures still visible, and a couple of smooth bore cannons on display.

The last remaining original fort from Halifax's earliest years.