



Defending the Halifax Naval Yard – Early Fortifications 1762-1815

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The Halifax Naval Yard was established in 1759 to support Royal Naval operations in the Northwestern Atlantic theatre during the Seven Years' War between Britain and France (1756-63). The recapture of the French fortress at Louisbourg in 1758 had opened the way for taking Quebec in 1759 and the eventual defeat of French forces in North America, for which Halifax became an important staging base. As the Naval Yard lay about half a mile north of the town and outside the town's existing defensive works, efforts were soon made to erect defenses around the Naval Yard itself. The impetus for constructing these works was the French capture of St. John's, Newfoundland in July 1762 during the Seven Years' War, and British fears of a pending French attack on Halifax.

The first structure intended specifically to defend the Naval Yard was *Maugher's Blockhouse*, built in 1762 on a small elevation near the foot of North Street, immediately north of the Naval Yard. Entrenched and occupied by a guard consisting of a sergeant and fourteen men, it likely fell into ruins a few years later.

With the end of the Seven Years' War in 1763 no further defensive works were considered necessary for the next twelve years until the start of the American Revolution in 1775. With American independence Halifax became the sole remaining British naval base on the eastern seaboard of North America. To better defend the Naval Yard from attack by land, three detached bastions were planned by William Spry CRE and erected in 1775. They were positioned about 300 yards inland from the Naval Yard and faced to the west and south-west. The southern bastion was located at the northwest corner of Gerrish and Brunswick Streets; the middle one, which contained a small blockhouse, was on the west side of Brunswick Street at the head of Artz Street, in the northeast corner of today's George Dixon Centre Park; and the northern bastion was at the southeast corner of Brunswick and North Streets.

Three additional blockhouses were constructed that same year, in 1775. Two small ones were positioned just outside the landward corners of the Naval Yard; one at the foot of Gerrish Street and the other at the foot of North Street. Each was 20 feet

square, accommodated 20 men and was designed to enfilade fire along the front of the palisade wall that enclosed the Yard. A third, larger blockhouse 30 feet square named *Fort Coote* was built on a small hill north of the Naval Yard, about where the shore office building in HMC Dockyard is now located, to landward of Jetty NJ just inside the Admiral's Gate. Also accommodating 20 men, it was surrounded by a redoubt about 90 feet square and mounted three 24-pounder canons.

In 1778 a more extensive fortification named *Fort Needham* was built on a hilltop $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile northwest of the Naval Yard, where the park bearing the same name is today. Intended to bolster the Naval Yard defences, *Fort Needham* consisted of a small five-sided earthen redoubt measuring 100 feet across its rear side and 75 feet along its four forward sides. Access was via a wooden drawbridge across a ditch on the rear side. Within the fort were two barracks to house 50 men, and armament consisted of four cannons, two on each of the two front faces. See also the separate entry on *Fort Needham* on the HMHPS web site.

The 1775 blockhouses and detached bastions clustered around the landward side of the Naval Yard fell into disrepair after the American Revolution ended in 1783. However, renewed warfare between Britain and both the United States and France between 1793 and 1815 saw further efforts made to protect the harbour and Naval Yard. Most new defensive works were pushed further out towards the harbour approaches and entrance, such as at Point Pleasant, York Redoubt and on McNab's Island, however *Fort Duncan* was thrown up on the Dartmouth shore across from *Fort Coote* in about 1793, and *Fort Needham* was rebuilt in 1807-08 in the same location as the earlier version.

Fort Duncan was an earthen redoubt about 160 feet square. Named after Commander Henry Duncan RN, Commissioner of the Halifax Naval Yard between 1782 and 1798, it was likely armed with a few 24-pounder cannons, similar to *Fort Coote*, with which it was designed to cooperate in defending the Naval Yard from seaward incursions. It was located roughly in the area between today's Windmill Road and the railway line running along the Dartmouth shoreline, just northwest of the Angus L. Macdonald Bridge. Both *Fort Duncan* and *Fort Coote* were dismantled by 1808, and the small hill on which *Fort Coote* stood was levelled to expand the dockyard later in the 19th century.

A pentagon of similar scale to its earlier version, the rebuilt *Fort Needham* mounted four 12-pounder cannons on traversing carriages and contained a barracks for 60 men. In 1808 *Fort McAlpine* was added, about 400 feet northwest of *Fort Needham*. A blockhouse armed with two 12-pounder carronades, *Fort McAlpine* was positioned to command the Windsor Road approach and a hollow where an enemy might approach

under cover; it was at about the location of the current Napa Auto Parts store on Strawberry Hill Road. *Fort Needham* and *Fort McAlpine* were finally abandoned after 1815, the end of The War of 1812, and quickly fell into disrepair. Of the defensive ring of fortifications surrounding the original Naval Yard nothing now remains.

Reference: Piers, Harry. The Evolution of the Halifax Fortress 1749-1928. The Public Archives of Nova Scotia, Halifax, 1947.