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The John Hunt Map of the First English Colony in New England

Jeffrey P. Brain

A map of Fort St. George, the first official English settlement in New England, is proved to be a remarkably accurate document. Drawn by a draftsman who was obviously trained in state-of-the-art military cartography, it is a testament to the thoughtful planning of the adventure and the competence of the principal participants, as well as a reliable guide to archaeological investigation.

Un plan du Fort St. George, le premier établissement Anglais de la Nouvelle-Angleterre, s'est avéré être un document d'une exactitude remarquable. Créé par un dessinateur sans aucun doute formé dans la tradition des cartographes militaires, ce plan témoigne de la planification réfléchie de l'aventure ainsi que des compétences des principaux participants. Le plan constitue de plus un guide fiable pour les interventions archéologiques sur ce site.

In late August 1607, a small band of English colonists landed at the mouth of the Kennebec River in Maine to establish the first English colony in New England (Thayer 1892; Quinn and Quinn 1983; Brain 2003). Known as the Popham Colony, it was sister colony to Jamestown and was intended as the northern branch of a coordinated geopolitical effort by England to claim that part of North America lying between Spanish Florida and French Canada. Both colonies were sent out by the Virginia Company— Virginia being the name applied to this entire coast by the English since the days of Sir Walter Raleigh—and were intended to be the initial beachheads of English domination. As such, they were primarily military outposts designed to defend against attack from both local native inhabitants as well as European antagonists. Once defense had been established, the mandate of the colonists was to explore the new country for exploitable resources and also find the long-sought northwest passage through the continent to the Pacific Ocean. Both colonies were similar in size and composition, consisting of just over 100 men the majority of whom were soldiers, and were comparably equipped. Both sailed forth in high hopes, confident that they possessed the best human and technological resources that England could muster for the challenge. The Popham Colony, however, failed after a year and the colonists returned to England in the fall of 1608. Unlike Jamestown, which just managed to survive after horrible trials and thus became the first permanent English colony in America, the Popham

Colony has become a mere footnote, its place in history taken by the Pilgrims thirteen years later.

The most important historical legacy of the Popham Colony is a picture-map of their fort that was drawn on-site by one of the colonists, John Hunt (FIG. 1). Entitled *The Draught of St Georges fort Erected by Captayne George Popham Esquier one the entry of the famous River of Sagadahock [Kennebec] in virginia taken out by John Hunt the viii day of October in the yeare of our Lorde 1607*, it is the only detailed plan of an initial English colony in the Americas that is known to have survived. It is of unique value for describing the appearance of one of these early settlements, but its potential depends upon its authenticity and accuracy. Both these attributes have been questioned by scholars because according to the legend the map was drawn less than two months after the colonists landed and it is quite impossible for them to have completed such an elaborate facility within that time.

The authenticity of the map is beyond question. Its pedigree is impeccable and there are intrinsic details that attest to its genuineness. The map was discovered in the General Archives in Simancas, Spain in 1888 by a researcher in the employ of J. L. M. Curry, United States Minister Plenipotentiary to the Court of Spain. Accompanying the map was a letter to Philip III of Spain from Don Pedro de Zuñiga, Ambassador to England. Dated 10 September 1608, the letter refers to the map which the ambassador apparently had acquired through his efficient espionage

Figure 1. (opposite page) Picture map of Fort St. George (Archivo General de Simancas, MPD, 19, 163; original size: 11" x 17"). The map exhibits several innovations that occurred in military cartography during the late 16th century, such as a detailed plan view drawn to a consistent scale that was probably based upon an instrument survey. The intrinsic value of the map is manifold. It is a technical, military, social and political document. It was certainly a master plan for the builders that showed the colonists' aspirations rather than what had actually been completed on October 8, 1607. Its overly finished appearance was also a conscious attempt at propaganda intended to encourage investors back in England. Moreover, it was probably expected to serve an even wider audience as a statement of England's claim to this piece of North America where the presence of a fine new fort would intimidate potential enemies. Perhaps not so intentionally, the map reveals the state of the art of military engineering as practiced in the recent Irish War. It also provides a glimpse of 1607 colonial society: the president's house (no. 1 on map) is appropriately situated in the elevated citadel area, but the house of the second in command who was socially more prominent, being the nephew of the great Sir Walter Raleigh, is the largest private residence within the fort (no. 3 on map).

system, perhaps from an unnamed 'person who had been there' (i.e., in Virginia). Another letter in the archives from Zuñiga, dated 15 January 1609, reports the failure and abandonment of the Popham Colony and at that point the map must have been deemed irrelevant and was deposited in the archives where it lay forgotten for the next 280 years. Thus by a curious twist of fate Spanish espionage and bureaucracy preserved the only detailed visual record of an initial English colonial site on North American shores.

The Honorable Curry provided a copy of the map to the American historian Alexander Brown who first published it in 1890 (Brown 1890: 190).

Maine historians, who had long and incorrectly argued over the location of Fort St. George, were struck by the odd configuration of the fort which they surmised must have been built to fit a specific piece of land. They immediately identified this unique topography at the tip of Sabino Head on the west side of the mouth of the Kennebec River (Hill 1891; Thayer 1892: 152-156). The correspondence between the fortification outline, as well as natural details drawn on the map, and the topographic features that are still preserved to this day is abundantly evident (FIG. 2). The plan not only fits just one specific spot, but clearly must have been drawn on-site by someone who had

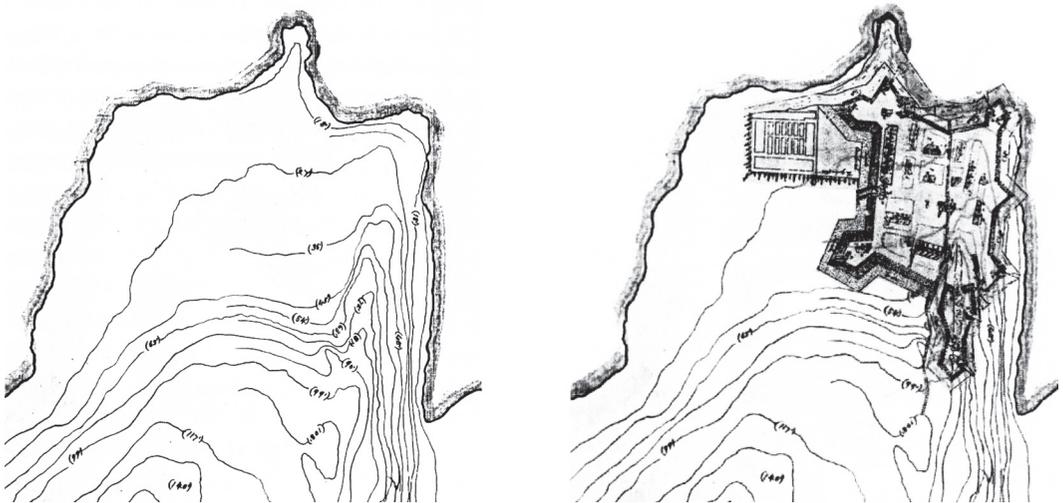


Figure 2. U. S. Army Corps of Engineers 1865 contour map of Sabino Head (National Archives RG 77, DR 9, SH24) (left) and same with John Hunt's 1607 picture map of Fort St. George superimposed on it at the same scale (right). The fit of the Hunt plan on this particular piece of land amply demonstrates that Fort St. George was designed to take advantage of the local topographic features. Especially to be noted is the placement of the garden area on the flat terrace to the west and the southern citadel extension on the high rock ledge.

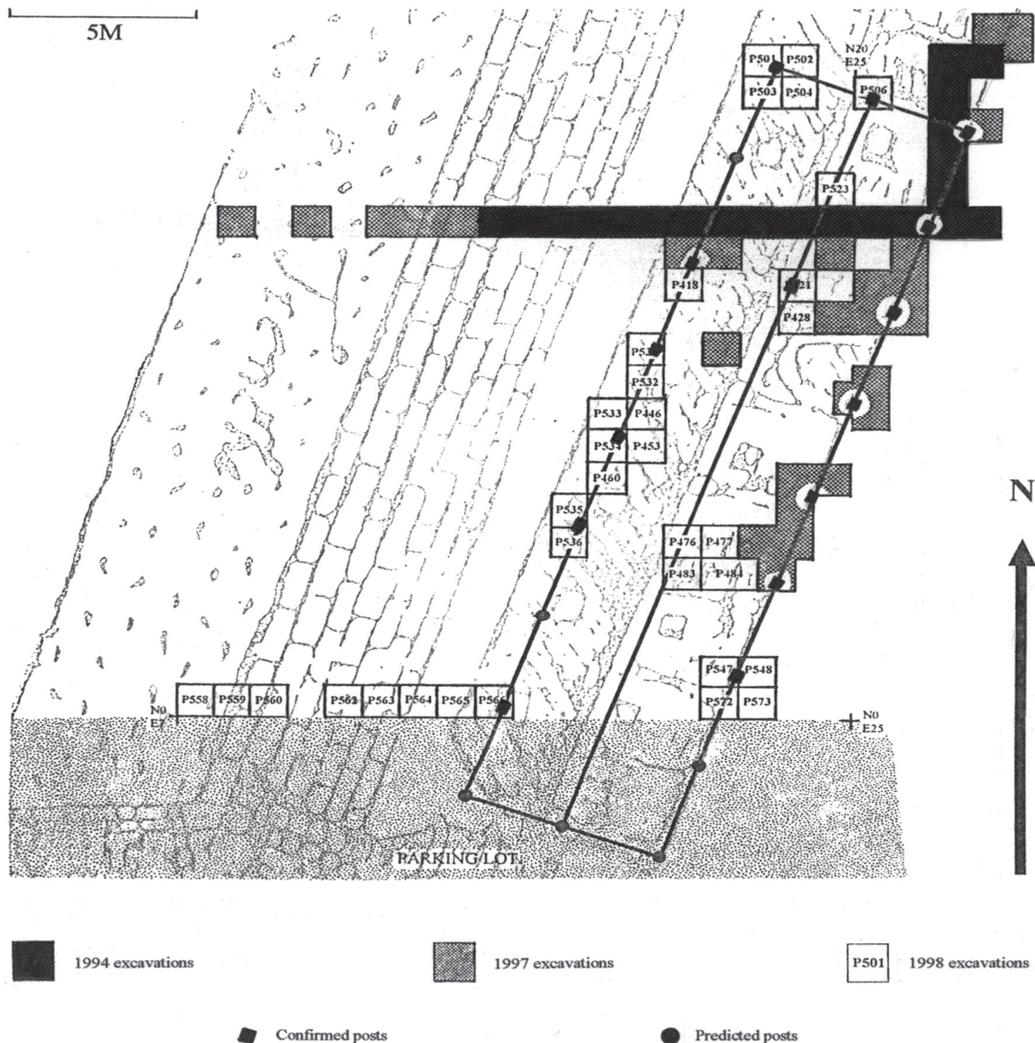


Figure 3. The 1994, 1997, and 1998 excavation plans at the location of the Fort St. George storehouse using John Hunt's drawing as a guide. The crucial first step was the precise placement of the map on the topography. Once the storehouse was located, it became the reference point for finding other buildings and features (Brain 2007: 23-103).

actually observed the landforms and the construction of the fort.

The draftsman is presumed to be the John Hunt identified in the title inscription cited above. The actual phrase "taken out by John Hunt" is interpreted to mean that Hunt not only physically removed the map (returning to England on one of the ships that had brought the colonists, the *Mary* and *John*, which sailed on October 8th) but that it was also the result of his observations and creation.¹ It would

make no sense to credit a mere courier and not the map maker. About John Hunt, himself, we know nothing for certain. There is, however, some intriguing circumstantial evidence which strengthens the case for his being a cartographer. The Popham Colony is named after Sir John Popham, the chief financial investor in the venture, and George Popham, the first president of the colony and Sir John's nephew. Accompanying George to Virginia was his nephew, Edward Popham, Sir John's great

nephew. Family participation was obviously encouraged; in fact, most of the principals involved in the colony were related to the Pophams by blood or marriage. It is thus of considerable interest that Edward Popham's sister, Katherine, was married to a John Hunt (Popham 1752). It cannot be established that this was the same John Hunt, but the case is strengthened by the fact that Edward, himself, was married to the daughter of Richard Bartlett (*ibid.*). One of the most famous of the military cartographers with the English forces during the Irish War of 1593-1603 was one Richard Bartlett (Hayes-McCoy 1964; Klein 1995: 131-133). Again, we cannot prove that this was the same Bartlett, but by now the coincidences are becoming too close to be ignored. Furthermore, the Hunt map shares many stylistic details with known Bartlett maps and it is clear that Hunt was influenced by, if not trained in, the school of military cartography epitomized by Bartlett.

These maps incorporate several later sixteenth-century innovations, the most important of which is that they were based upon surveys—perhaps made with instruments such as the compass, circumferentor, and plane table—and were drawn according to a consistent scale which is graphically illustrated on the map by a bar or other device subdivided according to standard units of measurement (Hayes-McCoy 1964: xv; Pollak 1991: xxviii; Harvey 1993: 27-41; Hindle 1998: 30). The maps are also characterized by the fact that they are artistic picture-maps drawn from a bird's-eye view (Hayes-McCoy 1964: xi; Klein 1995: 133; Hindle 1998: 54). Hunt's map is a somewhat naive rendering of this technique which might be called a bird's-eye plan. The view of the entire fort is from above and the fortification trace is shown in plan. The buildings within the fort are accurately placed in relation to each other according to the scale, but they are depicted as they would have been seen from ground level, from scattered viewpoints, and at an angle that shows at least two sides of the structure. The latter artifice presents a three dimensional aspect that details both elevation and plan, but is not drawn in perspective which is properly done from a single slightly elevated viewpoint and a scale that varies with distance (Hayes-McCoy 1964: xi; Hindle 1998: 54). The result is awkward and rather disorienting

to the eye, but it allows the determination of precise dimensions and spatial relationships on the ground.

The general accuracy of the map was confirmed when the remains of Fort St. George were discovered on Sabino Head through archaeological exploration. Excavations in 1994-2005 revealed not only that the overall plan is precisely as drawn by Hunt but that the buildings within the fort were drawn to scale and placed in exact relationship to each other (Brain 2007). The map is so reliable that using the scale of feet and paces the excavators could go to a specific location within the fort and expect to find evidence of the feature drawn on the map at that spot. Hunt drew the storehouse in such meticulous detail that it was even possible to predict within centimeters where the individual wall posts would be found (FIG. 3). In those cases where the excavations revealed no evidence of a feature shown on the map then it could be interpreted as part of the master plan that was never constructed. The existing map, then, is an incredibly accurate portrayal of the design of Fort St. George and the buildings within it that were completed or under construction in early October 1607. This unusually dependable document may be confidently used for architectural reconstruction, as well as a trustworthy guide to future archaeological excavation at Fort St. George, and perhaps other early English colonial sites.

The John Hunt map also lends itself to broader historical interpretations. The additional buildings and embellishments indicate that it was more than just a master plan. These details were added to the map in order to give the fort a fully finished appearance. In this form it served two purposes: first, as a piece of propaganda designed to encourage investors back home, and, second, as a defiant statement to other European powers that the English had established a presence and had every intention of staying in place. It may even be that this copy was intentionally betrayed to the Spanish in order to ensure that the message was received. As such a harbinger, it becomes an iconic image for the birth of the British overseas empire (Cumming, Skelton and Quinn 1971:257-258; Mancall 1995; Pagden 1998; Cormack 2001), even though the colony itself was abandoned almost before the Spanish received the map.

Although the Popham Colony was a contemporary failure, the attempt left a first footprint on these shores, the archaeological and historical value of which is immensely enhanced by the unique legacy of John Hunt.

Endnotes

¹ See the Oxford English Dictionary for contemporary meanings of 'take' and 'take out' that include observation, measuring, drawing and copying. The latter meaning is especially pertinent because the surviving map is so neat and finely drawn that it must be considered a cleaned up and embellished copy of the original rough field sketch and working notes.

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