

THE HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY OF FORT DECATUR: AN UNDISTURBED WAR OF 1812 OCCUPATION IN LEDYARD, CONNECTICUT

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While at a ball in Washington, DC in December of 1812, President James Madison's wife, Dolly, received a communique relaying that Captain Stephen Decatur, as a result of masterful seamanship, tactical surprise, and grand heroism, had captured an important British warship, the HMS *Macedonian*, 500 miles south of the Azores. The HMS *Macedonian* was escorted back to New York harbor by Decatur's ship, the USS *United States*, for repairs after having been at sea for a considerable time. When Decatur disembarked at New York, a large spontaneous reception was held to exalt the Navy's newest hero. By late spring of 1813, repairs and refits to the *United States* and the newly renamed USS *Macedonian* were completed and the ships were once again prepared for action. Decatur, now elevated to the rank of Commodore, set sail with the *United States* and the *Macedonian*, as well as a sloop-of-war of 18 guns named the USS *Hornet*. Decatur attempted to run the British blockade of New York, but could not pass Sandy Hook due to the presence of the vastly superior British fleet. Instead, the three ships in the squadron sailed through Hell's Gate and out into Long Island Sound, where Decatur aimed to enter the Atlantic between Montauk Point and Block Island.

Upon reaching the eastern limits of the Long Island Sound, Decatur was stopped in his tracks once again when he and his crew sighted a squadron of ships under the command of Sir Thomas Hardy. They included the HMS *Ramillies* and the HMS *Valiant*, both 74-gun third class British ships-of-the-line, as well as two frigates, the HMS *Acasta* and HMS *Orpheus*. Decatur quickly surmised the disparity in the two forces and on June 1, 1813, made a run for New London, which was under the protection of the guns of Fort Griswold and Fort Trumbull. Several days later, Decatur thought he saw an opening in the British line and made ready to sail the *United States*, the *Macedonian*, and the *Hornet* back out of New London to head for the Atlantic. Before getting far he noted the presence the *Ramillies*, not far behind the *Valiant*. Decatur realized he was again out matched, and he returned to the safety of New London Harbor.

By mid-June of 1813, Decatur understood he could not break through the British blockade of New London and decided to alter his position. The *United States*, the *Macedonian*, and the *Hornet* were all lightened and sailed across the shallows of the Thames River upstream approximately eight miles to Gales Ferry in Ledyard. There, sheltered behind Allyn's Point, Commodore Decatur's squadron anchored. Decatur further strengthened his position by erecting a fortification, today called Fort Decatur. This defensive position was established on the crest of Dragon Hill (today Mount Decatur), which provided excellent views of the Thames River and approaches from both land and sea. Decatur ordered cannons be brought up to the fortification from the ship. This arduous task was done by a contingent of his men and teams of oxen. Local tradition also holds that Decatur's men drove iron stakes and rings into the bedrock on each side of the river and suspended an iron chain across the narrows to prevent British vessels from entering the area where Decatur and his men were entrenched.

While bottled up near Allyn's Point, Decatur and his men did not languish, but kept busy making preparations for returning down the Thames River and back into the Long Island Sound to rejoin the war. Between June and October of 1813, Decatur kept his men in a high state of readiness and frequently conducted maneuvers and live fire training exercises so that any sudden attack by the British on their position could be repelled. Decatur even established a makeshift school at Gales Ferry for the teaching of his officers and midshipmen. He also kept a garrison at the fort and his row guard on high alert for any sudden attack by the British.

In October of 1813, wanting to return his men and ships to the open sea, Commodore Decatur led the *United States*, the *Macedonian*, and the *Hornet* back down the Thames River in hopes of escaping the British

blockade of New London that had sidelined them from the war. By mid-November, the three ships had safely returned to New London Harbor. They remained in the harbor for nearly a month, when Decatur finally determined that December 12th would be the night to break through the British line. As he moved his ships southward, Decatur reported seeing “blue lights” on either bank of the harbor and reported that they represented warning signals to the British of his intent. In the days and weeks following the incident, tensions ran high in New London and Decatur realized his presence there was a liability. As a result, he once again turned his ships northward and returned to a point on the Thames River to the north of Fort Decatur and the iron chain, where he had the masts and yard arms removed from the *United States* and the *Macedonian*. They were stowed below decks and the two ships were laid up side by side along the river’s edge. Only the *Hornet* remained ready to sail; it eventually slipped the British blockade in November of 1814. Shortly thereafter, Decatur returned to New York by land, and the effects of the war in New London were all but over.

Nearly 85 year later, on February 28, 1898, the Belton Allyn Society, G.A.R. (Grand Army of the Republic) of Gales Ferry memorialized the location of Fort Decatur and the events that took place there during the War of 1812. They commissioned the engraving of a large boulder on site with the following: *This boulder was marked by the Belton Allyn Society of the G.A.R. of Gales Ferry as being the northern boundary of Fort Decatur that was erected in the years 1813 and 1814 to protect Decatur’s fleet from the British. February 28, 1898.* The location of the boulder as the northern extent of the fort must have been correct because only three years later, in 1901, John Avery in his *History of Ledyard, 1650 to 1900* reported that the “old fortification is still extant, though in quite a dilapidated condition.” Avery went on to describe the fort, saying “One side, fronting eastward, is 130 feet, more or less, in length. Another, fronting toward the southwest, and lying nearly at right angles with the river, is about 110 feet long. The remaining side, parallel with the river, is about 90 feet long. The fortification has long borne the name of Fort Decatur.”

In December of 2021, 208 years after Decatur attempted to run the blockade at New London and 123 years after the fort was recognized by the Belton Allyn Society, G.A.R. of Gales Ferry, Heritage Consultants, LLC (Heritage) returned to the location to conduct archaeological investigations consisting of a visual reconnaissance of the upper limits of Mount Decatur, shovel testing, metal detection, and ground penetrating radar (GPR) survey. Almost immediately, visual reconnaissance of the area resulted in the relocation of the boulder inscribed by the Belton Allyn Society, G.A.R. of Gales Ferry. Pedestrian survey to the south of the boulder revealed a series of low ditches and stone work in roughly the shape of a diamond. Inspection of the fort remains also resulted in the identification of a series of stacked stones forming a circle at the southern tip of the fort. This feature was identified as a protective bastion for the fort and appears to have been designed to repel attacks from the south. The wall ditches were relatively shallow and measured approximately 1 meter (3.3 feet) in width. Finally, the southeastern wall of the fort was located atop a sheer bedrock outcrop measuring approximately 2.4 meters (8 feet) in height. From a visual perspective, the location and configuration of the fortification was well defined and appeared to remain in a good state of preservation (Figure 1).

Once Fort Decatur was identified, Heritage archaeologists fanned out and examined the remainder of the Mount Decatur area. Inspection of the area to the northwest of the fort revealed the presence of a large glacial erratic that had a semicircle of stones attached to its northern edge (Figure 2). The semicircle consisted of two to three courses of fieldstones placed strategically to provide what appeared to be the base of a protective structure. Numerous other stones appeared to have fallen downslope from this structure as well. This small structure measured approximately 2 x 2.5 meters (6.6 x 8.2 feet) in area. Because of its location on the northern slopes of Mount Decatur and its defensive character, this structure was determined to represent possible sentry or guard post that was associated with the use and occupation of Fort Decatur.

Heritage archaeologists excavated 50 x 50 centimeter (20 x 20 inch) shovel tests near the sentry/guard post and the fort. A shovel test in the center of the North sentry/guard post yielded 12 pieces of daub (Figure 3),

charcoal, a machine cut nail, and two kaolin pipe bowl fragments that cross mended. The pipe bowl fragments could not be dated specifically, but they contain an embossed eagle and shield, which suggest that they dated from the early National period and not the Colonial era. The dense charcoal fragments, recovered from within a relatively thick layer, suggests the presence of a hearth feature between the large glacial erratic and the ring of stones that formed the boundary of the sentry post. Based on the ring of stones, disassociated stones down slope, hearth, and daub artifacts, this sentry/guard post was likely a partially enclosed structure. Shovel tests placed within and near Fort Decatur itself yielded only three artifacts, including two precontact era quartz bifacial thinning flakes and a single shard of bottle glass. This was interesting because, despite the obvious presence of the fort as represented by the inscribed boulder, the trenchwork, and the southern bastion, very few artifacts were collected during shovel testing.

After collecting very few artifacts from shovel tests, Heritage archaeologists turned to metal detection. This proved to be a very fruitful avenue of research. Metal detectorists recovered numerous examples of clothing items, fasteners, military objects, and miscellaneous and unidentified items from Fort Decatur and the northwestern sentry/guard post. The clothing related items included a copper alloy buckle and a pewter button. The latter dates from ca., 1800 to 1830 and correlates well with the date of occupation of Fort Decatur. Fasteners collected from the Fort Decatur area, as well as near the sentry post, included whole and partial machine cut nails dating from the 19th century and an iron tack. The fasteners may have been used in the construction of the fort or the sentry/guard post. The metal detecting survey also resulted in the recovery of nearly two dozen examples of musket balls, some of which were consistent with the buck and ball loads commonly carried during the War of 1812 (Figure 4). Most of these were intact and may have represented accidental losses; however, some were flattened because they were fired and struck a hard object. As described above, Commodore Decatur purportedly trained cadets in the area, which may explain the impacted musket balls. Miscellaneous objects recovered from the area included an iron tube fragment and what appeared to be a complete copper tube measuring approximately 10 centimeters (4 inches) in length. The latter had a wooden dowel on its interior that clearly served some function. The exact purpose of the tubes remains unknown. The other miscellaneous objects recovered during the metal detecting survey included an early iron chain link, the purpose of which was unknown. Finally, the metal detecting survey result in the recovery of 12 unidentified objects made of iron, cast iron, and lead. Most of the artifacts described above were found clustered around the fort location and the sentry/guard post, indicating that these two locations were the primary activities areas of soldiers on Mount Decatur (Figure plan). These artifacts also clearly demonstrate that both locations were occupied by American soldiers. They are rare examples of items related to a military occupation dating from the War of 1812.

Heritage archaeologists also conducted limited GPR survey across Fort Decatur, including six transects that cut across the fortification. Of these, two transects proved particularly important for understanding the soil stratigraphy associated with construction of the fort. These two transects clearly displayed evidence of the trenches that comprised the fort. That is, vertical cuts in the stratigraphy are evident in both trench areas, as well as increased dielectric contrast. The latter was indicative of mixing of plowzone and subsoil sediments in the trench areas, which would be expected as the local soils were disturbed by trench excavation. The GPR survey also revealed important information on the eastern side of the fort, where it was built atop a bedrock outcrop. The bedrock outcrop was represented by the long linear reflection in the GPR data, and it was no doubt an important feature in determining the location of the fort by Decatur; it provided a naturally defensible position (Figure 5). The radar profile associated with the outcrop also may indicate that fill soils were deposited on top of the outcrop, as part of the fort construction, to elevate and level off this area. This soil may have been transported from a large borrow pit that is located approximately 17 meters (56 feet) to the west of the fort.

Heritage archaeologists also conducted an inspection of the shoreline of the Thames River. They identified a large iron ring pinned into a large glacial boulder along the waterline at Point Breeze on the opposite side of the river from Fort Decatur. The iron ring was situated to the north of a wharf the purportedly dates from

Colonial times. Unfortunately, no matching ring has been identified to date on the eastern side of the Thames River below Fort Decatur, but the find made by Heritage indicates that the story of Decatur stringing an iron chain across the river at the narrows may just be true.

The recent archaeological investigation of Fort Decatur and the various associated landscape features demonstrate that they exhibit a remarkable degree of depositional and historical integrity, perhaps the best preserved example of a War of 1812 fortification remaining in the nation. There is no other War of 1812 fortification within the United States that has such a short occupational history and is a single component site; nearly all other fortifications during this war were built or occupied on top of or within Revolutionary War era forts, or were reused during the Civil War. The Fort Decatur site is of National significance, and it bears witness to some of the important, but little remembered, events of the War of 1812 in New England. Heritage continues to work in tandem with the owner of the land on which Fort Decatur is located to preserve it in perpetuity so that the tangible remnants of the events that took place there endure into the future.

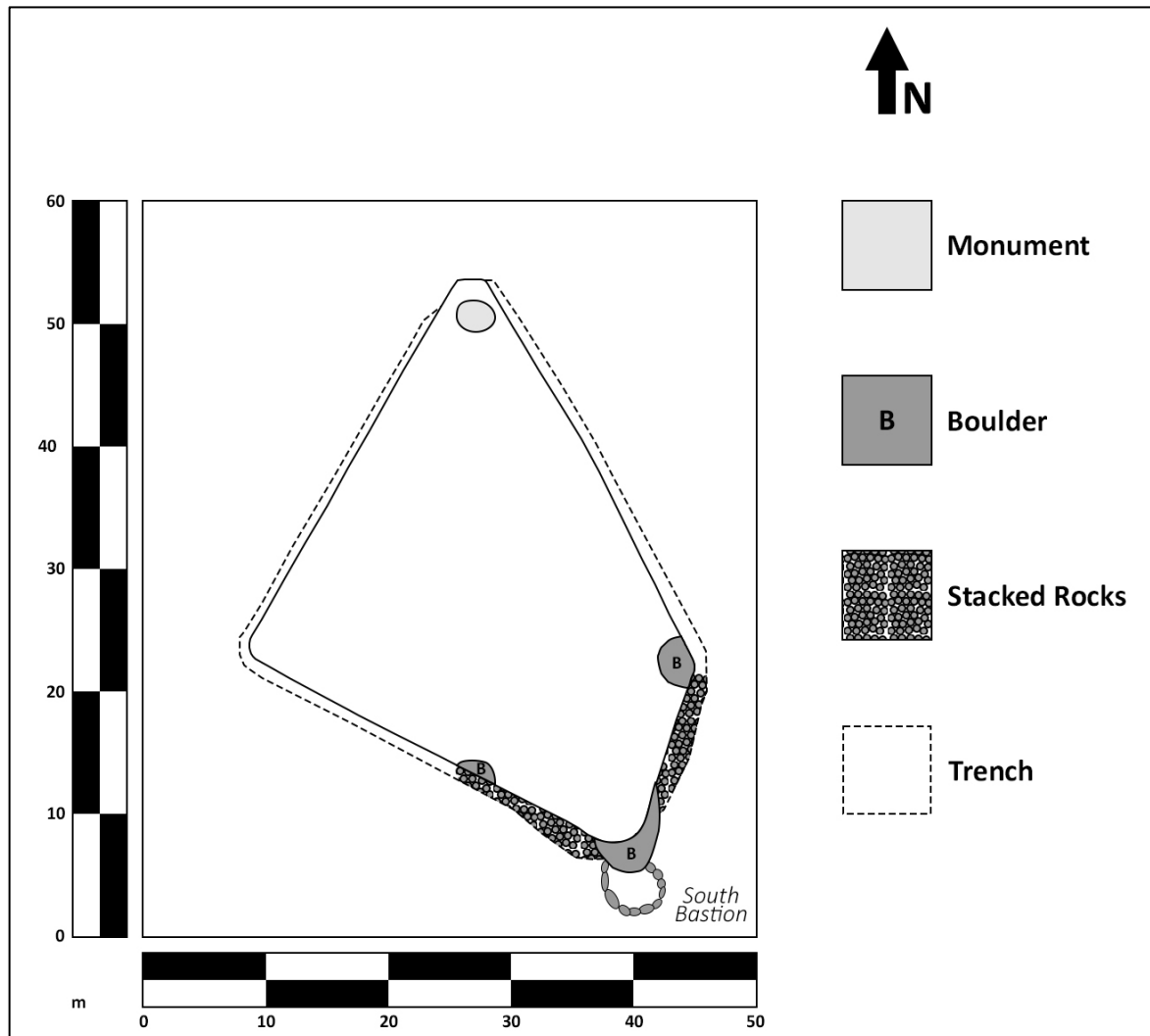


Figure 1: Plan drawing of Fort Decatur remnants.



Figure 2: Remnants of North Sentry post, on the northern slopes of Mount Decatur, looking east.



Figure 3: Daub recovered from STP within the North Sentry/Guard Post.



Figure 4: Buck and Ball lead shot recovered from Fort Decatur.

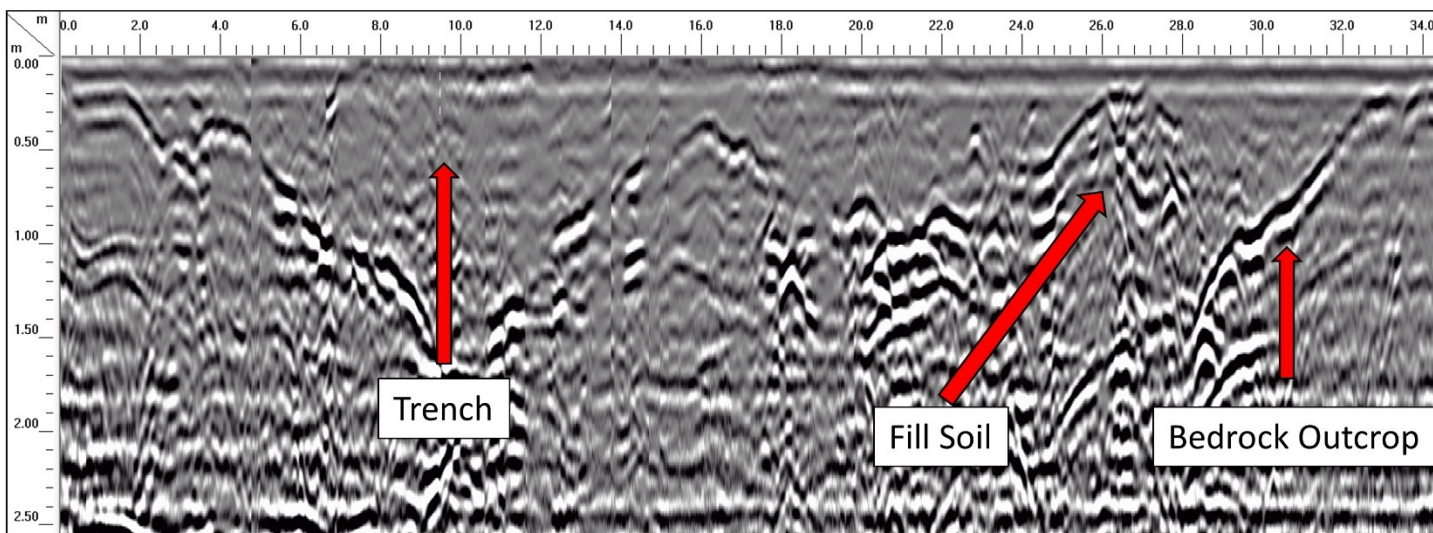
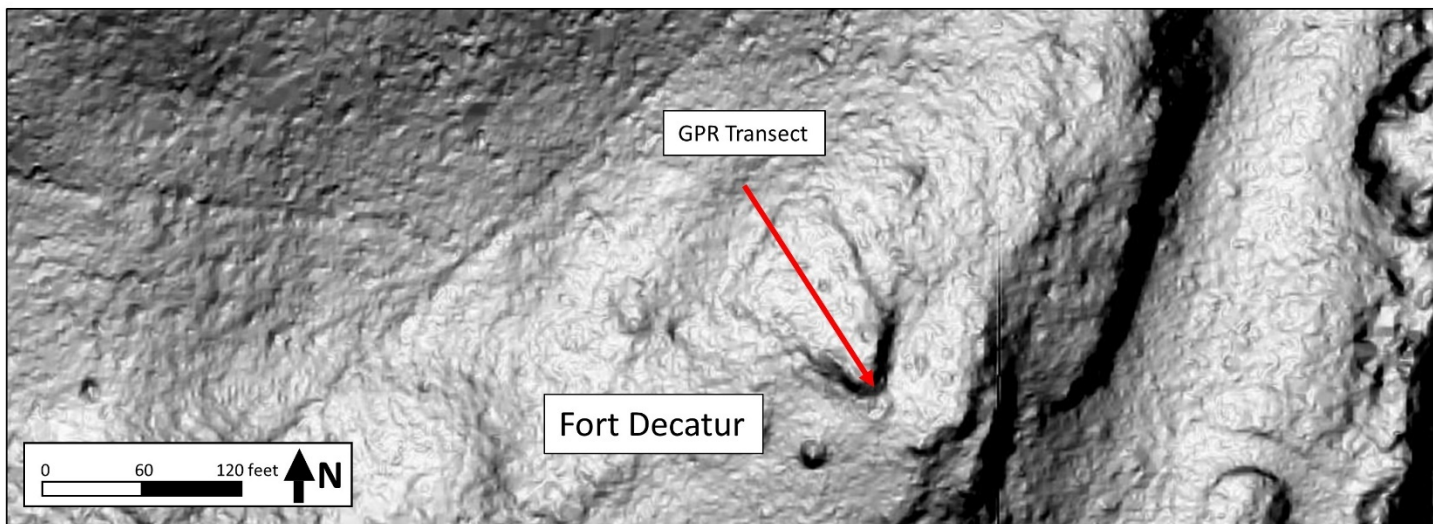


Figure 5: LiDAR map (above) of Fort Decatur, with relevant GPR transect indicated. GPR profile (bottom) displays interpretations of Fort Decatur Stratigraphy.