



A section of a corner post, two of the horizontal cross members, and a piece of planking in their original positions. Note the doveled joints and the angle at which the corner post is cut. The piece of chain over the top of the section of corner post was taken from the excavation and is wrought iron. (Photo by Bob Wheaton, courtesy of Columbus *Dispatch*.)

BULLETIN
of the
Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio

January, 1953

CINCINNATI

Vol. 11, No. 1

THE RE-DISCOVERY OF FORT WASHINGTON

by

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By 1789, land speculators and settlers had moved down the Ohio River and were beginning to penetrate up its tributaries into the wilderness. As a result of this movement westward, the Indians became more and more hostile, and it was increasingly apparent that (1) the seat of the government of the Northwest Territory at Marietta was too far removed from the center of activity to be in effective control, and (2) the quickest way to subdue the Indian menace would be a campaign up the Miami Valley to the center of the savage resistance.

In order to accomplish this, Major John Doughty, a military engineer and artillerist with Brigadier General Josiah Harmar's army, was sent down the Ohio in the summer of 1789 to select a site and to build a fort near the mouths of the two Miamies.

Various land speculators in the region tried to convince the major of the advantages to be had by placing the proposed post in or near their respective holdings. However, he was deaf to their entreaties, and, after scouting the area between the two Miamies, he selected a spot near the town of Losantiville (later, Cincinnati) for his post.

In a letter to Harmar, dated August 20, 1789, Doughty noted that he had reconnoitered the lands lying between the two rivers

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and had finally chosen a site. While he mentioned that it did not have all of the features requisite for a perfect fort location, he recognized its excellent position relative to transportation and communication. Hearing of the periodic floods, he stated his decision to place it on the second bank (terrace) above the river and out of reach of the high waters.

Unlike other frontier posts, Fort Washington was the acme of perfection in wooden fortifications. Designed not only as a military base, it encompassed all of the comforts possible for wilderness living. In a series of letter-reports to his commanding officer, Doughty brings out this point. It was not only large in size and strong in construction, but contained many refinements little known to such structures. Plastered walls, glassed windows, and finished, planked floors were among the luxuries noted. As a matter of fact, it was constructed upon such a comparatively grand scale that Harmar, after inspecting the completed works, wrote to Secretary of War Henry Knox, January 20, 1790: "the public ought to be benefitted by the sale of the buildings whenever we evacuate them."

From the time of its construction in the autumn of 1789 until some thirteen years later, Fort Washington remained the strongest, the most important of the frontier posts in the Northwest Territory. Within its walls, army leaders conferred with each other over methods of effective campaign against the hostile Indians, Governor Arthur St. Clair directed the machinery of government, and representatives and judges of the territory sat to debate and to mete out justice. Here assembled and were mustered out the Kentucky Mounted Volunteers, who augmented the federal forces in their wilderness campaigns against the savage foe. To this post came Indians desiring peace, settlers seeking sanctuary, and river boats carrying the produce of the eastern states. Fort Washington was truly the citadel of the west during its early stages of development.

However, with the passing of the years, the old fort lost its importance as, one by one, its primary functions were taken over by other agencies. As a military post, it lost its active, pre-eminent position with the ending of the Indian Wars and the signing of the Treaty of Greene Ville in 1795. As a center of political life, it failed to function after the division of the Northwest Territory in 1800, though some political meetings were held there subsequent

to that time. Its garrison was no longer necessary either as a protective instrument or as a depot and jumping-off place for military expeditions. Cincinnati grew and encroached upon the grounds of the old fortification. Finally, having lost its last remnant of respectability as a frontier post with the removal of its garrison across the river to the Newport Barracks in 1804, Fort Washington bowed to the tide of progress.

In the early autumn of 1952 work was begun at the northeast corner of Broadway and Third Street in downtown Cincinnati, preparatory to the erection of a new building. In the course of the excavation, a "soft spot" in the earth was found. In this spot logs were discovered. Henry Gest, field engineer for the construction company (and, interestingly enough, great grandson of the Cincinnati city engineer who located the fort for the 1829 court hearing, later to be discussed) had Virginius Hall, director of the Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio, notified. Mr. Hall, in turn, asked the writers of this article to explore the site. There followed a period of nearly two weeks of watching, waiting, digging, and drawing. One by one, the features of the Fort Washington powder magazine came to light.

Upon the first visit of our archaeological and historical team, October 13, 1952, the excavation over the magazine was approximately fifteen feet below grade. Already logs of an upper structure had been pulled out. None of the workmen could give a coherent story of their original arrangement. However, careful work with spade and trowel at the base of the excavation revealed a structure, generally pentagonal in shape, the diameters being approximately 9 and 10 feet. Further excavation revealed the structural features of the sub-surface portion of the powder magazine.

The powder magazine, at least from the fifteen foot level below original grade to its base, was constructed of corner posts of white oak and black walnut, each cut into a pentagonal shape approximately 6 by 7 inches in measurement, and driven into the ground. Between these corner posts, planks about two inches thick and varying in width from 5 to 16 inches were likewise driven into the glacial sand and gravel of the original grade. In order to hold the planks in place, horizontal cross-members were doweled into the corner posts at intervals of 32 inches, the outer edge being hewn flat so as to fit tightly against the planking.

The pressure of the earth on the outside of the planks kept them pressed closely against the horizontal members and made nails unnecessary. (The planking probably came from dismantled river boats which were bought by Doughty for about \$1.50 each at Cincinnati. See Fig. 1.)

Perhaps it would be easier to understand the structural features if mention were made of the probable method of construction. The powder magazine was built after the stockade was erected (as shown on the 1792 map. Fig. 2). Thus, limitations imposed by lack of space and loose berm made it mandatory that corner posts and planks be driven into the earth. Once these were driven, the earth inside was dug out, and the same process was repeated to the desired depth of the magazine. This accounts for the fact that, as the excavation went deeper, the pentagonal angles became less and less apparent and the bottom of the magazine was smaller than the top. Unfortunately, the present excavation was not carried to the bottom of the magazine, though solid ground was struck a few feet farther down by the driving of a stake. It is estimated that the magazine was about twenty-five feet deep.

Upon the top of these piers which were driven into the ground were placed horizontal logs approximately 9 and 10 inches in diameter, hewn on one side (interior) only, and interlocked in the accepted notched-end fashion. This was carried up to the superstructure which appeared above the surface of the ground. On the outside of the planking, and still evident in the recent excavation, was blue clay, placed there to prevent the seepage of water into the magazine.

Previous to the recent discovery of the powder magazine, the last investigations of the location of Fort Washington, which ring with any semblance of authenticity, were those held in connection with conflicting land claims in the area at a court hearing in Cincinnati in 1829.

At that time, Dr. Daniel Drake, then an old resident of the town, and one who had bought some of the old fort lands when they were sold in 1808, testified as to its location. That legal deposition together with his map of Cincinnati in 1815 form the basis for the study of Robert Ralston Jones which appeared in 1902.

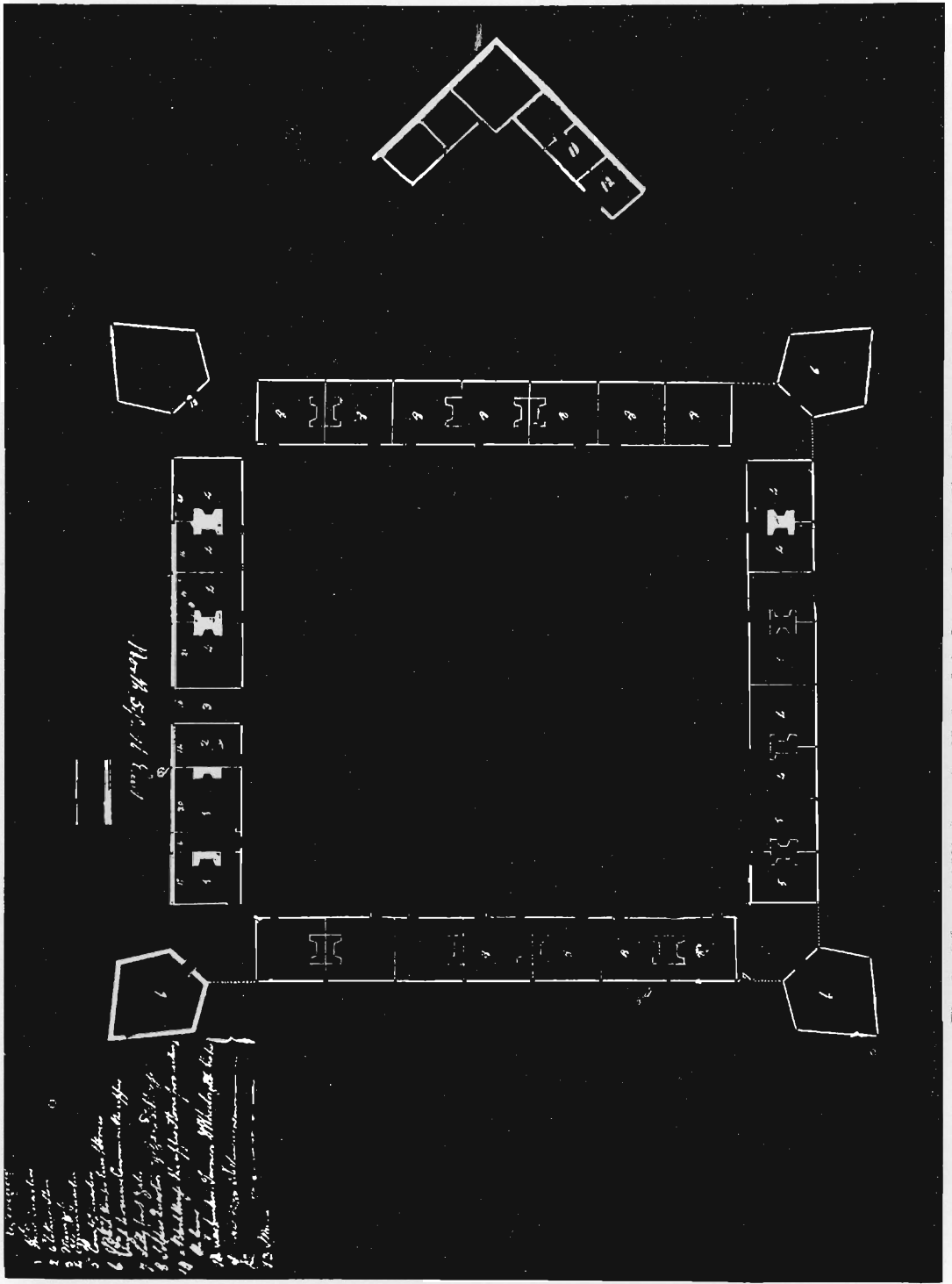


Fig. 3. Map of 1789 from the National Archives showing N°59'16E construction line.

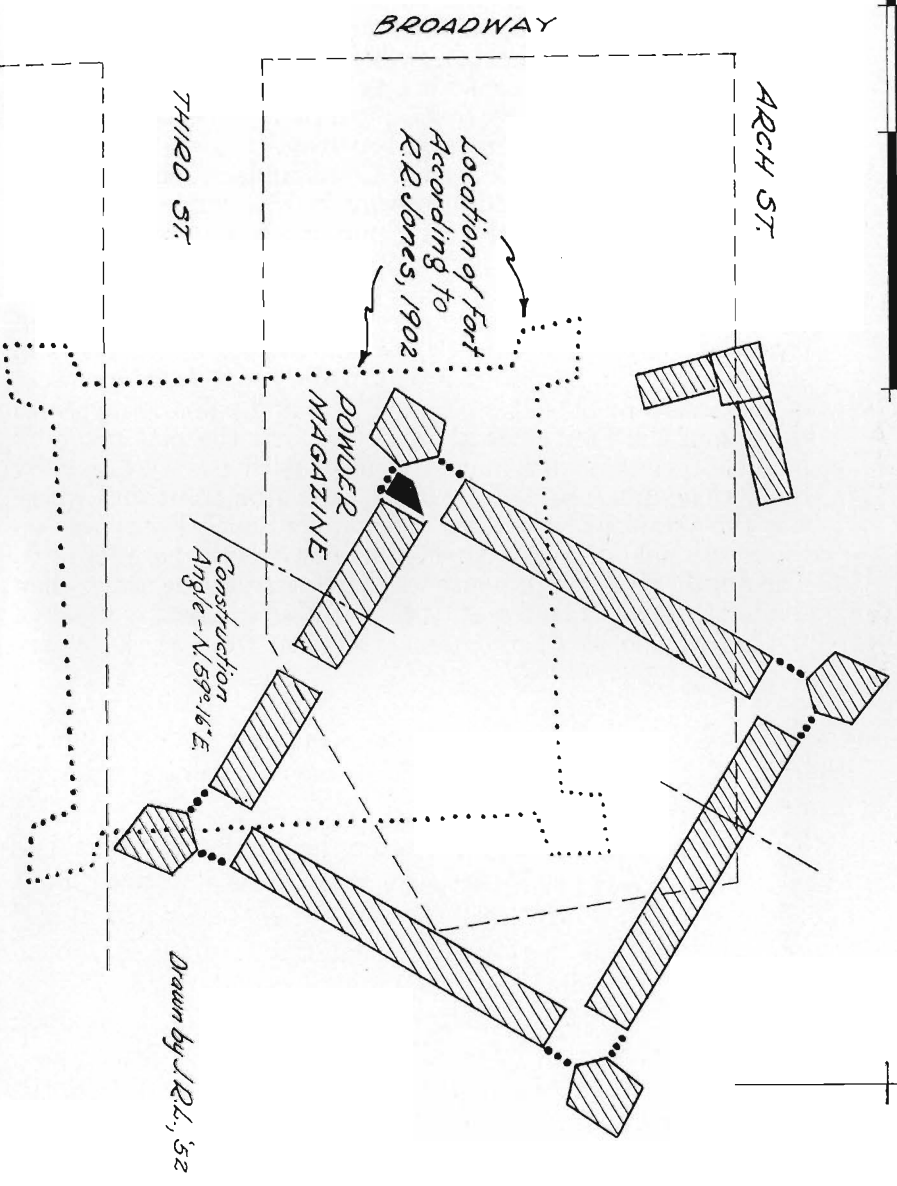
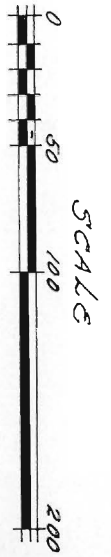


Fig. 4. This drawing shows the location of Fort Washington as a result of the discovery of the powder magazine which was situated adjacent to the southwest blockhouse. The declination of 4 30 E in 1790 has not been taken into consideration in this drawing, and, on the whole, would make little difference in the angle of the fort from that which is shown above.

In 1829, Dr. Drake testified as follows:

Same time and place came Daniel Drake, who likewise being carefully examined cautioned and sworn to testify the whole truth does depose and say. I was present on the site of old Fort Washington at the time that Joseph Gest the City Surveyor made a survey of the foundation of that Fort a plot and description of which is now before me, and I believe that the line and angles of said Fort as laid down by him are accurate as it is possible to fix them. Question. How is it that you are able to testify to this fact? Answer. I once lived in the rooms that were occupied by the Commander of the Garrison, this was in 1802 or 3, and afterward in 1808 when the reserve was sold by the Government, I purchased several lots which included the S. E. angle and Block House and built upon the same, where I resided from 1812 to 1823, during which period the foundations of the Fort were everywhere to be seen and could be compared with the lines and corners of the lots and streets, finally in preparing a plat of the town, for the picture of Cincinnati in 1814, I took great care and pains to lay down the site of the Fort correctly and find that the plat made by Mr. Gest corresponds almost exactly with it. Question by the Defendants. How did Fort Washington front and where was the principal Gateway? The whole South Front was on the South side of Front Street, but not exactly parallel to it. The South West Block-house was farther from the street than the South East. The Great Gate was I believe in the centre of the South line of Block-houses. (Taken from R. R. Jones, *Fort Washington* (1902), p. 92.)

With all due respect to Drake as a pioneer physician and a leader in his community, his deposition leaves much to be desired in the way of clarity and certainty.

The first important statement is that he purchased several lots which included the southeast angle and blockhouse and "built upon the same . . ." In itself, the statement seems logical and sound. However, his second statement that the whole "South Front was on the South side of Front street, but not exactly parallel to it" is obviously incorrect. Drake's house, built upon the lots he mentions that he purchased, was on Third Street, and, even supposing that his home was situated on lots north from the south front of the southeast blockhouse, one immediately remembers Doughty's statement that he had selected a site on the second bank (or terrace) of the river in order to be safe from flood waters. If we take Drake's statement as fact, we at once are placed in an

impossible situation as the fort then would have straddled the second bank, not a likely possibility!

Likewise Drake says, in essence, that the fort was on an angle, and that the front, *he believed*, faced south by east. That the fort was on an angle is borne out by the National Archives plan of 1789 (see: Fig. 3), but the front, as shown on that plan, faced west of south.

Fortunately, there have been preserved two maps of Fort Washington, the one drawn in 1789 and the one drawn in 1792 (see: Fig. 2). The first shows the fort in the process of construction. The second displays the completed structure. For a moment, then, let us consider these two maps, which were not available in 1829.

The 1789 plan definitely shows the size, the shape, and, most important, the angle of construction, N 50° 16' E. There is no compass north shown on this map. Heavily inked lines designate those parts of the fortification which were completed at the time the plan was forwarded to Harmar. No. 13 on the legend of the plan specified the powder magazine. On the plan itself, the only No. 13 is at the entrance way to the southwest blockhouse, the general location of the powder magazine, but the number is probably a measurement rather than a designation.

The plan of the completed structure (1792) shows two important features in so far as we are concerned. The first, and most important, is the exact designation of the powder magazine, No. 12, adjacent to the southwest blockhouse. The second is the use of a north compass point, probably magnetic. Otherwise the maps are consistent in most respects.

These plans then tell us two things which definitely locate the fort as shown in Fig. 4. First, the 1789 plan shows that the fort was constructed on an angle, the front facing west of south. Secondly, the finding of the powder magazine definitely gives the investigator a point of orientation, as it is clearly designated in the 1792 plan. Therefore, one has only to use the powder magazine as a pivotal point, rotate the plan to the N 59° 16' E angle, and the location is established. One will also find that the N point, as shown in the 1792 plan, coincides exactly with a projected north line on the 1789 plan.

The long-standing mystery of the exact location of Fort Washington seems, at last, to be solved. Where faulty memories once were the only sources of information, where landmarks no longer in evidence were referred to, there now comes the discovery of two plans of the fort and the powder magazine. These three elements form the basis for the location of the fort, and they complement one another so well that the doubt which was aroused by the deposition of Drake and the study of Jones no longer has reason to exist.

(A somewhat different reconstruction of the exact site of Fort Washington will be presented in the next issue of the Bulletin, prepared by Dr. Arthur G. King, of Cincinnati.)