

A PROPOSED THAMES ESTUARY HISTORIC PRESERVATION/ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PLANIntroduction

The Thames Estuary region of southeastern Connecticut has been a noteworthy area from the days of the earliest European settlers. In its vicinity are found many remembrances of Indian history and of the relationship between the Indians and the Whites. Even more common are the many traces of American maritime history ranging from fishing and whaling to manufacture and repair of warships to coastal defense.

Rather significantly, this estuary has retained its maritime character and aspect through over three centuries of settlement. Its money was made then largely from activities related to the sea and today the same is true. The major employer in the area is the Electric Boat Company which produces nuclear submarines, and the associated Naval Submarine Base and related facilities also serve as a major economic prop to the region. However, the result economically has been an overspecialization in defense-related activities and a consequent lack of diversity. Thus the region is more vulnerable than others to possible cutbacks in government spending and should take steps to achieve a more balanced economy.

One Proposal for Diversification

In considering diversification, a region's leaders must first ascertain what its strengths and weaknesses are. Then a program building on its potential strengths must be developed and carried out. One such potential strength in the Thames Estuary is its rich store of maritime history, seen in the many homes, forts, wharves, and ships which are part of the local scene. Indeed much of the substantial tourist business of southeastern Connecticut depends at least in part on the regional resource.

From time to time, proposals to build upon this potential have been made. A 1963 State report "The Appearance of Connecticut" mentioned the concept of a "Maritime Heritage Area" in the nearby Groton-Stonington area. The Southeastern Connecticut Regional Planning Agency later expanded upon this concept to include the Thames Estuary. As stated in its 1968 "Opportunities for Historic Preservation" - - "It is doubtful whether any other area in the nation so well displays the variety and time span of our maritime heritage as does this section of Connecticut". In 1977 the State Department of Environmental Protection's "Connecticut's Marine Heritage Landscape" again discussed the preservation potential of southeastern Connecticut, of which the Thames Estuary was a key part.

Therefore the historical resource of the region has been recognized by planners, although no action program to capitalize upon it has to date been developed. With the need to diversify the region's economy wherever possible, the time may now be ripe to propose such a program as a means of expanding the vacation-tourism industry of the area.

One option might be to utilize Senator Ribicoff's Long Island Sound Heritage proposal, which would authorize the protection of key sites and areas along the Sound as a joint effort of the Federal and State governments. Indeed a Thames Estuary historic preservation program could be a leading element in this legislative proposal and perhaps give it the impetus it now apparently lacks. A major advantage of this option would be to use an existing legislative proposal rather than to initiate a wholly new one.

Another and more feasible vehicle would be to press for a National Maritime Historic Area, developed and operated by the National Park Service. Although some individual sites may not independently be of "national

significance" and therefore warranting Federal action, the various sites found in the region together offer a potential which is clearly of "national significance". In addition, development of such a proposal would be in line with the recent National Park Service trend to emphasize historic themes in the urbanized northeast, including the authorized facilities in Lowell and Boston, Massachusetts. Furthermore, this theme would seem to be timely in view of the newly-authorized Federal Maritime Heritage Preservation Grant Program. This option would require initiation and passage of legislation by Congress, usually a rather lengthy process. However, the possible revamping of an existing legislative proposal such as the Long Island Sound Heritage discussed above should receive consideration as one means of expediting the legislative process.

Nevertheless, regardless of which option is utilized, it is clear that the Thames Estuary contains a valuable historic resource of national significance and of extraordinary diversity and extent which could be turned into a substantial asset for tourism and related economic activity. In addition, in view of serious fiscal problems at the local and State level, development of this potential seems possible only through direct action by the Federal Government. As Connecticut is one of two states lacking a National Park or Historic Site, a situation surely not commensurate with its recognized role in the making of the United States, it would seem particularly appropriate and timely that direct Federal action be considered in the Thames Estuary. Indeed simple equity would seem to warrant that Connecticut be the beneficiary of Federal preservation action of a resource surely deserving of it.

However, such action will not take place without the strong support of regional leaders. It is they who must agree that this proposal is feasible and then take appropriate legislative action through the state's Congressional

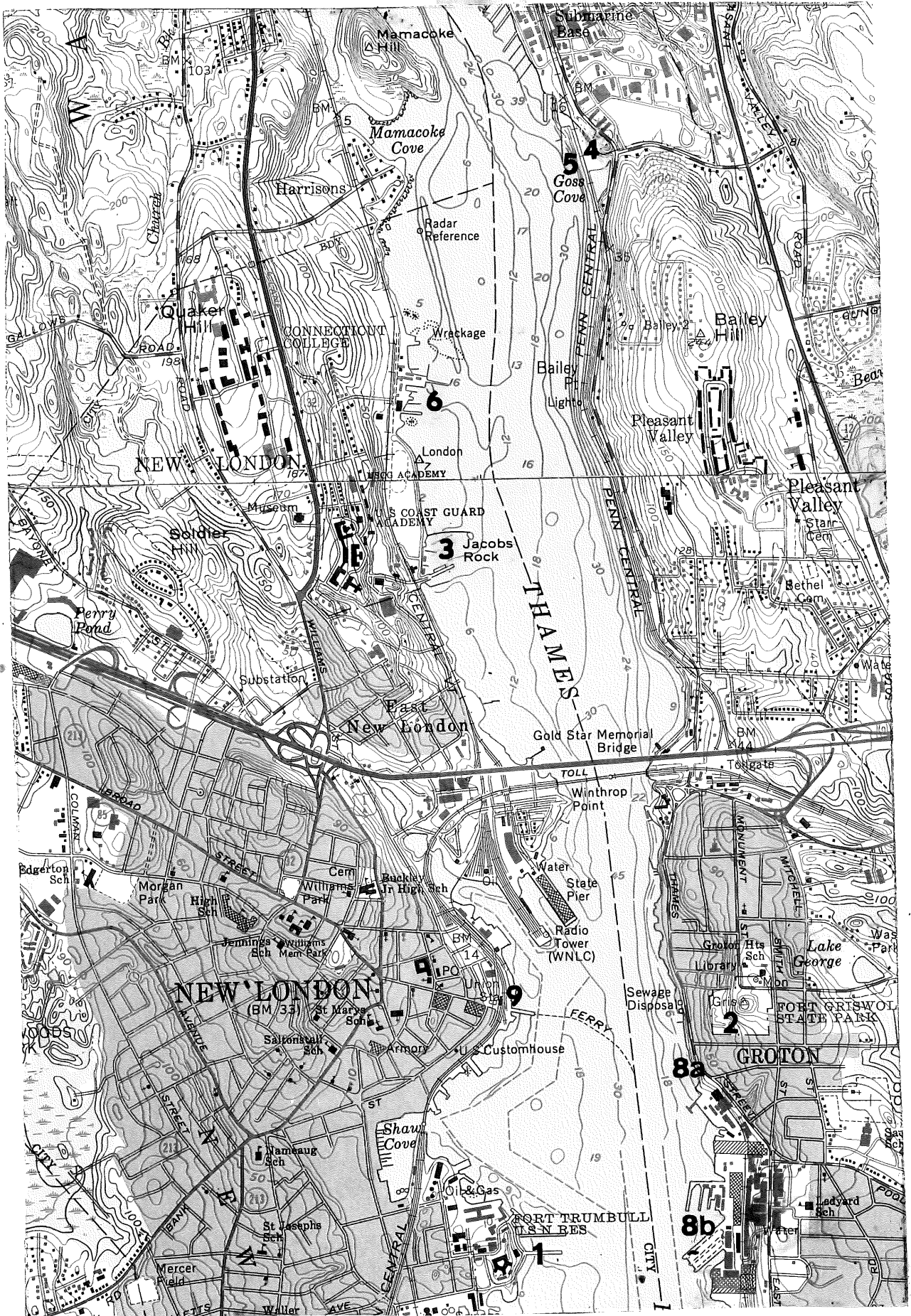
Delegation to ensure that it will become a reality. If positive, dynamic leadership caused such action to occur in Lowell, Massachusetts, there seems to be no reason why it cannot also happen in the Thames Estuary of Connecticut.

Key Elements of a Proposed National Maritime Historic Area

As stated above, the Thames Estuary region contains a vast treasure-trove of sites of historic interest, many of which relate directly to the maritime history of the United States, from the Revolutionary War to the present. Fortunately, the most significant of these are already in public ownership, a factor which would reduce the cost of developing an area of this type and improve its degree of feasibility. As located on map #1 following, the prime sites which could serve as the basis of a National Maritime Historic Area include:

- (1) Fort Trumbull, New London, a U.S. Navy-owned facility dating from the mid-Nineteenth Century and one of a number of forts built at that time for the purpose of coastal defense. In addition, there is a Revolutionary War period block house dating from the time of Benedict Arnold's capture and burning of New London. The fort is located within the compound of the Navy's Underwater Systems Center. However the Navy apparently would be agreeable to its release for historic preservation and restoration purposes if the City of New London were to provide the Navy with nearby replacement acreage through the municipal urban renewal program. A well-executed proposal of this type could result in a striking waterfront landmark for New London, a major tourist attraction, and expedited renewal and beautification program. The excellent 1977 development proposal by Interdesign/Hartung Architects demonstrates the site's potential, although an optional proposal would include all of the shorefront between the Coast Guard Pier and Bentley's Creek within the

MAP 1

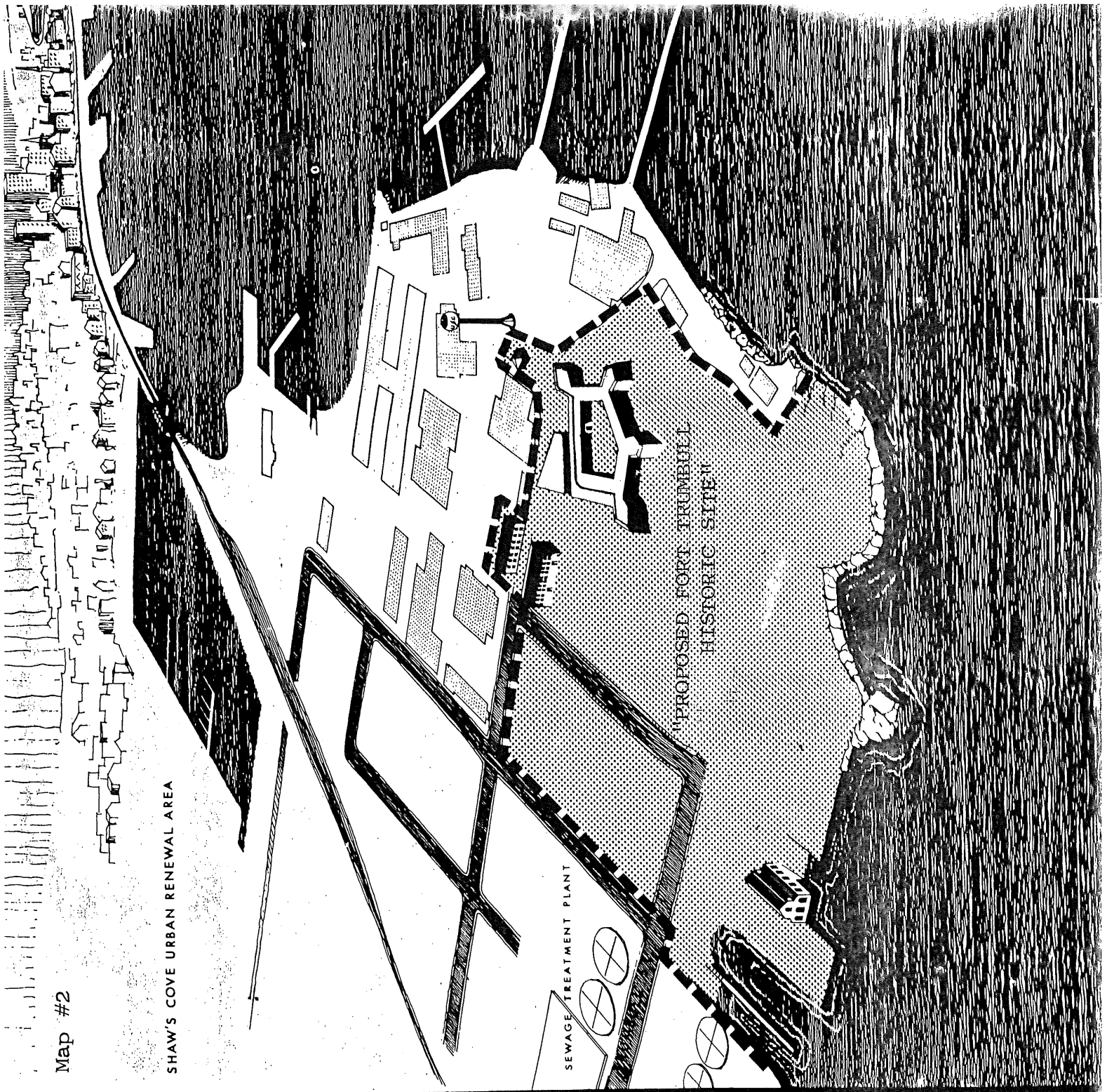


the project area (see map #2 and Appendix A).

- (2) Fort Griswold, a twenty acre State Park on a hilltop in Groton overlooking the Thames River just northeast of the Electric Boat Company and also including a small riverside marker site (see Appendix B). It commemorates the famous battle where the British under Benedict Arnold after capturing Fort Trumbull and burning New London then attacked the fort on the Groton side. Because of limited state financing, Fort Griswold has not been developed to its potential as a key Revolutionary War site.
- (3) U.S. Coast Guard Academy, New London. It is open to visitors daily, with guided tours also available through the visitors' center. A major attraction is the training ship Eagle which may be boarded when in port.
- (4) U.S. Submarine Base, Groton the home port of the Atlantic submarine fleet. Public tours of this facility are provided. However, national security considerations have restricted the volume and extent of public use. Nevertheless the proposal to construct a new Submarine Museum - Library at Goss Cove at the southern end of the base would solve the security problem and also allow a desirable linkage with #(5) below, the U.S.S. Nautilus.
- (5) U.S.S. Nautilus, the first American nuclear submarine. Built in Groton and recently retired from active service, the Nautilus has been proposed as a tourist attraction. Various places including the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis have demonstrated an interest in obtaining the submarine for this purpose, although the Thames Estuary with the Electric Boat Company and the U.S. Submarine Base would seem to have the strongest claim to her. One Navy proposal would be to anchor the Nautilus in the

Map #2

SHAW'S COVE URBAN RENEWAL AREA



Thames River across the railroad tracks from the Goss Cove site described in #(4) above. To link the Nautilus and the Submarine Museum - Library, a proposal has been made to build the latter over the tracks and thereby removing a probable public safety problem.

- (6) Thames River Shipyard. A four acre Federally-owned site just north of the Coast Guard Academy in New London containing an excellent intact shipyard of the late Nineteenth Century style. Included is a still functioning ship-hauling device and twenty buildings complete with original equipment, which generated a reuse proposal by the South Street Seaport Museum in New York as a possible historic boat museum and repair yard. This proposal by a respected organization active in restoring historic boats and waterfront property on lower Manhattan Island, is based upon the growing number of museum boats in various cities along the east coast and the need for a boatyard to undertake needed periodic repairs. Because of the Thames Shipyard's high degree of survival and uniqueness (one of three in the United States), it appears to warrant rating as being of national historic interest. However, it has been declared surplus by the U.S. General Services Administration and is threatened by sale to private interests, apparently the current lessee of the property, in the near future. A possible compromise would be to restore and operate the facility at least in part as a functioning shipyard under a lease arrangement. Indeed the lessee could well serve as the agent necessary to carry out the historic ship repair envisioned in the South Street Seaport Museum proposal.

- (7) New London Ledge Lighthouse, located at the mouth of the Thames River. Considered by some local observers to be a significant area landmark this publicly-owned site is another prospective element in a possible National Maritime Historic Area. As access by boat is possible, its availability for tours by the public may be feasible.
- (8) Related Points of Interest. In addition to the major sites in public ownership listed above, the Thames Estuary contains several other key attractions, including:
- (a) Submarine Memorial, Groton, a private non-profit foundation. The U.S.S. Croaker, a World War II submarine, has been restored to its original condition and made available for public tours. With its central location adjacent to the Electric Boat Company (see below) and near Fort Griswold, it could become an important integral part of any tour of the National Maritime Heritage Area.
- (b) Electric Boat Company, Groton, the prime manufacturer of nuclear submarines for the U.S. Navy. Although not open for public tours, existing harbor tours by boat see it as a major point of interest. Also, the possibility of limited public tours of portions of the facility may deserve exploration.

Integration of Sites Into a Tourism Circulation System

Because a Thames Estuary National Maritime Historic Park would involve a number of sites as with the Boston National Historic Park, a plan or system to connect them seems desirable for a number of reasons. First of

all, in an urban location existing roads cannot handle a substantial increase in vehicular traffic without resulting congestion. Secondly, available space for adequate amount of parking is often not available at many points of interest. Furthermore, the increasing energy crisis would seem to mandate increased reliance on mass transit rather than on the private automobile.

Fortunately, these historic sites, although found on both sides of the Thames River, are nevertheless concentrated in a relatively small harbor area only five to six miles in length. Therefore a plan for channelling large numbers of sightseers through the area without heavy impact on it would involve establishing one or more visitor centers where people could park and then take a tour by bus, boat, or some interlinking version of the two comparable to the boat-scenic train linkage along the lower Connecticut River. Interestingly, recognizing this tourist potential, one private entrepreneur already offers an hour boat tour of New London Harbor.

The nerve center of such a tour operation should be the newly-rehabilitated Union Station (see #9 on Map #1) which is in a geographically-central location within the proposed National Maritime Historic Area. Its assets include ready access to the heavy tourist traffic along I-95, location on a major rail line (The Shore Line), and a location adjacent to the Greyhound Bus Terminal and to municipal parking garages. Furthermore it is also adjacent to the Municipal Pier which could serve as the base for local boat tours. Thus it is ideally suited to serve as a multi-modal transportation center.

At this point the visitor to New London could readily take a tour bus or boat or some combination of the two around the Maritime Historic Area. On returning, he would then have the option of enjoying the restaurants and shops available in downtown New London, where an ambitious urban renewal program is attempting to foster economic growth while retaining the area's age-old charm. Apparently the main problem has been to attract people to the downtown area, and this proposal should go far to accomplish this goal. Finally, location of such a tour center in downtown New London could well provide the needed impetus for a long-awaited hotel-convention center complex on nearby vacant urban renewal land.

In summation, a well organized transportation system could provide easy access for the tourist to the elements of a Thames River National Maritime Historic Area. In addition to providing this needed linkage, congestion on local roads could be avoided. Finally, location of the hub of this system at Union Station in downtown New London should serve as a major financial boom to the business of this area.

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OPTIMUM DEVELOPMENT

This phase would expand the Fort Trumbull Heritage Center to its ultimate potential and generate the full range of economic, employment and cultural benefits to New London and the region through greatly increased visitation to the facility.

Economic benefits would include the stimulation of a variety of tourist related businesses such as shops, restaurants, motels, transportation services, craft manufacturing, marinas, sightseeing boats, and other activities not only in the Fort Trumbull area but also the Shaw Cove Redevelopment Area and the Captain's Walk/Bank Street central business district. Employment would be generated through short-term construction activities and long term tourist related industries. Culturally, this phase would establish Fort Trumbull as a major historic site on the East coast as well as generating the variety of interesting complementary themes relating to Coastal Defense, Ocean Research, and Regional History.

The optimum development would require the following actions:

- Acquisition of the parcel of land bounded by Smith, Walbach, East, and Trumbull Streets together with the land south of Trumbull Street to Bentley's Creek abutting the Municipal Sewage Treatment Plant.
- Reassessment of the utilization of the landfill area to the south of Bentley's Creek.

The following ideas would be included in this final development phase:

- Creation of a commercial or semi-commercial development on the land bounded by Walbach, East, Trumbull, and Smith Streets appropriately designed to be visually consistent with the Fort Trumbull Heritage

Center. An alternative use for this property might be the creation of a small conference center over several levels of parking which could be used by various area industries and education institutions.

- Restoration of the existing picturesque brick building between Trumbull Street and Bentley's Creek and development of the land to include additional parkland or museum facilities which might include the relocated Thames Shipyard hauling equipment if its preservation on its present site is not feasible. This site could also be a repository for other maritime artifacts which might be acquired in the future. Berths could also be provided for one or more historic Naval vessels which would relate to the defense theme of the overall facility. Connection could be made from this point via a bridge or small ferry to the landfill area to the south of Bentley's Creek.
- Development of the landfill area to the south of Bentley's Creek for parking and other development uses to increase the tax base of the Community while providing support areas for the Fort Trumbull Heritage Center. Such uses might include housing, parkland, and other low intensity developments.

This development will have no major additional effect on the Naval Underwater Systems Center.



NORTH



LATHAM ST.

FORT ST.

SLOCOMB TER.

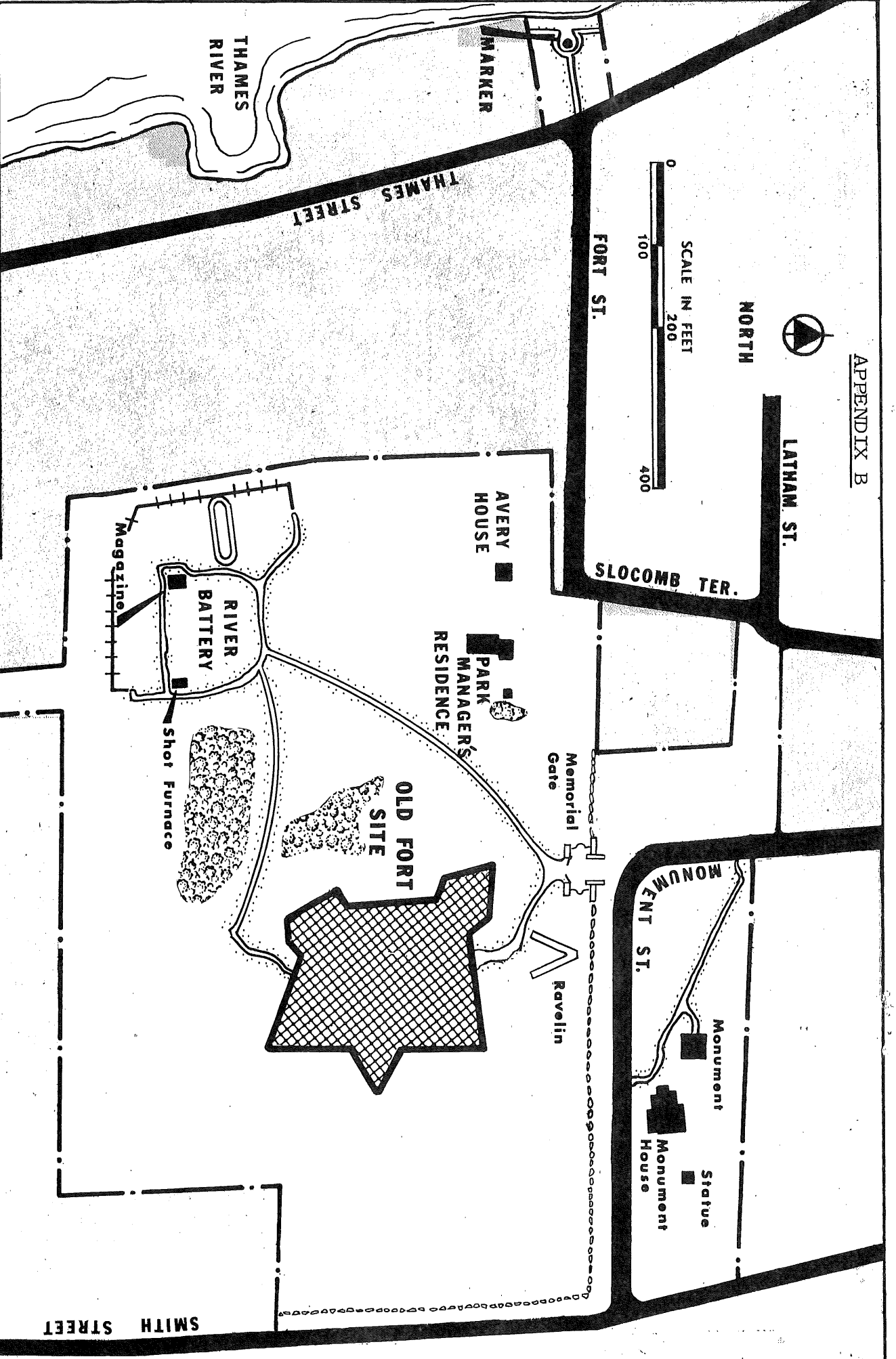
MONUMENT ST.

BAKER AVENUE

SMITH STREET

FORT GRISWOLD STATE PARK

Groton
Connecticut



FORT GRISWOLD STATE PARK
Groton, Connecticut

From the observation deck atop the great granite obelisk that commemorates a decisive battle of the Revolutionary War, the park visitor can look out upon New London, the shore of Groton and the Thames River as it flows into Long Island Sound. It was just offshore on September 5, 1781, that Rufus Avery, through the pre-dawn mists, spotted a fleet of thirty-two sailing ships of the British Navy and sounded the alarm. Local militia responding to a two-gun signal poured into the hilltop fort under command of Colonel William Ledyard to await the imminent attack.

British forces commanded by Benedict Arnold, Norwich-born traitor, were intent upon diverting General Washington's Continental Army thereby relieving the pressure on the forces of Cornwallis around New York City. Arnold divided his 1,800 men into two forces to attack on both sides of the Thames simultaneously. By afternoon, with buildings, ships and provisions aflame in New London, British Colonel Eyre demanded surrender of Fort Griswold after having stormed the hill using the traditional classic solid lines of red-coated musketeers. The formation was scattered, temporarily raked by intense American rifle fire including a grapeshot barrage leveled by an American privateer seeking to escape the harbor. The 155 defenders were shortly overrun. Colonel Ledyard surrendered his sword to the British officer on demand. Ledyard died on the spot; run through with his own sword.

The incident seemed to incite a massacre. The attackers plundered and robbed the remaining sixty-seven defenders and loaded the wounded on the Fort's heavy ammunition wagon which then broke away and rolled down hill causing further suffering.

The Ebenezer Avery House became both hospital and refuge for the survivors.

Financed by a lottery, a monument was erected on the anniversary of the battle in 1830. Its height was increased to 134 feet for the Battle Centennial in 1881.

Fort Griswold, named for a former Governor, was placed under the guardianship of a special commission acting in behalf of the State in 1903. In 1953, custody was assumed by the State Park and Forest Commission. A museum now displays relics of the Fort and of regional interest. More recently the Ebenezer Avery House was relocated from Thames Street to within the Fort's boundaries, restored and donated to the State by the Avery Memorial Association.

The Park grounds are open each day during daylight hours. The buildings are open seasonally with attendants on duty to assist visitors.

Location: One mile south of Route I-95 on the Thames River in Groton.