

## WHO BUILT THE NEWPORT TOWER?

by

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### Who built the Newport Tower?

Also called the Old Stone Tower, Touro Tower, Old Stone Mill or, simply, The Tower, standing near the west end of Touro Park in Newport, Rhode Island, the round stone structure and its park owe their existence to the generosity of Judah Touro, who in 1854 gave the City of Newport \$10,000 to buy the land so that it would not be developed into home sites. Founded in 1639, the town of Newport had grown up the hill from Narragansett Bay and Newport Harbor to engulf the meadows that lay above the shore. Judah Touro and others ensured that this tiny scrap of land was preserved, so that the Newport Tower has stood in its pretty little park ever since, undisturbed except by dogs and their owners, tourists, historians, and other curious persons.

In 2004, a member of the Newport Historical Society explained, "We're 99.9 percent sure the tower was built as a windmill by Governor Benedict Arnold in the 17th century." When asked about the remaining 0.1 percent of doubt, the member added, "Oh, well, the public does so love a good mystery, we like to leave a bit for them."

This curious structure, about whose origin 0.1 percent of doubt remains, is circular, constructed of mostly unworked local stones set in mortar of several different types owing to repairs over the years. At ground level are eight round columns connected by eight round arches made of flat stones set on edge so that the bases form a smooth curve on the arches' undersides. Its inner face includes beam-holes for at least two floors above ground level; four windows, three of which are double-splayed; seven niches; and a fireplace built into the east wall, with one large, blackened stone as a hearth, and an overhead arch resembling the eight main arches. Nothing remains of any interior wooden structures.

The question "Who Built the Newport Tower?" has a long and contentious history. The theory that Governor Benedict Arnold built it about 1675 has been favored because Arnold's 1677 will provides the first written record of the Tower. Arnold used it as a marker to describe where he wanted to be buried, and which parcel of land he wanted his wife to inherit. He didn't say he built the tower, but he certainly owned the land on which it stood between 1651, when he moved to Newport, and 1678, when he died.

The Norse theory came into being around 1830, when Carl Christian Rafn, Danish secretary of the Royal Society of Northern Antiquities in Copenhagen, suggested that the Tower was built in the 12th century by the Norse under the leadership of Eric Gnuþsson, a bishop from Gardar, Greenland, sometime between 1112 and 1121. Rafn never saw the tower but made his claim based on a drawing by F. Catherwood.

Other theories include the Scottish Theory: Sir Henry Sinclair, exploring the coast of North America between 1395 and 1398, planned a community and began it with the Tower but never returned from Scotland; the Chinese Theory: retired British submarine commander Gavin Menzies believes a Chinese treasure fleet rounded the Cape of Good Hope in the 1420s and began a colony, and that members of the colony built the Tower so that returning ships could find them - but Chinese ships never returned either; Dr. Manuel Da Silva posits the theory that the CorteReal brothers, Gaspard and Miguel, shipwrecked in the early 1500s, built the Tower so that rescuers could find THEM.

The Chronognostic Research Foundation's current research on the Newport Tower began in January 2003 when I visited Newport and Touro Park after more than two years of my own private research into the tower and its origins. It was immediately clear why so many people still had questions about the tower's origins: it certainly didn't look like other 17th-century structures, which are square or rectangular and built of wood; and it certainly didn't look like a 17th century mill: grist mills of New England are smock mills, tapered from narrow at the top to wide at the bottom, and built of wood.

None of our library research revealed any 100-percent-certain evidence pointing to the builder of the Tower. Even William S. Godfrey Jr., who completed a thorough archaeological excavation under the Tower in 1949, was barely willing to say that, given the meager evidence he had uncovered, the Tower must have been built in the 17th century, by Governor Benedict Arnold or a contemporary; but Godfrey was unwilling to say that the Tower had been a mill, because he could find no evidence of any mill-like structures and not enough ash to conclude that such interior structures had burned. He left it to posterity to determine WHY the Tower had been constructed.

Given the many theories and the ongoing controversy, could anything more be discovered about the tower's origins? The tower itself had been excavated thoroughly, but its context was relatively unknown. The context was Touro Park and only Touro Park: all Newport had grown up around this small parcel, and other clues located on the bench of land above Newport Harbor were lost under centuries of construction. Some of Touro Park, at least, might have remained undisturbed through the years. This was the Chronognostic Research Foundation's first research problem: to discover as much as possible about the context of the tower from Touro Park itself.

In October, 2003, we sponsored a ground-penetrating radar survey of the park. Early Sites Research Society had done a GPR study in 1994, but its plots were impossible to read, since 3-D imaging was not yet available. Geophysical Applications Inc. of Foxboro, MA, collected the 2003 data and analyzed it using a 3-D imaging module. This delineated two subsurface features, one square and one rectangular, that appeared to be building foundations, close enough to the Tower to allow the hypothesis that they were linked in some way. Using Sanborn Fire Insurance maps superimposed on a Newport City Engineering Department map, we eliminated the possibility that one feature might be an old bandstand that had stood in the park between 1896 and 1963. The

anomalies we found were unknown to everyone who has ever studied the problem of the Tower.

This past June, we completed one more electrical resistance study of Touro Park. Geophysicist Dan Lynch of Providence found the subsurface features we originally discovered and another fascinating anomaly to the southwest of the Tower: an amorphously shaped area of stone, where the Newport Parks Department has never been able to get any trees to grow. We suspect that we have located the stone pile the builders used as they were collecting and choosing various sized stones for walls, arches, lintels, columns, fireplace, hearth, and so on. If this is true, we may be able to recover tools used during construction, as well as artifacts from the two foundations.

With data and graphics in hand, we addressed the Newport City Council, for the third time, on June 28. We met all their conditions: a respected Rhode Island archaeologist (Ray Pasquariello of Providence) as principal investigator; a permit to excavate from Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission (RIHPHC); liability insurance; re-landscaping deposit for Newport Parks Department; and a date that didn't conflict with Newport's many tourist events: October 15 to November 15, 2006. On July 12, the City Council issued the following resolution:

"RESOLVED: that the Agreement for Excavation in Touro Park between the City of Newport and Chronognostic Research Foundation, Inc. for the excavation at Touro Park as a part of an archaeological project, is hereby approved, and the Mayor is authorized to sign said agreement, upon review of the City Solicitors office, on behalf of the City."

For the first time in nearly 60 years, an archaeological excavation will take place in Touro Park, perhaps finally to answer the question: Who built the Newport Tower? The Norse, perhaps, with a connection to Greenland? The Scottish, with an eye to colonization? The Chinese, or the Portuguese, both needing rescue? Or perhaps even the Basque, known for their whale-spotting towers on the coasts of France and Spain?

We won't know until we dig.

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