

## Revolutionary Cumberland: A Note on a Historical Controversy

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During the spring of 1897 Mrs. Abbie Rickard, the historian of a local Rhode Island chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, produced a paper on the town of Cumberland and the Revolutionary War. Parts of the paper were printed in Rhode Island newspapers, but it never made its way into any scholarly publication.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Rickard's piece managed to set off a lively historical debate over the role of Cumberland in the war effort. In short, one side argued that the town played an active role in the war, while the other held that Cumberland was reluctant to join the cause of freedom. This dispute seems never to have been settled, and thus a fairly significant question on a matter of local Rhode Island history remains unanswered.

The 1897 controversy ignited over what Mrs. Rickard had to say regarding the operation of a beacon that once stood atop Tower Hill Road in Cumberland. This beacon was one of four that were erected in Rhode Island during the Revolutionary era as a signaling network. Relying heavily on family histories handed down from generation to generation, Rickard argued that the beacon was lighted during the Battle of Bunker Hill, and that upon seeing its glow against the night sky, a company of patriotic Cumberland residents "assembled and [were] on their way to Boston."<sup>2</sup>

This claim was immediately disputed by Sidney S. Rider, one of Rhode Island's most outspoken historical and literary commentators. In the 10 July 1897 issue of his *Book Notes*, Rider explained that the General Assembly had designated the beacons for use "to alarm the country in case of an invasion." "Was Bunker Hill a case of invasion?" asked Rider rhetorically. "Well, hardly." Moreover, he wrote, "The battle was fought out and ended long before a light could have been seen forty miles away. No man left Rhode Island for the scene of the battle *after it was over*. Mrs. Rickard's story is tradition, and is positively worthless, recorded facts wholly overthrow it."<sup>3</sup> Making good use of "recorded facts," Rider convincingly discredited Rickard's story of the beacon, but apparently he was not yet satisfied. In the 7 August 1897 issue of *Book Notes*, he declared that "the backwardness of the town of Cumberland in supplying men for the Revolutionary Army is a plain matter of record which no amount of tradition can overthrow."<sup>4</sup>

Although Rider never went so far as to label Cumberland loyalist, another writer drawn into the controversy was not so restrained. Commenting on the Revolutionary-era disposition of Cumberland in the *Woonsocket Evening Reporter* of 12 July 1897, Erastus Richardson, author of the *History of Woonsocket*, stated that "the records and traditions show a most alarming evidence of toryism hereabouts."<sup>5</sup> Of what this "alarming evidence" consists, we do not know; neither in the article nor in his other published writings did Richardson support his contention. The claim of pro-British sentiment in Cumberland has been neither endorsed nor explicitly refuted by other historians, and we are therefore left with a charge of loyalism unsupported by published evidence. Can the assertion be substantiated?

*Artist's rendering of the Revolutionary-era Providence Beacon. Frontispiece from Edward Field, Revolutionary Defences in Rhode Island (Providence, 1896). RIHS Collection (RHi X3 1360)*

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