

PRESCOTT FARM, GUARD HOUSE
2009 West Main Road
Middletown
Newport County
Rhode Island

HABS RI-414-A
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS
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PRESCOTT FARM GUARD HOUSE

HABS No. RI-414-A

Location: 2009 West Main Road, Middletown, Newport County, Rhode Island.¹

The Guard House faces southwest towards the parking area of the farm, the visitor's center structure, and an orchard. Beyond these is West Main Road, a major thoroughfare, which dates to the island's early settlement years. The coordinates for the house are 71.290271 W, 41.553176 N and were obtained through Google Maps in June 2011. The site is open to the public and has no restriction on the release of location data.

The coordinates represent the present location of the house, but not its original location. It is known that the Guard House was moved at least once, possibly twice. The Newport Restoration Foundation (NRF), the current owners of the site, believes the house stood close to West Main Road at the foot of a formal garden. At an unknown point in time, the house was attached to the rear of the farm's primary dwelling house, the Nichols-Overing House, where it served as the middle of three additions to the main house.² In 1970, the property was purchased by Doris Duke on behalf of the NRF. Recognizing its significance as an early eighteenth-century structure, Duke had the Guard House moved to its present location, where it functions as part of the NRF's mission of "preserving, interpreting, and maintaining the landscape and objects reflecting Aquidneck Island's eighteenth- and nineteenth- century architectural culture."³

Significance: The significance of the Guard House is three-fold. The first is that it represents an exceptional surviving example of early-eighteenth-century craftsmanship. The nature and importance of its construction was why Doris Duke, founder of the Newport Restoration Foundation, opted to preserve the structure during the 1970s.⁴

¹ Today, Prescott Farm straddles the Portsmouth/Middletown line. Originally, the boundary separated Portsmouth from Newport, but in 1743, the northern part of Newport, abutting Portsmouth, split off to form Middletown. See Garman 10.

² Personal communication with Robert Foley, Preservation Director, and Lisa Dady, Director of Education, of the Newport Restoration Foundation. The supposition that the Guard House was originally located near West Main Road comes from a map made by Lieutenant Frederick Mackenzie in 1777. The map shows a house fitting the Guard House's size and shape near the road and at the base of a formal garden. However, it is unclear if this house is, indeed, the Guard House and no other evidence has been uncovered to further clarify the matter. The house could certainly have been moved from another location anywhere else in the vicinity. The Guard House's position in the middle of the Overing House addition is documented by a photograph in the NRF collection taken before it was moved to its present location.

³ http://www.newportrestoration.org/about/mission_history.

⁴ While she was active at the NRF, Duke made all decisions regarding what was to be preserved on NRF sites and what was not. If she chose to keep a building, it was because she saw something in it. See Beth Bjorklund, "Doris

The Guard House also represents the extent to which Newport's mercantile culture reached into Portsmouth's farming landscape during the Colonial era. As an agricultural building, the Guard House serviced the farm, but also the owners' business interests, which were centered in Newport. It further documents the wealth of the farm's owners in its architectural detail, its size, and its presence as a dependency on the farm.

Lastly, the Guard House witnessed the capture of Major General Richard Prescott by Colonial forces on the evening of July 9/10, 1777. This major event prefaced the Battle of Rhode Island, which occurred over the summer of 1778, and provided an important morale boost for Colonial troops. Even though the Guard House was not the site where Prescott was actually captured, the folklore surrounding that event lives on and remains a curious story still told today about the Guard House.

Description: The Guard House is a two-story, single-cell structure. It measures two bays on all sides of its square plan. The building rests on a fieldstone foundation. The roof is a side gambrel. The door is located in the southwest corner of the structure and is a modern addition. There is a single window on the first floor of the southwest side of the house, functioning in balance to the door. There are four windows (two on each floor) on the southeast side, two windows on the first floor of the northeast side, and two windows on the second floor on the northwest side. It is likely that all windows were replaced during the 1970s.⁵

The exterior of the Guard House is covered in clapboard siding, currently painted red. There is a watertable at the base of the siding that extends over the foundation, protecting the sill from weather and shedding water away from the house. There are decorative moldings running along the entire roofline—the moldings run straight along the roof sides and then follow the profile of the gambrel. On the sides, the moldings travel underneath the eaves of the roof, creating a complex system of decorative elements. In comparison, the moldings around the windows and door are relatively simple. The roof is currently covered in wood shingles.

The interior of the first floor is plastered with an unknown system, presumably plaster and lath. The ceiling is also plastered and appears, from the measurements, to be slightly dropped. The floor is covered with wide floorboards that may date from the 1970s. Simple moldings surround the windows and door and the southwest, southeast and northeast walls are devoid of ornament,

Duke.” Also, personal communication with Robert Foley, Preservation Director, and Lisa Dady, Director of Education, of the Newport Restoration Foundation.

⁵ Changes made during the NRF's restoration in the 1970s were partially documented through photographs only. These are contained in a binder on the Guard House at the NRF headquarters, 51 Touro St., Newport, RI.

excepting exposed corner posts. The northwest wall contains, from west to east, a box stair, a closet, a fireplace and bake oven, and a second closet. The stair twists to the second floor clockwise. The closet is an open space, with a slant on the west side reflecting the stair. The brick fireplace is large enough to cook in and has a brick flue and hearth, and a wood mantelpiece. The bake oven extends off its east side. The second closet contains a bulge on its west side, reflecting the presence of the bake oven, and shelves at approximately one foot intervals on the north and east sides. The stair, closet, and second closet have doors with antique-like hardware and latches such that when closed, all is hidden behind wide planks similar to those used on the floor. While the paneling may date from the 1970s, the fireplace and stair appear to be original.

The second floor is accessed via the stair, which is open with no railings. This space also contains wide floorboards but is otherwise unfinished. The rough-hewn rafters are entirely exposed, revealing how the gambrel was originally constructed. Of particular note is the pegged mortise-and-tenon joints located at the angle of the gambrel and at the peak of the roof. The six rafter systems are spaced approximately equidistant from each other. Wood boards of various widths and lengths cover the rafters and nails from the wood shingles are visible. The chimney stack is freestanding on this floor, creating a space between it and the northwest wall about one foot in width. There is a second fireplace opening onto the room and a brick hearth; both are considerably smaller than those on the first floor. There are two windows with simple moldings on the northwest and the southeast sides of this floor. This area is quite spacious and shows clearly the advantages of using a gambrel roof construction. Overall, the house is in superb condition, reflecting the careful maintenance strategies of the NRF as well as the restoration completed in the 1970s.

History: The history of the Guard House reflects its function as a dependency on what is now known as Prescott Farm.⁶ During Aquidneck Island's early settlement years, the middle part of the island was sparsely populated. This area was well removed from the towns of Portsmouth, founded in 1638 on the northern part of Aquidneck Island, and Newport, founded in 1639 at the island's southern harbor. The 40 acres that would become Prescott Farm does not appear to have been settled until the second quarter of the eighteenth century, which is consistent with what is known about early settlement patterns.⁷ According to local historian James E. Garman, "... large areas of grazing land were granted to the settlers further south from the [Portsmouth] settlement."⁸ Garman refers to the middle part of the island, where Prescott Farm is now located.

⁶ Prescott Farm has been known by this name since the late nineteenth century, but it was not the original name of the farm. Originally, the farm went by the names of its owners. See Cummings 3.

⁷ There is no available information on whether any Native American tribes occupied the area.

⁸ Garman 7.

While some historians have suggested that the towns of Portsmouth and Newport were rivals, in fact, they maintained important links, including a connecting road. This road ran adjacent to the west side of the Prescott Farm property and is now one of the area's main thoroughfares. Information from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century maps as well as the orientation of the Nichols-Overing House, the primary dwelling on the site, suggests that the property was oriented towards this road.

The earliest known improvements to the property were mostly likely undertaken by Jonathan Nichols and his son, Jonathan Nichols, Jr. The Nichols' were descendents of Thomas Nichols, the original grantee of the land.⁹ Either Nichols (c. 1681-1727) or his son (1712-1756) is thought to be the constructors of what is now known as the Nichols-Overing House, the farm's dwelling house. The Nichols' identification as the house's builders is also documented by references to a dwelling house in subsequent deeds noting the sale of the property out of the Nichols family.¹⁰ Furthermore, the Nichols-Overing house is a three-story, five bay structure whose architectural style and construction techniques match other early eighteenth-century structures. A best estimate for the date of the house is c. 1725.

It is likely that the Guard House was constructed near to the time of the Nichols-Overing House. Like the Nichols-Overing House, the Guard House reflects early eighteenth-century building techniques, which are evident in the exposed second-story rafters and in the gambrel shape of the roof. On the second floor, one can visually appreciate the joining techniques, the spacious quality of a gambrel roof, the lighting effect of the four windows, and the internal fireplace flue. Interestingly, the entire gambrel roof is self-supporting—it rests upon the first floor planks, but could easily stand as its own section elsewhere on the property. These techniques, along with the choice of the gambrel roof form, are consistent with those prevalent in Newport during this time.¹¹

As built, the Guard House would have participated in a system of farming that embodied a combination of subsistence crops, cash crops, and trade. However, there is no evidence documenting what the Nichols family farmed, making it difficult to discuss the farming system in place during this period with any concrete detail. A 1777 map shows a formal garden between the Guard House and the Nichols-Overing House that may also have been constructed at this time. Most significantly, this map also suggests the possibility that the Guard House was originally located adjacent to the Portsmouth-Newport road, a theory currently being considered by the Newport Restoration Foundation.¹² If this

⁹ Cummings 2.

¹⁰ Cummings 3.

¹¹ Downing and Scully, chaps 2 & 3.

¹² See note 1.

location proves true, then the Guard House could have had any number of functions. The house gets its present-day name from this theory, as it appeared to be “guarding” the property.

The Nichols family was evidently very prosperous; both father and son Jonathan Nichols served as Deputy Governor for the Colony of Rhode Island and Jonathan, Jr., served in that position twice.¹³ But, without further information, it is difficult to determine whether that wealth originated from farming Prescott Farm or whether the Nichols participated in the nascent trading systems in Newport. The construction of the Guard House as a dependency in and of itself suggests wealth and farm-related prosperity. Given that, it might have served one of two purposes, as an overseers house, with the lower level acting as a kitchen and the upper level as living quarters, or as a kitchen exclusively, with kitchen staff living above stairs. If an overseer lived there, then it represents the living conditions of that person’s station in life, and it becomes possible that more of the current finishes are original. If used as a kitchen, it might have been occupied by an enslaved African-American, suggesting that more of the finishes date from the Duke period. Either way, the Guard House provides documentation of these early trends in farming on Aquidneck Island. Further research may reveal more about how the house was originally used.

Prescott Farm, the Nichols-Overing House, and the Guard House passed out of the Nichols family’s hands in 1765 and were purchased in 1771 by Henry Jonathan (John) Overing (1731-1783). Born in Boston, Overing had moved to Newport in 1758 and been granted town citizenship—a fact that meant he met the wealth requirements for voting.¹⁴ Overing married Mary Whitehorne, the daughter of John G. Whitehorne, prominent Newport merchant and distiller who was probably a business contact.¹⁵ Overing owned at least two sites in Newport, possibly on the southern end of Thames St. The 1774 Blascowitz map marks a wharf at the southern end of town as Overing’s wharf, giving some sense of where Overing’s Newport properties were located. Overing’s Newport properties were significant because they were where he conducted his sugar refining business. It is possible that Overing distilled the molasses into rum himself or he might have acted as supplier for other local distilleries, including Whitehorne’s.¹⁶ That Overing was involved in the triangle trade is evident from this choice of activity, as well as by his ownership of somewhere between 8 and 11 slaves.¹⁷ According to noted historian Elaine Forman Crane, even the conservative number

¹³ Cummings 2.

¹⁴ Cummings 4.

¹⁵ “Overing Genealogy.”

¹⁶ Cummings 5.

¹⁷ The 1774 census of Newport lists Overing as owning 8 slaves. The 1774 census of Middletown lists Overing as owning 3 slaves. It is unclear if these slaves are double counted and/or moved back and forth between Prescott Farm and the Newport properties.

of 8 slaves would have made Overing one of the largest slave-owners in Newport. Only 2% of Newport's slaveholding families owned more slaves than Overing.¹⁸

Overing's choice to purchase a country farm reflects other contemporary trends in Newport's merchant culture. While extremely profitable, the triangle trade was also extremely risky and it was helpful to have other sources of income. Owning a farm provided the access to at least some foodstuffs as well as domesticated animals. Surpluses of these items could also be useful in coastal trade or in local towns. Thus, it is extremely important to view the Guard House as a participant in the broader trade networks originating from Newport's triangle trade system. It is also intriguing to speculate about the Guard House's function during this period. Was it involved in Overing's sugar baking endeavors? Did it perform another function related to the triangle trade? Did it house slaves who worked the farm and otherwise supported Overing's merchant interests? Perhaps further research will uncover more information in the future.

These farms also offered an outlet for the merchant classes' growing prosperity. Overing did not live at Prescott Farm on a daily basis, but instead used it as a getaway from the busy wharves of Newport and a place in which to emulate the landed gentry of England. According to Crane, "Isolated advertisements in the newspaper hint that Newport merchants sought country homes and farms with substantial acreage in the neighboring communities of Portsmouth and Middletown, as well as in North and South Kingston."¹⁹ Not coincidentally, Overing's property bordered one owned by the Coggeshalls, another prominent Newport merchant family.

Overing remained a loyalist during the British occupation of Newport. In 1777, he took an oath to support the British crown and, not long after, allowed Major General Richard Prescott to use his Portsmouth house for his headquarters. It is unclear what led Prescott to choose this site for his headquarters; at the time, it was noted that the country offered less protection for this important British officer, and indeed, on July 9/10, 1777, Prescott was captured.²⁰ Lieutenant Frederick Mackenzie, who was stationed near the farm, described the events in his diary:

"A party of Rebels landed ... about 5 miles N. of Newport, from whence they advanced very silently to General Prescott's quarters at Mr Overing's on the W. road. They surrounded the house about 10 minutes before 12, seized the Sentry, who had challenged twice, but who, not being loaded, could give no further alarm, and immediately forced open all the doors, they then went directly into the Chambers, where they laid

¹⁸ Crane 58.

¹⁹ Crane 56-7.

²⁰ Garman 13-14.

hold of Genl Prescott, and Lieut Barrington, his aide-de-campe, and in about 7 minutes quitted the house, taking the General, Lieut Barrington, and the Sentry with them, returned to their boats by the way they came and immediately went off.”²¹

Here, the term “Chambers” surely refers to the rooms above stairs in the Nichols-Overing House. According to the map made by Lieutenant Mackenzie, the Guard House still resided in its position near the road. It therefore was a witness to the events of the evening of July 9/10, 1777—the “party of Rebels” would have walked right by it.

Aside from its proximity to other events centered in Portsmouth during the Battle of Rhode Island, there is little further information to document the lifestyle and/or history of the Guard House throughout the end of the eighteenth century and the nineteenth century. The one exception is the inventory of the farm’s equipment, taken in 1783 after Overing’s death. The inventory includes, among other things, a list of animals (2 oxen, 2 cows, 2 heifers, 1 calf, etc), farm equipment (4 pitch forks, 5 rakes, 1 milk pail, 1 cheese tub, etc.), dining items (6 pewter plates, 2 platter, etc.), along with other items necessary for farm life.²² There seems to be little suggestion of much activity beyond keeping animals and, perhaps, raising a few token crops. It would be reasonable to question the extent to which Overing, in his later years and after the Revolution had devastated Newport’s merchant culture, was in a position to work his land. The Overing’s Newport household’s inventory included 4 slaves, but it is unclear whether they also worked out at the farm. Because it also functioned as part of Newport’s mercantile culture, the Guard House, too, surely fared ill during this period of severe economic decline.

In 1796, Mary Overing sold the Prescott Farm property and after this time, the farm changed hands about a dozen times. In a deed dating to 1889, the property was referred to as “Prescott Place,” for the first time giving the property its present-day name. Sometime during this period, the Guard House was moved to join with two other additions as a rear ell on the northeast side of the Nichols-Overing House. The NRF’s current working theory is that a previous kitchen, also located to the rear of the Nichols-Overing House, burned and the Guard House was moved up the hill to serve in that capacity.²³ This theory strengthens the idea that the Guard House was originally used as a kitchen for the farm.

In 1970, Doris Duke, founder of the Newport Restoration Foundation, purchased the property for \$475,000. At this time, she decided to remove the Guard House from the rear of the Nichols-Overing House and move it down the hill to its

²¹ Mackenzie 148.

²² Cummings 12, 15.

²³ Personal communication, Robert Foley, Preservation Director, and Lisa Dady, Director of Education, of the Newport Restoration Foundation.

present location. The Guard House's exceptional rough-hewn framing appealed to Duke, and despite a lack of knowledge of any specific historic context, she determined it to be exemplary of the period's construction. Her goal in moving it away from the Nichols-Overing House was that it could stand as such an example for others to observe. Curiously, along the way, the Guard House gained a reputation for being the room from which Prescott was taken, even though the structure was nowhere near the Nichols-Overing House at that time. Despite this, a plaque on the front of the Guard House marks it as having been the site of General Prescott's capture. The NRF does not promote this theory and instead interprets the house as an example of eighteenth century farm life.

The Guard House testifies to the complex system of mercantile culture in the Portsmouth/Newport region during the eighteenth century. Today, it is a superlative example of early eighteenth century construction, from which lessons can be taken regarding Colonial-era building techniques. It also occupies a specific place in Doris Duke's efforts to preserve Newport's Colonial heritage. Altogether, the Guard House is a special place with a tantalizing history well worthy of further documentation and research.

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