

AN INFINITELY IMPORTANT OBJECT: STRATEGY, AUTHORITY, AND
THE AFTERMATH OF COLONIALISM AT WEST POINT IN THE
AMERICAN REVOLUTION

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation studies the Continental Army's attempts to control navigation on the Hudson River in the New York Highlands during the American Revolutionary War. It examines the overlapping lines of authority between federal, state, and military entities; the escalation of civil-military tensions over supplies, provisions, and pay; how American strategy created varying levels of resources and troops in the region, and the failure of efforts to mitigate that risk; the anxiety created in Continental officers when they rejected a French engineers' advice on the location and scope of riverside defenses; and how George Washington and his officers used the fortifications at West Point to demonstrate the legitimacy of the United States to domestic and foreign audiences. This dissertation utilizes correspondence, diaries, memoirs, the journals of legislative proceedings, orderly books, archeological studies, and contemporaneous newspapers to reveal that, despite the hindrance of overlapping authorities, the fortifications in the Highlands enabled US strategy and displayed the aftermath of colonialism in the United States.

Controlling river traffic in the Highlands began as a colonial project with plans that outstripped available resources and relied on technology incapable of achieving its purpose. The New York Provincial Congress relocated its efforts five miles south and included a physical obstacle in the water. A British attack overwhelmed the defenses at the southern location in just a few hours. The Continental Army, contrary to the advice from a French military engineer, decided to rebuild near the original site and began the iterative development of a system of layered defenses. The project successfully deterred the British from attempting to take the works forcefully. Civil-military relationships grew

tenser as the war wound down, but Washington's intervention assured continued civilian control of the army.

This dissertation uses the example of the Highlands fortification process to provide a new understanding of strategy that gives the term more explanatory value. It takes seriously the impact of the power imbalance between Great Britain and its North American colonies and analyzes the lingering effects of that relationship on the United States. Finally, it reveals the tension and conflict between different lines of authority throughout the war and uncovers the roots of civil-military tensions in the young republic.

DEDICATION

For my wife

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INTRODUCTION

Before the Declaration of Independence, before the Battle of Bunker Hill, before the Continental Army existed or George Washington became its commander, the Second Continental Congress desired fortifications along New York's lower Hudson River.

Without some way to control navigation through the area known as the Highlands, the Rebels assumed their cause was hopeless.

The river was the key to interior inter-colonial communications, trade, and supply because of the poor infrastructure of British North America. Overland travel between the colonies was extraordinarily difficult. Roads, if maintained at all, were little more than trails across frequently rough terrain. Weather significantly degraded road conditions, often making travel impossible until snow had melted, or heavy rainfalls evaporated. Additionally, there was little colonial penetration into the interior of the continent beyond the river network. Rebel control of the Hudson allowed communication between New England and the Middle colonies independent of sea travel. Much of the inter-colonial trade in people, ideas, and goods relied on freedom of movement across the Hudson.¹

From a military perspective, controlling the lines of communication was essential to American victory. British naval superiority as early as 1775 forced communications

¹ Edward C. Boynton, *History of West Point and Its Military Importance During the American Revolution* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1871), 15-17; Charles E. Miller, Jr., Donald V. Lockey, and Joseph Visconti, Jr., *Highland Fortress: The Fortification of West Point during the American Revolution, 1775-1783* (West Point: United States Military Academy, 1988), 5-11; Dave Richard Palmer, *The River and the Rock: The History of Fortress West Point, 1775-1783* (New York: Greenwood Publishing Corporation, 1969), 312-14; Gerald C. Stowe and Jac Weller, "Revolutionary West Point: 'The Key to the Continent'," *Military Affairs* 19, no. 2 (1995): 82-85.

and trade to rely on overland routes. Gen. George Washington understood that if the Crown's forces also controlled the Hudson, they could limit inter-colonial interaction and support.² From the British perspective, the resistance to imperial policies in North America was the result of a small, vocal minority located in and around Boston. Gaining control of the Hudson would isolate the incipient insurgency and give colonists south of New York time to reconsider the decision to challenge imperial rule. Furthermore, the river constituted the southern third of the Hudson-Lake George-Lake Champlain corridor linking Canada with New York City. The British could use that route to reinforce their troops in New York and the Middle Colonies. From the Rebel perspective, control of the Hudson secured their internal communication lines and provided a bulwark against potential incursions by the British from New York City. Likewise, American control of the Hudson created the persistent threat of invasion for Canada and expeditions against potentially hostile Native American nations to the north.³ The importance of the river was one reason Lt. Gen. Thomas Gage, the commander-in-chief of British forces in North America, initially located his headquarters in New York.

² George Washington to Jean Baptiste Charles Henri Hector, comte d'Estaing, 11-12 September 1778, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-16-02-0616>; Washington to Israel Putnam, 2 December 1777, *Founders Online*, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-12-02-0473>.

³ Palmer, *The River and the Rock*, 311-26; Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America: British Leadership, the American Revolution, and the Fate of the Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 93-5, 111-14; Ira D. Gruber, "British Strategy: The Theory and Practice of Eighteenth-Century Warfare," in *Reconsiderations on the Revolutionary War*, ed. Don Higginbotham (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978), 23-27; George C. Daughan, *Revolution on the Hudson: New York City and the Hudson River Valley in the American War of Independence* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2016), 22-47.

The Hudson River, though, was an unusual North American waterway. As a tidal river, its current reversed direction twice a day. From Albany going south, it entered the Highlands and twists through high hills and granite cliffs. The wind swirled in the gorges, making sailing difficult. The land on either side transitioned from cliff to woodland to field and back again as the river flowed toward the Atlantic Ocean. In the late eighteenth century, remnants of the last ice age remained as boulders, sand, and dirt littered the slopes of the surrounding hills. About 100 miles south of Albany and 60 miles north of Manhattan, the river narrowed and turned ninety degrees to the east for half a mile before making another sharp turn to resume its course to the south. A flat, wooded plot of land called West Point jutted into the Hudson at the double turn and towered three hundred feet above the river. Ships sailing in either direction hugged the bank below the elevated ground because the shifting winds and tides challenged even the most seasoned sailors. It was the ideal chokepoint.⁴

From the Continental Congress' decision to place defenses on the Hudson in May 1775 until the Battle of Forts Montgomery and Clinton in October 1777, efforts to fortify the river were sporadic and slow. The rebellious colonists had acquired some knowledge of fort construction under British supervision, but no inter-colonial body had existed to coordinate previous projects.⁵ The New York Provincial Congress made scant progress in

⁴ Francis A. Galgano, "The Revolutionary War in the Hudson Highlands: Fortifying West Point, 1775-1779," *Middle States Geographer* 43 (2010): 60–71.

⁵ René Chartrand, *The Forts of Colonial North America: British, Dutch and Swedish Colonies* (Oxford: Osprey, 2011), 4-7; Fred Anderson, *Crucible of War: The Seven Years' War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754-1766* (New York: Vintage, 2000), 411-12. The two precursors to the Continental Congress, the Albany and

obstructing the navigation of the Hudson by the winter of 1775, despite beginning the effort in May. Bernard Romans, the engineer that the provincial congress hired to design the defenses, selected a small island across the river from West Point as the site for what he christened Fort Constitution. He envisioned a bastion-style fort in the European tradition, controlling river traffic with an array of cannons. His plan was significantly larger, more complicated, and more costly than “field works” or crude frontier stockades.⁶

The New York Provincial Congress fired Romans in January 1776 and moved the main effort to a location five miles to the south where Popolopen Creek emptied into the west side of the Hudson. The New Yorkers then requested the Continental Army assume control of the Highland defenses. Washington assigned one artillery company to Fort Constitution, but the overwhelming weight of effort shifted to the new site. The army strung a chain-and-boom system between the river’s banks to obstruct shipping. Above the western anchor on either side of Popolopen Creek, soldiers erected Forts Montgomery and Clinton to protect the river obstacles. In October 1777, British troops attacked over the undefended high ground directly west of the forts, capturing both positions in a little more than three hours of fighting. They then sailed north toward Fort Constitution under

Stamp Act Congresses in 1754 and 1765 respectively, met for very limited objectives and each lasted less than a month.

⁶ For European, bastion-style forts, see, Sebastien Le Prestre de Vauban, *A Manual of Siegecraft and Fortification*, trans. George Rothrock (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1968). For field fortifications or frontier-style forts, see David Simmons, “Military Architecture on the American Frontier,” *Selected Papers from the 1983 and 1984 George Rogers Clark Trans-Appalachian Frontier History Conference*, ed. Robert J. Holden (Vincennes: Vincennes University Printing Center, 1985), http://npshistory.com/series/symposia/george_rogers_clark/1983-1984/sec5.htm.

a white flag to offer the Americans a chance to surrender, but the garrison at the fort fired on the approaching ships. When the British returned in force, they found the position abandoned.

A mixture of deficiencies accounted for the flawed placement, design, and construction of the first defensive works in the Highlands. The root cause of the United States' defeat in October 1777, however, was the cumbersome management of the Rebel war effort in 1775, a system complicated by the overlapping political and military authority.

When the British withdrew in November 1777, Washington assigned a French engineer, Lt. Col. Louis-Guillaume-Servais des Hayes de La Radière, to lead the Hudson fortification project, but the headstrong foreigner clashed with Rebel leaders over the scale and location of the new fort. Continental Army officers and New York officials decided to place the chain between Constitution Island and West Point and build new works on the west bank. Radière disagreed. He lobbied to rebuild Fort Clinton because he deemed its natural advantages superior to the Americans' proposal. The French engineer failed to convince Continental officers to adopt his plan, and Washington eventually recalled him to the Main Army. Another European engineer, Col. Thaddeus Kościuszko from Poland, took over the engineering work at the site. In a little less than two years, Kościuszko essentially completed the system of fortifications. He shielded the river obstructions at West Point with a network of forts, redoubts, and artillery batteries sufficient to deter the British from attempting to take the position by force. There were a few minor battles and skirmishes in the area during 1779 and 1780, but the treason of Maj. Gen. Benedict Arnold constituted the British Army's most serious attempt to

capture the post. Nevertheless, as late as April 1781, Gen. Sir Henry Clinton, the British commander-in-chief in North America, expressed his intention of “securing (even by a regular Attack) the important Post of West Point, whenever the Attempt can be made with Propriety.”⁷

After the US victory at Yorktown, the majority of the Continental Army spent the remainder of the war in the North. West Point served as a central hub for a line of positions from Connecticut to New Jersey that effectively contained the British presence in New York City. At the conclusion of the war, the Continental Army disbanded, and the garrison at West Point shrunk to only fifty-five men. Nearly twenty years later, West Point became the home of the United States Military Academy.

The purpose of this dissertation is to emphasize the ongoing importance of West Point to the military strategy of the Revolutionary War, to highlight the nascent relationship between civil and military authorities in the United States, and to explore the aftermath of the American colonial experience on West Point and the Continental Army. This dissertation engages and expands the historiography of the American Revolution and the early Republic. It argues that West Point was critical to Rebel and British strategy. The following pages show the civil-military relationship that played out at the site was fraught with tension and contestations for power and authority. Finally, this dissertation contends that the lasting influence of a provincial past created significant anxiety for the Rebels as the Continental Army attempted to meet European military standards. West Point saw no defining battle that marked a turning point in its

⁷ Sir Henry Clinton to Lord George Germain, 5 April 1781, 151:36, Sir Henry Clinton Papers, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

development. Rather, it evolved slowly and sometimes painfully in response to pressures from the British without the direct test of battle.

Historiography

Most historians have ignored or downplayed the Northern Theater of the American Revolutionary War after 1778.⁸ While Britain focused most of its efforts in Georgia, the Carolinas and Virginia, it still looked for opportunities to attack vulnerable points north of the Potomac River. In 1780, for instance, Gen. Sir Henry Clinton seriously considered striking Newport, Rhode Island, before Lt. Gen. Jean-Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, comte de Rochambeau's newly arrived French army could get organized and pose a threat. A year later, Clinton repeatedly requested that Lt. Gen. Lord Charles Cornwallis release some of his troops for a raid on Philadelphia. The relative dearth of analysis on the Northern Theater after 1778 has resulted in a misunderstanding of how the Continental Army executed Washington's strategy. A study of a particular place in the North can also illuminate the complicated civil-military relations of the nascent United States and the legacy of its colonial heritage.

West Point

Scholarly treatments of Highland fortifications in the Revolutionary War are scant, outdated, focused on military operations, and more recently have not incorporated different methodologies of military history. The earliest coverage of West Point in the

⁸ For example, see Don Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence: Military Attitudes, Policies, and Practice, 1763-1789* (New York: Macmillan, 1971); Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977); Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

Revolution came in Edward Boynton's *History of West Point*, written in 1871. Boynton presented a tactical history with little analysis and confined his conclusions to the strength of the fortifications' design.⁹ Subsequent authors like Alexander Flick, Gerald Stowe and Jac Weller expanded the narrative to include the initial effort at defending the bend in the river with the erection of Fort Constitution on the east bank. They incorporated the wider context of the war, but they also fell within the "drum and trumpet" school of military history.¹⁰

Dave Palmer wrote what many consider the definitive history of West Point in the Revolution. Unfortunately, he failed to document many of his claims and quotations, which makes validating them extremely difficult. Compounding the error, his analysis was often quite superficial and did not examine the social, political, and military reasons underlying the Continental Army's approach to the site.¹¹

Even after the cultural turn of the 1970s, the historiography made limited use of additional analytical tools to examine the impact of the West Point fortification project on American society. Paul Walker published a collection of primary texts with explanatory notes about engineers in the Revolution. These documents provide a wide range of examples of engineering work in the war. In the chapter on West Point, however, he overstated the importance of the position militarily while failing to discuss its political

⁹ Boynton, *History of West Point*.

¹⁰ Alexander C. Flick, "The Construction and History of Fort Constitution, 1925 Annual Meeting Address," in *Constitution Island and West Point in the Revolutionary War*, ed. Constitution Island Association (West Point, NY: Constitution Island Association, 1925), 1-31; Stowe and Weller, "Revolutionary West Point."

¹¹ Palmer, *The River and the Rock*.

and social value.¹² Charles E. Miller, Jr., Donald V. Lockey, and Joseph Visconti, Jr., updated Palmer's work and argued that West Point fortifications presaged defensive systems at fortresses like Liege, Namur, and Verdun in pre-World War I Europe. They also focused almost exclusively on tactics at the expense of a larger cultural context. Although the authors claimed that the efforts at West Point revealed "how an eighteenth-century society was able to translate governmental programs into accomplishments in a revolutionary environment," most of the rest of the work focused on solutions to tactical military problems and did not explore the societal causes or implications of the project.¹³

From 1990 to 2003, James Johnson published three articles that went beyond the tactical focus of the earlier historiography. He updated Flick on the construction of Fort Constitution and broached the subjects of civil-military relations and the maritime components of the defenses. Johnson argued that the combat at Fort Clinton and Montgomery on 6-7 October 1777 was decisive for the Battle of Saratoga because it prevented Clinton's force from rescuing Lt. Gen. John Burgoyne's army. In reality, the battle only cost the British a day more than they had planned. Also, because it occurred 10 days before and 120 miles away from Saratoga, it was unlikely that the British forces could have reached Burgoyne in time to make a difference. Ultimately, Johnson ignored

¹² Paul K. Walker, *Engineers of Independence: A Documentary History of the Army Engineers in the American Revolution, 1775-1783* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1981).

¹³ Miller, Lockey, and Visconti, *Highland Fortress*, 2, 205-7. Quotation on 2.

the civil-military questions the narrative raised and stayed firmly on the familiar ground of operational military history.¹⁴

The most recent addition to the historiography, Lincoln Diamant's *Chaining the Hudson*, maintained the predominant focus on military operations and argued that the chain across the Hudson River was instrumental in turning the British to operations in the South. Diamant offered a compelling narrative that focused on the technological history and design of the post-1778 fortification, but he did not connect the events at the post to larger questions about the Revolution and society.¹⁵ The historiography invites an update that includes topics like the role of West Point in American strategy, civil-military relations during the Revolutionary War, and the enduring imprint of colonialism on the forces there.

Strategy

The second historiography this dissertation engages is the study of strategy in the Revolutionary War. Contemporary interpretations of Washington's approach to the war contended he employed a Fabian strategy. Named after the Roman general Quintus Fabius Maximus Verrucosus, this method avoids battles, seeks to harass the enemy with minor raids or skirmishes, and prioritizes the army's survival at all costs. It relies on

¹⁴ James M. Johnson, "The Flawed Works of Fort Constitution," in *Key to the Northern Country: The Hudson River Valley in the American Revolution*, ed. James M. Johnson, Christopher Pryslopski, and Andrew Villani (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2013), 200-208; Johnson, "A Warm Reception in the Hudson Highlands," in *Key to the Northern Country*, 211-17; and Johnson, "Interpreting the Battle for the Hudson River Valley: The Battle of Fort Montgomery," in *Key to the Northern Country*, 223-31. The first article originally appeared in 1990, the second in 2001, and the last in 2003.

¹⁵ Lincoln Diamant, *Chaining the Hudson: The Fight for the River in the American Revolution* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004).

mobility and time to eventually overload the adversary's logistics network while degrading his will to continue the war. John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, Benjamin Franklin, Brig. Gen. Louis Lebègue Duportail, and Vice Adm. Charles Henri Hector d'Estaing extolled Washington as the "American Fabius."¹⁶

Historians focused their debate over Washington's strategy on two variables: change and tactical orientation. Although they acknowledged the changing political environment, Russell F. Weigley, Robert Middlekauff, and Edward Lengel saw no alteration in Washington's approach. Weigley and Middlekauff argued that Washington was defensively oriented, validating the general's contemporaries. Lengel emphasized Washington's proclivity to engage the British between 1776-78 to contend that while the general accepted a war of attrition, his first instinct was to seek a decisive battle.¹⁷

Those who argued that changes occurred disagreed regarding their number, manner, and impact. For example, Dave Palmer argued that there were four phases of American strategy. The level of offensive action the Continental Army took characterized each stage. In contrast, Donald J. Stoker and Michael W. Jones identified three phases but

¹⁶ John Adams to Abigail Adams, 18 June 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-02-02-0210>; Hamilton to Susanna Livingston, 18 March 1779, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-0061>; Commissioners at Court of France to Committee of Secret Correspondence, 6 February 1777, in Jared Sparks, ed., *The Diplomatic Correspondence of the American Revolution* [...], 12 vols. (Boston, MA: N. Hale and Gray and Bowen, 1829), 1:260; Louis Lebègue Duportail to Washington, 20 April 1778, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-14-02-0517>; Washington to d'Estaing, 5 September 1778, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-16-02-0556>.

¹⁷ Weigley, *American Way of War*; Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause*; Edward G. Lengel, *General George Washington: A Military Life* (New York: Random House, 2005).

maintained the US strategy was essentially static after the summer of 1777. Kris J. Stillings observed a single change in strategy, the result of the bitter defeats the Americans suffered in the summer and fall of 1776. Stoker and Jones and Stillings agreed with Middlekauff and Weigley that Washington was primarily defensive. At the same time, Palmer sided with Lengel in seeing the Virginian favor a more aggressive approach to the war.¹⁸

The historiography allows for a new intervention. These works possess significant limitations, most notably the absence of an explicit definition of the word "strategy." Washington's revolutionary peers ignored the incongruent aspects of his plans because fixed fortifications are inimical to a Fabian approach as the preservation of the army outweighs defense of a particular territory. Weigley, Middlekauff, Lengel, and Palmer conflated strategy and tactics and interpreted Washington's conduct almost exclusively through the lens of offensive versus defensive tendencies. Neither Stoker and Jones nor Stillings acknowledged the changing political objectives of the Americans during the war. Analyzing West Point defenses with a new definition of strategy, however, reveals a consistent yet flexible approach to the war. Such a method offers a new interpretative framework for a broad range of military topics beyond the scope of this work.

¹⁸ Dave Richard Palmer, *The Way of the Fox: American Strategy in the War for America, 1775-1783* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1975); Donald J. Stoker and Michael W. Jones, "Colonial Military Strategy," in *Strategy in the American War of Independence* ed. Donald Stoker, Kenneth J. Hagan, and Michael T. McMaster (London: Routledge, 2009), 5-34; Kris J. Stillings, "General George Washington and the Formulation of American Strategy for the War of Independence" (master's thesis, United States Marine Corps Command and Staff College, 2001), <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA401347.pdf>.

Civil-Military Relations

Additionally, this dissertation adds to the historiography of civil-military relationships. Republican ideology asserted that citizen-soldiers, embodied in the militia, represented the ideal form of defense for society while a standing army inherently threatened liberty. A regular, disciplined armed force, however, stood a better chance in matching the threat of the British military, so the Continental Congress sought to mitigate the risks associated with a standing army. Scholars have focused on how state and national legislatures regulated the military during the Revolutionary War.¹⁹ Don Higginbotham argued that the Rebels started the war with strong governmental oversight of colonial armed forces, and Lawrence Delbert Cress added that colonial and state authorities insisted on maintaining jurisdiction over the regiments they raised and those units operating within their borders throughout the war.²⁰ James Kirby Martin and Mark Edward Lender wrote that General Washington was critical in establishing civilian control of military power, "even when state and Congressional politics adversely affected the war effort."²¹

¹⁹ See Daniel A. Hayden, "George Washington and Civil-Military Relations During the Revolutionary War: A Study of the Establishment of Civilian Control" (master's thesis, United States Army Command and General Staff College, 2012); and Andrew O. Saslav, "Civil-Military Relations: George Washington, An Example for Today's Leaders" (master's thesis, United States Army War College, 2017).

²⁰ Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence*, 18; Lawrence Delbert Cress, *Citizens in Arms: The Army and Militia in American Society to the War of 1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 94.

²¹ James Kirby Martin and Mark Edward Lender, *"A Respectable Army": The Military Origins of the Republic* (West Sussex: John Wiley and Sons, 2015), 41.

This dissertation challenges the historiography on three points. First, the New York Provincial Congress was neither an efficient nor effective executive body with respect to the building of fortifications in the Hudson Highlands. After the Continental Congress identified the need for obstructing navigation on the Hudson River, the New Yorkers floundered for nearly a year until Washington and the Continental Army assumed control of the project. Second, the legislatures and the Continental Army negotiated jurisdiction of the Hudson Highlands. Responsibility for obstructing the Hudson alternated between the Continental Congress, the New York Provincial Congress, the Continental Army, New York's governor, and specific individuals like Horatio Gates. Finally, the following pages will highlight the unexamined problem of layered authority in civil-military relations. Each successive commander of West Point faced a variety of directives and sanctioned powers that imbricated or contradicted each other, which decreased the overall efficacy of the Rebels in the Revolutionary War. By examining the construction and defense of river obstructions in the Highlands, this dissertation yields a more nuanced understanding of the civil-military dynamic in the Revolutionary War.

Aftermath of Colonialism

Finally, this dissertation engages with the underdeveloped historiography on the lingering impact of the colonial experience on the United States.²² Three authors have

²² H. Reuben Neptune, "The Irony of Un-American Historiography: Daniel J. Boorstin and the Rediscovery of a U.S. Archive of Decolonization," *American Historical Review* 120, no. 3 (2015): 935-50. Ellen Hartigan-O'Connor, *The Ties That Buy: Women and Commerce in Revolutionary America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1997); Gautham Rao, *National Duties: Custom Houses and the Making of the American State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); Drew R. McCoy, *The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America* (Chapel Hill:

opened the door for the present study. First, Eliga Gould in *Among the Powers of the Earth* argued European recognition of the United States' sovereignty legitimized the independence of the British North American mainland colonies. He only briefly covered the role of the Continental Army in the process, but he highlighted that the effort to gain legitimacy began during the War of Independence. This dissertation builds on his premise to explain how the fortification of West Point showcased American martial skills for a European audience.²³

Kariann Yokota complements Gould's argument. She explained that the United States relied on Europe for standards of taste, respectability, and value, which shaped the development of a national identity. Yokota contended that post-revolutionary Americans "performed for a British audience and craved validation from them, while at the same time hoping to forge a separate American identity using imported goods." This dissertation borrows Yokota's concepts of performance and internalized inferiority to

University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Douglas Bradburn, *The Citizenship Revolution: Policies and the Creation of the American Union, 1784-1804* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007); Eliga H. Gould, "The Question of Home Rule," *William and Mary Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (April 2007): 255-58; the phrase "aftermath of colonialism" developed in conversations with Dr. H. Reuben Neptune. Also, Jessica Choppin Roney, Neptune, H. Reuben Neptune, Emilie Connolly, Eliga Gould, Michael Hattem, Fabricio Prado, and Kariann Akemi Yokota, "What's Postcolonial About (Settler) Colonial America?" (roundtable discussion, Temple University, online, 4 October 2021).

²³ Eliga H. Gould, *Among the Powers of the Earth: The American Revolution and the Making of a New World Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014). See also, James Kirby Martin, "The Continental Army and the American Victory," in *The World Turned Upside Down*, ed. John Ferling (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 19-34.

argue that West Point exhibited military competency for foreign and domestic audiences while constituting a source of apprehension for the officers in command there.²⁴

Finally, Caroline Cox's *A Proper Sense of Honor* shapes this dissertation's analysis of the colonial impact on the employment of the Continental Army. She argued that the creation of the Continental Army's rank structure and its organizational aspirations to discipline and professionalism indicate the persisting effects of the colonial tradition. "The unthinking decision to divide the army into officer and not officer reflected a central division in colonial & British society. It also matched the organizing principles of the British and European armies with which the colonists were familiar." The following study will expand on her idea of inherited patterns in the construction and garrisoning of West Point.²⁵

Themes and Arguments

This dissertation uses the construction efforts at West Point to explore how strategy, civil-military relations, and the aftermath of colonialism in the United States developed and interacted. First, it argues that a poor definition of strategy has limited the understanding of the problems the United States and the Continental Army faced in the Revolutionary War. Colloquial practice has made strategy synonymous with "long-term" or "important." Such usage diminishes the explanatory power of the term. Likewise,

²⁴ Kariann Akemi Yokota, *Unbecoming British: How Revolutionary America Became a Postcolonial Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). On cultural performance through material goods, see Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Vintage Press, 1992). On how material culture linked the United States and Great Britain, see Hartigan-O'Connor, *The Ties That Buy*.

²⁵ Caroline Cox, *A Proper Sense of Honor: Service and Sacrifice in George Washington's Army* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 2-3.

conflating a strategy with a plan is also problematic because it assumes battlefield success necessarily fulfills policy objectives. Military plans arrange forces to pursue concrete objectives. Strategy, though, provides the critical connective tissue between military actions and political consequences. As professor of military strategy, Everett C. Dolman points out: “the strategy needs a plan, but the plan is not a strategy.”²⁶ Finally, equating strategy with a preferred fighting style drives the discussion to the level of specific military actions and removes the concept from its association with broad policy goals. A better definition of strategy is possible.²⁷

²⁶ Everett C. Dolman, *Pure Strategy: Power and Principle in the Space and Information Age* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 6.

²⁷ For the theory undergirding strategy see Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, indexed ed., trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Baron Antoine-Henri De Jomini, *The Art of War*, trans. Capt. G.H. Mendell and Lt. W.P. Craighill (Radford, VA: Wilder Publications, 2008); Hans Delbrück, *History of the Art of War, VI: The Dawn of Modern Warfare*, trans. Walter J. Renfroe Jr. (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 1990). A good comparison between Jomini and Clausewitz is Mark T Calhoun, “Clausewitz and Jomini: Contrasting Intellectual Frameworks in Military Theory,” *Army History* 80 (2011): 22-37. More contemporary takes on definitions of strategy are Sir Basil Henry Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (New York: Penguin Group, 1991); Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1974); Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Christopher Hemmer, *American Pendulum: Recurring Debates in U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015); Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Anchor Books, 2002); Justin Kelly and Michael J. Brennan, “The Leavenworth Heresy and the Perversion of Operational Art,” *JFQ: Joint Force Quarterly* 2010, no. 56 (1st Quarter 2010): 109-16; Hilde Eliassen Restad, *U.S. Foreign Policy Traditions: Multilateralism Vs. Unilateralism Since 1776* (Oslo: Norwegian Institute of Defense Studies, 2010); David Dunn, “Isolationism Revisited: Seven Persistent Myths in the Contemporary American Foreign Policy Debate,” *Review of International Studies* 31, no. 02 (April 2005): 237-61; John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 56-57; Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter With the World Since 1776* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997); Eliot Cohen, “The President Gave Us His Plan. But Does He Have the Right Strategy?,” *Washington Post*, 6 December 2009, B1; Fred Charles Iklé, *Every War Must*

Barry Posen defined grand strategy as “a state’s theory about how it can best ‘cause’ security for itself.”²⁸ This dissertation applies that construction to war and argues a strategy is a theory to predict what military actions will create an advantageous political relationship between the belligerent countries at the cessation of armed conflicts.

For the purposes of analyzing strategy, the proposed definition provides greater opportunities for investigation. First, it enables the somewhat anachronistic exercise of examining strategies that came into being before military theorists popularized the concept. Second, the new definition centers the political objectives of a war and forces consideration of the conflict’s context. Third, it reveals a fuller picture of the belligerents’ understanding of the potential pathways to success. Finally, this approach has contemporary relevance for broader questions about where and when governments should act. Simply put, historians can paint a better picture by understanding strategy as a theory.

This dissertation positions the fortification of the Hudson Highlands as a central element of the American prediction for the best way to end the Revolutionary War on favorable terms. The Rebels’ theory contained two critical parts. First, the individual states had to remain united. If one or more states left the union, the likelihood of the others achieving independence dropped dramatically because Britain would be able to

End. 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); and Dolman, *Pure Strategy*. The dominant definition in the United States military comes from Arthur F. Jr. Lykke, “Defining Military Strategy,” *Military Review* 69, no. 5 (1989): 183-86. For a critique of Lykke, see Jeffrey W. Meiser, “Ends + Ways + Means = (Bad) Strategy,” *Parameters* 46, no. 4 (2016): 81-91.

²⁸ Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the World Wars* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 13.

concentrate its resources on those areas still in rebellion. As Washington declared, “Our Success must depend upon a firm Union and a strict adherence to the General plan. Other Measures may produce a partial relief, but never can remove the principal Evil.”²⁹

Second, the United States needed to increase the cost of the war to the British to diminish the will of Parliament to continue investing resources in the fight. The Continental Congress promptly identified the advantages of forming alliances with Britain’s long-standing foes, especially the French. To gain its political objectives, the United States needed to uphold the union and force the British to conclude that recognizing US independence was less costly than continuing the war.³⁰

West Point, directly and indirectly, supported the Rebel and British theories of victory. First, control of the Hudson River in the Highlands enabled communication between New England and the Middle and Southern Colonies, which increased the material and moral support the colonies and states provided each other. With the river crossings open, Pennsylvania and Delaware sent grain to New England, and cattle and manufactured goods returned. Second, the soldiers in the Highlands limited the mobility of the British Army outside of New York City. The threat of attack from the West Point garrison forced the British commander to keep several thousand troops posted at the

²⁹ Washington to Nicholas Cooke, 20 January 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-08-02-0121>.

³⁰ John Adams to Henry Laurens, 8 December 1778, in Jared Sparks, *Diplomatic Correspondence*, 4: 283-84; Arthur Lee to Committee of Secret Correspondence, 3 June 1776, in Sparks, *Diplomatic Correspondence*, 2:14-15; Secret Committee to Silas Deane, 3 March 1776, in Sparks *Diplomatic Correspondence*, 1:5-9; Thomas Jefferson, Declaration on Taking Arms, 6 July 1775, in Worthington C. Ford, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789*, 34 vols. (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1906), 2:128-57. Hereafter, *JCC*.

city's defenses. By 1779, Washington's Main Army formed a loose arch of positions from Rhode Island to New Jersey with West Point as the keystone. As a result, the British had a paltry area to forage for provisions and supplies, which drove the costs of sustaining their army higher.

The proposed definition of strategy reveals the consistency in Washington's actions and explains the fluctuating priority West Point received throughout the war. The Hudson River was critical to the success of the Revolution. The Continental Army secured the routes for communication between the colonies and resisted the British Army when and where it could. Because West Point ensured American control of the river, it enabled the Main Army to impose costs on the British elsewhere. When Washington's force provided a buffer between the British and the Highlands, West Point's importance decreased as the troops accomplished the mission. In both circumstances, though, the mechanism through which the United States intended to gain British recognition of independence remained the same. The strategy was consistent regardless of the prioritization of resources to the Highland forts.³¹

³¹ On the significance of the Hudson River and West Point, see Jedidiah Huntington to Washington, 16 April 1783, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-11079>; Henry Knox to William Knox, 7 May 1779, in Francis S. Drake, ed., *Life and Correspondence of Henry Knox, Major-General in the American Revolutionary Army* (Boston: Samuel G. Drake, 1873), 61; Washington to Putnam, 2 December 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-12-02-0473>; Washington to Marie-Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette, 4 July 1779, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-21-02-0286>; Washington, Diary, August 1781, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/01-03-02-0007-0004>.

Second, this dissertation argues that overlapping lines of authority weakened American defenses and increased civil-military tensions. State, federal, and army leaders agreed that maintaining control of the Hudson River in the Highlands was critical, but they diverged on the entity responsible for overseeing, directing, and funding the project. The New York Provincial Congress looked to the Continental Congress for funds while insisting on its right to give orders to all troops inside the state. The Continental Congress sent multiple inspection teams to West Point, but it often ignored that site in favor of more immediate concerns. Civilian overseers tolerated significant location and design flaws in addition to construction delays. George Washington and the Continental Army stretched the boundaries of military power, especially with respect to state legislatures. The competing lines of authority between the New York Provincial Congress and the Continental Congress, however, was the root cause of the deficiencies that Sir Henry Clinton exploited during his 1777 expedition into the Highlands.

Disputes over power in the region did not create problems solely between state and federal legislatures. The Continental Army reflexively copied the hierarchical rank structure of the British Army, but conflicts still arose. Most famously, when the Continental Congress appointed Maj. Gen. Horatio Gates to the presidency of the Board of War, he became Washington's civilian superior. As a major general, though, he remained Washington's military subordinate. The conflict impacted West Point because Gates assigned a second engineer to the site without informing Washington of the decision. Two years earlier, a New York militia colonel in command of the garrison at Fort Montgomery refused to relinquish command to a Continental Army lieutenant colonel despite orders from Washington because of the rank difference. Near the end of

the war, a popular New York major general faced a court-martial because of contested authority over access to the West Point arsenal. Rank and seniority did not prevent or resolve all the problems when competing jurisdictional claims collided.

The Continental Congress and Continental Army grew increasingly suspicious of each other as the conflict wound down. The army occupied positions in and around West Point after the siege of Yorktown. Supplies and provisions often ran short, and the soldiers and officers routinely went without pay. Poor discipline in camp and mutinies showed the impact of the neglect. Sensing an opportunity, those favoring greater centralization in the United States used the army's beleaguered state to press for more power for the Continental Congress. Civil-military tensions escalated until the officers considered using the army as leverage in negotiations with Congress. Ultimately, the civil authority and military officers negotiated their relationship through the end of the war.

Third, this dissertation takes seriously the social and cultural anxiety experienced in the United States as part of their process of independence. America was colonial because of imposed spatial and temporal hierarchies.³² The imperial center, Great Britain, set standards for behavior and determined policy. The periphery, Britain's North American colonies, idealized the center as the source of civility and refinement but came to challenge its power to enact laws for the internal operation of those provinces. The process of independence rejected one-half of the colonial relationship, but the new United States still looked to Great Britain as the standard for proper practices. The Revolutionary

³² Michael Warner, "What's Colonial About Colonial America?," in *Possible Pasts: Becoming Colonial in Early America*, ed. Robert Blair St. George (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 49-70.

War would settle the issue of American political independence, but sources of authority, social conventions, and cultural norms remained firmly rooted in European standards. In the aftermath of colonialism, then, the Rebels reaffirmed the imperial center's standards while fighting against the metropole.

The fortification of the Hudson Highlands demonstrated the continuing sway of the colonial dynamic. The nature of the terrain and limited resources forced adaptations of the European standard. For example, West Point's layered defense and earth-and-timber construction deviated from Continental officers' conceptions of a "proper" fort. Without imperial guidance to validate their decisions, Rebel leaders remained uncertain about the effectiveness of even necessary and skillful departures from European norms. Nevertheless, army officers and politicians repeatedly prioritized lessons from their own experience over the advice of the recognized French experts in engineering. Their ongoing uncertainty about the decision, though, shows the impact of the previous dependency on Great Britain.

For foreign and domestic audiences, West Point asserted the credibility of the United States despite the anxiety from the aftermath of colonialism. To Europeans, West Point exhibited the United States' viability as a country. One of the concerns that France harbored in supporting the United States was the possibility that the thirteen states would fail to cooperate and act as a unified whole. Concentric rings of fortifications expanding out from the chain across the Hudson broadcast the Continental Army's resolve to hold that position. West Point offered tangible evidence of Americans' ability to work together and meet European military standards. From the British perspective, the formidable works deterred direct attacks. Sir Henry Clinton judged a successful siege both

prohibitively costly and uncertain. For a domestic audience, the Continental Army produced a visible symbol of the benefits derived from the union. Politicians and other civilian dignitaries frequently visited West Point to see the grand works, and Washington boasted of the defenses' strength in response to Arnold's treason. West Point presented important evidence that verified the legitimacy of the Continental Army and the United States.

Sources and Scope

The dissertation draws from a variety of sources. Archeological reports help inform the discussion of fortification construction and siegecraft. Wartime congressional reports, as well as proceedings from both the secret and public journals, detail the official acts and deliberations of the Continental and the New York congresses. Supply records combined with diaries, letters, and orderly books give insight into the daily life of soldiers and laborers at and around West Point. Personal papers fill in the narrative with more candid thoughts about the project from the people who were directly involved in the fortifications' design, construction, and manning.

The advantage of looking at a specific location that figured prominently in the Revolutionary War is that the story comes with a discrete beginning and ending. The Continental Congress made the decision to obstruct the Hudson River in the Highlands and provide protective fortifications in May 1775. While the Treaty of Paris formally ended the war in 1783, this dissertation will extend slightly past that time to explore the role played by West Point and the Continental Army in developing a national identity and gaining governmental legitimacy. A skeletal force of fifty-five men occupied West Point

after 1784 as Congress rejected the recommendation for a regular standing army and created a frontier constabulary force with one-year enlistments.

Defining the scope of the study in geographic terms, though, is more complicated. The Battle of Forts Montgomery and Clinton in 1777 occurred where they did because of the delays, confusion, and frustration that attended military construction around West Point. This dissertation discusses the battle as it illustrates the impact of Washington's gamble to rely on militia in defense of the Highlands. Conversely, the Battle of Stony Point does not receive detailed coverage despite West Point's role as the line of departure for the attack and the result of US control of the river in the Highlands. The deciding factor in what to include or exclude rests on physical proximity to West Point and the degree to which those events contribute to examining the dissertation's main themes.

Chapter Outline

The chapters of this dissertation follow a chronological order. Chapter 1 covers the period up to June 1776. The break comes because of the Declaration of Independence's impact on Rebel war goals and the shift from the West Point area in preparations to obstruct navigation on the Hudson. The chapter will cover the decision to block the river, the site selection process, the hiring of Bernard Romans as the project engineer, and the construction delays resulting in Romans' removal. The first attempt to fortify West Point highlights the contested and unsure source of authority and expertise in the United States. This chapter argues that the initial bungled efforts to construct fortifications at West Point resulted from overlapping civilian and military authority that went unresolved during the pre-independence phase of the war.

Chapter 2 examines the period of neglect from July 1776 to the British withdrawal from the Highlands in late October 1777. The Continental Army took over the mission of obstructing the Hudson, but it essentially abandoned the area around West Point and moved five miles to the south. American forces built Forts Clinton and Montgomery there but failed to secure the overland passages to the new forts. When the British Army took the offensive in mid-1777, it placed the Continental Army on the horns of a dilemma because the Rebels lacked the resources to respond in all the areas the British attacked. This chapter will argue that while competing jurisdictional claims continued to delay the project, Washington's strategy demanded he accept risk in the Highlands. The rival lines of authority, however, had hindered adequate development of the fortifications on the river. His mitigation measures relied on the New York militia, but it failed to respond to the mustering orders. The result was an ill-prepared and undermanned defensive position that was potentially catastrophic for the Rebel cause.

Chapter 3 analyzes the most crucial timeframe in the development of West Point as a defensive position, from November 1777 to November 1779. The day after the disaster at Forts Montgomery and Clinton, Washington once again prioritized defense of the Hudson Highlands and sent a French engineer, Louis-Guillaume-Servais des Hayes de La Radière, to restart construction at West Point. By the spring of 1778, work still had not resumed because, unbeknownst to Washington, Horatio Gates had assigned Polish engineer Thaddeus Kościuszko to the post. Radière and Kościuszko fell into a heated disagreement over their respective military rank, as well as their competing visions for the design and construction of the post. Kościuszko eventually prevailed, Radière left, and construction accelerated dramatically. This chapter will demonstrate that Kościuszko

and Radière represented different types of expertise, and the Americans chose to favor the Pole's experience over the Frenchman's education. The decision, though, increased their apprehensions because of the potential repercussions on the new French alliance. Furthermore, the design and construction of the Highland defenses during this time conveyed a message of military competency to multiple audiences. It provided evidence of the United States' legitimacy to its citizens and allies while limiting British options for supply and attack.

Chapter 4 covers the darkest days of West Point in the Revolution, from December 1779 until January 1781. Severe storms in the winter of 1779-80 pushed the garrison at West Point past the brink of discipline, and part of the Massachusetts line mutinied in January of 1780. The environmental conditions also eroded several of the works, and an ineffectual commander, Maj. Gen. Robert Howe, failed to accomplish the necessary repairs. When Maj. Gen. Benedict Arnold took command in August 1780, the fort's degradation increased the likely success of his plan to surrender the position to the British. Arnold's treason, and the British efforts to encourage it, served both military and narrative goals because the treachery of a high-ranking and heroic figure in the Continental pantheon would undercut American claims to unity and viability. After Arnold's betrayal, Washington furthered his claims to legitimacy by enforcing the death penalty on Arnold's accomplice under the customs of war. Continental officers remained concerned about meeting the expectations of European countries in their handling of the affair. The army received some benefit from a renewal of support in the wake of Arnold's plot, but the Pennsylvania Line mutinied on 1 January 1781 because of the dreadful conditions. This chapter will contend that social conventions prevented Washington from

relieving Howe, which weakened an already vulnerable fort. In addition, it shows that British military leadership believed the most susceptible part of West Point was the loyalty of those men in the garrison. Finally, this chapter maintains that American and British interpretations of Arnold's treason reveal persistent influence of the colonial past and the uncertainty that arose from challenging the metropole.

Chapter 5 explores the period between the Pennsylvania Line mutiny and the final dissolution of the Continental Army in June 1784. After an initial spike in support for the Army in the wake of the Arnold affair, supplies and provisions for the Main Army quickly slipped to pre-crisis levels. The general officers pled with the Continental Congress, state legislatures, and governors to provide more for the men serving the country. Meanwhile, Washington finally coordinated his long-awaited operation with the French Army under Lt. Gen. Jean-Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, comte de Rochambeau. After the joint Franco-American victory in Virginia, West Point's garrison fought complacency and boredom as the war wound down. The post still hosted dignitaries from Europe and the United States, and preparation for combat waned after the summer of 1782. Some of the officers in Washington's Main Army grew so frustrated with their perception of congressional neglect that they advocated leveraging their military power to compel action. Washington's personal intervention restrained that impulse, though, and the officers reaffirmed their commitment to civilian control of the military. Against Washington's advice, Congress disbanded the Continental Army in the summer of 1784, leaving a mere fifty-five men to maintain West Point. This chapter argues that the strength of the defenses at West Point fixed the British forces in New York City and enabled the Main Army to move against Virginia. Further, it contends the civil-military

tensions escalated in the war's closing years because financial difficulties from a lack of pay threatened to undermine Continental officers' status as gentlemen. The worry grew so intense that many exhibited sympathy for the Newburgh Conspiracy. The chapter concludes that the characteristics of civil-military relations in the United States an open question until the end of the war.

Each chapter also examines the British plan and strategy for the time under discussion. War is inherently interactive, so understanding the British theory of victory helps contextualize American choices. The king's forces clung to the notion that the Rebels were a minority group throughout the conflict. Success only required enough stability to allow the loyal subjects to rally to the empire. France's entry into the war did not, by any means, guarantee the inevitability of American independence, but it forced Great Britain to make difficult decisions about which of their colonies were most important to defend. Those decisions created opportunities for Washington to further raise the price for the British to keep fighting.

While the Hudson River was important, even critical, for the Rebels' cause the initial efforts to obstruct navigation on it were inefficient and disorganized. Overlapping claims to authority revealed significant tension in civil-military relations and the anxiety inherent in the process of transforming from colonies into a nation. Eventually, Americans would find their footing and construct a fortress that was able to deter the British from even attempting to take it by force and create a central location from which to threaten New York City. In May 1775, though, all that the Second Continental Congress knew for sure was that armed conflict with Great Britain was imminent and the

colonies were woefully unprepared to defend themselves. Their first order of business was to change that.

CHAPTER 1

ABANDONING THE AMERICAN GIBRALTAR, MAY 1775-JUNE 1776

Members of the New York Provincial Congress might have convinced themselves that the king would forgive military preparations as rebellion spread across British North America in the spring of 1775. After all, investing in fortifications could help the British Empire if the conflict between the colonies and Parliament abated. Plus, a fort situated in the Hudson Highlands was, by definition, not offensive. It was merely a preventative measure in case the situation got out of hand.

The obstruction of the Hudson River commanded a high priority at the outbreak of the American Revolutionary War. One of the first six resolutions that the Continental Congress passed in May concerned fortifying the Highlands. The New York Provincial Congress had appointed a commission to oversee such defenses in June and hired an engineer to design them in August. On 14 September 1775, the New York Committee of Safety first reviewed the plans for the position on Constitution Island, which sat directly across the Hudson from West Point. Along with the construction cost estimates, the Committee of Safety sent the plans to the Continental Congress five days later.

That same day, though, everything changed. No sooner had the Committee of Safety sent these documents to the Continental Congress than Whitehead Hicks, the mayor of New York City, interrupted its deliberations. New York's royal governor, William Tryon, had received instructions from London that labeled erecting fortifications, among other military preparations, as an act of rebellion. The legislators

remained undeterred, immediately offering to pay Beverly Robinson for the land on which they intended to build Fort Constitution.¹

Thus began the prolonged and contested effort to fortify West Point, which serves as a lens for examining questions of broader significance. Two legislative bodies, at different levels of government, employed three types of workforces (militia, regular army, and civilian) to achieve a vital national objective. The conflicts, cooperation, and ultimate failure of their decision-making illuminate the difficulties of civil-military relations when authority overlaps. This chapter explains how and why the New York Provincial Congress and Continental Congress opted to obstruct the Hudson at Forts Montgomery and Clinton instead of West Point and Constitution Island between May 1775 and June 1776. Delays in decision-making led to inferior defenses, highlighting the country's nascent tension between civilian and military authorities.

Competing political and military entities decreased the overall effectiveness of the Rebel forces in the Revolutionary War. The Continental Congress and the New York Provincial Congress erred in their initial efforts to block navigation on the Hudson. The British surrender at Saratoga in October 1777 mitigated the error's impact, but the move south enhanced the potential for a devastating defeat. The lack of qualified and competent engineers led to a dangerous indecisiveness in both legislative bodies. Civilian legislatures tolerated significant design flaws. Competition between the New York

¹ Peter Force, ed., 18 September 1775, *American Archives, Fourth Series: Consisting of a Collection of Authentick Records, State Papers, Debates, and Letters and Other Notices of Publick Affairs* [...], 9 vols. (Washington, DC: M. St. Clair Clarke and Peter Force, 1840), 3:902.

Provincial and Continental Congresses, however, formed the root cause of the deficiencies. The failure began in May 1775.

Fortifications

In eighteenth-century Europe, forts provided improved defensive positions, a secure area to mass troops for potential counterattacks, and protection to civilian populations. Engineers employed manufactured obstacles and barriers to mitigate the effectiveness of attacking forces' fire and slow or stop the advance of infantry into a defended site. Additionally, a fort provided defenders with advantageous positions from which they could rain down a withering fire on an enemy. Military leaders did not expect a defensive position to hold out against an enemy indefinitely but rather to force an invader to expend valuable time in executing a siege. A well-designed fort, adequately supplied and defended, could delay an invading army long enough for a relief force to mobilize. Fortifications also facilitated mounting counterattacks. A garrison could assemble behind the protective ramparts and sally out at its convenience, which meant that invading armies could not safely bypass forts without exposing themselves and their lines of communication.²

Vauban

For the century preceding the War of Independence, Sébastien le Prestre de Vauban dominated the art of fortification and siegecraft in western Europe. Vauban was born on 15 May 1633 in Burgundy, France. He obtained a commission as an engineer in 1655 and served until he died in 1707. Vauban became the Inspector-General of

² David G. Chandler, *The Art of Warfare in the Age of Marlborough* (New York: Spellmount, 1990), 13-20.

fortifications in 1677, a lieutenant general of the King's Armies in 1688, and in 1703 gained the title marshal of France. While he presided over the construction of the *frontière de fer* (iron border) shielding France, he was most responsible for bringing offensive action back into vogue. He took part in more than 50 successful sieges and developed a paradigm for attacking fortified positions that could reduce a defended site in no more than forty-eight days.³

Four general concepts summarized Vauban's approach to fort building. First, defenders should tailor a fortification to the specific ground it occupied to take advantage of local geographic advantages. Second, each design should seek to produce the maximum defensive fire from a fortress with cannon and musketry covering every possible approach. Third, defensive sites should offer a series of obstacles at specific places and a series of protective works outside the main fort to keep the attacker at maximum range. Finally, a fort must have the ability to project power through sorties mounted by its garrison. A Vauban-style fortress was the European standard against which military experts compared all other defensive works.⁴

³ Ken Powell, *The Great Builders* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2011), 60-65; Christopher Duffy, *The Fortress in the Age of Vauban and Frederick the Great, 1660-1789* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 71-72.

⁴ Vauban, *Manual of Siegecraft and Fortification*; Jamel Ostwald, *Vauban Under Siege: Engineering Efficiency and Martial Vigor in the War of the Spanish Succession* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 1-13; Christopher Duffy, *Fire & Stone: The Science of Fortress Warfare, 1660-1860* (London: Greenhill Press, 1996), 19-24; Duffy, *The Fortress in the Age of Vauban*, 2-3; Chandler, *Art of Warfare*, 73-75.

North American Forts

From the beginning of the European incursion into North America, the French, Spanish, Dutch, and British built defensive works with their settlements. Individual British colonies oversaw the construction of multiple defensive positions during King Philip's War, the Nine Years War, the War of Austrian Succession, and the Seven Years' War. A determined and organized workforce could rapidly construct an adequate fieldwork like the redoubt that crowned Breed's Hill on June 17, 1775. Bastion-style forts in the European tradition were more extensive, complicated, and costly to erect than crude frontier stockades. The creation and maintenance of the string of forts that sprang up from South Carolina to Nova Scotia proved incredibly expensive in both time and money. Forts in North America ran the gamut in size, construction material, permanence, and ground traces.⁵

The British dotted the eastern seaboard with numerous forts. From the earthworks on Roanoke Island to the timber stockades around Halifax, they relied on local materials to throw up some kind of defensive structure. Most of these sites used bastions and incorporated elements like ditches and terrepleins, which were artillery platforms behind the fort's walls (see figure 1). The most significant differences were in the complexity of the ground trace, or planform outline (figure 2), and the constructions materials. Where

⁵ René Chartrand, *The Forts of Colonial North America: British, Dutch and Swedish Colonies* (Oxford: Osprey, 2011), 4-7; Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause*, 289-91; Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 411-12; For field fortifications or frontier-style forts, David Simmons, "Military Architecture on the American Frontier," *Selected Papers from the 1983 and 1984 George Rogers Clark Trans-Appalachian Frontier History Conference*, ed. Robert J. Holden (Vincennes: Vincennes University Printing Center, 1985), http://npshistory.com/series/symposia/george_rogers_clark/1983-1984/sec5.htm.

European fortifications featured multiple defensive lines, those in North America were much simpler, usually having a wall only one log thick behind a ditch with a wooden terreplein that soldiers accessed from ladders.⁶

There were, of course, exceptions. Britain and France made some of their coastal and river defensive sites from stone and

brick to withstand the threat of naval and land artillery. For example, the French built Fort Chambly from stone to help control the Richelieu River and the invasion route into New France from the south. Other stone structures guarded the colony, including those at Montreal, Louisbourg, and the French Castle at Fort Niagara. The Dutch rebuilt Fort Amsterdam on Manhattan with stone after the first edifice crumbled due to neglect. The British favored stone construction for Forts Ticonderoga, Crown Point, and the

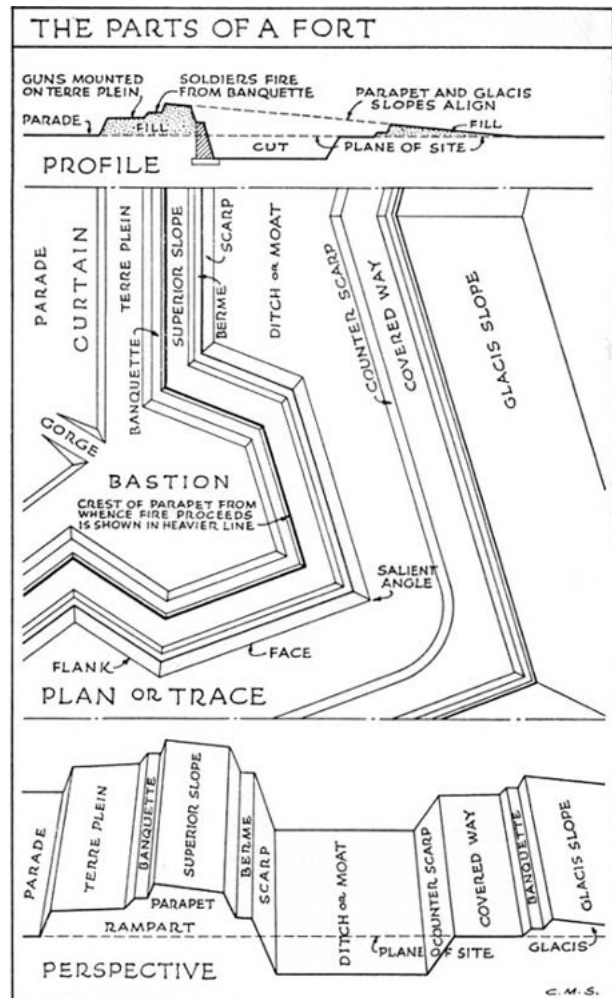


Figure 1: Parts of a Fort

⁶ J. E. Kaufmann and H. W. Kaufmann, *Fortress America: The Forts That Defended America 1600 to the Present* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2004), 13-93; René Chartrand, *The Forts of New France in Northeast America 1600–1763* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2008); Chartrand, *The Forts of Colonial North America*. Figure 1 from Simmons, “Military Architecture on the American Frontier;” Figure 2 from Francis Lima, “Star Fort,” 10 May 2014, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:StarFort.svg>.

works around Boston. Despite these examples, most North American complexes were earth-and-timber structures that rapidly fell into disrepair.

In the early colonies, what passed for a fort was usually little more than a simple home with a sturdy fence. Rather than having low, thick masonry walls filled with earth,

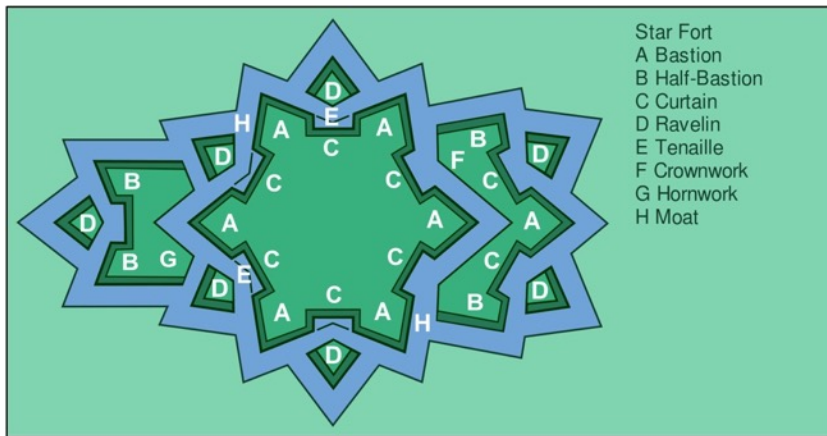


Figure 2: Bastion Fort Ground Trace

these sites featured a palisade, or wall of vertical spiked logs, encircling the interior (figure 3). Such garrison houses would have been susceptible

to cannon fire, but the dearth of artillery in the continent's interior made it an acceptable risk. The structures were smaller in scale because of their limited time in service. For example, the so-called “Line of Forts” on the northern border of Massachusetts during the Seven Years’ War was only active for about nine years. The more minor works provided an acceptable defensive position at a fraction of the cost of a masonry bastion fort. As the territory in North America under the British expanded rapidly in the eighteenth century, little incentive existed to build permanent fortifications that would become obsolete within a few years or even months.⁷

⁷ Figure 3 from Andrew King, 29 January 2020, <https://twitter.com/twitandrewking/status/1222700615626903552/photo/1>.

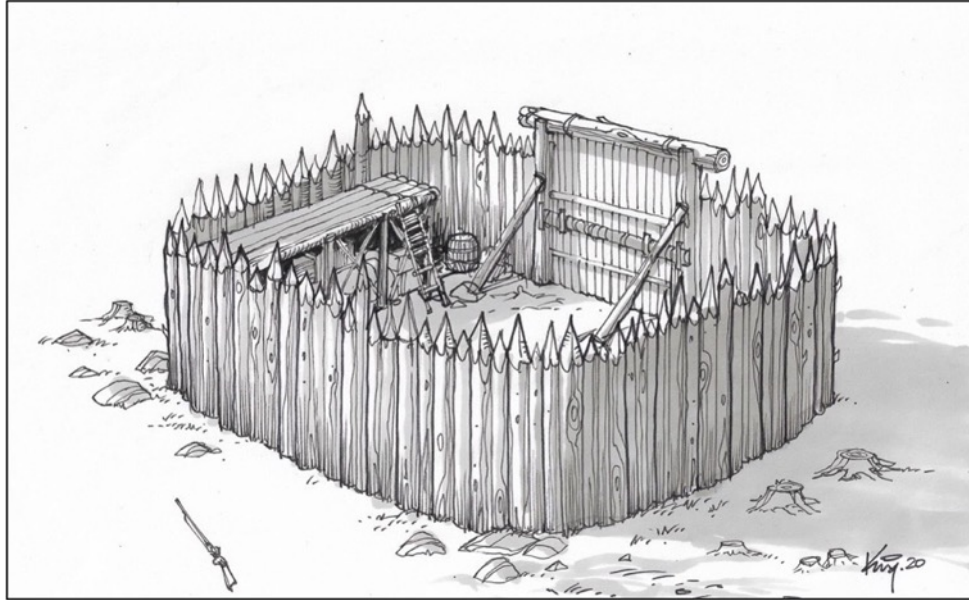


Figure 3: Palisaded Outpost

Additionally, the threats European colonists faced did not require all the elements of Vauban-style defensive works. A simple palisade with small openings to shoot through (embrasures or loopholes) protected those sheltering inside the walls. While colonists might call many defensive military structures forts, a significant gap existed between most American edifices and the European standard.⁸

A flurry of construction accompanied the Seven Years' War in North America. When an army found the need for a defensive position on the frontier, builders used readily available materials, most commonly timber, to construct a palisade and blockhouse. Some frontier posts had one or two bastions and incorporated other European design elements like ditches and abatis—felled trees with sharpened limbs facing the avenue of approach. British forces abandoned or neglected most of these newly

⁸ Michael D. Coe, *The Line of Forts: Historical Archaeology on the Colonial Frontier of Massachusetts* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2006), 4-6; Kaufmann, and Kaufmann, *Fortress America*, 9, 55-62.

built forts shortly after the war. The more permanent structures tended to protect important ports and river crossings. These forts, usually constructed of masonry and much larger than those the British had vacated, received consistent maintenance in the years leading to the American Revolution.⁹

When commissioning a fort to control the navigation of the Hudson River through the New York Highlands, the Continental Congress and New York Provincial Congress assumed, based on previous experience, that defenses could be ready in two or three months and would occupy defensible terrain where they could interdict traffic on the waterway. The project's overseers would only meet one of those conditions.

Initial Actions: May-August 1775

Armed conflict between Great Britain and its North American colonies surprised the members of the Second Continental Congress. Convening just twenty-two days after Lexington and Concord, Congress scrambled to understand what was happening and what its response should be.¹⁰ It moved to form a military organization that would be ready to respond to British provocations and appointed George Washington to head a committee to “consider what posts are necessary to be occupied in the Colony of New York, and by what number of troops it will be necessary they should be guarded.”¹¹ Before that committee could report, however, Congress received news that soldiers under

⁹ Kaufmann and Kaufmann, *Fortress America*, 65-67.

¹⁰ Ford, 11 May 1775, *JCC*, 2:28-41.

¹¹ Ford, 15 May 1775, *JCC*, 2:52.

Col. Ethan Allen had taken Fort Ticonderoga. Matters were rapidly escalating without any direction or support from Congress.

One week after learning about Ticonderoga, Washington and his committee recommended that New York adopt several defensive measures.¹² First, Washington specified the creation of fortifications in the Hudson Highlands to control the river north of New York City. Second, works needed to stand on both sides of the river to block British shipping more effectively. Lacking knowledge of the lay of the land, Washington's committee required that "experienced persons" investigate and recommend the locations of these fortifications. Finally, the resolution's wording strongly implied that the New York Provincial Congress would oversee, direct, and fund this project. The men investigating locations should possess knowledge of military matters, but civilian representatives would exercise ultimate authority over this project.

There was no precedent in American colonial history for a continental defense project. The Continental Congress, while initially summoned to coordinate peaceful protest, expanded its role after Lexington and Concord and became a governing body. As historian Robert Middlekauff pointed out, "Congress ... was beginning to act as if it were the representative of a sovereign nation" by the summer of 1775.¹³

The New York Provincial Congress wasted no time fulfilling part of the Continental Congress' request. On 30 May, it directed James Clinton and Christopher Tappen to sail up the Hudson and determine the best place to put a fort. Clinton, a

¹² Ford, 25 May 1775, *JCC*, 2:59-61.

¹³ Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause*, 287.

member of the provincial congress and a lieutenant colonel in the New York Militia, had experienced combat during the Seven Years' War in Canada. He also came from Ulster County, which encompassed the western Highlands. Tappen was Clinton's brother-in-law and from the same area.

Clinton and Tappen reported back to the New York Provincial Congress on 15 June. They indicated both West Point and the island directly across the river as ideal spots for fortifications but thought that the former site should accommodate a larger post. They recommended constructing both forts with stone because of its ready availability in the surrounding areas. Boats for communication between the two sites would also be necessary. Clinton and Tappen also championed a striking innovation—the addition of booms chained together stretching across the river. Thus, their defensive scheme was to physically obstruct the river and guard the chain with two fortifications whose cannon offered a further deterrent to the passage to any warships. The provincial congress heartily endorsed the plan and sent it to the Continental Congress the same day.¹⁴

Inexplicably, the effort to fortify the Hudson stalled for two months. In the meantime, the Continental Congress named George Washington commander-in-chief of the Continental Army on 15 June 1775. Two months later, the New York Provincial Congress received a letter from General Washington, who mistakenly reported that British troops were about to leave Boston, and New York was their likely destination. The New Yorkers leaped into action. They ordered two ships to sail east to gather

¹⁴ James Clinton and Christopher Tappen to New York Provincial Congress, 13 June 1775, in *Journals of the Provincial Congress, Provincial Convention, Committee of Safety and Council of Safety of the State of New-York: 1775-1775-1777*. 2 vols. (Albany: Thurlow Weed, 1842), 1:40-41. Hereafter, *JNYPC*.

intelligence on British movements and asked Brig. Gen. David Wooster of the Continental Army to return his troops to Harlem.¹⁵ The legislators also assigned a five-man commission to “manage the erecting and finishing of the [Highland] fortifications.”¹⁶ The provincial congress granted the commission the authority to build and manage the fortification, but because none of the commissioners had experience in fort building, it also hired an engineer named Bernard Romans.

Born in Holland in 1720, Romans migrated to England in his youth to study botany, mathematics, and engineering. In 1756, he traveled to America and began his career as a surveyor. He won promotion to principal deputy surveyor for the Southern colonies in 1768 and began charting the newly acquired colonies of East and West Florida. After pay disputes and quarrels with his supervisor and the Georgia governor, he left the British civil service and moved to New York City in 1773. He sold advanced copies of his book, *Concise Natural History of East and West Florida*, along with two enormous maps of the territories. Romans was a skilled cartographer, and the American Philosophical Society inducted into its ranks him because of the quality of his maps.¹⁷

¹⁵ Washington to New York Provincial Congress, 10 August 1775, in *JNYPC*, 1:109; New York Provincial Congress to David Wooster, 18 August 1775, in *JNYPC*, 1:110-11. Wooster was a brigadier general in the Continental Army and a major general in the Connecticut militia.

¹⁶ 18 August 1775, *JNYPC*, 1:110.

¹⁷ Lincoln Diamant, *Bernard Romans: Forgotten Patriot of the American Revolution* (Harrison, NY: Harbor Hill Books, 1985); Steve Fisher, “Bernard Romans (fl. 1720-1780),” in *American National Biography*, Oxford University Press, online ed., <https://doi-org.libproxy.temple.edu/10.1093/anb/9780198606697.article.1301420>; George F. Reason, “Bernard Romans and the First Attempt at Fortifying the Hudson River,” *Journal of the American Revolution*, 21 November 2019,

One week after Lexington and Concord, Romans offered his services to the Massachusetts Committee of Safety. The committee gave him a captain's commission and one hundred pounds to recruit a force to take Fort Ticonderoga. Romans joined Col. Ethan Allen and Col. Benedict Arnold on the way to Ticonderoga, but those two officers essentially ignored him. After the capture of the British fort, Arnold reported that Romans was "esteemed an able engineer," but the latter's concurrence with Arnold's opinion of Ticonderoga's condition is what elicited that praise. Armed with Arnold's off-hand recommendation, Romans sought new employment and represented himself as a military engineer to the New York Provincial Congress—a legislature in desperate need of one. The men he worked with at Ticonderoga did not mourn his departure. As Capt. Edward Mott noted, "he had been a trouble to us, all the time he was with us."¹⁸

Romans' Plan: September-October 1775

After only two weeks on the job, Romans delivered a fortification plan on 14 September. He envisioned a variety of structures and artillery positions focused on preventing ships from passing West Point. Along with a written description, he prepared four maps to illustrate his ideas. He described the terrain on Constitution Island and explained that the enemy could only land troops at points E and F in his "No. 1" (figure 4, left side). He planned to prevent a landing through the combined fire of batteries 1, 2, and 3 illustrated in his "No. 3" (figure 5). His second illustration showed his defensive

<https://allthingsliberty.com/2019/11/bernard-romans-and-the-first-attempt-at-fortifying-the-hudson-river/>.

¹⁸ Edward Mott, *Papers Relating to the Expedition to Ticonderoga, April and May 1775* (Hartford: Connecticut Historical Society, 1860), 169, quoted in Reason, "Bernard Romans."

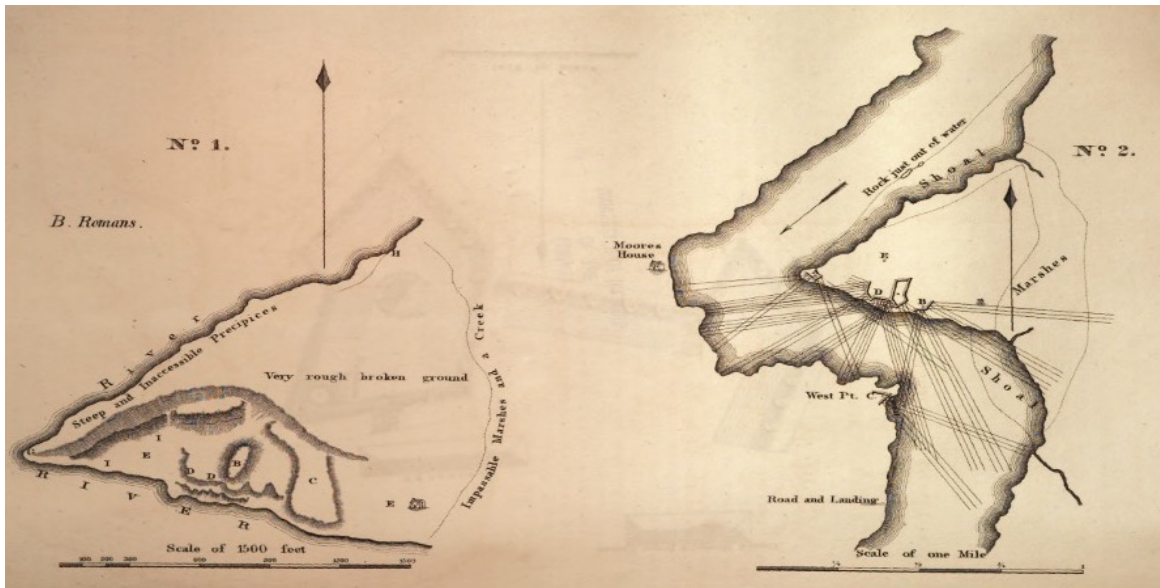


Figure 4: Romans' Plan, No. 1 & No. 2

theory (figure 4, right side). Romans decided that cannon fire alone could stop approaching ships. Because of where he positioned the guns, though, ships would pass through the first ninety-degree turn before the artillery could target them.¹⁹ Romans confidently asserted that “this is the most frugal plan that can be of any service here; a less or more imperfect plan would only be beginning a strong hold for an enemy.”²⁰

Romans' defensive theory responded to a single threat and relied on a single response. He ignored the directions of the Continental Congress and the vision of the New York Provincial Congress committee that chose the site. To begin with, Romans imagined a waterborne assault as the only threat he needed to address. Of all the gun

¹⁹ Romans to New York Provincial Congress, 12 October 1775, Force, *American Archives, Fourth Series*, 3:1285; Figures 4 and 5 from Maps Accompanying Romans Report to Committee of Safety, 14 September 1775, Force, *American Archives, Fourth Series*, 3:736-39.

²⁰ Romans Report to Committee of Safety, 14 September 1775, in Force, *American Archives, Fourth Series*, 3:735-36.

emplacements he proposed, only one covered any approach to the fortification from the east. Further, in plan No. 1 (fig. 4), he highlighted the terrain to the east of Fort Constitution as “Very rough broken ground” and “Impassable Marshes and a Creek.” The British never tested this judgment, but a similar assumption concerning the approach to Fort Montgomery, only five miles to the south, proved wholly unfounded.²¹

Romans completely disregarded possible integration with naval forces and the use of physical obstructions on the river despite the express desire of the Continental

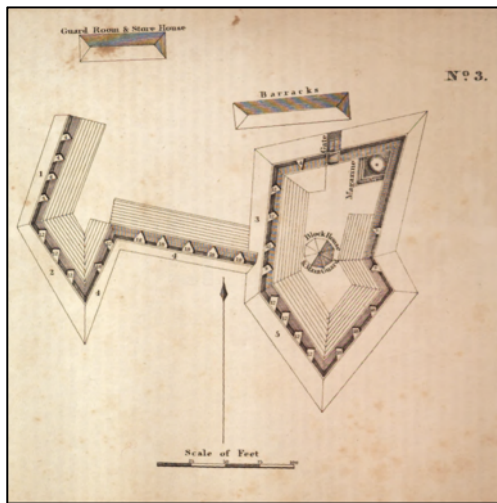


Figure 5: Romans' Plan, No. 3

Congress. Instead, he relied on firepower from four-, six-, and nine-pound cannons. While he avoided the problem of having to defend anchors for a line of obstructions on both sides of the river, his plan ignored two crucial facts about the Rebels' military situation: the building season was almost over, and very few cannons were available.

Building the number of protected gun

emplacements for his plan to have a chance of success would take months. Even with adequate supplies and manpower, which Romans lacked, it is doubtful he could have completed such an undertaking before the weather turned and the ground froze. But even if Romans could accomplish such a Herculean task, it would be unlikely that the Rebels could obtain enough ordnance for the site. Less than two months after Romans submitted

²¹ Galgano, “The Revolutionary War in the Hudson Highlands,” 64-65.

his plans, Col. Henry Knox led one of the most daring and strenuous expeditions of the Revolutionary War to bring fifty-nine cannons from Fort Ticonderoga to the Boston siege lines. There was little chance that the colonies could spare the sixty-one cannons and twenty swivel guns Romans required. The engineer confidently assessed the tactical problem, but his plan offered no viable solution.²²

The New York Provincial Congress accepted Romans' plan on 14 September 1775, but most of the discussion and correspondence of that day surrounded a conflict of authority between the provincial congress and General Wooster of the Continental Army over the placement of troops. Originally from Connecticut, Wooster served in the Seven Years' War, commanded the militia for New Haven, and received a major general's commission from Connecticut in April 1775. The same month, the Continental Congress commissioned Wooster as its third most senior brigadier general and placed him under Maj. Gen. Richard Montgomery for the invasion of Quebec. Wooster's forces, initially answerable only to the governor of Connecticut, transitioned to the Continental Army and

²² Miller, Lockey, and Visconti, *Highland Fortress*; Diamant, *Chaining the Hudson*, 1-19; 13 June 1775, *JNYPC*, 1:40-41. For more on Knox, see Mark Puls, *Henry Knox: Visionary General of the American Revolution* (New York: Macmillan, 2010); William Hazelgrove, *Henry Knox's Noble Train: The Story of a Boston Bookseller's Heroic Expedition That Saved the American Revolution* (Guilford: Prometheus Books, 2020); Marc G. DeSantis, "Train Man: When the Continental Army Captured a Huge Cache of British Artillery at Fort Ticonderoga, George Washington Turned to Henry Knox to get them to Boston," *Military History Quarterly: The Quarterly Journal of Military History* 30, no. 1 (22 September 2017): 24-26; Joseph W. Kirschbaum and Autum Resney, "Fort Ticonderoga's Captured Cannons Gave American Rebels a Chance to Seize Boston," *Military History* 19, no. 5 (2017): 24-27.

fell under a new chain-of-command, with the Continental Congress ultimately at the top.²³

In late September, Wooster had nearly 4,000 men at Harlem. The provincial congress' Committee of Safety, meeting during the adjournment of the larger body, needed manpower to construct the fort in the Highlands. It asked Wooster to move a company of his men to the Highlands, but he refused, citing his orders from Washington.²⁴ The committee responded with a 16 June 1775 letter from the Continental Congress giving it authority over Wooster's troops within the colony of New York.²⁵ Unpersuaded, the general replied that the congressional directive dated from before the Continental Army had formed, he had very few troops as it was, and the orders from Washington were clear. He added, "I have authority to say that no Provincial Congress can, with any propriety, interfere in the disposition of Continental Troops, much less control the orders of any General Officer."²⁶ The Committee of Safety immediately wrote to the Continental Congress to request its adjudication of the matter.

²³ Sheldon S. Cohen, "David Wooster (2 March 1711–2 May 1777)," in *American National Biography*, Oxford University Press, online ed., <https://doi-org.libproxy.temple.edu/10.1093/anb/9780198606697.article.0101010>.

²⁴ New York Committee of Safety, 13 September 1775, in Force, *American Archives, Fourth Series*, 3:893; Wooster to New York Provincial Congress, 15 September 1775, in Force, *American Archives, Fourth Series*, 3:897.

²⁵ New York Committee of Safety, 13 September 1775, in Force, *American Archives, Fourth Series*, 3:893; Wooster to New York Provincial Congress, 15 September 1775; and New York Committee of Safety to Wooster, 16 September 1775, both in Force, *American Archives, Fourth Series*, 3:897; Ford, 16 June 1775, *JCC*, 2:95.

²⁶ Wooster to New York Provincial Congress, 17 September 1775, in Force, *American Archives, Fourth Series*, 3:900-901.

Nearly a month after the feud between the New York Provincial Congress and the general started, Wooster received orders from the Continental Congress to send troops to the Highlands to aid construction. In a time when changes in local situations with far-reaching implications outpaced the speed of communications, multiple bodies with shared authority served only to muddle and slow the military response on the ground. When minutes mattered, the Continental Congress wasted weeks.²⁷

Slow communications also plagued the commission ostensibly in charge in the Highlands. The commissioners had not seen Romans' plan before he submitted it. Their response when they found out ten days later implies they were unaware Romans intended to present it to the Committee of Safety. In addition to the commissioners' objections to the plan, they also demanded to know the limits of their authority. "It is our duty to be faithful to the important charge committed to our care, as we will not be answerable for measures we cannot conduct; therefore, request the favor of you, gentlemen, to inform us whether we are under Mr. Romans' direction, or whether he is obliged to consult with us upon the measures to be pursued."²⁸ In short, the commission wanted to know who was in charge in the Highlands.

The Committee of Safety, meeting during the adjournment of the rest of the provincial congress, had forwarded Romans' plan to the Continental Congress on 18 September 1775. Ten days later, the committee received the commissioners' objection. As fate would have it, Romans attended its meeting that day to lobby for more pay, a

²⁷ Ford, 7 October 1775, *JCC*, 3:282-83.

²⁸ Samuel Bayard to New York Provincial Congress, 25 September 1775, in *JNYPC*, 1:158-59.

commission as a colonel in the New York militia, and a contract to build the works for £5,000. The committee refused his offer and told him to contact the treasurer of the provincial congress if he needed money. There is no mention in the record of Romans' spat with the commissioners influencing the decision. Instead, the committee claimed the provincial congress should decide since the larger body would reconvene soon. It is hard to imagine, however, that the commissioners' complaint did not factor into denying Romans what he desired.²⁹

That same day, the Committee of Safety wrote to the commissioners in charge of the fortifications, essentially saying that Romans was to give the commission "his best advice and assistance as an engineer." The committee closed encouragingly, saying that "the works may be carried on with all your joint wisdom, advice and assistance."³⁰ Such cooperative language typified pronouncements from the provincial congress, but it would not produce results. The commissioners took it as further evidence of their authority over Romans, but the engineer still desired total control of the project.

Concerns: October 1775

Civilian authorities were growing impatient with the overall progress in the Highlands. On 5 October, five days after Romans returned to the nascent fort, the Continental Congress received intelligence that the British were sending twenty-four cannons and five regiments from Ireland to New York in the next few weeks. The

²⁹ Romans Proposal, 29 September 1775; and New York Committee of Safety Response to Romans, 30 September 1775, both in *JNYPC*, 1:159-61.

³⁰ New York Committee of Safety to Commissioners in Highlands, 30 September 1775, in *JNYPC*, 1:161.

delegates also learned that Britain intended to focus their upcoming offensive on the Hudson between New York City and Albany. The debates in Congress on 6 October centered on fortifying the Hudson as expeditiously as possible. Congress was concerned that there were no booms or other obstructions to riverine passage.³¹

John Adams' notes on the debates that day detail the delegates' apprehension about the military situation in the Highlands. John Rutledge from South Carolina insisted on placing obstructions on the river "by Booms, or otherwise." Congress largely agreed. The delegates seemed resolved to send General Wooster's troops to assist in the Highlands, but the discussion soon devolved into a disagreement about pay and funding. General Washington did not make allowances for extra compensation for the troops who built defensive works at Cambridge earlier that year. Still, he resolved to do so in the future for those who pulled such duty at the rate of one-half a pistareen per day.³² Congress felt that Wooster's men should receive a similar allowance but disagreed over where to get the money. The Congressmen were aware they "have been represented as beggarly fellows," and "if we ... don't pay, it will make a bad impression."³³ The

³¹ John Hancock to Washington, 5 October 1775, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-02-02-0100>; Thomas Gage to William Legge, 1 October 1775, in Force, *American Archives, Fourth Series*, 3:927-28; John Adams, Notes on Debate, 6 October 1775 in Ford, *JCC*, 3:487.

³² A pistareen was a small-denomination Spanish coin. There was no standard money in the colonies, so determining an exact equivalent is nearly impossible. See Thomas A. Kays, "When Cross Pistareens Cut Their Way Through the Tobacco Colonies," *The Colonial Newsletter: A Journal of the American Numismatic Society* 41, no. 1 (April 2001): 2169-99.

³³ John Adams, Notes on Debate, 6 October 1775 in Ford, *JCC*, 3:487.

Continental Congress and its New York counterpart agreed on the need to obstruct the Hudson, but they remained divided on the method.

More concerning, though, was how to direct Wooster to provide men for labor on the project. Benjamin Franklin suggested that Congress order Wooster and his men to start work on the fortifications. Roger Sherman of Connecticut argued that the order should emanate from Wooster's commanding officer, General Schuyler, who was planning an invasion of Canada. John Langdon from New Hampshire said that Congress should permit Schuyler to decide if he needed Wooster's forces for the Canadian expedition. Rutledge responded that Schuyler probably did not need Wooster's troops, but Sherman thought it best to leave the decision with the department commander.³⁴

Ultimately, the Continental Congress decided on 7 October to direct the New York Provincial Congress to "immediately render Hudson's river defensible; that in doing this they be particularly attentive to form such works as may be finished before the winter sets in." Congress asked the New Yorkers to perform three different tasks. First, the provincial congress should look at the proposed construction material. Romans favored stone, but the Continental Congress worried about the cost and time required. It left the decision to the provincial congress but urged consideration of a potentially faster and cheaper method. Second, Congress ordered Wooster, provided he had no countermanding orders from Schuyler, to go to the Highlands with as many troops as the commissioners needed. Finally, in what would foreshadow future decisions, the Continental Congress asked if there were other places where New York could build forts

³⁴ John Adams, Notes on Debate, 6 October 1775 in Ford, *JCC*, 3:487.

quickly. The intention was to have “small batteries ... erected, so as to annoy the enemy on their passage.”³⁵ The directive’s language was somewhat ambiguous, however, leaving room for Romans, the commissioners, and New York’s legislature to interpret it as a suggestion rather than an instruction.

The provincial congress was likewise concerned about emplacing defenses along the Hudson quickly. On 12 October, the same day the legislators received the Continental Congress’ resolution and the intelligence that prompted it, they wrote to the commissioners and Romans to investigate alternative sites and “give us your opinions as to the fortifications necessary to be built at these places, with an estimate of the expenses.” In a single paragraph, though, they urged haste on three different occasions, belying their distress at the present state of the defenses on so vital a line of communications.³⁶

But, to the Continental Congress at least, the provincial congress showed unwarranted confidence about the fortifications’ progress. Without any information from the commissioners or Romans, the New Yorkers claimed that “we expect [the fortifications] will be in such forwardness in about six weeks, as to have most of the cannon mounted.” In anticipation of artillery’s arrival, they asked the Continental Congress to assign four companies of artillerymen, totaling 320 men, to the Highlands defenses. Manning the forts on the Hudson would remain an issue as colonial and

³⁵ Both quotations from Ford, 7 October 1775, *JCC*, 3:282.

³⁶ New York Provincial Congress to Commissioners in the Highlands, 12 October 1775, in *JNYPC*, 1:174.

continental congresses tried to stretch their limited resources across the broad swath of land in need of defense.³⁷

The next day, the New York Provincial Congress received a letter from Romans and the commissioners in response to the Continental Congress' questions. Romans argued that he was doing as well as expected despite a late start. Further, the engineer still favored using stone because of its availability, and the area was "a miserable timber country, even fascines are with more difficulty got than stones." The real problem, according to Romans, was the lack of regulation and organization among the workers. More masons would help, too. He did concede that a site south of Constitution Island, near Popolopen Creek, could be advantageous. He dismissed physically blocking the river as "an easy matter" and made no effort to construct barriers of any kind. Romans saw artillery as the key to checking river traffic, and he asked for more heavy cannons with the promise to be able to position them within a week.³⁸

While the end of October passed in relative peace around West Point, the New York Provincial Congress struggled to make ends meet. On 20 October, the commissary for the commissioners in the Highlands lamented a desperate need for funds. That same day, the New York Provincial Congress wrote to the Continental Congress, stressing that it needed money or would risk falling into arrears with soldiers and contractors. The New York Provincial Congress again begged for resources less than two weeks later. Almost

³⁷ New York Provincial Congress to Continental Congress, 17 October 1775, in *JNYPC*, 1:177.

³⁸ Romans to New York Provincial Congress, 16 October 1775, in *JNYPC*, 1:179-80. This dissertation will use the modern spelling of Popolopen Creek.

as an afterthought, it mentioned the movement of two understrength Continental companies from New York City to the Highland fortress.³⁹

War on a Second Front: November 1775

The Continental Congress eventually decided to take a more active role in the construction of the Highland fortifications. On 8 November, it passed resolutions concerning the command of the facilities, the arrangement of troops, the activation of the militia, and the pay of individuals working and guarding the site. Its resolutions concerning the New York militia are especially interesting given the usually strict separation in chains of command between continental civilians and state forces. While technically only a recommendation, the Continental Congress asserted increased authority over military matters at the individual colonial level with the degree of specificity regarding which militia to activate without an imminent invasion threat. It usually asked for states to furnish whatever troops they could. This time, though, Congress specifically asked for “two hundred men of the militia of Dutchess, Orange, and Ulster Counties, and one Company of artillery from the city of New York.” On that same day, Congress tasked a three-man committee going to Fort Ticonderoga to also “take an accurate view of the state of our fortifications upon Hudson’s river, and make a report of it as soon as it can conveniently be done.”⁴⁰ The delegates in Philadelphia were blissfully unaware of the drama developing on Constitution Island.

³⁹ John Berrien to New York Provincial Congress, 20 October 1775; New York Provincial Congress to Hancock, 20 October 1775; and New York Provincial Congress to Hancock, 3 November 1775, all in *JNYPC*, 1:182, 193-94.

⁴⁰ Ford, 8 November 1775, *JCC*, 3:338-41.

Romans was not getting along with the commissioners in the Highlands. On 8 November, he blamed his slow progress on the organization and composition of the workforce. Specifically, Romans said he had twenty-seven masons, but only seven of them were doing stonework because he needed the rest for masonry support tasks like breaking and carrying stones. The people who should be providing the masons' construction materials were too busy unloading boats at the water's edge. He said that "this disposition is the most erroneous that can possibly be imagined."⁴¹ The project needed oxen and teamsters to free up the laborers and masons to focus on their primary tasks. He claimed the commissioners showed preferential treatment to carpenters from the city. Romans held that reorganization and increased regulation would solve the problem and bemoaned his role as advisory only without the power to make changes.

The commissioners responded two days later with counteraccusations and a blunt assertion of their authority. They argued that because Romans had not mentioned the appropriate ratio of laborers to masons earlier, he had failed in his duty to inform them of his needs. Instead, his overall management of the project had led to construction delays. For example, they pointed out that Romans wanted oxen and carts for transporting materials but had not anticipated the need to construct a road to the construction site. Romans had failed to order the number of nails he needed until a shortage caused work to stop.

Most importantly, though, the commissioners accused Romans of consistently underestimating the time and cost requirements for building structures. His examination

⁴¹ Romans to Commissioners for Fortifications, 8 November 1775, in Force, *American Archives, Fourth Series*, 3:1355-59.

of the ground before developing a fortification plan, which he had not shown to the commissioners, was superficial at best. The fault lay with him. To Romans' charge of favoritism, they pled ignorance of any policy that would lead to such a situation but asked why Romans was just now letting them know about it. Finally, the commissioners asserted their authority over Romans: "We know the powers we are invested with, and will be glad to see you not interrupt them, by assuming sole director in every thing here." The commissioners were in charge, and Romans needed to start acting like it.⁴²

The engineer was unimpressed. Rather than respond to the commissioners, he wrote the New York Provincial Congress to argue that he should oversee the entire project. His memorial, in which Romans refers to himself in the third person, erroneously claimed that the New York Provincial Congress had promised him a commission as colonel in the militia. The legislature promised only a colonel's salary, but that was a minor grievance to Romans. His actual demand was "if it be thought requisite to continue him here, he begs that it may please you to alter his appointment, so that the Commissioners must consult him in every thing ... for he knows that in all states whatever an Engineer, whose plan is once approved of, knows no superior, but in the execution thereof, his word is law."⁴³ Romans considered himself part of the military, so his authority over the military project should be absolute.

⁴² Commissioners for Fortifications to Romans, 10 November 1775, in Force, *American Archives, Fourth Series*, 3:1359-62. Quotation on p. 1362.

⁴³ Petition and Memorial of Bernard Romans to the New York Provincial Congress, 15 November 1775, in Force, *American Archives, Fourth Series*, 3:1363-64.

Two days later, Romans laid into the commissioners. His response centered on two issues: expertise and authority. The commissioners should not question his expertise because “the truth is, gentlemen, you have no business with any calculation of the kind. You are to judge afterward.” On the specific issue of transporting supplies, he hinted at his more significant grievance of not being in charge. “I can show your teamsters how . . . , but as every country clown knows how, it is below me, even while I am the paltry being that is not allowed to direct his own plan.” Romans felt he needed absolute onsite authority to complete the work. Moreover, the commissioners should hold no power over him. “I could not construe this into a request, much less an order from men who have no manner of authority over me.”⁴⁴ Unfortunately for Romans, the civilian legislature was in charge and had delegated its authority to the commissioners.

Equally unfortunate was the fact that the committee to inspect the works on Constitution Island left Philadelphia on the very day that Romans responded to the commissioners. Robert R. Livingston wrote to the president of Congress, John Hancock, one week later. In a diplomatic assessment, the committee stated that it “found the fort in a less defensible situation than we had reason to expect.” The reason stemmed from where Romans had focused his effort: the barracks, the blockhouse, and the curtain wall on the island's south side. Romans claimed that he could mount fourteen cannons on the wall within a week. The commission replied that it would be “very insufficient in itself to answer the purpose of defence” because “it does not command the reach to the southward, nor can it injure a vessel turning the West Point; and after she has got round, a

⁴⁴ Romans to the Commissioners for Fortifications, 16 November 1775, in Force, *American Archives, Fourth Series*, 3:1364-67. Quotations on 1365 and 1367.

small breeze or even the tide will enable a ship to pass the curtain in a few minutes.” Worse still, the site was significantly lower than the surrounding terrain. “The grounds on the West Point are higher than the fortress, behind which an enemy may land without the least danger.”⁴⁵ James Clinton and Christopher Tappen had noted the importance of West Point, but Romans had decided that Constitution Island was the key to the whole position. The committee from the Continental Congress thus noted the tactical deficiencies in Romans’ theory of defense and lamented the expense it would take to remedy it. Romans mentioned to the committee that the site on Popolopen Creek offered an alternative to Constitution Island, but the congressmen did not have time to view it.

Investigation and Decision: December 1775-January 1776

The New York Provincial Congress had chosen a terrible time to go into recess. It had adjourned on 4 November after meeting only nine of the previous sixteen days. Elections for a new congress occurred on 14 November, but it took until 6 December to gather enough delegates to form a quorum. Finally, as the war of letters between the engineer and the commission for fortifications escalated, the New York Provincial Congress convened and set about finding a solution to the slow progress in obstructing the Highlands. When it ordered the construction of additional barracks and a magazine, it addressed the directive “to the commissioners appointed to superintend the building of the said fortifications.” After reviewing the correspondence between Romans and the commissioners, it ordered Thomas Palmer, Isaac Nicoll, and Joseph Drake “to repair to the fortifications in the Highlands and endeavor to accommodate the difference subsisting

⁴⁵ Committee of Congress to John Hancock, 23 November 1775, in Force, *American Archives, Fourth Series*, 3:1657-58.

between the commissioners ... and the engineer; and in case they shall not be able to accommodate the said difference, to give such directions as they may think necessary for expediting the work of the said fortifications ... and make report as well of the true causes of such difference.”⁴⁶ Almost seven months after initiating the project, the New York Provincial Congress had had enough.

Led by Thomas Palmer, the committee left no room for doubt. Its 14 December report blamed the row on Romans saying that he “must either have mistaken the charge committed to him ... or as appears from his conduct, has assumed power with which he knew he was not intrusted.”⁴⁷ In addition to the question of Romans’ usurpation of authority, the committee observed the same tactical problems the Continental Congress’ investigation noticed. “We find that none of the cannon can be pointed so as to obstruct any vessel on her passage up, until she passes the West point ... we are of opinion no vessel would be under the command of the battery more than half the reach from the West Point to the point of Martle’s rock [Constitution Island].”⁴⁸ The committee denigrated Romans’ plans for the “so-called Grand Bastion” because construction could not be completed in season and would be ineffective at the primary mission of preventing navigation of the river. Like the rest of the structures, the barracks on the island were vulnerable to attack from West Point, which an enemy could take without ever coming under fire from the fort across the river. Romans claimed he had pointed out the necessity

⁴⁶ 6 December 1775, *JNYPC*, 1:207.

⁴⁷ Palmer to New York Provincial Congress, 14 December 1775, in *JNYPC*, 1:223.

⁴⁸ Palmer to New York Provincial Congress, 14 December 1775, in *JNYPC*, 1:224.

of a redoubt on one of the two points Palmer observed as commanding the terrain of Fort Constitution but had only recently noticed the other one. The New York Provincial

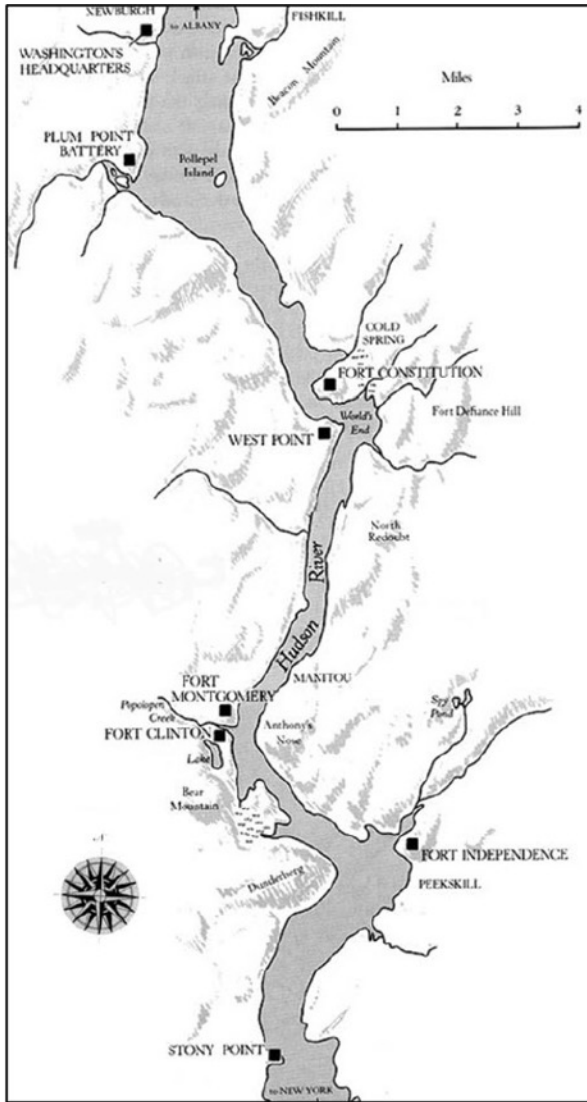


Figure 6: Map of Hudson Highlands

Congress, in concurrence with Palmer and his committee, blamed Romans for the poor siting and slow construction.⁴⁹

Ultimately, the committee decided that the position at Popolopen Creek was “by far the most advantageous situation in the Highlands for a fortification, as one erected on this point would command the reach of the river downwards to ... nearly three miles, and from the same point the reach upwards may be commanded as far.”⁵⁰ That site was also more defensible, so the committee recommended quickly establishing a fort there (figure 6).⁵¹

⁴⁹ Palmer to New York Provincial Congress, 19 December 1775, in *JNYPC*, 1:226.

⁵⁰ Palmer to New York Provincial Congress 14 December 1775, in *JNYPC*, 1:224.

⁵¹ Figure 6 from Eugene J. Palka and Francis A. Galgano, *This Historical Geography of the Hudson Highlands: A Geographical Perspective of the Role of the Hudson Valley and West Point During the American War of Independence*, 2nd ed. (West Point: United

The New York Provincial Congress agreed with Palmer's assessment, but its response demonstrates the difficulties of overlapping layers of authority in the effort. It sent Palmer and Capt. Thomas Grennell, the commanding officer of troops at Constitution Island, to Philadelphia to relay their report.⁵² In their letter accompanying Palmer, the New York Provincial Congress strongly implied that the Continental Congress should decide how to proceed. "We beg leave to suggest to you that the report of the committee respecting the expediency of erecting a fortification on the eminence at [Popolopen] kill demands your most serious attention."⁵³ The Continental Congress had delegated that authority, however, to New York in May 1775.⁵⁴

The delay would allow for some mischief. Romans heard of the report and rushed to New York City to defend his decisions and chart the course for the further development of Fort Constitution. On 3 January 1776, the Committee of Safety, meeting in the absence of the full provincial congress, heard Romans' defense of his plan. The committee declined to confirm the earlier decision to focus on Fort Montgomery and sent Romans with his explanations to the Continental Congress "that they may have every information that can be offered them relating to the state of, and place of erecting the said

States Military Academy Department of Geography and Environmental Engineering, 2006), 9.

⁵² 19 December 1775, *JNYPC*, 1:226.

⁵³ New York Provincial Congress to New York Delegates at the Continental Congress, 20 December 1775, in *JNYPC*, 1:227.

⁵⁴ Continental Congress to New York Provincial Congress, 26 May 1775, in *JNYPC*, 1:16.

fortifications.”⁵⁵ In their letter to the Continental Congress, the Committee of Safety noted that the new site “would better answer the purposes of a temporary defence, and at much less expense than will necessarily attend the execution of Mr. Romans’ scheme.”⁵⁶ This one minor line, buried about halfway through the letter, indicates a fundamental misunderstanding between Romans and the Committee of Safety on the overall intent of the project. Romans attempted to build a large, permanent stone structure. The New York Provincial Congress Committee of Safety wanted a temporary site aligned with the more typical colonial fortifications.

Romans went to Philadelphia, but he was several days behind Palmer and Grennell. The latter two had already reported their findings to the Continental Congress. That body agreed to the recommendation to halt work on Constitution Island and concentrate the construction effort at the confluence of the Hudson River and Popolopen Creek. Furthermore, Congress directed the new fort consist of earthworks and be built “in the most expeditious manner, and upon the most reasonable terms.” But the delegates’ wording suggests that they still viewed the New York Provincial Congress as the primary decision-maker in the matter. Due to the lack of clear lines of authority and responsibility, both action and oversight were absent in the Highlands.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ New York Committee of Safety to Continental Congress, 3 January 1775, *JNYPC*, 1:236.

⁵⁶ New York Committee of Safety to Continental Congress, 3 January 1776, *JNYPC*, 1:236.

⁵⁷ Ford, 5 January 1776, *JCC*, 4:34.

When Romans and the Committee of Safety's letter reached the Continental Congress on 13 January, the members formed a committee of five men to review the correspondence and consult with Romans. Over a month later, the group recommended that new construction cease, but the New York Provincial Congress should see to completing partially finished buildings. Instead, an earth-and-timber battery of up to eighteen cannons located on Constitution Island would defend the river both north and south while also protecting West Point. Ultimately, Romans was too late to prevent the Continental Congress from endorsing Palmer's recommendation, but he persuaded the delegates to allow a few more guns and a barracks at his site. Nevertheless, a new engineer, Col. William Smith, was laying out the fortification at Popolopen Creek by the end of February.⁵⁸

The new site seemed ideal. It was on high ground, right next to the water. A gentle curve in the river allowed long-range cannon to engage boats going up or down the river. The river was wide, but it narrowed at the bend, which made blocking the channel easier. And, best of all, the rugged mountains directly to the west of the site were impenetrable. The defensive positions could concentrate on southern approaches or amphibious assaults while nature guarded the rear.

Ignoring the potential of an overland assault proved to be a fatal mistake.

New Site: February-June 1776

The year 1776 would see additional overlapping responsibilities and conflicting authority surround the fortifications in the Highlands. On 16 January, the New York

⁵⁸ Ford, 13 January 1776, *JCC*, 4:53; Ford, 15 February 1776, *JCC*, 4:152-53

Provincial Congress ordered building materials at Fort Constitution transported to the new site at Popolopen Creek and officially placed Col. Isaac Nicoll in command of the fortifications on the Hudson while dismissing Romans. On 2 March 1776, the New York Provincial Congress ordered troops from the Continental Army to start working at the Popolopen Creek site, newly christened Fort Montgomery in honor of the slain Gen. Richard Montgomery. Later that month, Colonel Nicoll and Thomas Palmer appealed to the New York Provincial Congress for a decision about command authority as each claimed to be in charge of the troops at the fortifications.⁵⁹ The New York Provincial Congress replied on 26 March that, while Nicoll held command, Palmer and the other commissioners “undoubtedly have power to direct that the troops be set to work in such numbers, and at such parts of the fortifications, as they may think proper to carry on the works.”⁶⁰ The response was wholly inadequate. One of the primary duties of command was to arrange forces for task completion. The New York Provincial Congress decided that Nicoll was the commander, but the commissioners had the authority to make command decisions.

Further confusion resulted from the transfer of authority to the Continental Army. Seven months after the Continental Congress directed the Continental Army to assign a colonel to command the Highlands forts, Washington finally chose Lt. Col. Henry Beekman Livingston. Washington qualified his orders to Livingston, however, saying

⁵⁹ Instructions to the Commissioners for Fortifications on Hudson’s River, 16 January 1775, *JNYPC*, 1:253. Diamant, *Chaining The Hudson*, 16; 1 March 1776, *JNYPC*, 1:332; Nicoll to New York Provincial Congress, 22 March 1776, in *JNYPC*, 1:381.

⁶⁰ New York Committee of Safety to Nicoll, 26 March 1776, *JNYPC*, 1:386.

that “if no Superior Officer is there you must take the Command.”⁶¹ Isaac Nicoll was a full colonel. Livingston arrived at Fort Constitution on 9 May, but confusion reigned for five days because Nicoll doubted he could cede control to a junior officer. The provincial congress relieved Nicoll shortly after that, solving the problem.⁶²

The New York Provincial Congress resolved some of the overlapping authorities between colonial, continental, and military institutions by ordering its forces to take all further direction from General Washington in June 1776. It essentially abandoned civilian control over obstructing the Hudson and fortification efforts to defend those obstacles. While more efficient, disaster threatened because the new arrangement lacked a strictly political actor. Washington established complete Continental Army control over the fortifications a week later by dismissing the congressional commissioners and the minutemen employed there. The legislature acquiesced to Washington’s control of the Highland defenses without complaint.⁶³ As further evidence of overlapping authority and confusion, the New York Provincial Congress felt the need to confirm the dismissal of the commissioners and minutemen themselves. Such an arrangement risked military plans becoming incongruous with the civilian authority’s intent. Having abdicated all control for the project, the civilians would lack the power to correct the situation.

⁶¹ Washington to Livingston, 4 May 1776, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-04-02-0166>.

⁶² Livingston to Washington, 14 May 1776, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-04-02-0238>; New York Provincial Congress to Nicoll, 8 May 1776, *JNYPC*, 1:435-36.

⁶³ 8 June 1776, *JNYPC*, 1:484; 13 June 1776, *JNYPC*, 1:493.

The British Perspective

Defining the Problem

The Seven Years' War left Great Britain in possession of a vast empire, but the war's costs and the outlays for maintaining newly acquired colonies placed heavy financial burdens on the metropole. Parliament passed a series of laws to alleviate the financial burden Britain was under and increase its control over the North American colonies. The Proclamation Line of 1763 prohibited colonists from settling land recently acquired from the French west of the Appalachian Mountains. The Sugar Act of 1764 actually cut an existing tax on imported molasses, but it increased enforcement measures that would prevent colonists from circumventing the tax as they had previously. The Stamp Act of 1765 required that many printed materials use stamped paper produced in London and purchasable only with British currency. The Parliament intended these measures to raise revenue and assert greater control over the colonies.

Colonial opposition to these measures was swift and significant. American objections centered around the relationship between Parliament in England and the colonial governments in North America. Parliament eventually relented and repealed the Stamp Act and reduced the sugar tax. The Declaratory Act of 1766, however, argued that Parliamentary jurisdiction in the colonies was identical to that in Britain. In other words, Parliament was within its rights to pass whatever legislation it wanted to govern the empire's colonial holdings. The cycle of British taxation, colonial protest, eventual repeal, and assertion of parliamentary power despite the annulment occurred again in the late 1760s with the Townshend Acts. Many in England, including the King and the prominent governmental ministers, held that colonial actions in opposition to the laws

(e.g., non-importation agreements and simply refusing to pay the taxes) were an affront to the sovereignty of the metropole.⁶⁴

Lt. Gen. Thomas Gage, the commander-in-chief of His Majesty's Forces in North America, helped shape the imperial response to colonial protests. During riots over the Stamp Act, he argued that the source of trouble was the elite class in America. "The plan of the people of property, is to raise the lower class to prevent the execution of the Law ... without the influence and instigation of these the inferior people would have been quiet."⁶⁵ His assessment changed by 1770, though, and he saw the problem in regional terms. He declared that "America is a mere Bully, from one End to the Other, and the Bostonians by far the greatest Bulleys."⁶⁶ Gage's view evolved further, and in 1772 he surmised that "Democracy is too prevalent in America, and claims the greatest Attention to prevent it's Encrease, and fatal Effects."⁶⁷ His final articulation of the root cause of

⁶⁴ Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause*, 234; Ira D. Gruber, *The Howe Brothers and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972), 12; John Ferling, *Winning Independence: The Decisive Years of the Revolutionary War, 1778-1781* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021), 2-7. For the origins of the Revolution as a crisis over sovereignty and empire, see Jack P. Greene, *The Constitutional Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 67-76; Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 198; Craig Yirush, *Settlers, Liberty, and Empire: The Roots of Early American Political Theory, 1675-1775* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 215-18, 253-59.

⁶⁵ Thomas Gage to Henry Seymour Conway, 21 December 1765 in Clarence Edwin Carter, ed., *The Correspondence of General Thomas Gage with the Secretaries of State, and with the War Office and the Treasury 1763-1775*, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1933), 1:80-81.

⁶⁶ Gage to William Barrington, 12 November 1770, in Carter, *Gage Correspondence*, 2:563-64.

⁶⁷ Gage to Barrington, 13 April 1772, in Carter, *Gage Correspondence*, 2:602-3.

American unrest did not overtake the socio-economic and regional interpretations. Instead, Britain would operate for the first three years of the conflict under the assumption that the problem was the elites, specifically the elites in New England.

The Tea Act of 1773 brought the crisis to a head. Protests against the law culminated in December of that year with the Boston Tea Party. In retaliation, Parliament passed the Coercive Acts, named Gage the royal governor of Massachusetts, and sent additional troops to the Bay Colony to impose martial law.

The plan to coerce the colonies relied on three assumptions. First, it assumed any hostilities would be brief. Gage argued that early and overwhelming armed action would cow the malcontents. Second, British leaders believed that the unrest was predominately the fault of a small group of elites in New England while the vast majority of the population supported the imperial position. If the British military force could isolate New England, then loyal subjects in the rest of the North American colonies could resume their everyday lives. Finally, the plan relied on the disunity of the colonies. There had been little appetite in the North American colonies for unified action before 1774, so those favoring the use of force predicted a continuation of that trend. British control of the Hudson river would ensure the colonies could not support each other.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Stanley Ayling, *George the Third* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), 243; Ferling, *Winning Independence*, 3-4; Gage to Barrington, 2 November 1774; Gage to Barrington, 14 December 1774; and Gage to Barrington 28 Mar 1775, all in Carter, *Gage Correspondence*, 2:658-72; John William Fortescue, *History of the British Army*, 13 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1902), 3:168; Gruber, *Howe Brothers*, 12; O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America*, 24-25, 29-30; Rick Atkinson, *The British Are Coming: The War for America, Lexington to Princeton, 1775-1777* (New York: Henry Holt, 2019), 20-21; John Ferling, *Almost a Miracle: The American Victory in the War of Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 25-26; Dartmouth to Gage, 15 April 1775, in Carter, *Gage Correspondence*, 2:194; Sir Henry Clinton, *The American Rebellion: Sir*

Open Hostilities

In 1775, General Gage commanded around four thousand effective soldiers in the Massachusetts Bay Colony and an additional one thousand troops throughout the rest of North America. Prime Minister Frederick North, Second Earl of Guilford, sent an additional three infantry regiments and one light dragoon regiment from Ireland, but they would not arrive until the late spring of 1775. Three major generals accompanied these reinforcements to aid Gage in his more vigorous prosecution of the insurrection: William Howe, Henry Clinton, and John Burgoyne. With nearly six thousand troops and a trio of experienced generals to lead them, the king and Lord North assumed Gage would quickly subdue the colonists.⁶⁹

The clashes at Lexington and Concord were unexpected but should not have come as a complete surprise. The British had assumed hostilities would erupt for some time. The Battle of Bunker Hill was an extremely costly victory for Gage, and the siege of Boston quickly became a stalemate. The British could not build sufficient combat power to break through the Rebel lines, and the colonists had no way of stopping British resupply from the sea.⁷⁰

Henry Clinton's Narrative of his Campaigns, 1775-1782, with an Appendix of Original Documents, ed. William B. Willcox (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), 11.

⁶⁹ Dartmouth to Gage, 27 January 1775, in Carter, *Gage Correspondence*, 2:179-83; Dartmouth to Gage, 22 February 1775, in Carter, *Gage Correspondence*, 2:184-86.

⁷⁰ Arthur Bernon Tourtellot, *William Diamond's Drum: The Beginning of the War of the American Revolution* (New York: Doubleday, 1959); John Ferling, *Whirlwind: The American Revolution and the War That Won it* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2015), 110-35; Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause*, 266-98; Ferling, *Almost a Miracle*, 61-71.

The conflicts of 1775 had only a minor effect on Britain's theory of victory. Parliament assumed the vast majority of colonists in America remained loyal to the king. It, therefore, still intended to isolate New England and provide time for the preponderance of the population to regain governmental control. Howe took over from Gage in September 1775 and shifted the base of operations to New York City the following summer. Meanwhile, Rebel preparations to defend the Hudson Highlands entered a new phase five miles south of West Point.

Conclusion

A mix of deficiencies existed in the placement, design, and construction of the military fortifications in the Highlands. First, there were very few military engineering experts in North America at the time. The men who selected the site, Christopher Tappen and James Clinton, had limited military experience. They were familiar with the region's topography, but the New York Provincial Congress assumed they had the requisite skill to select a suitable defensive site. Bernard Romans was an engineer, but he had never built a fort. Multiple design decisions resulted in costly delays and little progress toward the goal of securing the river. Second, the chain-of-command was convoluted. The Continental Congress appointed George Washington as the commander-in-chief of the Continental Army around Boston and Maj. Gen. Phillip Schuyler as the commander for the Northern Department. The New York Provincial Congress was, supposedly, in charge of constructing the fortress in the Highlands. Neither congress explicitly defined its relationship to the other or to the soldiers under Washington and Schuyler. Later, Col. Isaac Nicolls refused to hand over command to a Continental lieutenant colonel despite explicit instructions to do so because of his understanding of command relationships.

A lack of qualified engineers and confused chains of command hurt the project initially, but the root cause of the limited progress was the overlap of authority that existed in 1775. The fortification effort got off to a slow start because of inadequate government oversight. The Continental Congress directed New York to begin work in May, but the New York Provincial Congress only chose a site to fortify. Two months slipped by in the meantime. On-site, a question of jurisdiction resulted in delays. Who ultimately was in charge at Constitution Island? Was it the civilian authority embodied by the commissioners for fortifications? Or was it Bernard Romans, who represented himself as a military authority? The New York Provincial Congress failed to explicitly state the commissioners' power in relation to the engineer. Hence, Romans and the commissioners' war of words in late-1775 revolved around who was in charge. Also, what criteria were the basis for claims to primacy? Romans argued military necessity and his purported expertise outweighed all other sources, but the commissioners contended that their authority rested on the legitimacy of the New York Provincial Congress as a governing body. Ultimately, the civilians would win, and Romans would be out of the job, but not before that conflict resulted in delays and cost overruns so significant that the New York Provincial Congress essentially abandoned the works at Fort Constitution.

The different parties involved in this imbroglio finally managed to achieve a functional working relationship after the New York Provincial Congress voluntarily gave direction of the endeavor to Washington. By deferring to the national military, the provincial congress implied a preference for a subordinate relationship to the Continental Army. The New York's Rebel leadership realized that effective and efficient defensive positions required professional expertise. Unfortunately, the Continental Army did not

have access to a sufficient number of engineers that early in the war, and American military leaders overestimated the impregnability of the position from overland attacks. The resulting miscalculation ended in disaster the following year.

CHAPTER 2

POTENTIAL AND DISASTER ON THE HUDSON: JUNE 1776-OCTOBER 1777

The confusion that prevailed during Lt. Col. Henry Beekman Livingston's arrival at Fort Montgomery in May 1776 allowed him to survey the stalled state of construction and report to Washington. After visiting Forts Montgomery and Constitution, he judged the garrisons "in a most deplorable situation," lacking sufficient men, provisions, tents, and money. He wanted to ensure "that if any thing unfortunate should happen my reputation should <no>t lay Open to Censure."¹ The Continental Army still could not control navigation of the Hudson River through the Highlands. It had placed no obstacles in the water north of Manhattan, and only a few colonial ships contested British passage. Fort Constitution was ill-positioned and significantly more expensive than the New York Provincial Congress or the Continental Congress anticipated. Workers slept in ships on the river while they struggled to complete the barracks at Fort Montgomery. The militia, Continental soldiers, and civilians at Fort Montgomery reported to different superiors. Conflicting lines of authority and Washington's strategic choices retarded the development of the Hudson Highland posts, and the British Army took advantage of that weakness in October 1777.

¹ Livingston to Washington, 14 May 1776, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-04-02-0238>.

Stirling's Assessment

In response to Livingston's warnings, Washington dispatched Brig. Gen. Lord Stirling (née William Alexander); Col. Rufus Putnam, chief of engineers; and Capt.



Figure 7: Hudson Highlands

Winthrop Sargent, an artilleryist from Col. Henry Knox's Regiment, to investigate. Washington feared "that the Fortifications in the highlands are in a bad situation, and the Garrisons on Acc[oun]t of Arms worse." He told those officers to report on the state of the region's defenses and "direct such alteration [as] shall be judg'd necessary for putting them into a fit, and proper posture of defence."²

Lord Stirling subsequently briefed Washington on the deficiencies in the Highlands. First, the Continental Army needed to occupy more sites, and Stirling recommended a position south of the Highlands at Tethard's Hill. Two roads passed close to that eminence, one to

² Washington to Putnam, 21 May 1776, in John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*, 39 vols. (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1932), 5:67-69; Figure 7 from Galgano, "The Revolutionary War in the Hudson Highlands," 62.

Connecticut and one to Pennsylvania. In addition to adding a buffer for the Highlands forts, a military force there would protect the flow of people, equipment, and food



Figure 8: Gabions

between New England and the Middle Colonies. Finally, a fort on Tethard's Hill could control Peekskill Bay and deprive the British of a staging area for attacks into the Highlands.³

Traveling north on the river, Stirling next observed the formidable but unoccupied ground of Anthony's Nose.

The steep hill towered over the east side of the Hudson, nearly unassailable from the waterside. Artillery pieces could not depress their barrels enough to target enemy ships. Still, Stirling contended that "a Body of Rifle Men, placed here would be of very great use, in annoying an Enemy as the Decks of every Vessel that passes, must be open to them."⁴

Directly across the river, three glaring problems at Fort Montgomery greeted Stirling. First, the construction material was inappropriate. In a typical earth-and-timber

³ Lord Stirling to Washington, 1 June 1776, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-04-02-0336>.

⁴ Stirling to Washington, 1 June 1776, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-04-02-0336>. Figure 8 from S.D. Hatfield, "A Gabion in the Hand ...," *Historia Militaris*, 7 December 2017, <http://hitoriamilitaris.org/gabion-hand/>. Figure 9 from William Dwight Whitney, ed., *The Century Dictionary: An Encyclopedic Lexicon of the English Language*, 6 vols. (New York: Century, 1911), 2:2147.

fort, an engineer marked the outline for outer wall, and then workers staked gabions—large wicker baskets (figure 8)—along the ground trace to create the width of a fort’s wall. Next, they placed fascines—bundles of sticks tied together (figure 9)—on top and alongside the gabions for added protection. At Fort Montgomery, artillery or musket fire

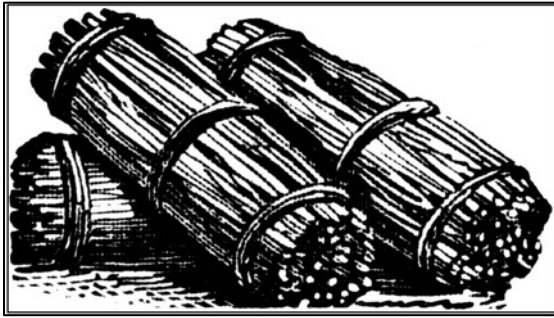


Figure 9: Fascines

presented a fire hazard because the embrasures (openings in the wall for defenders to shoot from) were too close to the fascines. Sterling directed covering the area around embrasures with mortar to mitigate the risk. Second, the works lacked

protection against attacks from the west. The post had a single wall with cannons facing the river but no barriers to withstand an assault from the hills behind the fort. Stirling recommended the commissioners build a redoubt on the high ground directly west of the site. Finally, and most importantly, Fort Montgomery was vulnerable to an attack from the south of Popolopen Creek. Putnam and Sargent saw that the land there “projects more into the River, Commands all the principal works [of Fort Montgomery] and is within two and three hundred yards of them; On top of this point is a level Spot of ground of near an acre, Commanded by nothing but the Inaccessible Mountains, at about Twelve hundred yards distance.” Stirling wanted the position fortified immediately. He further envisioned Fort Montgomery as a grand weapons magazine and “a regular, Strong Work capable of Resisting every kind of Attack.” Additional batteries south of the creek “would then command the passage of the River, with so formidable a Cross Fire as would

deter any attempt to Approach with Shipping.”⁵ Much work remained, but the general saw potential at the mouth of Popolopen Creek.

Stirling’s recommendations relied on two fundamental yet incorrect assumptions. First, Stirling believed artillery alone could stop ships on the river. Fort Montgomery and the recommended additional sites relied solely on firepower to control river traffic. Nearly six weeks after Stirling’s report, however, British warships easily sailed past the Rebel cannons emplaced on Manhattan. Washington concluded that the operation “exhibited a proof of the incompetency of Batteries to stop a Ships passage with brisk Wind and strong tide where there are no obstructions in the Water to impede their motion.”⁶ Second, Stirling assumed the terrain west of the sites was impenetrable. He referred to the area as “inaccessible mountains.” Nearly fifteen months later, Lt. Gen. Sir Henry Clinton would prove him wrong.

Six miles farther north, Fort Constitution sat poorly situated and impotent to prevent British passage. Four walls with a few artillery positions in each lined the island’s south side. Artillerymen on the largest wall could not train their guns on passing ships until the vessels had rounded the first bend in the river. No single point on the island commanded the surrounding terrain. Stirling concluded sarcastically: “Upon the

⁵ Stirling to Washington, 1 June 1776, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-04-02-0336>; For more on the finished site, see Charles L. Fisher, ed., *“The Most Advantageous Situation in the Highlands”: An Archaeological Study of Fort Montgomery State Historic Site* (Albany: New York State Museum, 2004).

⁶ Washington to Col. Adam Stephen, 20 July 1776, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 5:313.

whole Mr. Romans has displayed his Genius at a very great Expence, and very little publick Advantage.”⁷

Across the river, though, and a mere five hundred yards away, West Point loomed over Fort Constitution. The wooded escarpment dominated the river in both directions while allowing communication with Fort Montgomery over land or water. Stirling observed that West Point seemed ideal with fifty acres of flat land on top of the bluff overlooking the Hudson.⁸

Insufficient manpower and equipment at all the Highland forts prevented prompt construction and effective defense. At Fort Montgomery, three companies from Col. James Clinton’s 2nd New York Regiment assisted two commissioners, fifteen carpenters, and four masons. The one hundred eighty-eight privates and thirty noncommissioned officers of the garrison only had twenty-two guns. At Fort Constitution, two companies of Clinton’s Continentals and fifty-six members of Capt. John Wisner’s Orange County Minutemen assisted another two commissioners, four carpenters, and two blacksmiths. The garrison had only forty-one serviceable muskets, and the minutemen owned thirty-

⁷ Stirling to Washington, 1 June 1776, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-04-02-0336>.

⁸ Stirling to Washington, 9 June 1776, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-04-02-0373>.

one of them. Stirling ordered the creation of a forge at Fort Montgomery and the expansion of the blacksmith facilities at Fort Constitution to expedite weapons repair.⁹

Lord Stirling called the logistics for the entire area “strangely managed.” Overlapping lines of authority shredded any chance of efficiency or effectiveness. This time, however, the Continental Congress’ departments came into conflict with each other. Walter Livingston, commissary of stores and provisions for the New York Department since July 1775, delegated the distribution of supplies to an unnamed sergeant at Fort

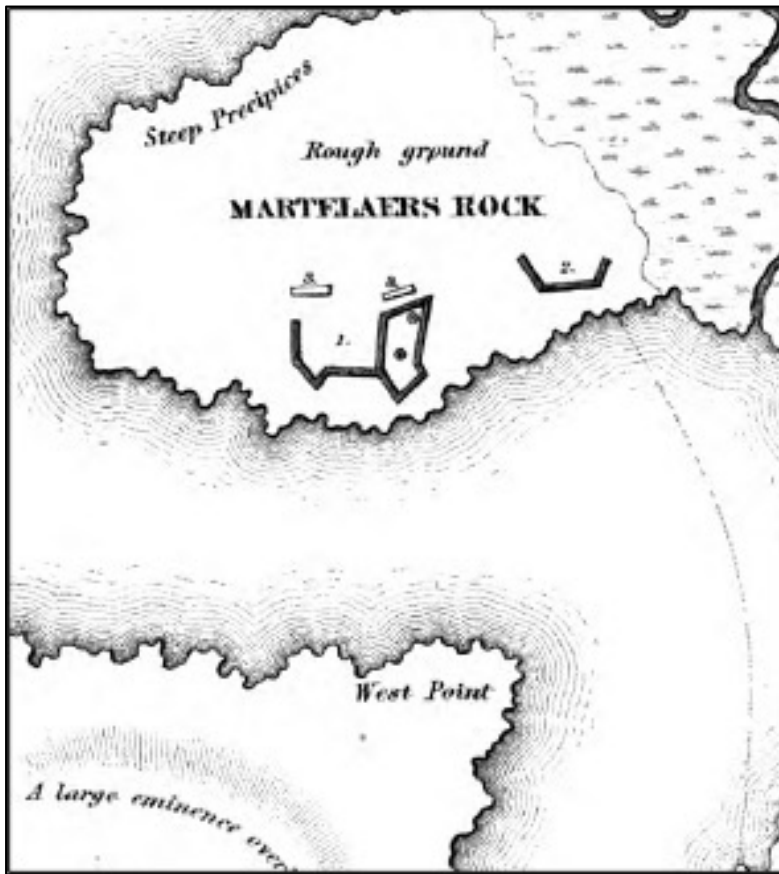


Figure 10: Fort Constitution, 1776

Constitution who operated “without any Rule but his own Caprice, Indiscretion, and want of Honesty.” As the Continental Army moved into New York, Livingston resisted its commissary general, Col. Joseph Trumbull, due to mutual personal and political animosity. The

⁹ Stirling to Washington, 1 June 1776, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-04-02-0336>. Figure 10 from Boynton, *History of West Point*, 27.

Continental Congress resolved the confusion on 8 July 1776 by giving Trumbull control of all supplies and provisions for armies in New York and Canada, but provision and equipment shortages persisted in the Highlands for several months.¹⁰

In response to Stirling's recommendation, Washington assigned Colonel Clinton to command the forts in the Hudson Highlands on 14 June 1776. Clinton's first task was to find enough weapons for the garrison. He confessed, "I don't know at Present any way to Supply them unless we can be furnished by New York." Less than two weeks later, Clinton revealed that construction of buildings had stalled for want of nails. As June drew to a close, Clinton struggled to resolve the mounting problems at Fort Montgomery with little help available from Washington or the Continental Congress.¹¹

July 1776

Two events on 2 July 1776 altered the strategic arc of the Revolutionary War: the Continental Congress passed the Declaration of Independence, and a British invasion fleet landed on Staten Island in New York. The Declaration changed rebellious Americans' goal from redress of grievances to political separation from the empire. The British invasion changed the location and severity of the military threat.

¹⁰ Ford, 8 July 1776, *JCC*, 5:527.

¹¹ James Clinton to Washington, 22 June 1776, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-05-02-0045>; James Clinton to Washington, 27 June 1776, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-05-02-0075>. Despite Washington's discharge of the New York Provincial Congress' commissioners, Clinton kept two on-site pending the arrival of an engineer.

Declaration of Independence

The Declaration justified independence and announced the goal of the newly christened United States “to assume, among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of Nature and Nature’s God entitle them.” Congress listed twenty-seven grievances to arouse the sympathy of “the candid world” because it understood from the beginning other countries in the international order would determine its legitimacy. Britain would likely be the last to recognize the independence of the United States, but that concession formed the prerequisite for peace negotiations.¹²

The Continental Congress planned to continue the war until the cost proved too much for Britain to bear. As John Adams put it, “They will neither acknowledge our independence, nor withdraw their fleets and armies, nor shall we get rid of them, but by destroying them, or making them prisoners, until the nation is so exhausted, and their credit so sunk, that the Minister can raise no more money.”¹³ The best-case scenario for the United States was a war between Britain and another European power that would diminish the British threat to American ports and cities. The United States, therefore,

¹² For explanations of the rise and eventual victory of the independence movement, see Scott Liell, *46 Pages: Thomas Paine, “Common Sense,” and the Turning Point to Independence* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2004); Don Cook, *The Long Fuse: How England Lost the American Colonies, 1760-1785* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1995), 179-239; Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause*, 227-339; and Richard R. Beeman, *Our Lives, Our Fortunes and Our Sacred Honor: The Forging of American Independence, 1774-1776* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 281-382. For the Declaration of Independence as a foreign policy document, see Robert Kagan, *Dangerous Nation: American’s Foreign Policy From Its Earliest Days to the Dawn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Vintage, 2007).

¹³ John Adams to Henry Laurens, 8 December 1778, in Sparks, *Diplomatic Correspondence*, 4:283-84.

sought European allies to provide support, expand the conflict to multiple theaters, and increase the costs of the war for the British.

British Invasion

When Gen. William Howe launched British offensive operations in the summer of 1776, he sought to isolate New England and divide the American colonies. Ten days after the king's troops landed on Staten Island, five British warships sailed up the Hudson to cut communications between the Highlands and New York City while cheering local Loyalists. Coordinating with Howe and operating under the direction of Vice Adm. Molyneux Shuldham, Capt. Hyde Parker of HMS *Phoenix* led the flotilla past the fortifications in Manhattan and New Jersey.¹⁴ The small squadron suffered minimal damage and only three wounded in that sortie. After plowing past the American defenses, the ships continued for another seven miles to anchor at a broad and deep section of the river known as Tappan Zee, located between Tarrytown and Nyack. In addition to this threat, General Howe's brother, Vice Adm. the Right Honorable Richard, Viscount Howe, commander-in-chief of British naval forces in North America, arrived at Staten Island with over eighty ships and thousands of additional troops.¹⁵

¹⁴ HMS *Phoenix* had forty guns; The other ships were HMS *Rose* with twenty guns, the schooner HBM *Tryal*, and the tender ships HBM *Charlotte* and *Shuldham*.

¹⁵ Richard J. Koke, "The Struggle for the Hudson: The British Naval Expedition Under Captain Hyde Parker and Captain James Wallace, July 12-August 18, 1776," *New York Historical Society Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (April 1956): 115-75; Capt. Hyde Parker, Jr., *Journal of H.M.S. Phoenix*, 12 July 1776, in William Bell Clark, William James Morgan, and Michael J. Crawford, ed., *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, 11 vols. (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1970), 5:1037-38; Daughan, *Revolution on the Hudson*, 44-53.

Response

The sudden appearance of British warships north of Manhattan shocked the New York legislature into action. After blithely acquiescing in Washington's dismissal of the commissioners at the Highland fortifications six weeks earlier, the Provincial Congress formed a secret committee "to devise and carry into Execution such measures as to them shall appear most Effectual for Obstructing the Chanel of Hudson's River or annoying the Enemy's Ships in their passage up said River." The six committee members received a five-thousand-pound budget to defray costs and the authority to call out the militia, impress people into service, and confiscate private property for the state's defense.¹⁶

On 19 July 1776, the Secret Committee met with James Clinton at Fort Montgomery for the first time and shifted the technology for controlling the river from firepower to physical barriers. To begin, Clinton suggested stretching a series of rafts made from pine logs fifty feet long with sharpened, iron-covered ends across the river between Fort Montgomery and the base of Anthony's Nose. The group agreed and decided to create another layer with smaller beams to "Answer the double purpose of Pounding any Vessels that may Sail up to it; and if that should fail, to lessen the Shock of those Vessels when they come to the boom." Finally, the men agreed to procure wheels for the cannon carriages within the fort.¹⁷

¹⁶ 16 July 1776, *JNYPC*, 1:526-28; Edward Manning Ruttenber, *Obstructions to the Navigation of Hudson's River: Embracing the Minutes of the Secret Committee [...]* (Albany: J. Munsell, 1860), 13-14. The committee consisted of John Jay, Robert Yates, Christopher Tappan, Robert R. Livingston, and William Paulding.

¹⁷ Ruttenber, *Obstructions*, 62-64. Figure 11 from Ruttenber, *Obstructions*, 64.

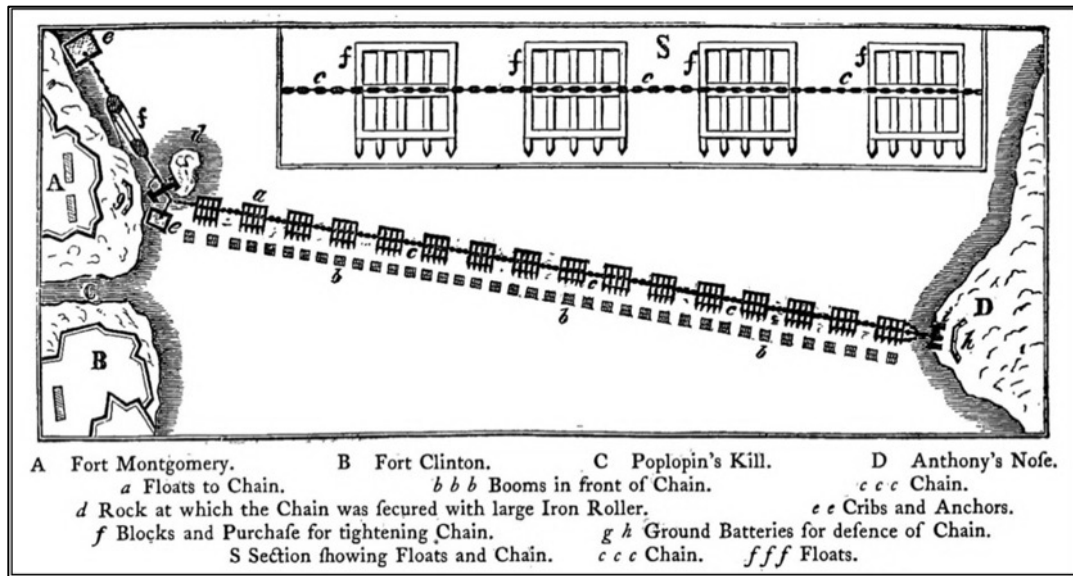


Figure 11: Fort Montgomery Chain and Boom

The next day, the committee began procuring the necessary supplies. At Fort Ticonderoga, 150 pine logs and a length of chain sat unused after the collapse of the Canadian invasion. The committee appealed directly to Maj. Gen. Phillip Schuyler, the commander of the Northern Department, which included Ticonderoga, to send those materials south. Schuyler demurred and warned the committee: “I have transmitted ... direction to send the Chain to you, under the Charge of a careful Officer *if it can be spared.*” He added that, in the interim, those fortifying the Highlands should “sink Casoons or Sloops filled with Stone” to interdict river traffic. The river was too deep at the fortified sites for this method to be effective, however, and the Secret Committee continued to put their faith in a chain-and-boom system that would stretch between the two banks.¹⁸

¹⁸ Schuyler to Secret Committee, 25 July 1776, in Ruttenger, *Obstructions*, 68-69. Emphasis in the original.

As the committee got underway, Washington sent a precious resource to Fort Montgomery, Lt. Thomas Machin, an engineer. Machin was born in Staffordshire, England, in 1744 and entered military service at age thirteen. He served as an artillery cadet in the Battle of Minden in 1759. Returning to England, Machin trained as a civil engineer and oversaw the design and construction of the Duke of Bridgewater's ten-mile canal between Worsley and Manchester. In 1772, he sailed to America to investigate a potential copper mine in New Jersey. Even though Machin found no copper deposit to mine, he stayed in the colonies. He moved to Boston, joined the Sons of Liberty, took part in the Boston Tea Party, and helped plan the fortifications erected at Bunker Hill on the eve of the battle. Machin suffered a bullet wound during the fighting and earned a lieutenant's commission with Col. Henry Knox's artillery regiment in January 1776. He remained in Boston after the British and Continental armies left in 1776 and oversaw the repair and improvement of Boston Harbor's defenses. On 21 July 1776, Washington instructed Machin "to act as Engineer in compleating such Works, as are or may be laid out for the Defence of the River and adjacent Defiles on each Side the River." His job quickly expanded to determine how to float a heavy iron chain across a tidal river.¹⁹

Machin began work immediately on arrival at Fort Montgomery. He laid out an earth and timber fort on the site Stirling recommended south of Popolopen Creek. The workers named it Fort Clinton in honor of the diligent James Clinton. Machin repeated the process at newly-named Fort Independence on the east side of the river directly under

¹⁹ Gary A. Trudgen, "Thomas Machin - Patriot," 4 December 1982, Thomas Machin Papers, New York Historical Society; Washington to James Clinton, 21 July 1776, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-05-02-0301>.

Anthony's Nose. The end of August saw cannons in position on both sides of the river at Forts Montgomery, Clinton, and Independence, ramparts at the two new sites nearing completion, and powder magazines at all three finally complete.²⁰

August-October 1776

August 1776 recorded minor successes and major catastrophes. On 16 August, the Americans drove off four British ships anchored in Tappan Zee and sank one. In the six weeks since the small flotilla first went north, the Americans had installed more underwater obstacles in the Hudson, but the ships could sail past on a flood tide relatively unscathed. Five days later, Howe moved most of his army to Long Island. After nearly a week of preparation, the British attacked and routed the Continental Army. A risky nighttime evacuation across the East River saved what remained of Washington's Main Army, but the escape was temporary. At the end of the month, Howe threatened to attack the isolated Continentals on Manhattan, and Gen. Sir Guy Carleton menaced the northern perimeter of the United States from Canada.²¹

On 8 September 1776, Washington outlined his plan to defeat the British Army, which he dubbed a "War of Posts." The description reveals Washington's understanding of his army's capabilities and the lingering effects of his colonial background. After August, Washington was confident his enemy intended to trap his Main Army on Manhattan to force an open battle or starve out the Americans. He thought "it would be

²⁰ Trudgen, "Thomas Machin - Patriot," Machin Papers; "Machin The Chain Maker," *Correspondent* 4, no. 3 (September 1973): 5-6.

²¹ Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence*, 149-61; Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause*, 346-56.

presumption to draw out our young Troops into open Ground against their superiors both in number and discipline.”²² Washington’s solution, therefore, was to fight defensively for the foreseeable future.

Washington’s justification for the defensive approach included, in order, the recent experience of the Continental Army, advice from potential European allies, military effectiveness, and the desires of Congress. Experience taught Washington the advantage of placing green soldiers in fortified positions, but he immediately invoked the authority of European military experts to validate his opinion. Almost as an afterthought, Washington added that Congress favored such an approach too.

While historians often cite the “War of Posts” as evidence of Washington’s defensive bent, such an interpretation misses a critical section in his letter. Washington’s stated purpose was to offer “a full and comprehensive view of our situation and thereupon form such a plan of future defence as may be immediately pursued and subject to no other alteration than *a change of Operations on the Enemy’s side may occasion*”²³ He intended not to dictate an unchangeable course of action for the remainder of the war. Instead, the general understood that a defensive approach would make the most sense until something in the overall environment changed.

The fighting in September and October increased the importance of the Highland posts as the Continental Army retreated north. The Rebel victory at Harlem Heights

²² Washington to Hancock, 8 September 1776, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-06-02-0203>.

²³ Washington to Hancock, 8 September 1776, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-06-02-0203>. Emphasis added.

stopped Howe's advance momentarily, but the British enjoyed nearly unfettered freedom of movement via naval transportation. When Washington discovered Howe's plan to move north and trap the Main Army on the island, he withdrew his forces to White Plains. The resulting battle pushed the Americans even farther toward the Highlands. Combined with Sir Guy Carleton's pressure from the north, the advance of Howe's troops from the south squeezed American defenses into an ever-tightening ring with the Hudson Highland fortifications at the center.

The secret committee acting for the New York Provincial Congress understood the situation's urgency, but its efforts retarded the process and further demonstrated the confusion in civil-military relationships. The river defenses needed both ships and the chain, but the committee diverted blacksmiths in Poughkeepsie from shipbuilding to chain forging on 27 September. Two weeks later, the committee declared that James Clinton should install the chain system at West Point, ignoring the plans of the last nine months to locate the primary river defenses at Fort Montgomery. West Point remained unoccupied, so the group also directed the construction of defensive works on the site. On 14 October, James Clinton and Machin convinced the committee to revert to the initial arrangement with the chain obstructing the river at Fort Montgomery²⁴

November 1776

Obstructing the River

November brought a host of changes, setbacks, and advances in the defense of the Hudson River in the Highlands. On 12 November, Washington assigned Maj. Gen.

²⁴ Ruttenber, *Obstructions*, 78-80.

William Heath to command all the troops and posts in the Highlands, effectively creating another military department within the Middle Department. Heath received explicit instructions to defend the overland passes through the Highlands and gain control over the river traffic as soon as possible. He quickly organized his command and assigned regiments to cover mountain passes and man riverside forts. Four days later and forty miles away, Washington watched from New Jersey as the Manhattan fort bearing his name fell to British and Hessian troops. The commander-in-chief moved south with the remnants of his army, and Heath's garrison became the most critical obstacle preventing British control of the Hudson.²⁵

In early November, Lieutenant Machin oversaw the installation of the chain between Fort Montgomery and Anthony's Nose.²⁶ Workers assembled the chain on the west side of the river during an ebb tide and anchored it to the shore beneath Fort Montgomery. Rowers then hauled the loose end across the river, where Machin fastened it to the shore anchor under the looming cliff of Anthony's Nose. The tide reversed a few hours later, and the chain bowed downstream. After a few minutes, it snapped near the midpoint. Machin collected the pieces and determined a swivel link in the chain from Fort Ticonderoga caused the failure. After replacing the defective part, the rowers and Machin rigged the chain again. The Hudson then repeated the process of breaking it with

²⁵ Robert K. Wright, Jr., *The Continental Army* (Washington, DC: United States Army Center of Military History, 1983), 88-95; William Heath, *Memoirs of Major-General William Heath*, ed. William Abbatt (New York: William Abbatt, 1901), 76.

²⁶ The exact date does not appear in the historical record. Ironworkers in New Windsor shipped the last links of the chain to Fort Montgomery on 1 November 1776. Heath first mentioned the chain breaking in Heath to Charles Lee, 21 November 1776, in *The Lee Papers*, 4 vols. (New York: New York Historical Society, 1872), 2:297-98.

tidal force. The second time the chain failed because a Poughkeepsie-manufactured clevis broke. Machin asked for another chance, as he believed the problem was not with the chain but with the floatation system. On 20 November 1776, the Secret Committee agreed and authorized him to make another attempt. The approaching winter, however, forced the engineer to wait until spring to see if his alterations worked.²⁷

In the meantime, the New York legislature scrambled to find another way to obstruct the Hudson River. The Committee of Safety forwarded a report on the chain to Schuyler and requested his advice. It also instructed the Secret Committee in the Highlands to make a nautical survey “of such parts the River as may be most effectually obstructed, so as not only to impede the navigation but likewise to prevent the landing of Troops below such obstruction.”²⁸ The Secret Committee decided a section of river at Pollepel Island was the only place “it is possible for an Obstruction to be made by *docking* effectually to impede the Navigation of Hudson’s River, at any place above the South Part of the Highlands.”²⁹ It recommended using *chevaux-de-frise*, which were large boxes with protruding spiked logs (figure 12). The New York Committee of Safety agreed and directed the work to commence. Brig. Gen. George Clinton of the New York militia arrived at Fort Constitution on 30 November with about 500 men and began

²⁷ For more on the actual mechanism of the shore anchor system, see Ruttenber, *Obstructions*, 64, 84; James Clinton, Chain Across the North River, 9 December 1776, in Peter Force, ed., *American Archives, Fifth Series: Containing a Documentary History of the United States* [...], 3 vols. (Washington, DC: M. St. Clair Clarke and Peter Force, 1853), 3:1140.

²⁸ 23 November 1776, *JNYPC*, 1:714-15.

²⁹ Ruttenber, *Obstructions*, 102 (emphasis in original).

assembling the caissons the next day. A combination of bad weather, an absence of blacksmiths, and a critical shortage of nails delayed the project for several weeks, though. When Clinton's

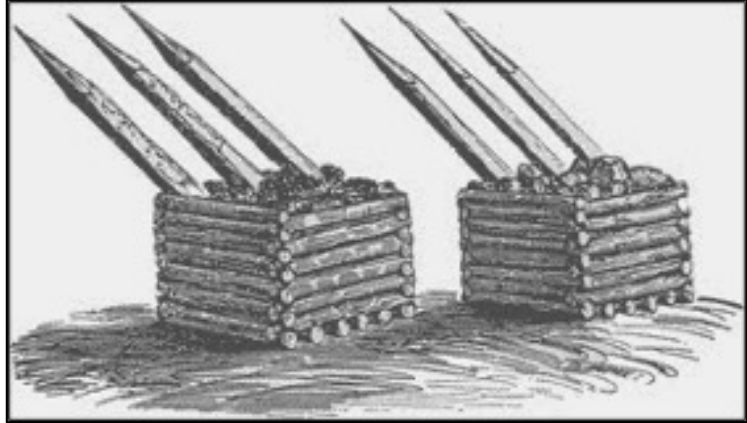


Figure 12: *Chevaux-de-frise*

men could finally sink the obstructions, the river had started to freeze over.³⁰

Strategy

Concurrently, a disagreement over strategy erupted in the Highlands. After the battle at White Plains, Washington left Maj. Gen. Charles Lee, the Continental Army's second-in-command, there to "prevent a fine fertile country affording them [British Army] supplies." In the retreat after the loss of Fort Washington, the Continental commander-in-chief ordered Lee to move his division to the west side of the Hudson "unless ... some new event should occur, or some cogent reason present itself."³¹ Lee considered this "a Recommendation not a positive order from the General."³² He

³⁰ George Clinton to Peter Van Brugh Livingston, 1 December 1776, in Hugh Hastings, *Public Papers of George Clinton, First Governor of New York, 1777-1795, 1801-1804* [...], 10 vols. (Albany: Wynkoop Hallenbeck Crawford, 1899), 1:440-42; Clinton to Heath, 5 December 1776, in Hastings, *Public Papers of George Clinton*, 1:446. Figure 12 from Jay Campbell, "Chevaux de Frise at Plum Point," *Joel Campbell (1735-1828): His Life and Times*, 23 February 2014, <http://joelcampbell1735.blogspot.com/2014/02/>. For more on Clinton, see John P. Kaminski, *George Clinton: Yeoman Politician of the New Republic* (Madison: Madison House, 1993).

³¹ Washington to Lee, 21 November 1776, in *Lee Papers*, 2:294-97.

³² Lee to Heath, 21 November 1776, in *Lee Papers*, 2:291.

reasoned “that the two armies - that on the east and that on the west side of North River - must rest on its own bottom; that the idea of detaching and reinforcing from one side to the other ... was chimerical; but to harbour such a thought in our present circumstances is absolute insanity.”³³ Lee decided Heath’s troops should go in place of his own because the crossing points “would be such an immense round, that we cou’d never answer any purpose.”³⁴ He ordered Heath to send two thousand men from his corps to the west side of the Hudson and await further orders. Heath demurred because of Washington’s written instructions. Since most Continental enlistments would expire with the new year, Heath also worried that the number of troops Lee demanded would leave just over 300 soldiers to garrison the forts. Heath convinced Lee to declare in writing that the latter “exercised command” over the garrisons in the Highlands, which absolved the former of responsibility for any troop removals. Eventually, Lee personally ordered two of Heath’s regiments to join him on the march to New Jersey, but he countermanded that instruction just as the troops departed the forts.³⁵

The encounter between Lee and Heath centered on competing strategies within the Continental Army. Lee and Washington wanted to defeat the British, but each general assessed the capabilities of their forces differently. Washington saw a lack of resolve and discipline in his troops but optimistically thought additional training would rectify those deficiencies. “I have not found that readiness to defend even strong posts at all hazards

³³ Lee to James Bowdoin, 21 November 1776, in *Lee Papers*, 2:291-92.

³⁴ Lee to Heath, 21 November 1776, in *Lee Papers*, 2:291.

³⁵ Lee to Heath, 21 November 1776, in *Lee Papers*, 2:291; Lee to Washington, 24 November 1776, in *Lee Papers*, 2:307; Heath, *Memoirs*, 82, 87-88.

which is necessary to derive the greatest benefit from them,” he remarked to John Hancock. “The honour of making a brave defence does not seem to be a sufficient stimulus when the success is very doubtfull and the falling into the Enemy’s hands probable: But I doubt not this will be gradually attained.” Delay benefitted the Rebels because it multiplied British war costs and allowed time for Washington to train his army. While temperamentally disposed to take the offensive, Washington held that prolonging the war was more prudent than risking all on a single battle at that time.³⁶

The risk inherent in Washington’s approach was the potential for the loss of public support. The Continental Army relied on the states to provide resources and personnel for service because the Continental Congress lacked the authority to enforce its levies. It was vital, therefore, that the general population support the cause. The New York legislator, William Duer, observed, “in the present Political Situation of this County, when the minds of the Inhabitants are in a fluctuating State whether they shall take the path of Allegiance to this State or fly for Protection to the Enemy nothing we conceive can be more Injurious to the public Cause, or Dishonourable to the State than to persist in the unhappy mode of retreating.”³⁷ Washington ordered Lee to cross the Hudson because “the Enemy are evidently changing the seat of War to this side of the North river—that this Country therefore will expect the Continental Army to give what support they can, or failing in this, will cease to depend upon or support a force from

³⁶ Washington to Hancock, 8 September 1776, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-06-02-0007>.

³⁷ William Duer to Henry Van Rensselaer, 24 February 1777, Oversized Items, Alexander McDougall Papers, New York Historical Society.

which no protection is giv'n to them.”³⁸ The Rebels could not afford to place the army based solely on military criteria. Congress and Washington had to give at least the appearance of productive activity to maintain public support.

Lee, on the other hand, was less patient. He begged the president of the Massachusetts Council for more troops not only to “cover your Province and these fertile districts from the insults and irruptions of the tyrant’s troops, but sufficient to drive ’em out of all their quarters in the Jerseys, or all is lost.” He committed himself “by the help of God to unnest ’em [British] even in the dead of winter.” Instead of marching to join Washington as directed, he chose to attack a British detachment near his position because it “lye in so exposed a situation as to present us the fairest opportunity of carry’g ’em off—if we succeed, it will have a great effect.” He believed ultimate American victory hinged on a successful offensive military action.³⁹

The question was what would cause the British government to quit the war, and thus recognize the independence of the United States. Washington assumed time and high costs would do the job. Lee saw battlefield victory as the solution and would brook no delay.

Winter 1776-1777

Fort Montgomery was still in poor shape as 1776 entered its final month. The New York legislature reluctantly admitted that the small garrison there was ill-equipped to continue construction. To the Continental Congress, the New Yorkers maintained that

³⁸ Washington to Lee, 21 November 1776, in *Lee Papers*, 2:294-97.

³⁹ Lee to the President of the Council of Massachusetts, 22 November 1776, in *Lee Papers*, 2:303-4; Lee to James Bowdoin, 21 November 1776, in *Lee Papers*, 2:291-92.

obstructing the Hudson was possible and promised a layered defense of obstacles on and in the water, land-based fortifications, and frigates. Abraham Ten Broeck, the president of the New York legislature, sarcastically asked, “but how are these objects to be effected without engineers, sailors, or cannon?” The provincial congress had achieved little in 1776. Making clever use of the passive voice to deflect blame, it noted: “Those fortifications which have been erected were constructed without skill, and yet remain incomplete; what is still worse, they are in great measure unprovided of cannon.” Another building season ended without the Americans obstructing river traffic in any meaningful way.⁴⁰

The posts also had few men and fewer supplies. The enlistees’ terms in James Clinton’s regiment expired in January 1777. He complained to the New York Provincial Congress that, even if he could convince most men to stay past their enlistment dates, “they would be of little service, as several of them are without shoes, etc. And has done no duty this long time on that account.” As winter settled onto the Highlands, Clinton’s men had “received no pay since 1 August last; and if they had money there is no clothing nor shoes to be purchased here.”⁴¹ Clinton saw utter failure imminent unless his men received supplies. “Without shoes and some clothing, we will not be able to keep up our guard and get firewood, and do the other necessary duty of a garrison.”⁴² He did not,

⁴⁰ New York Convention to the President of the Continental Congress, 28 December 1776, in Force, *American Archives, Fifth Series*, 3:1466-67.

⁴¹ James Clinton to New York Convention, 22 December 1776, in Force, *American Archives, Fifth Series*, 3:1367.

⁴² James Clinton to Pierre Can Cortlandt, 11 December 1776, in Force, *American Archives, Fifth Series*, 3:1169-70.

however, complain of a lack of muskets or powder, so some of the supply problems from earlier in 1776 must have abated.

The garrison executed two raids during the winter months. Washington ordered Heath to lead Brig. Gen. Samuel H. Parsons' brigade across the Hudson toward Morristown "so as to give all possible Protection to the Country and Vigour to the Cause." Heath marched through New Jersey and seized a few supplies and weapons but saw no active combat. After only nine days away from the Highlands, Heath received orders to return to Fort Montgomery based on the New York Convention's fears of a British attack and loyalist activities.⁴³

Heath conducted the second raid in January 1777. In the wake of the successes at Trenton and Princeton, Washington moved the Main Army to Morristown for winter quarters.⁴⁴ He instructed Heath to take four thousand militia and, while leaving a sufficient force to defend the Highlands, "move down towards New York ... as if you had a design upon the city; that being an object of great importance, the Enemy will be reduced to the necessity of withdrawing a Considerable part of their forces from the Jerseys, if not the whole to Secure the City."⁴⁵ Washington told Heath to attack whenever

⁴³ Washington to Heath, 7 December 1776, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-07-02-0207>; Heath, *Memoirs*, 90-95; Washington to Heath, 16 December 1776, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-07-02-0281>; Matthew Cantine to Washington, 11 December 1776, *JNYPC*, 1:748.

⁴⁴ For more on the Morristown encampment, see Steven Elliott, "The Highlands War: Civilians, Soldiers, and Environment in Northern New Jersey, 1777-1781" (PhD. diss., Temple University, 2018), 120-26.

⁴⁵ Washington to Heath, 5 January 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-07-02-0412>.

he held an advantage, but the Rebels failed to surprise the British troops at Fort Independence. Minor skirmishes dominated the action after the first day, and Heath withdrew in the face of an impending blizzard after ten days of fighting.⁴⁶

Concern for the state of Rebel defenses in the Highlands heightened in the new year. After the January raid, Heath went on leave to Connecticut, and Washington assigned Brig. Gen. Alexander McDougall to command in the Highlands. McDougall was born in Scotland but raised in America. From as early as 1770, McDougall took an active part in New York politics, favoring independence. Commissioned in the Continental Army in 1776, he spent most of the 1776-77 winter confined to his sickbed, but he had mostly recovered by February when he reported to the Highlands.⁴⁷

Washington was relatively sanguine about that area's security, telling McDougall that the British were moving toward Morristown instead of directly up the river. Regardless, McDougall worried about the dearth of men available to garrison the forts. Only four hundred soldiers remained within the three posts after an enlistment extension ended in mid-March. Washington agreed with McDougall's assessment of the forts' manning and ordered thirteen regiments, still in the recruitment and training process, to the Highlands.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Heath, *Memoirs*, 97-105. The Fort Independence Washington referenced was different from the one at the base of Anthony's Nose. The British Fort Independence stood in the Valentine Hill area, just north of Kingsbridge.

⁴⁷ For more on McDougall, see Roger J. Champagne, *Alexander McDougall and the American Revolution in New York* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1975); and William L. MacDougall, *American Revolutionary: A Biography of General Alexander McDougall* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1977).

⁴⁸ Return of Men in Garrison, 7 March 1777, Oversized Items, McDougall Papers; Washington to McDougall, 6 March 1777, Founders Online,

The Continental Congress also fretted about the state of the Highlands' defenses, so it commissioned George Clinton a brigadier general in the Continental Army on 25 March 1777 to preside as the commandant of the Highland forts.⁴⁹ Clinton assured Washington that with "the Obstruction of the navigation of Hudson's River under my Direction ... we have this Business in great forwardness and I have not the least Doubt but we shall compleat it in Season nor but that it will be effectual."⁵⁰

George Clinton's appointment further complicated the command structure in the region. Clinton was simultaneously a brigadier general in the Continental Army and the New York militia. As a Continental Army officer, he answered to the Continental Congress through George Washington. As an officer in the New York militia, however, he reported directly to the New York Provincial Congress. Washington, though, had named McDougall the senior officer for the area. The presence of the Secret Committee for Obstructing the Hudson River exacerbated the situation even more. Entirely outside the military chain-of-command, it answered only to the state legislature but often coordinated with the Continental Army and the New York militia. As the campaigning season opened in 1777, organizational confusion hampered the Rebel defensive posture.

<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-08-02-0550>; Washington to Heath, 13 March 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-08-02-0598>. Five regiments were from New York, and eight were from Massachusetts.

⁴⁹ Ford, 25 March 1777, *JCC*, 7:203.

⁵⁰ George Clinton to Washington, 23 February 1777, in Hastings, *Public Papers of George Clinton* 1:618-20.

Spring 1777

Late in March, the British opened the campaign season of 1777 with an attack on Peekskill, where McDougall kept his headquarters. On 23 March, Lt. Col. John Bird and detachments from four British regiments landed one-and-a-half miles south of Peekskill. As the raiding party advanced, the Rebels hastily withdrew from the town on McDougall's orders, taking what supplies and weapons they could. When Lt. Col. Marinus Willett's 3rd New York Regiment arrived on the scene the next day and counterattacked, the British withdrew to the south. McDougall reoccupied Peekskill on 25 March. The commanding general blamed a lack of "Necessary Support" for the loss, but the entire episode also demonstrated the Highlands' vulnerability.⁵¹

Nearly a month later, another British raid made life at the Highland forts more difficult. Maj. Gen. William Tryon, former governor of North Carolina and New York, led seven British regiments to destroy the supplies at Danbury, Connecticut. Local militia under Brig. Gens. Benedict Arnold and David Wooster harassed the British column as it made for the coast, but the nearly two-thousand-man strong raiding party had already disrupted the American supply chain. The troops in the Highlands immediately felt the effects because Danbury was their source of food. The British attacks in March and April convinced Washington to move Continental stores to Ulster County, well north of the forts.⁵²

⁵¹ McDougall to Washington, 29 March 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-09-02-0018>; William M. Willet, *A Narrative of the Military Actions of Colonel Marinus Willet, Taken Chiefly From His Own Manuscript* (New York: G. and C. and H. Carvill, 1831), 40-42.

⁵² James K. Martin, *Benedict Arnold, Revolutionary Hero: An American Warrior Reconsidered* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 316-21; McDougall to

Concerns and Investigations

Concerns over the state of the Highland defenses steadily grew through the spring. George Clinton's optimism in February about the region's defensive readiness was misplaced. To be fair, the garrisons managed to install the chain at Fort Montgomery on 23 March after Machin's adjustments to the floatation system. Nevertheless, only 298 men occupied the fort that month and less than 200 were fit for duty.⁵³ Clinton admitted, "the Garrisons of this and the other Fortresses in the Neighborhood being already rather Weak considering their Importance and the defenseless Situation on the Land side where we are now busily employed in erecting proper works."⁵⁴ McDougall added, "how long we shall hold the Fort, against a respectable force, is extremely uncertain; I think it is a very weak post, against a Vigorous attack by land."⁵⁵ Washington worried about a British approach from the west side of the river. He told McDougall to "fall upon every Measure

Washington, 5 May 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-09-02-0337>; Washington to McDougall, 7 May 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-09-02-0350>.

⁵³ Return of the Garrison at Fort Montgomery, 7 March 1777, Oversized Items, McDougall Papers.

⁵⁴ George Clinton to Washington, 1 April 1777, in Hastings, *Public Papers of George Clinton*, 1:691-93. Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington* dates this letter 1 May 1777. Based on the context of the rest of the letter referring to courts-martial of "sundry persons" and almost identical language used in a letter from Clinton dated 2 May, it seems most likely the latter date is correct.

⁵⁵ McDougall to Washington, 5 May 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-09-02-0337>.

to put the Fortifications in such a State that they may at least resist a sudden Attack, and keep the Enemy employed until reinforcement may arrive.”⁵⁶

McDougall felt overwhelmed and, on 5 May 1777, requested Washington appoint a major general to the post because of the amount of work there. Washington’s choice, Maj. Gen. Israel Putnam, merely added another layer of command without clarifying lines of authority.⁵⁷

On 12 May, Washington sent three trusted officers, Maj. Gen. Nathanael Greene, Continental Artillery chief Brig. Gen. Henry Knox, and Brig. Gen. Anthony Wayne, to inspect the defenses in the area. Washington remarked that “the vast importance of the posts and the great probability that the enemy will direct their operations against them make me anxious for their security.”⁵⁸ In his letters to Greene and McDougall, Washington emphasized the vulnerability of the Highlands to an attack from the west. Greene, Knox, and Wayne agreed with Washington on the defenses’ importance and painted a grim picture of the project’s current state.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Washington to McDougall, 7 May 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-09-02-0350>.

⁵⁷ Washington to McDougall, 5 May 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-09-02-0337>.

⁵⁸ Washington to McDougall, 11 May 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-09-02-0384>.

⁵⁹ Washington to McDougall, 7 May 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-09-02-0350>; Washington to McDougall, 10 May 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-09-02-0374>; Washington to Greene, 12 May 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-09-02-0390>; General Officers to

The investigation suggested two mutually supportive measures to secure the critical region from attack. First, the generals advised an improvement to the obstacles in the water. Like the Secret Committee, these officers thought a boom or at least two cables, placed in front of the chain, would absorb the shock of a ship attempting to ram its way through. Additionally, they ordered two sailing ships and a pair of row galleys to anchor just north of the obstructions so that “the fire from the Ships and Gallies in front, and the Batteries upon the flank, will render it impossible for the Shipping to operate there.” Second, the generals recommended adding four to five thousand troops and small outposts to guard the passes through the mountains. Regional security depended on implementing both measures. “We are very confident if the obstructions in the River can be rendered effectual,” they wrote, “the Enemy will not attempt to operate by Land, the passes through the Highlands are so exceedingly difficult.”⁶⁰ The threesome concluded that the mere appearance of strength at Fort Montgomery could deter a British attack.

Even though McDougall joined Greene, Knox, and Wayne in making these recommendations to Washington, he followed up with his own report two days later. He disagreed with building additional redoubts in the passes through the mountains because “if the Troops will not defend strong Defiles, they will not any works that we can finish in the probable time allotted to us.” For that reason, he chose to concentrate on the training and discipline of the garrison rather than additional construction. He worried more about the lack of provisions. Fort Montgomery had less than a five-day supply of

Washington, 17 May 1777, in *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene*, Richard K. Showman, ed., 13 vols. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 2:81-82.

⁶⁰ General Officers to Washington, 17 May 1777, in Showman, *Papers of Greene*, 2:82.

meat, and many troops lacked proper clothing.⁶¹ McDougall's information surprised Washington, but the commander-in-chief pledged to "direct the Cloathier Gen[era]l to adopt the most expeditious method to cloath them."⁶² General Putnam arrived in Peekskill the same day of Washington's latest missive, though, and McDougall assumed command of a brigade of Continental soldiers.

Washington's Response

In early June, Washington finally decided on a course of action for the campaign season. After a 12 June 1777 council of war, Washington concluded the British would either attack Philadelphia or pursue the Main Army. As a result, Washington ordered all but one thousand of the Continental troops then in the Highlands to join with the Main Army. The soldiers remaining around the Hudson River defenses "with the Convalescents and such Militia as are there and can be occasionally drawn in, is esteemed sufficient to defend the posts there under the present Appearances of Affairs."⁶³ The same day, Washington sent word to Putnam, who recently arrived in the Highlands, to begin the troop movement.⁶⁴

⁶¹ McDougall to Washington, 19 May 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-09-02-0469>.

⁶² Washington to McDougall, 20 May 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-09-02-0480>.

⁶³ Council of War, 12 June 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-10-02-0008>. Maj. Gens. Greene, Lord Stirling, Stephen, Lincoln, and Brig. Gens. Maxwell, Knox, Varnum, Wayne, Muhlenberg, Weedon, Woodford, Scott, and Conway composed the council.

⁶⁴ Washington to Putnam, 12 June 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-10-02-0014>

Washington expected the militia to provide the four or five thousand men required to secure the Highlands. The militia, however, dispersed at the end of July, and the Continental forces in the Highlands numbered just over two thousand men in five infantry regiments comprising Brig. Gen. Samuel H. Parsons' brigade and one artillery regiment. Only Col. Lewis Dubois' 5th New York and Col. John Lamb's 2nd Continental Artillery Regiment manned the works at Forts Montgomery, Clinton, and Constitution. The New York Legislature, the restyling of the New York Provincial Congress after April 1777, called out twenty-five hundred militia for service in the Highlands in response to rumors of an imminent British advance up the Hudson in August. About half showed up, and those men dispersed within two weeks because the expected attack failed to materialize.⁶⁵

The poor state of the Highland defenses did not motivate Putnam to take corrective actions. The ships that Greene and the council of generals had recommended took their positions in mid-June, but Putnam essentially neglected working on any

⁶⁵ Washington to George Clinton, 25 July 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-10-02-0397>; George Clinton to Putnam, 26 July 1777, in Hastings, *Public Papers of George Clinton*, 2:139-40; George Clinton to Washington, 26 July 1777, in Hastings, *Public Papers of George Clinton*, 2:140; Samuel H. Parsons to Washington, 30 July 1777, in Charles S. Hall, *Life and Letters of Samuel Holden Parsons, Major-General in the Continental Army and Chief Judge of the Northwestern Territory, 1737-1789* (Binghamton: Otsenigo, 1905), 106; Hugh Jameson, "The Organization of the Militia of the Middle States During the War for Independence, 1775-1781" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1936), 266. The other regiments in Parsons' brigade were Col. Henry Sherburne's and Col. Samuel B. Webb's Additional Continental Regiments, Col. Charles Webb's 2nd Connecticut, and Col. Samuel Wyllys' 3rd Connecticut.

structures in the various forts.⁶⁶ Instead, he ordered Parsons to attack Long Island via Connecticut and look for opportunities to raid New York City.⁶⁷ Washington repeatedly warned Putnam to keep his troops concentrated for the defense of the Hudson River, but the latter did not comply.⁶⁸

Summer 1777

The Continental and British armies maneuvered around each other during most of the summer. Sir William Howe (knighted for his successes of the previous year) sailed from New York City with the bulk of his army in July, and Washington marched the Main Army to defend Philadelphia when the British fleet showed up at the mouth of the Delaware River. Howe reversed course, though, and Washington suspected the British move was a diversion. He sent Maj. Gen. John Sullivan's division and McDougall's brigade to Peekskill on 1 August to mitigate the risk.⁶⁹ Three weeks later, though,

⁶⁶ George Clinton to Putnam, 15 June 1777, in Hastings, *Public Papers of George Clinton* 2:33-34; Machin to Board of Inquiry, Reel 2, McDougall Papers.

⁶⁷ Hall, *Parsons*, 107.

⁶⁸ Washington to Putnam, 25 June 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-10-02-0125>; Washington to Putnam, 30 June 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-10-02-0155>; Washington to Putnam, 13 July 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-10-02-0265>.

⁶⁹ Washington to McDougall, 1 August 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-10-02-0485>; Washington to Sullivan, 1 August 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-10-02-0489>; Washington to Putnam, 1 August 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-10-02-0487>.

Howe's intention to attack Philadelphia crystallized, and Washington recalled Sullivan's force while moving McDougall's brigade to New Jersey.⁷⁰

Howe defeated Washington at Brandywine in September, inflicting heavy losses. Washington needed to replace those killed, wounded, and captured, so he ordered Putnam to send troops from the Highlands to reinforce McDougall's brigade, which moved to rejoin the Main Army. Washington told Putnam to immediately concentrate his force at Peekskill and call for the militia to provide additional manpower if needed. The commander-in-chief added that "when they are ordered in and drawn together, they will be fully competent to repel any attempt that can be made by the Enemy from below in their present situation."⁷¹ George Clinton agreed that the Highland posts were eminently defensible and even told the state legislature that the forts were "in so respectable a state of defense as to promise us security against any attack in that quarter."⁷² Charitably, Clinton misrepresented the readiness of the Highland forts.

Fort Montgomery and Fort Clinton were vulnerable to an attack because of manpower shortages and incomplete works. On 20 September, only five hundred ten enlisted men fit for duty occupied Fort Montgomery. Recently sworn in as the governor of New York, George Clinton ordered half of six militia regiments to march to Peekskill for one month's duty on 29 September. After the false alarm in August, though, only

⁷⁰ Washington to Sullivan, 22 August 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-11-02-0046>.

⁷¹ Washington to Putnam, 23 September 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-11-02-0310>.

⁷² George Clinton, Governor's Address to the Legislature, 10 September 1777, in Hastings, *Public Papers of George Clinton*, 2:298.

three to five hundred militia (of two thousand ordered) went to their posts. Those who did arrive almost immediately requested leave to harvest their crops when they discovered no British forces in the immediate area. Many left without permission, and Putnam released the few who remained.⁷³

Structurally, the forts remained incomplete. Only three redoubts of Fort Montgomery faced west, and “part of the walls of the fort were not more than half raised.” A lone redoubt to the southwest of Fort Clinton guarded the approach to the site. Neither McDougall nor Putnam had followed the recommendations of the general officer council to build redoubts or breastworks in the passes through the Highlands. Combined with the manpower shortages, these flaws significantly imperiled the post.⁷⁴

British Perspective

The British plan in 1776 combined a direct approach against the Continental Army with an indirect approach against New England. Gen. William Howe intended to take New York City and use it as a base from which to launch attacks against Rhode Island and create a blockade around Boston and other Northeastern port cities. Howe also planned to attack north on the Hudson River with his force and rendezvous with Gen. Sir Guy Carleton attacking from Quebec. If successful, the British Army would sever all

⁷³ Garrison Return, 20 September 1777, George Clinton Papers, New York Historical Society; George Clinton to Cols. John Field, Henry Ludington, Abraham Brinkerhoff, William Humphrey, John Freer, and Jacobus Swartwout, 29 September 1777, in Hastings, *Public Papers of George Clinton*, 2:348-49; George Clinton to Washington, 9 October 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-11-02-0468>.

⁷⁴ Machin to Court of Inquiry, English to Court of Inquiry, Falkner to Court of Inquiry, n.d., all in Reel 2, McDougall Papers. Quote from Machin.

communications from the Middle Colonies to the “seat of rebellion” in New England. Howe doubted, however, that isolating New England would be sufficient, so he also wanted to crush the Continental Army in “a decisive Action, than which nothing is more to be desired or sought for by us as the most effectual Means to terminate this expensive War.”⁷⁵ Howe backed away from his desire for a decisive battle and emphasized maneuver and expanding the territory under British control for most of 1776. He opted to apply unrelenting pressure on Washington by sending Gen. Henry Clinton, promoted in January 1776, to capture Rhode Island while establishing a line of defense across New Jersey.

For 1777, the lately knighted Sir William Howe decided to attack Philadelphia in hopes of drawing out and destroying the Continental Army. Lt. Gen. John Burgoyne advocated a three-pronged attack on Albany to take control of the Hudson River valley. Secretary of State for America Lord George Germain opted to implement the invasion from the North and ordered Howe to cooperate with Burgoyne. Howe received these instructions on 8 May, 5 July, and 16 August 1777, but he ignored them because he had Germain’s prior endorsement of his plan and lacked the troop strength to do both. Howe offered to attack up the Hudson as a diversion, but he never meant to link up with Burgoyne.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Ira D. Gruber, *Howe Brothers*, 25-31; William Howe to Lord Dartmouth, 25 April 1776, quoted in Ira D. Gruber, “British Strategy,” 24.

⁷⁶ Gruber, “British Strategy,” 24-25; David Smith, *Whispers Across the Atlantick: General William Howe and the American Revolution* (Oxford: Osprey, 2017), 184-86, 194-205; William Howe, *The Narrative of Lieutenant General Sir William Howe* [...] (London: H. Baldwin, 1780), 19. Robert K. Wright, Jr., “Too Little, Too Late: The Campaign of 1777 in the Hudson Highlands” (master’s thesis, College of William and

Howe, along with most of the British ministry, did not expect Burgoyne to face much resistance after the capture of Fort Ticonderoga. All the king's men assumed strong Loyalist sentiment in the area and counted upon those people to support the British Army on its way to Albany. Such support failed to materialize. In its place, a Rebel army under Maj. Gen. Horatio Gates closed with and eventually defeated Burgoyne at Bemis Heights, New York.⁷⁷

Battle of Fort Montgomery

Henry Clinton, who had been knighted following the New York campaign, assumed command of the defenses in New York City after Howe departed for Philadelphia. Born in England, Clinton's family brought him to America at age eleven. Four years later, he entered the British Army and fought with distinction in the German states throughout the Seven Years' War. Clinton accompanied Howe and Burgoyne to Boston in 1775, became second-in-command to the former after February 1776, assisted in capturing New York City, and led the successful attack against Newport, Rhode Island. Following a brief winter visit to England, Sir Henry returned to America to discover Howe intended to attack Philadelphia at the expense of the ministry-approved move up the Hudson. Clinton failed to convince his superior to alter that approach, and Howe left him in charge of the garrison in New York City. In early August, Howe wrote Clinton that "if you can in the meantime make any diversion in favor of General Burgoyne's

Mary, 1971), 41-47; O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America*, 123-46; Gruber, *Howe Brothers*, 199-201.

⁷⁷ O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America*, 111-13; Clinton to Burgoyne, 11 September 1777 in Clinton, *American Rebellion*, 70.

approaching Albany ... I need not point out the utility of such a measure.”⁷⁸ Clinton spent most of August and September gathering intelligence and waiting for reinforcements. In late September, he heard from Burgoyne that “an attack or even the menace of one upon Fort Montgomery would be of great use.”⁷⁹

Sir Henry had to decide how to attack the American forts on the Hudson River while maintaining the defense of New York City. He estimated approximately four

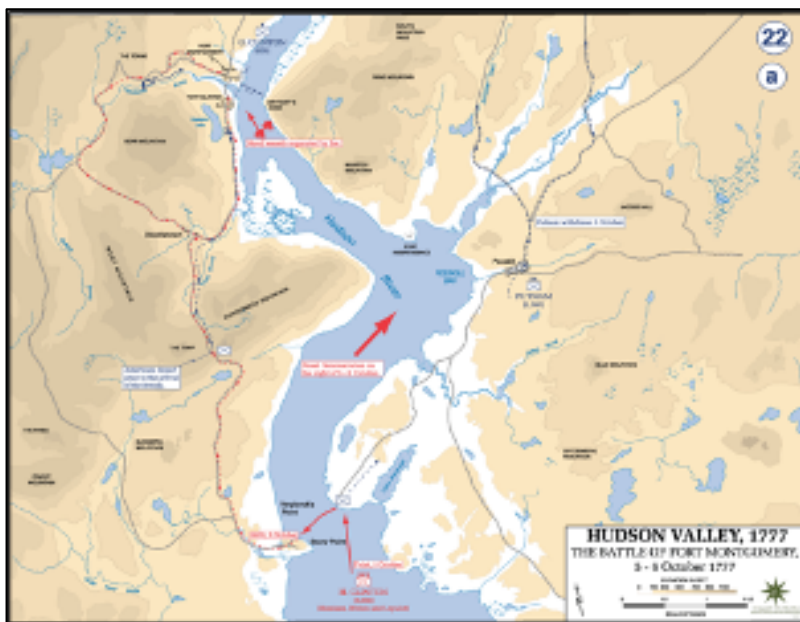


Figure 13: Battle of Fort Montgomery, 5-6 October 1777

thousand defenders in the Highlands after McDougall’s brigade departed. He had around seventy-two hundred rank and file soldiers fit for duty, including over three hundred artillerymen and nearly three thousand provincials.

On 24 September, seventeen hundred British and German recruits arrived in New York City, swelling Clinton’s numbers to almost nine thousand effectives.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Howe to Clinton, 30 July 1777, in Clinton, *American Rebellion*, 66.

⁷⁹ Burgoyne to Clinton, 21 September 1777, in Clinton, *American Rebellion*, 72.

⁸⁰ Clinton, *American Rebellion*, 63-72. Figure 13 from United States Military Academy (USMA), “The Battle of Fort Montgomery, 5-6 October 1777,” *West Point Maps and Atlases* (website), accessed 14 February 2022,

On 3 October, Clinton began his move north. He marshaled just over three thousand troops at Tarrytown, about fifteen miles north of New York City. Two days later, he sailed north and landed at Verplanck's Point to secure that post and fix Putnam's Continental force in place on the Hudson's east side. Clinton intended for the diversionary attack to cover his true aim of seizing the forts on western bank of the river. Simultaneously, he sent naval forces into Peekskill Bay to block Putnam's boats from transferring troops across the river. American soldiers at Verplanck's Point fled to Peekskill as soon as the British landing commenced, leaving a single twelve-pound cannon behind.

While at Verplanck's Point, Clinton received another letter from Burgoyne asking him to arrive in Albany ready to resupply and refit the Canadian expedition. Burgoyne's provisions would not last past 20 October, he was facing a Rebel army twice his size, and no support from Canada could reach him. Clinton could do nothing more than continue his plan in hopes of getting to Albany in time to help.⁸¹

As Sir Henry launched his campaign, American forces were in disarray. Putnam preemptively denied responsibility for any defeat. He told the president of the Continental Congress that "the post is of as much importance as any upon the Continent, and I will exert myself to the utmost for its defence, weakened as it is—but permit me to tell you, sir, that I will not be answerable for its safety with the strength left me against

<https://www.westpoint.edu/academics/academic-departments/history/american-revolution>.

⁸¹ Clinton, *American Rebellion*, 73-74.

the force I am sensible the enemy can, and believe will, speedily send against it.”⁸² Gov. George Clinton ordered half of the militia out to strengthen the garrisons on the evening of 3 October. The next day, the governor learned from his brother James Clinton that the British had landed at Tarrytown, but Putnam, the picket boats, and the alarm guns remained silent. More distressingly, hardly any militiamen had answered the George Clinton’s summons.⁸³

On 6 October 1777, Sir Henry shuttled three divisions under cover of darkness to Stony Point on the west bank. The first division, under Lt. Col. Mungo Campbell, contained the 52nd Foot, 57th Foot, and the Loyal American and New York Volunteer regiments along with Lt. Col. Andreas Emmerich’s Chasseurs. Campbell marched north to secure the Dunderberg Pass two miles short of Fort Clinton. From there, he circled around Bear Mountain to the west and attacked Fort Montgomery from the rear. The second division consisted of the grenadier and light infantry battalions, the 26th Foot, 63rd Foot, and one company of Scottish Highlanders from the 71st Foot. Maj. Gen. John Vaughn commanded the division, but Sir Henry accompanied him the entire day. Vaughn relieved Campbell at Dunderberg Pass and then waited to move on Fort Clinton until Campbell commenced his attack. Maj. Gen. William Tryon commanded the British reserves and followed Vaughn’s path along the river’s western shore.⁸⁴

⁸² Putnam to President of Congress, 29 September 1777, Reel 2, McDougall Papers.

⁸³ Hall, *Parsons*, 116; James Clinton to George Clinton, 4 October 1777, in Hastings, *Public Papers of George Clinton*, 2:360-61.

⁸⁴ Clinton, *American Rebellion*, 75.

Putnam believed the British soldiers at Verplanck's Point would mount the main attack. He concentrated his forces around Peekskill and ordered sixty troops from the west side to reinforce his position. On the evening of 5 October, George Clinton arrived at Fort Montgomery and took personal command of the fort and the six hundred men in garrison there. He assigned his brother James to defend Fort Clinton and hold the bridge between the two posts over Popolopen Creek. He then dispatched Maj. Samuel Logan and one hundred men to reconnoiter Stony Point as the most likely place of the British landing on the west shore. Logan's force set up a defensive position at Timp's Pass, an excellent spot to delay an attack because of the approaching road's steep grade and winding layout along with inaccessible high ground on either side funneling all traffic to a single point. Logan detached a smaller party under Lt. Samuel English to complete the reconnaissance to the water's edge.⁸⁵

In the early morning of 6 October, English peered into a dense fog that had settled in the river valley. A sudden gust of wind lifted the fog just enough for him to see the British fleet heading toward his position. English immediately reported the development to Major Logan at Timp's Pass. Logan, suffering from a nearly debilitating illness, sent a runner to inform George Clinton of the impending attack and then decided to retire with his detachment to the safety of the garrison. In response, George Clinton sent out another party under the command of Lt. Paton Jackson. The British van arrived in Doodletown just before Jackson departed the fort. British scouts ambushed Jackson's unit and drove it

⁸⁵ Putnam to Court of Inquiry, n.d., Reel 2, McDougall Papers; William Allision to Elihu Marvin, 4 October, 1777, in Hastings, *Public Papers of George Clinton*, 2:364; George Clinton to Washington, 9 October 1777, in Hastings, *Public Papers of George Clinton*, 2:389-95; English to Court of Inquiry, n.d., Reel 2, McDougall Papers.

back to Fort Montgomery. Recognizing the emerging threat, George Clinton sent defenders to two different forward positions. The first, composed of fifty militia under Lt. Col. James McClaughry and fifty Continentals under Lt. Col. Jacobus Bruyn, went south to delay Vaughn's division. Capt. Ephraim Fenno directed the second party (120 men and



Figure 14: Battle of Fort Montgomery, 6 October 1777

a single three-pound field piece) due west of Fort Montgomery to the north side of Bear Mountain. Shortly after 1:00 p.m., Sir Henry Clinton's advancing divisions engaged both parties and forced them back to their works.⁸⁶

George Clinton intended to hold his ground until reinforcements arrived. He had sent a message to Putnam at 8:00 a.m. on 6 October, reporting the advancement of the British in force from the south and requesting reinforcements. Unfortunately, he entrusted Silvester Waterbury to deliver the message, and Waterbury was actually a Loyalist. Putnam did not receive the request until nearly 4:00 p.m.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ George Clinton to Washington, 9 October 1777, in Hastings, *Public Papers of George Clinton*, 2:389-94; Machin to Court of Inquiry, n.d., Reel 2, McDougall Papers.

⁸⁷ George Clinton to Washington, 9 October 1777, in Hastings, *Public Papers of George Clinton*, 2:389-95; Putnam to Court of Inquiry, n.d., in Reel 2, McDougall Papers. Figure 14 from USMA, "The Battle of Fort Montgomery, The British Attack, Dusk, 6 October 1777," *West Point Maps and Atlases* (website), accessed 14 February 2022,

When McClaughry and Bruyn fell back, James Clinton dispatched Bruyn to aid his brother at Fort Montgomery. McClaughry stayed at Fort Clinton and took command of about eighty men and three six-pound cannons in the lone redoubt one hundred yards to the southwest of the main breastworks. Vaughn and Campbell approached Forts Clinton and Montgomery respectively around 3:00 p.m. and began a series of rushes to breach the fort's walls. The defenders repulsed the attack multiple times but ultimately caved to the superior numbers. The final assault began around 5:30 p.m., and the British occupied the forts about fifteen minutes later as the Americans scrambled to escape in the gathering darkness.⁸⁸ Forty-one British soldiers and less than one hundred American troops died in the fighting.⁸⁹

Sir Henry promptly followed up his victory. The resounding success of 6 October bolstered the prospects of reaching Burgoyne in time to prevent disaster. Vaughn dismantled Fort Montgomery and began repairing Fort Clinton to serve as a base of operations for the British. Sir Henry sent word upriver to demand the surrender of Fort Constitution. Capt. Gershom Mott, commanding the single artillery company there, fired at the approaching British vessels despite the white flags they flew. Sir Henry returned in

<https://www.westpoint.edu/academics/academic-departments/history/american-revolution>.

⁸⁸ Hall, *Parsons*, 117; George Clinton to Washington, 9 October 1777, in Hastings, *Public Papers of George Clinton*, 2:389-95; Putnam to Washington, 8 October 1777, in Hall, *Parsons*, 117; Clinton, *American Rebellion*, 76-78; James Clinton to Court of Inquiry, n.d.; Moody to Court of Inquiry, n.d.; Faulkner to Court of Inquiry, n.d., all in Reel 2, McDougall Papers.

⁸⁹ George Clinton to Washington, 9 October 1777, in Hastings, *Public Papers of George Clinton*, 2:389-95; Putnam to Washington, 8 October 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-11-02-0461>.

force the next day and found the fort abandoned. The British ships subsequently navigated around the *chevaux-de-frise* near Pollepel Island without any damage. From 8 to 15 October, Vaughn's division destroyed supply depots and set fire to barracks on both sides of the river as far north as Kingston. Burgoyne surrendered to Gates on 17 October, but Clinton only learned of the defeat several days later. The Rebels, their ranks swelled to two thousand effectives after the militia finally responded, blocked communication between Clinton and Burgoyne. Two days after Burgoyne's surrender, Sir Henry arrived at Livingston Manor. He received orders from Howe to destroy Fort Clinton and send four full regiments, two battalions, and all the newly arrived British and German soldiers to Philadelphia. An immensely successful campaign ended because Sir Henry "was under the mortifying necessity of relinquishing the Highland and all the other passes over the Hudson, to be reoccupied by the Rebels whenever they saw proper."⁹⁰

The Continental Army convened a Court of Inquiry to determine the reasons for its stunning loss in the Highlands. Nearly every officer who testified blamed the lack of men at the two posts for the loss. Parsons summarized the overwhelming opinion of those in command when he told Governor Trumbull of Connecticut that "thus was a Post of importance, and the lives and liberties of some of the bravest men, made a sacrifice to the careless inattention of our countrymen to objects of great and extensive public importance."⁹¹

⁹⁰ Clinton, *American Rebellion*, 77-81.

⁹¹ Hall, *Parsons*, 118-19.

The reliance on militia during harvest season, Putnam's positioning of his resources, and sheer chance also contributed to the loss of the Highland forts. In the three months preceding the attack, the militia call-outs bred complacency among the citizen-soldiers. Each time the state governments summoned the militia for unsubstantiated rumors, fewer and fewer reported for duty. Putnam also ignored Washington's admonition to place the men in the passes and forts. Putnam kept Parsons' brigade of Continentals at White Plains for most of September and on the east side of the river after that. Had he heeded earlier calls to at least station men at the passes in the Highlands, it is likely that he could have gained more time to maneuver his forces in response to Sir Henry's thrust. Finally, the British commander was extraordinarily fortunate. The morning fog on 6 October shrouded his movement across the Hudson. Major Logan's illness likely influenced his decision to return to the main breastworks instead of mounting a defense at Timp's Pass. Lastly, the eight-hour delay in receiving George Clinton's request for reinforcements prevented Putnam from shifting men to meet the main attack. Sir Henry's prediction, however, proved correct, and the Americans rapidly reoccupied the Highlands. The Continental Army's next attempt to control the Hudson's traffic would occur at West Point.

Conclusion

Overlapping lines of authority hampered American efforts to secure the Highlands in the sixteen months from June 1776 to October 1777. The New York Provincial Congress gave Washington and the Continental Army the authority to oversee construction of the defenses in May 1776. Still, it created the Secret Committee only two months later. The committee, and the New York legislature itself, ignored the Continental

Army's departmental lines and sought the advice of Maj. Gen. Phillip Schuyler, who was over two hundred miles away at Fort Ticonderoga. The Secret Committee inserted itself into the Continental Army's process, ignored the plan that had been in place for nearly a year, and further delayed the project.

Making matters worse, Washington assigned Maj. Gen. William Heath to command a *de facto* military department without congressional approval. He transferred responsibility for the security of the Highlands to first Heath, then McDougall, and finally Putnam. Those commanders had to negotiate troop levels and resource allocations with the Continental Congress, as well as the New York, Connecticut, and Massachusetts state legislatures. Without the license of Congress, the Highlands' departmental commanders struggled in an awkward liminal state of having responsibility for the region but not the power associated with an approved military department.

The Continental Congress' assignment of George Clinton to commandant of the Highlands embodied overlapping and conflicting lines of authority. For nine days in 1777, George Clinton was simultaneously a brigadier general in the New York militia and the Continental Army as well as both the lieutenant governor and governor of New York. He reported to the New York Legislature (as governor), the Continental Congress (as commandant of the Highland forts), George Washington (as a Continental Army general), and Alexander McDougall (as a militia general stationed in the Highlands). Clinton tried to gain the necessary resources for the sites, but the sheer weight of his responsibilities stymied his efforts. The forts and garrisons in the Highlands suffered because of it.

Heath's raids and the battles at Trenton and Princeton in December 1776 and January 1777 challenge the interpretation of Washington as a defensive commander. Washington's orders to attack, mere months after vowing to fight defensively, seemingly contradicts the idea that he believed delaying was the most appropriate course of action. The circumstances of the Continental Army, though, changed between September and December 1776. Its enlistments expired in January. Some kind of victory was necessary to reinvigorate the recruiting process for 1777. Washington also intended Heath's raids to support the larger movement of the Main Army and limit the support New Jersey loyalists gave to the British. The analytical lens of offensive versus defensive strategy portrays Washington as waffling at a critical juncture. Defining strategy as a theory of victory offers an alternative explanation. Washington seized opportunities to prolong the war or directly inflict losses on the British in order to drive up the conflict's costs, which would eventually produce the desired result. Both offensive and defensive tactics supported that strategy.⁹²

The Continental Army had to choose where and how to spend its limited resources. As Washington told Brigadier General Parsons, "it would give me pleasure, if the situation of our Army, would justify the leaving Strong Guards of Continental Troops at every place subject to the landing of the Enemy; but as it will not, it imports us highly, to collect a respectable force at such posts and passes, as are most important and material

⁹² David Hackett Fischer, *Washington's Crossing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Ferling, *Almost a Miracle*, 172-89.

for us to secure.”⁹³ Burgoyne and Sir Henry Clinton threatened to seize control of the Hudson Highlands, which would limit the ability of the states to support each other. Howe occupied Philadelphia to demonstrate British power and taunt the Continental Army into a decisive engagement. Washington had to choose which of the three attacks to counter with his best troops.

While the fall of Philadelphia was terrible for morale and a massive loss of face for the Americans, the Continental Congress still functioned. From this point of view, Washington erred in taking most of the Continental troops out of the Highlands. Control of the Hudson enabled communication between New England and the other states. Military units, food, and manufactured goods flowed across the Hudson River. If the British controlled the river, all the states would suffer.

The penalty for not meeting Howe’s force with a strong response, however, was the potential loss of popular support for the war. Maintaining the alliance of the thirteen independent states demanded Continental Army action. The British had placed the Rebels on the horns of a dilemma. Because they could not effectively defend against three different attack axes, British advances in multiple sectors created massive vulnerabilities in the American defenses.

Washington accepted risk in the Highlands. Burgoyne’s offensive fully occupied Schuyler and, later, Gates. The Continental Army stood a better chance in open battle with the British than militia. That left only a few regulars available to man the ramparts on the Hudson. The militia would have to cover the remainder. Unfortunately for the

⁹³ Washington to Parsons, 7 May 1777, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-09-02-0351>.

Rebels, the response was inadequate. After Sir Henry retreated, though, the Continental Army garnered a second chance.

CHAPTER 3

THE CONSTRUCTION OF WEST POINT: NOVEMBER 1777-NOVEMBER 1779

The retreat of Gen. Sir Henry Clinton's forces to New York City in the autumn of 1777 did not end the threat to the Hudson Highlands. The Continental Army spent the next two years emplacing new forts, redoubts, batteries, and obstacles to block the river. For their third attempt to secure the Hudson, the rebellious Americans chose to place the works at West Point and enlisted the help of European engineers. Two engineers with different assumptions about the most likely threat forced the Continental Army's leadership to choose between competing visions of the size and shape of the post. Overlapping lines of authority again retarded progress on the project. The Continentals eventually developed a layered system to control navigation on the Hudson and guard against attacks over land and water. The result was not a replication of European forms but an adaptation of them to the American environment.

Continental commanders at West Point repeatedly rejected the advice of a French engineer and revealed their preference for experience over education. Even though they sincerely believed in the validity of their choices, a break with the recognized experts in fortification was fraught with uncertainty. Washington and his generals risked casting the United States as militarily backward and unworthy of formal recognition. Officers commanding at West Point and in the surrounding region continually voiced their concerns about the strength of the fortifications and the damage losing the post would cause their reputations and the fight for independence.

The design and construction of West Point presented an argument for military competence to three different audiences. Domestically, control of the Hudson at West Point kept the lines of communication between New England and the lower states open. For the British, the fortifications deterred attacks up the Hudson River and limited freedom of movement outside New York City. Finally, France saw the United States' ability to protect its territory, which bolstered the young country's claim to legitimacy. The Continental army's efforts ultimately succeeded since communications remained uninterrupted, the British never attacked the fort, and a French delegation toured West Point and expressed its approval of the fortification scheme.

Engineers Needed: Pre-1777

The representatives in the Continental Congress knew the rebellious colonies did not have enough engineers to meet their military needs. In December 1775, Congress ordered the Committee of Correspondence to "use thir endeavors to find out and engage ... skilful engineers not exceeding four."¹ In early December 1776, Benjamin Franklin arrived in France with instructions to "engage a few good Engineers in the Service of the United states."² Gen. Claude Louis, Comte de Saint-Germain, the minister of war, tapped Maj. Louis Lebègue Duportail to secretly lead a delegation of four engineers to serve in the Continental Army. Duportail insisted that the Continental Congress give him a

¹ Ford, 2 December 1775, 3:400-401.

² Continental Congress, Instructions to Benjamin Franklin, Silas Deane, and Arthur Lee as Commissioners to France, 24 September - 22 October 1776, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-22-02-0371>.

promotion, a pay raise, and command of all the engineers in America. Desperate for a man with Duportail's expertise, the US commissioners agreed to his demands.

Letters between the Congress and Continental Army officers validate this perceived engineer shortage and the Rebels' high admiration of French military training and education. For example, James Lovell of Massachusetts advocated for Duportail by highlighting his professional credentials. "The Corps of Engineers is very honorable in France; and officers from it are sought by different european Powers."³ George Washington held that "Engineers ... are absolutely necessary and not to be had here." He cautioned, however, against accepting anyone without "authintic testimonials of their skill and knowledge."⁴ Washington remained silent on what qualified as proof of expertise, but he was satisfied with Duportail's bona fides. For Washington, graduation from the engineering academy at Mézières amounted to evidence of skill and knowledge, which indicated he still subscribed to the European standard of training and education. Ultimately, the Continental Army commissioned Duportail a brigadier general on 17 November 1777.⁵

³ James Lovell to George Washington, 24 July 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-10-02-0379>.

⁴ Washington to Richard Henry Lee, 17 May 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-09-02-0448>.

⁵ For a fuller discussion of the battle over Duportail's rank, see Elizabeth S. Kite, *Brigadier-General Louis Lebègue Duportail, Commandant of Engineers in the Continental Army, 1777-1783* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1932), 29-33; Alex Storozynski, *The Peasant Prince: Thaddeus Kościuszko and the Age of Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2009), 40-43; Palmer, *The River and the Rock*, 132-33.

Location Debate: November 1777-January 1778

Before Washington learned of the loss of Forts Montgomery and Clinton, he ordered Lt. Col. Louis Guillaume Servais Deshayes de la Radière, an engineer from the French delegation, to direct the further fortification of the Highlands. Radière, a captain in the French Army, was a graduate of the prestigious engineering academy of France, but he lacked wartime experience. Described as methodical and detail-oriented, he soon clashed with all the Rebel authorities in the Highlands.⁶

During Sir Henry Clinton's occupation of the Hudson Highlands, the United States aimed to regain control of the captured posts. Almost as soon as Clinton retreated to New York City, Maj. Gen. Israel Putnam received instructions to rebuild the riverside defenses.⁷ Congress, unaware Clinton had withdrawn, directed Maj. Gen. Horatio Gates drive the British out of the area and rebuild the fortifications. Shortly thereafter, Washington urged Putnam to "turn your most serious and active attention, to this very and infinitely important object. Seize the present opportunity, and employ your whole force and all the means in your power for erecting and compleating ... such works and obstructions as may be necessary to defend and secure the river against any future attempts of the Enemy."⁸ The recent American success at Saratoga was encouraging, but

⁶ Washington to Radière, 8 October 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-11-02-0456>; Kite, *Duportail*, 80-81.

⁷ Ford, 5 November 1777, *JCC*, 9:865-66; Washington to Putnam, 4 November 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-12-02-0113>.

⁸ Washington to Putnam, 2 December 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-12-02-0473>.

the French had not formalized an alliance with the United States, and the Hudson River remained conspicuously vulnerable. Washington fully expected Henry Clinton to attempt another strike in the spring.

On 5 November, Putnam, Gov. George Clinton, Brig. Gen. James Clinton, Col. Hugh Hughes, and Lieutenant Colonel Radière toured the Highlands to investigate possible locations for the primary defensive works along the Hudson. The Rebels concluded that West Point, directly across the river from the ruins of Fort Constitution, was the ideal place at which to obstruct the river. Radière disagreed and requested more time to develop a detailed recommendation. Putnam granted the request and spent much of the next two months planning a never-attempted attack on the British at Kingsbridge near Manhattan. He would not begin work on the new sites until January 1778.⁹

Continental Army and New York militia leaders preferred West Point over Fort Clinton because obstacles in the river could obstruct navigation more effectively at the former. James Clinton explained that only chevaux-de-frise, chains, and booms could effectively block ships sailing north. The only place chevaux-de-frise would work was near Pollepel Island, where the Continentals had attempted to install some in December 1776. A chain-and-boom system would serve best at West Point because the river “is quite narrow, and the wind, owing to the crookedness of the river, very uncertain.”¹⁰ The

⁹ Putnam to Washington, 7 November 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-12-02-0147>; James Clinton to Horatio Gates, 24 November 1777, Reel 2, Horatio Gates Papers, New York Historical Society; Hamilton to Washington, 10 November 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-01-02-0339>.

¹⁰ James Clinton to Gates, 24 November 1777, Reel 2, Gates Papers.

Continental Army relied on the chain to obstruct river traffic, so its optimal placement drove the American's decision-making process.

Radière eventually recommended rebuilding Fort Clinton because he prioritized placing the fort where the defenders would most likely succeed against a siege. After nearly two months of investigation, the Frenchman requested a council of war, where he presented his reasons for preferring Fort Clinton to West Point. First, although the river at West Point was more challenging to navigate, he claimed, inaccurately, that the river was narrower at Fort Clinton. Second, the chain required additional fortification on the east side of the river at West Point, but the steep cliffs of Anthony's Nose prevented the British from landing there to dismantle a chain anchor. Third, Fort Clinton possessed a natural harbor in Popolopen Creek, while West Point lacked a nearby place for defensive watercraft to dock.¹¹

Radière admitted that each of Fort Clinton's advantages was slight. His ultimate reason for preferring the southern site, though, was the surrounding terrain. An enemy force could not land its siege artillery near Fort Clinton, nor could it "find ground to make trenches and batteries and consequently can't besiege a Fort built where Fort Clinton was." Additionally, the restricted terrain there enabled a small fort of earth and timber to control the surrounding area. The walls would not have to be thick enough to withstand siege artillery, so the Continental Army could construct the site rapidly and at minimal cost. Because West Point was vulnerable to a Vauban-style siege, Radière

¹¹ Lewis de la Radière to Continental Army Council of War, 2 January 1778, Series 4: General Correspondence, 1697-1799, George Washington Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mgw445181>.

argued that “we must build a larger and Stronger Fort ... which will require a greater Garrison and more Cannons.” Repeatedly, Radière emphasized the savings in time and money reconstructing Fort Clinton afforded. Garrison size, construction materials, the number of required outworks, and the ability to defend a partially completed fort all pointed the French engineer toward the site on the Popolopen Creek.¹²

Putnam referred the question to the New York Legislature, which appointed New York Supreme Court Justice John Sloss Hobart to lead a five-man committee to render a decision. On 14 January 1778, the group recommended fortifying West Point over Fort Clinton because of the latter’s vulnerabilities to a surprise attack. Radière was correct that there was insufficient space for the British to construct siege lines, but the long and deep valleys in the area would allow attackers to sneak up on the fort under cover of darkness. The terrain demanded the Continentals build an outpost to monitor the approaches to the primary site, but the garrison could not directly support such positions because of the distance between them. An enemy force, therefore, could “make themselves masters of the redoubt on the first dark night after landing ... and, together with the eminences and broken grounds within a short distance of the fort, would render it impossible for the garrison to resist a general assault for many hours together.” The committee warned that enemy occupation of the mountain passes would prevent the militia from relieving the siege. It failed to address the apparent contradiction in the ability of the besiegers to interdict a relief force while the garrison could not disrupt the attackers’ advance.¹³

¹² Radière to Council of War, 2 January 1778, Washington Papers, Series 4, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mgw445181>.

¹³ Jonathan Sloss Hobart to New York Legislature, 14 January 1778, in *JNYPC*, 1:1117.

On the other hand, the committee noted that militia could relieve a siege at West Point because of the sheer number of potential avenues of approach. It worried that Radière's intention to use earth and timber at Fort Clinton would create significant delays because neither was readily available onsite. Further, the winter weather had closed the roads and waterways leading to the position. The committee conceded Radière's point concerning the terrain around West Point, but the potential for rapid construction, prompt relief, and easier river obstruction outweighed any disadvantages.¹⁴

The interpretations of Radière's recommendations in the historiography have almost uniformly condemned the French engineer as inflexible in his insistence on the European model of fortifications.¹⁵ Most of the evidence for this accusation derives from Radière's plan for West Point after the legislature's final decision in January 1778. Putnam and George Clinton attributed his design to "being a good paper engineer" and disparaged his lack of combat experience.¹⁶ Radière's assessment of the surrounding terrain and need for rapid construction, however, drove his preference for rebuilding Fort Constitution. Radière asked, "what is the best manner, in the present circumstances, to construct forts as soon as possible?"¹⁷ West Point was vulnerable to a traditional siege,

¹⁴ Hobart to New York Legislature, 14 January 1778, in *JNYPC*, 1:1117.

¹⁵ See Boynton, *History of West Point*, 48-57; Miller, Lockey, and Visconti, *Highland Fortress*, 57-60; James S. Pula, *Thaddeus Kościuszko: The Purest Son of Liberty* (Hippocrene Books, 1998), 117-22; Palmer, *The River and the Rock*, 134-145; Storzynski, *Peasant Prince*, 52-58.

¹⁶ Putnam to Washington, 13 January 1778, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-13-02-0190>; George Clinton to Gates, 5 February 1778, in Hastings, *Public Papers of George Clinton*, 8:711-12.

¹⁷ Radière to Lovell, 13 December 1777, in Kite, *Duportail*, 81-82.

which the British forces could readily execute. The one-hundred meters of flat, soft soil on the plain provided ideal terrain to dig counter-trenches and approach the fortification that protected the chain. That site would require a main fort large enough control that ground, and multiple redoubts sturdy enough to withstand British siege artillery. Fort Clinton, on the other hand, could be smaller because there was no easy approach to the site. Radière was willing to sacrifice optimal placement of the river obstacles to speedily construct a defensive position capable of meeting the projected threat.

Two days in advance of the New York committee's report, Putnam secured their recommendation for West Point and directed Radière to begin laying out the works. The French engineer did not believe in West Point's supposed advantages, but "as it is better to fortify a place less good than do nothing at all ... I am going to trace a fort at the place indicated."¹⁸ Meanwhile, he appealed the decision to George Washington and requested an in-person meeting to discuss his reasoning. Washington diplomatically denied the request and encouraged Radière to use his time to get the Hudson River defenses ready for the coming campaign season.¹⁹

Washington's decision to side with Putnam, Clinton, and the New York committee's recommendation was a serious gamble. As he emphasized to Putnam, defense of the river was critical to keeping the rebellious states connected and, therefore, his strategy. Continental forces had experienced defeat at Forts Montgomery and Clinton

¹⁸ Radière to Lovell, 13 December 1777, in Kite, *Duportail*, 81-82.

¹⁹ Radière to Washington, 13 January 1778, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-13-02-0187>; Washington to Radière, 25 January 1778, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-13-02-0302>.

only three months earlier, but those who fought there attributed the outcome to a lack of manpower. They never blamed the location or the forts' construction. Moreover, overruling Radière risked alienating the French government when the United States was desperate for European aid and unaware of the Treaty of Amity and Commerce. Nevertheless, Washington accepted the assessment of the viability of the two positions from Continental officers with no engineering experience.²⁰

No direct evidence of Washington's reasoning exists outside of his letters to Radière and Putnam, but his decision suggests he valued American experience over European training in this instance. Nevertheless, he implored Radière to stay at West Point and oversee the construction of the works as "the Eye of the Engineer is constantly wanting over Men not used to such Business." Washington thereby encouraged a combination of European techniques with American experiences.²¹

Short Resources: February-March 1778

While all of this was happening, the command structure of the Continental Army continued to hamper progress. The Continental Congress told Washington to recall Putnam from the Highlands and installed Maj. Gen Horatio Gates, the victorious commanding general at Saratoga, in the Connecticut general's place. To speed the reconstruction process, Congress also invested Gates with significant authority to procure

²⁰ Washington to Putnam, 2 December 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-12-02-0473>; James Clinton to Board of Inquiry, March 1777; George Clinton to Board of Inquiry, March 1778; and Putnam to Board of Inquiry, March 1778, all in Reel 2, McDougall Papers.

²¹ Washington to Radière, 25 January 1778, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-13-02-0302>.

supplies and coordinate between states for troops. Washington urged Gates to go to the Highlands, but Gates stayed in Albany, forcing Putnam to remain in command. Gates' authority did not automatically transfer to Putnam because Congress's resolutions were specific to the man and not the office.²²

Three weeks later, Congress further complicated the army's convoluted chain-of-command. Having seemingly forgotten its decision to place Gates in charge of the Highlands, Congress named him to the Board of War as president. The Board of War, initially a standing congressional committee, consisted of five members who were not in Congress and oversaw recruitment, weapons production, personnel administration, and prisoners of war. It acted as the sole liaison between Congress and the Continental Army. Gates' elevation to president of the Board of War effectively made him Washington's civilian superior and military subordinate.²³

Putnam updated Washington on the situation at West Point in early February 1778. Capt. Thomas Machin, engineer for Fort Montgomery and still responsible for the chain system to block the river, contracted the Sterling Ironworks to construct the new chain. At the same time, work continued on the *chevaux-de-frise* for the river around Pollepel Island. Putnam ordered repairs for several boats, which would serve as a last line of defense behind the chain, but timber shortages prevented completion of the work.

²² Henry Laurens to Washington, 5 November 1777, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-12-02-0122>; Ford, 5 November 1777, *JCC*, 9:865-66; Washington to Gates, 2 December 1777, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 130-33; Boynton, *History of West Point*, 49-51.

²³ Ford, 12 Jun 1776, *JCC*, 5:434-35; Ford, 17 October 1777, *JCC*, 9:818-20; Wright, *The Continental Army*, 121-22.

Radière completed the ground trace for the main fort and two batteries but had not started building them. Soldiers finished work on a single barracks and huts sufficient to house about 350 men, and a second was under construction. Ultimately, Putnam adopted many plans and expectations, but the Continental Army made little progress on the river obstacles or the fortifications to guard them.²⁴

Putnam left for Connecticut the day after he wrote to Washington. Command devolved to Brig. Gen. Samuel H. Parsons, who remarked, “I come to this command in most disagreeable circumstances, nothing done, everything expected and wished for, and everything in confusion. I have everything to pick from perfect chaos.” That chaos emanated from two interwoven challenges: unclear authority and conflicting engineers.

First, Parsons’ lack of authority resulted in supply shortages and hesitation in beginning the work. Parsons needed horses for transporting timber and other supplies, but he found the locals’ “tempers soured with the General who commanded the Department and not so well inclined to my command as I could wish.”²⁵ Putnam was deeply unpopular in the region, and the local population expressed their dissatisfaction with him by refusing to cooperate with the Continental Army.²⁶ Since Parsons’ civilian neighbors would not voluntarily hand over resources, he asked the New York Committee of Safety for help. It replied that it lacked the authority to impress horses or seize property. Parsons

²⁴ Putnam to Washington, 13 February 1778, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-13-02-0443>.

²⁵ Parsons to George Clinton, 16 February 1778, in Charles S. Hall, *Parsons*, 144.

²⁶ Livingston to Washington, 14 January 1778, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-13-02-0195>.

then turned to Gov. George Clinton, who said the committee did possess that power. Two days after Clinton's response, sixteen horses arrived at West Point to haul supplies to the work sites. A two-day delay was a minor affair, but the situation highlighted the self-imposed confusion hampering the project.²⁷

On the local level, strained civil-military relationships exacerbated the situation. For example, Captain Machin fretted about the lack of timber for the flotation system. He refused to cut down all the trees from one farm "and thereby render a good farm of little value," but he lacked the authority to decide where and how much harvest from each area. Machin applied to the New Windsor Committee of Safety "to appoint a Wood Ranger to oversee the business, that the Master Carpenters may apply to him for such timber as they shall receive orders to get."²⁸ The request typified the limited power of the Continental Army to act and the awareness of even junior officers to the importance of maintaining cordial relations with the local population.

Without consulting Washington, Congress and the Board of War began to take a more direct role in West Point's fortifications. In February, Congress asked George Clinton to take command of the Highlands. The governor declined due to his political duties but continued to be intimately involved in the project. Clinton authorized Parsons to impress transportation teams and facilitated the transfer of cannon from Fort

²⁷ Joseph Strang to Parsons, 16 February 1778; George Clinton to Parsons, 17 February 1778; Parsons to George Clinton 20 February, 21 February, 24 February 1778, all in Hall, *Parsons*, 144-47.

²⁸ Machin to New Windsor Committee of Safety, 22 February 1778, in Jephtha R. Simms, *History of Schoharie County, and Border Wars of New York* [...] (Albany; Munsell and Tanner, 1845), 553.

Ticonderoga to West Point. On 4 March, Congress empowered the governor to direct the emplacement of cannons, purchase additional guns as necessary, and oversee the work of all the artificers at West Point.²⁹ The next day, the Board of War went even further and directed “that the Plans of the Forts and Batteries to be erected, be left to the Discretion of Governor Clinton.”³⁰ By mid-March, Clinton and the Continental Congress controlled the financial and materiel issues at West Point, but the Continental Army commanded the labor force.

Parsons navigated dual chains of command to move the works forward. He noted potentially conflicting orders from Congress and Washington in November 1777 and February 1778. Congress approved Gates to act personally. Washington ordered Putnam to devote all the troops in the region to construction at West Point but then directed “small parties patrol towards the Plains.” Finally, Congress gave George Clinton dominion over the Highlands defenses, and “the commanding officer at Peekskill is ordered and directed to give him [Clinton] every assistance in his power in forwarding and perfecting the business committed to him.” Clinton, however, had turned down the assignment, and Parsons entered contracts and issued orders to start construction. As Parsons confided to Washington: “By your Excellency’s letter of the 2d of December, all the troops are ordered here; by the 27th, part only are to be employed; by the resolve of the 5th of November, as many as Gen. Gates shall choose to employ; by that of the 18th

²⁹ Maj. Ebenezer Stevens to George Clinton, 28 February 1778, in Hastings, *Public Papers of George Clinton*, 2:820; Gates, Board of War Resolutions, 5 March 1778, in Hastings, *Public Papers of George Clinton*, 2:847-48.

³⁰ Ford, 4 March 1778, *JCC*, 10:221-22.

of Feb., none but militia.” The dual and sometimes contradictory chains of command left the commander in the Highlands without the legitimate power to act. In early March, Parsons concluded that “as I now find I have no authority for the purpose, I do not think I have sufficient power to justify me in giving further orders whereby the public may incur an expense without some express direction for it.”³¹

Despite Parson’s trepidation about acting beyond his license, he moved construction ahead while Washington implored Congress to solve the command confusion. On 16 March 1778, Parsons reported the *chevaux-de-frise* ready for installation and the chain anchors prepared for the chain’s arrival. The soldiers had completed the west and south walls of the main fort and one bastion. Parsons planned to emplace cannons in one of the river batteries before the end of the month, and the gunboats under construction in Poughkeepsie waited only on the river ice to break to begin their journey to the line.³²

Washington had similarly succeeded in persuading Congress to grant the Highlands commander, whoever that may be, jurisdiction over the defenses’ construction. The commander-in-chief responded to Parsons’s complaints about the competing directives by removing Putnam, installing the newly promoted Maj. Gen. Alexander McDougall, and requesting Congress “to give [McDougall] every power necessary to promote the objects of [his] command.” Washington, however, was not waiting for Congress’ permission and told McDougall to “consider yourself as possessed of this

³¹ Parsons to Washington, 7 March 1778, in Hall, *Parsons*, 153-55.

³² Parsons to Washington, 16 March 1778, in Hall, *Parsons*, 156-57.

general controul and direction and to act accordingly.”³³ Two days later, he divulged to Congress his instructions and requested they fix the convoluted command structure. Congress eventually complied and, on 21 March, passed a resolution to give the commander in the Highlands all previous authority to coordinate for the militia, erect the fortifications, and arrange all forces for the defense of the river. The consequences of overlapping lines of authority, though, would play out over the next several months.³⁴

Chain-of-Command: March-April 1778

Parsons’ second challenge came from the French engineer. Despite losing the argument over where to place the defenses for the Hudson, Radière was still responsible for building them. His perception of the purpose of and threat to the fortification drove his design. The fort aimed to protect the chain from land assaults and help control the river traffic through artillery fire. Radière sited two batteries for twelve-pound cannon, one to the west of the chain facing north and the other to the south, facing east across the river. These two positions provided grazing fire against any ships approaching the chain. He laid out the main fort on the northeast tip of the plain to allow some of its cannons to engage vessels with plunging fire. The French engineer reasoned that the British Army would most likely attempt a traditional siege on the plain to the south of the chain anchor point. He planned to construct an enormous ditch, covered way (platform for infantry along the outer edge of the ditch), and glacis (barren slope leading to ditch) to deny the

³³ Washington to McDougall, 16 March 1778, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-14-02-0167>.

³⁴ Washington to Henry Laurens, 16 March 1778, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-14-02-0162>; Ford, 21 March 1778, *JCC*, 10:275-76.

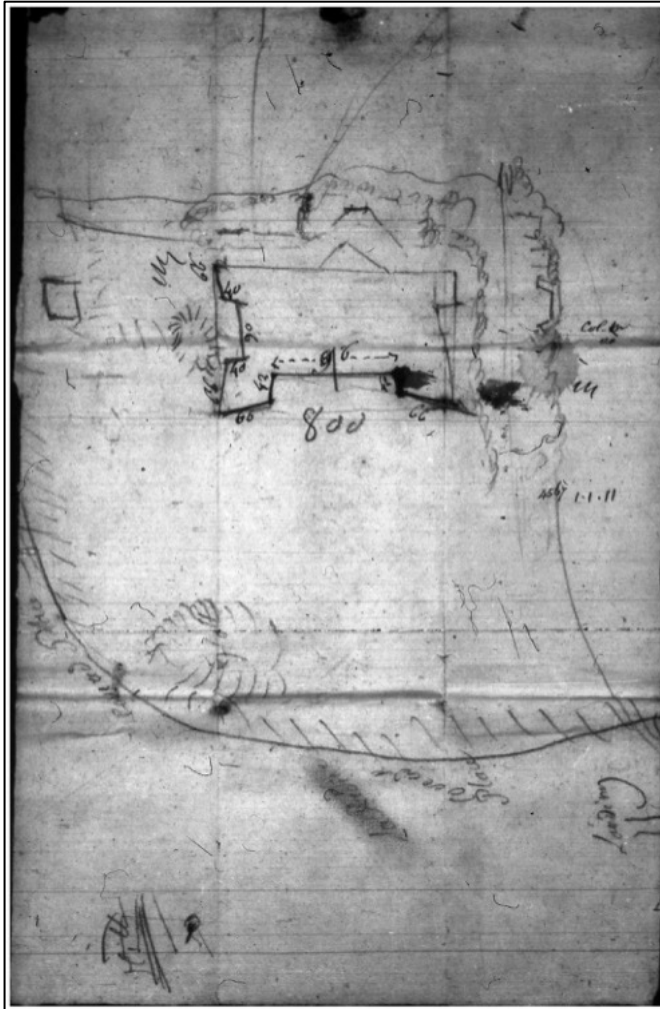


Figure 15: Radière, Sketch of Fort Arnold

British the opportunity to dig approach trenches in the soft soil. The hills to the west also presented Radière with a challenge. A ridge running northwest to southeast towered over his proposed location and offered a hostile army an excellent site for heavy artillery. Rather than building outworks on the heights, Radière designed his fortress with massive stone and masonry walls on the west and south to mitigate the danger from incoming artillery. Overall, he developed a single fort capable of

withstanding a siege for two weeks while protecting two waterside batteries and obstacles on the river.³⁵

The Americans resisted Radière's design as too costly in terms of time, money, and manpower. In the immediate aftermath of the decision to place the obstacles at West

³⁵ Radière, "Sketch of West Point," n.d., Oversized Items, McDougall Papers. Grazing fire against ships was most effective in the eighteenth century because of artillery's notoriously unreliability in range. Cannon balls could skip along the water to impact their target even if the exact range was off. Plunging fire was less effective against ships but threatened crew on the decks. Plunging fired posed significant risks to the relatively thin decking, sails, and rigging of ships. Figure 15 from Radière, "Sketch of West Point."

Point, Putnam remarked that Radière “seems greatly disgusted, that every thing does not go as he thinks proper.”³⁶ George Clinton likewise cast doubt on Radière’s suitability for the task at hand because of his apparent lack of experience. He confided in Maj. Gen. Horatio Gates that “the Engineer who has the direction of the works is deficient in point of practical Knowledge; without which altho possessed of ever so much scientific ... how unfit he must be for the present Task.”³⁷ The governor’s complaints motivated the Board of War to direct “that Col. La Radière accommodate his plans and Mode of construction the Batteries and Forts, to the Nature of the Country and Materials, Time and Number of Men; in all which he absolutely to be directed by Governor Clinton or the Commanding Officer of the Army.”³⁸ Although Parsons, Clinton, and Washington implored Radière to modify his plans and scale back the size of the fort, the French engineer saw no way to accomplish his goal through another route. In early March, he left West Point to present his case directly to Congress and the commander-in-chief. Washington, however, sided with his American generals again and sent Radière back to West Point. He endorsed the French engineer, though, as a capable officer who could effectively design and build the necessary defenses. In Radière’s absence and unbeknownst to Washington, the Board of War assigned a second engineer to the project—Col. Thaddeus Kościuszko.³⁹

³⁶ Putnam to Washington, 13 January 1778, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-13-02-0190>.

³⁷ George Clinton to Gates, 5 February 1778, in Hastings, *Public Papers of George Clinton*, 2:712.

³⁸ Board of War to George Clinton and Putnam, 5 March 1778, in Hastings, *Public Papers of George Clinton*, 2:847-48.

³⁹ Parsons to Washington, 7 March 1778, Founders Online <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-14-02-0070>; Washington to

Born in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth region of Brest Litovsk Voivodeship in 1746, Kościuszko graduated in the inaugural class from the Royal Knight School in Poland. To avoid taking a side in the civil war of 1768, Kościuszko accepted a scholarship from the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in Paris. As a foreigner, Kościuszko could not attend the *École Militaire* (French Military Academy) or the engineering academy at Mézières, but he took private tutoring from instructors of those schools. Kościuszko returned to Poland in 1774, but political changes prevented him from advancing in the military. He made his way back to Paris in 1776 and, through contacts in France, discovered the Americans needed engineers. He left for North America, arriving in Philadelphia in late August 1776.⁴⁰

Kościuszko's military superiors and the Continental Congress were impressed enough to commission him a colonel-engineer on 18 October 1776. The Pole designed and constructed the Delaware River defenses around Red Bank, New Jersey, in late 1776. Early the following year, Major General Gates befriended him and, when Gates assumed command of the Northern Army, made Kościuszko his staff engineer. Kościuszko gained practical experience despite some Continental Army officers ignoring his advice on fortifications. He led the American efforts to obstruct Burgoyne's invasion from Canada. Kościuszko sited and constructed the fortifications on Bemis Heights, which were

McDougall, 21 March 1778, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-14-02-0229>.

⁴⁰ Storozyński, *The Peasant Prince*, 1-31; Pula, *Kościuszko*, 15-41; Michael Haiman, *Kościuszko in the Revolution* (New York: Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences in America, 1943), 1-12.

instrumental in the American victory at the Battle of Saratoga.⁴¹ Writing almost forty years later, Maj. John Armstrong recalled, “in the retreat of the American army, Kościuszko was distinguished for activity and courage and upon him devolved the choice of camps and posts and everything connected with fortification.”⁴² When Gates received George Clinton’s complaints about Radière in March 1778, he sent Kościuszko to West Point.

Competing Engineers: March-April 1778

Overlapping authorities again threatened to delay the obstruction of the Hudson River. Kościuszko arrived at the camp and began directing the construction work a few days before Radière returned. Congress commissioned Kościuszko in October 1776 and Radière in November 1777. On paper, Kościuszko was the senior officer and, therefore, the lead engineer. Radière, however, disputed the rank order because he was a colonel *of* engineers, while Kościuszko was a colonel-engineer. Radière reasoned, therefore, that Kościuszko was subject to his command. Additionally, Radière was a graduate of the French engineering school, and Kościuszko lacked such credentials. The confusion from two different sources of authority created difficulties in deciding which engineer to keep at West Point. Their differences in opinion and style made retaining both officers

⁴¹ Storozyński, *The Peasant Prince*, 32-39; Pula, *Kościuszko*, 51-100; Haiman, *Kościuszko*, 9-34.

⁴² John Armstrong, “Notes on Tadeusz Kościuszko,” before 10 May 1818, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-13-02-0116-0002>.

just beyond the first, paralleled the course of the river and formed a narrow corridor between the water and the high ground. A single road connected West Point with Fort Montgomery and ran on the spit of land between the ridge and the water. The surrounding terrain stair-stepped up from the main site and offered an advancing enemy an elevated position from which to bombard the main fort. The Continental Army would either need to build a massive fortress to withstand such an artillery attack or fortify the surrounding hills.

Radière and Kościuszko presented competing theories on protecting the fort and chain from a British assault. Both engineers understood the primary site was vulnerable to fire from siege artillery. Radière envisioned a single large structure capable of withstanding bombardment from the adjacent hills. He convinced McDougall, Parsons, and James Clinton that a redoubt on Crown Hill was unnecessary because hauling siege artillery to the top was too difficult, and it was too far from the main fort to make a difference. Radière assumed the British would invest West Point with lines of contravallation, circumvallation, saps, and progressively closer counter-trenches in the style of Vauban. Because the ground around the main fort was so soft, the British could easily and rapidly dig their trenches and render it indefensible. Radière's design would deny attackers the only ground capable of supporting a European-style siege.⁴⁴

Kościuszko's experience of the loss of Fort Ticonderoga and the importance of the works on Bemis Heights informed his approach to fortifications. In both those instances, the British had attempted to maneuver to high ground and attack the fort with

⁴⁴ McDougall, *Diary*, 10 April 1778, Reel 2, McDougall Papers.

direct fire from large cannons. A Vauban-style investment was not the greatest danger to an American fort for Kościuszko. Instead, the Polish engineer worried about higher ground within artillery range of the main works. He intended to build a smaller main fort with additional redoubts on the higher ground to prevent bombardment from that quarter and delay the enemy's approach. After Radière successfully argued not to fortify Crown Hill, Kościuszko persuaded the same men to reverse their decision and construct works on the hill. McDougall realized that "the heights near it [the main fort] are such that the fort is not tenable if the enemy possess them. For this reason we are obliged to make some work on them." Kościuszko also doubled the number of waterside batteries, adding grazing fire to the chain's defense.⁴⁵

McDougall was conflicted about the best course of action. On the one hand, the Board of War sent Kościuszko, so the Pole arrived with the civilian government's authority. McDougall was aware of the intentions of the Board of War, which had told Putnam in early March to use Radière "as far as you shall find him really useful, and no farther."⁴⁶ Offending Radière could potentially hinder an alliance with France. Still, the security and efficacy of the fortifications outweighed the importance of one engineer's bruised pride. The animosity between McDougall and Gates, the president of the Board of War and friend of Kościuszko, further complicated the matter. Radière, on the other hand, had Washington's endorsement, although the commander-in-chief was unaware of

⁴⁵ Kościuszko, "Ruff Map of West Point, 1779," and McDougall to Parsons, 11 April 1778, both in Reel 2, McDougall Papers.

⁴⁶ Board of War to Clinton and Putnam, 5 March 1778, in Hastings, *Public Papers of George Clinton*, 2:847-48.

the Board of War's actions regarding engineers at West Point. Because Washington was Gates' military superior, McDougall could argue that he should retain Radière as the commander-in-chief desired it.

Equally as important, McDougall faced a choice between two European engineers with drastically different sources of legitimacy. Radière lacked experience but had the finest education and training in military engineering available in Europe. Kościuszko had acquired practical experience with the Northern Army in 1777, but his academic credentials did not match Radière's. Given the importance of the post in the Highlands, McDougall's anxiety and trepidation were reasonable.

McDougall's vacillation about fortifying Crown Hill demonstrates his anxiety over rejecting the advice of a European expert. The new commander of West Point was concerned about the effect his assignment might have on his reputation. He lamented that "the backwardness of the new works, considering the advanced season, and the total derangement of almost every department at this Post, occasioned by various Causes, have so greatly multiplied the difficulties of the command, that have but Little Hopes of maintaining my Reputation."⁴⁷ Combined with his initial trepidation, McDougall feared repeating the mistakes that lost Fort Ticonderoga in 1777, where Maj. Gen. Arthur St. Clair's refused to fortify nearby Sugar Loaf Hill and subsequently lost the post when the British occupied those heights.

McDougall's swift and complete reversal of opinion regarding the redoubt on Crown Hill suggests Radière's reasoning was likely unpersuasive. In a single day,

⁴⁷ McDougall to Washington, 29 March 1778, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-14-02-0328>.

McDougall went from accepting Radière's proclamation that the hill was irrelevant to writing that the position "is the most commanding and important of any that we can now attend to."⁴⁸ He worried about the fallout from rejecting Radière's opinion, but he recognized the limitations of the Continental Army to construct a European-style fortress.

Radière exacerbated the tension between American capabilities and European standards because of the size of works he demanded. In 1794 Col. David Humphreys, a staff officer for General Putnam, remarked that "the estimates and requisitions of Colonel la Radière, ... altogether disproportioned to our circumstances, served only to put us in mind of our poverty, and, as it were, to satirize our resources."⁴⁹ It is doubtful that Radière intended to mock the limited resources available to the Continental Army, but his failure to moderate the plan hurt the Americans' pride. The fact that the insult still stung sixteen years later shows the anxiety of Continental Army officers for measuring up to European standards.

On 6 April, McDougall received instructions from Washington that emphatically demanded the return of Kościuszko to the Main Army at Valley Forge. In a postscript, though, Washington equivocated and wrote that "however desirous I am of having Mr. Kosciusko, here, if he is employed in any special Service by order of Congress or the

⁴⁸ McDougall to Parsons, 11 April 1778, McDougall Papers, Reel 2.

⁴⁹ David Humphreys, *An Essay on the Life of the Honorable Major-General Israel Putnam: Addressed to the State Society of the Cincinnati in Connecticut* (Hartford: Hudson and Goodwin, 1798), 160-61, https://docs-newsbank-com.libproxy.temple.edu/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:EAIX&rft_val_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft_dat=0F3018F11D9E0030&svc_dat=Evans:eaidoc&req_dat=0EC297002C4725AF.

board of War-the above order you will set aside.”⁵⁰ McDougall responded that Kościuszko was more popular and easier to work with than Radière. Moreover, the Pole had more practical experience and was senior in rank. Finally, Washington recalled Radière because “as Colonel Radière and Colonel Kosciusko will never agree, I think it will be best to order Radière to return especially as you say Kosciusko is better adapted to the genius and temper of the people.”⁵¹

In sorting out the overlapping lines of authority, the Continental Army revealed the anxieties present in the aftermath of colonialism and suggested a preference for practical experience within the American military. Washington’s reluctance to remove Radière from West Point stemmed from a concern about the implications of ignoring the recommendations of a credentialed expert from France. Given that the American theory of victory hinged on European support for the war, any action that might anger or disincline France to join an alliance with the United States gave the commander pause. Parsons worried that Radière “appears to be a man of some learning and ingenuity,” but his obstinance in adapting to American leadership “rendered him not so suitable as some other persons to have the principal direction at this post.” Parsons, for one, favored Kościuszko over Radière because the latter refused to accommodate the available

⁵⁰ Washington to McDougall, 6 April 1778, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-14-02-0393>.

⁵¹ Washington to McDougall, 22 April 1778, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-14-02-0537>.

resources and “American temperament.” In effect, Radière failed to adapt the European tradition to include the lessons from the American experience.⁵²

After Radière left West Point in late April, Kościuszko was unquestionably the lead engineer in the Highlands. He and the other Continental Army officers iterated on the original plan through 1778 and 1779. From Radière’s original concept of a single fort and two batteries defending the chain across the Hudson, Kościuszko added four more forts, eight redoubts, and seven independent batteries over the next two years. Kościuszko combined his classical training with his American experience to create a formidable defense on the river.

Inspection: September 1778

West Point developed into a system of mutually supporting positions organized in three concentric rings. The first ring included the chain, the waterside batteries, and the main fort. Kościuszko’s plan started with the chain-and-boom system. Capt. Thomas Machin and Col. Hugh Hughes, deputy quartermaster general for the Continental Army, contracted with Peter Townsend, the manager of the Sterling Ironworks, for a five-hundred-yard-long chain of two-foot-long links made from two-inch bar iron with eight swivels and eighty clevises. Townsend delivered the chain two weeks earlier than the contracted date of 1 April 1778, but McDougall, Kościuszko, and Clinton changed the position of the chain anchors necessitating an additional 100 yards of links. Machin

⁵² Parsons to McDougall, 28 March 1778, Reel 2, McDougall Papers.

coordinated the rush production and still managed to string the chain by the last day of April.⁵³

Cannons in four batteries on the west side of the river protected the chain and added grazing fire to the interdiction efforts. Originally laid out by Radière, Chain



Figure 17: Greenleaf Map of West Point

Battery was the only position to the north of the bend. It held three twelve-pound guns and was the only site that originally had a stone parapet. As its name suggests, Chain Battery protected the southern anchor of the chain. On Gee's Point, Kościuszko added the Lanthorn Battery. The three cannons at this position forced enemy ships to sail away from West Point into a dead area on the lee side of Constitution

Island. Additionally, the Lanthorn Battery covered the chain and fired on ships approaching from the south. It had a six-to-seven-foot-thick earth and timber parapet, as did all the structures Kościuszko designed at first. Further south on the west bank,

⁵³ "Articles of Agreement Between Noble, Townsend & Company [...] and Hugh Hughes," 2 February 1778, in Hastings, *Public Papers of George Clinton*, 2:708-9; Lincoln Diamant, *Chaining the Hudson*, 141-56; Figure 17 from Moses Greenleaf, *Manuscript Plan of West Point*, 1779, 38 x 32 cm, Massachusetts Historical Society Collections Online, <https://www.digitalcommonwealth.org/search/commonwealth-oai:mc87qf48n>.

Radière's second battery, Water Battery, was the same shape as Chain Battery but about one-half the size. Because of the steep terrain, the two guns in the Water Battery could only provide plunging fire on approaching ships. The final waterside position Kościuszko added was South Battery. In 1778, it mounted only two nine-pounders, but Kościuszko expanded the position to hold four eighteen-pounders and one twelve-pounder. South Battery, like Water Battery, covered the Hudson River to the south, but it also provided fire against enemy forces moving on land toward the chain. Kościuszko concluded that the chain and four waterside batteries were sufficient to stop any British ships from sailing past West Point.⁵⁴

The chain and artillery controlled the navigation on the river, and the main fort protected them. Kościuszko modified Radière's proposal and focused on constructing a defensive post as rapidly as possible. The fort had five bastions and a gate on the northeast side. The Pole first built the west and south walls to protect against a land approach. The nine-foot-tall, twenty-foot-deep, earth-and-timber walls enclosed an area large enough to include barracks for seventy-two men and a twenty-foot by forty-foot powder magazine. Four pairs of cannons shot through embrasures in the southwest, northwest, and southeast walls. Although not as extensive as Radière envisioned, the glacis allowed the artillery to engage approaching troops. A *chevaux-de-frise* around the

⁵⁴ John H. Mead, *Survey of Fort Putnam and Other Revolutionary Fortifications at West Point, N.Y.* (West Point: West Point Museum Fund, 1968), 69-75; USMA History Department, *West Point Fortifications Staff Ride*, 3rd ed. (2008), https://www.westpoint.edu/sites/default/files/inline-images/WEST%20POINT%20FORTIFICATIONS%20STAFF%20RIDE_0.pdf, 33-36; West Point Gun Emplacements, n.d., Sir Henry Clinton Papers, University of Michigan Library Digital Collections, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/w/wcl1ic/x-533/wc/000625>; Kościuszko to McDougall, 25 April 1779, Reel 2, McDougall Papers.

gate completed the landward defenses. The ultimate purpose of the fort was to protect the chain and waterside batteries for fourteen days until militia or the Continental Army could relieve the besieged garrison.⁵⁵

The second ring of redoubts and forts protected the first ring. Building a smaller fort introduced vulnerabilities that Kościuszko needed to mitigate. Initially, he convinced

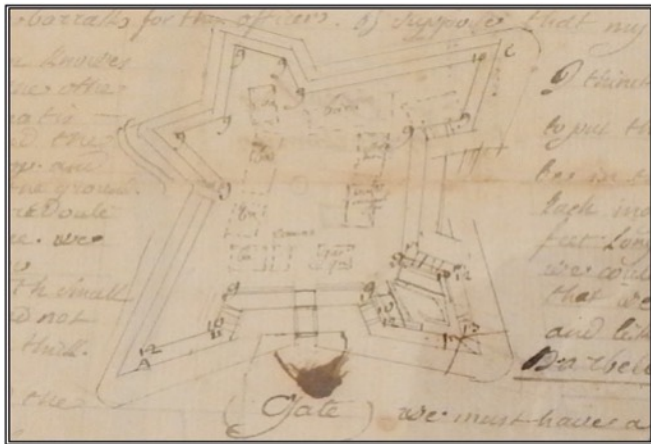


Figure 18: Champion Map of Fort Arnold

McDougall to place a redoubt on Crown Hill to prevent British siege artillery from taking those commanding heights. Kościuszko designed a fort with seven bastions, soon christened Fort Putnam in honor of Col. Rufus Putnam, to dominate the plain on which

primary fort sat and support the defenses on the lower ridge. He traced the works to follow the edge of a fifty-foot-tall rock cliff on the western side and large enough to contain a ten-day supply of rations for about four hundred men along with ten cannons and five mortars. The western wall was higher than the others to protect the men in the fort from potential fire from Rocky Hill, about one-half mile to the west. A tiny redoubt directly to the northwest of the main fort provided some protection against the unlikely

⁵⁵ Kościuszko to McDougall, 25 April 1779, Reel 2, McDougall Papers; Radière, “Ruff Map of West Point,” n.d., Oversized Items, McDougall Papers.

possibility of an attack from the north. The Continental Army abandoned this site, called the Sherburne Redoubt, before the end of the war.⁵⁶

The position of Fort Putnam created even more requirements. The ridge that led up to the new site was a steady incline, so Kościuszko relied on defense in depth. From the base of the ridge in the south toward Fort Putnam, Kościuszko oversaw the construction of Fort Meigs, Fort Wyllys, and Fort Webb. These forts took the names of the commanders of the regiments that built them: Cols. Return Jonathan Meigs, Samuel Wyllys, and Samuel B. Webb. All three units belonged to Brig. Gen. Samuel H. Parsons' Connecticut Brigade. Fort Meigs was U-shaped with the opening to the north, and its two cannons could fire on ships or troops approaching from the south. Fort Wyllys was a series of connected redans across the end of the ridge. Kościuszko intended its cannon to control the approach to Forts Webb and Putnam.⁵⁷ Fort Webb was an irregularly shaped redoubt with four embrasures and a powder magazine inside its walls. Its cannons covered the base of Crown Hill, the ridge toward Fort Wyllys, and the southeast corner of the plain. The Americans built these structures in the same way: earth-and-timber

⁵⁶ USMA History Department, *Staff Ride*, 43-44; Mead, *Survey of Fort Putnam*, 2-12, 81-90; Jacob W. Gruber, "Fort Putnam in the Context of Culture History" (Paper presented at Theoretical Approaches to Historical Archeology Symposium, Philadelphia, 9 January 1976); Figure 18 from Capt. Henry Champion, Jr., Plan of a Hudson Highlands Fort, ca. 1778, Special Collections, USMA Library, West Point.

⁵⁷ Contemporary accounts disagree about the number of cannons at Fort Wyllys and the existence of embrasures. Capt. Moses Greenleaf of the 15th Massachusetts Regiment depicted four embrasures; Distribution of Ordnance, 21 May 1779, Reel 2, McDougall Papers, shows a single four-pound cannon at Fort Wyllys. The West Point Gun Emplacements, n.d., University of Michigan Library Digital Collections, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/w/wcllic/x-533/wcl000625>, shows four cannons and no embrasures.

parapets featuring palisades or abatis sat atop a stone scarp with a slight slope toward the inside of the position. Inner walls were dry masonry, while banquettes or embrasures allowed men and cannon to fire either over or through the parapet. Kościuszko used stone on the ramparts up to the level of the firing platform and earth and timber above that.⁵⁸

On the east side of the river, Kościuszko built Greaton's Battery on Constitution Island. The site housed six cannons and used the same combination of a stone scarp and rampart with an earth and timber parapet as the batteries on the west side of the river. The nine-pound and six-pound cannons at Greaton's Battery could engage ships attempting to negotiate the double bend in the river at West Point. It also provided the only protection for the eastern chain anchor in Kościuszko's initial plan.⁵⁹

The outer ring evolved between August 1778 and September 1779. As Colonel Putnam constructed his eponymous fort on Crown Hill in August, Kościuszko noticed another eminence rising less than a half-mile away, Rocky Hill. He trekked to the top and realized that enemy cannons there would jeopardize Fort Putnam and, therefore, the entire system of works. The heights were nearly two hundred feet taller than Fort Putnam and steep on three sides. Kościuszko sketched out a hexagonal fort that covered the entire

⁵⁸ USMA History Department, *Staff Ride*, 37-41; West Point Gun Emplacements, n.d., University of Michigan Library Digital Collections; Mead, *Survey of Fort Putnam*, 22-23; Winthrop Sargent Sketchbook, 1778, Special Collections, USMA Library.

⁵⁹ USMA History Department, *Staff Ride*, 15-16; John H. Mead, *Archaeological Survey of Constitution Island and Adjoining Fortifications* (West Point: West Point Museum Fund, 1968-69), 49-52.

top of Rocky Hill and included a raised banquette, embrasures for three cannons, and a powder magazine.⁶⁰

Before Kościuszko could begin work on the last layer of defenses, Washington sent Duportail to the Highlands to inspect the fortifications. Duportail's instructions cautioned him to "consider the labor and expense which have already been incurred—the advanced season of the year and the resources of the Country" when making recommendations. Washington essentially asked Duportail to remember that he was not in France, and the United States did not have the luxury of time or money to build extensive, permanent fortifications.⁶¹

The chief engineer generally praised the first ring defenses (primarily Radière's design) and saved his criticisms for the second ring (Kościuszko's work). He complimented the design and placement of the main fort, which McDougall had recently named Fort Arnold to honor Maj. Gen. Benedict Arnold and simultaneously irk Maj. Gen. Horatio Gates. On the other hand, Duportail recommended scrapping Fort Webb altogether and starting over. Fort Wyllys needed an enclosed redoubt instead of just the series of redans. Fort Putnam was vulnerable and required more bomb-proof structures within the fort, a *chevaux-de-frise* and abatis to protect the gate, and a higher parapet all around. Duportail dismissed as unnecessary Kościuszko's recommendation to build a redoubt on Rocky Hill because "it would be very difficult for an enemy, even when master of it to bring heavy cannon there. Besides it would be too far to make a breach."

⁶⁰ Kościuszko to McDougall, 6 February 1779, Reel 2, McDougall Papers.

⁶¹ Washington to Duportail, 27 August 1778, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-16-02-0423>.

Duportail's report tacitly approved the construction materials and techniques of all the works, thus sanctioning Kościuszko's adaptations to the circumstances of West Point.⁶²

The French engineer's main concern was the lack of defenses on the east side of the river. He noticed that a single battery guarded the anchor on Constitution Island, and "there is no enclosed work on this side to hinder the enemy from debarking a sufficient number of men to get possession of the ground and cut the Chain." He recommended building three additional redoubts and a small battery to control the island. Duportail concluded that "the works, which are in hand at West Point and some inconsiderable ones, which it is necessary to add to them, will, with the help of the chain, perfectly fulfil the object which is proposed." In other words, the Continental Army needed to add some improvements, but the site could successfully defend the river.⁶³

Duportail submitted a comprehensive report with specific, actionable recommendations while still taking some unsubtle jabs at the Polish engineer. For example, while Kościuszko was a difficult name to spell, the appearance of four different misspellings in one document appeared to be an intentional slight. Kościuszko, absent during Duportail's inspection, took umbrage at the report but planned to make the suggested improvements. Washington approved Duportail's advice and added that "the favorable testimony which you have given of Col. Kosciuskos abilities prevents

⁶² Duportail to Washington, 13 September 1778, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-16-02-0637>.

⁶³ Duportail to Washington, 13 September 1778, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-16-02-0637>.

uneasiness on this head.” Duportail made no such comments, but Washington’s missive allowed both men to believe they had won his approval.⁶⁴

In December 1778, McDougall still fretted about the condition of West Point’s defenses. He specifically requested Lt. Col. Jean-Baptiste Gouvin, one of the French engineers that arrived in America with Duportail, to remain at the fort. Failing that, McDougall asked for the return of Radière as “the Service requires one or the other.” McDougall made no mention of Kościuszko even though the Pole was senior to both Frenchmen.⁶⁵

McDougall next asked the lower-ranking Gouvin to assess potential vulnerabilities and the best path forward to meet them. McDougall ordered him to devise a plan, from the perspective of a British general with an army of seven thousand men and British naval support, how to successfully assault West Point. McDougall wanted to know the site’s vulnerabilities on both the east and west banks as well as potential mountain passes or landing sites the Americans should defend. Furthermore, he asked if completing enclosed redoubts was more effective than a blockhouse in protecting the surrounding hills. Gouvin never performed the inspection because McDougall diverted him to a different task only three days later. Still, the orders reveal McDougall’s concerns about the strength of the position and the assumed expertise of the French.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Washington to Duportail, 19 September 1778, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-17-02-0043>.

⁶⁵ McDougall to Washington, 9 December 1778, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-18-02-0441>.

⁶⁶ McDougall to Gouvin, 17 December 1778, Special Collections, USMA Library.

Strategy: Winter 1778-Summer 1779

Overall, the garrison at West Point made significant progress on the works in 1778, primarily because the rest of Washington's Main Army interposed itself between the Highlands and the British in New York City. News of the French alliance reached America in May 1778 and inspired Washington to dream of more offensive action. In early July, Adm. Jean Baptiste Charles Henri Hector, Comte d'Estaing, arrived on the United States coast in command of twelve ships-of-the-line and four frigates with a contingent of four thousand marines. Washington proposed attacking New York City directly, but d'Estaing refused because his heavy warships risked getting stuck in the shallow waters of New York Harbor. Instead, Washington and d'Estaing agreed to attack Newport, Rhode Island. The British Royal Navy and a hurricane, however, drove d'Estaing into Boston Harbor for repairs, and the Continental Army barely avoided a devastating loss. Washington developed other plans to attack the British, but he ultimately judged those ideas too perilous and remained on the defensive. The winter of 1778-79 was mild but not enough to allow construction to proceed at West Point. McDougall had the chain retracted in late December and moved his men into winter quarters. For the most part, though, the garrison passed the months quietly, primarily fighting boredom and complacency as they waited for the next campaign season.⁶⁷

In May 1778, Gen. Sir Henry Clinton became the commander-in-chief for the British forces in North America. The expansion of the war in 1778 detracted from

⁶⁷ Ferling, *Winning Independence*, 98-108; Ferling, *Almost a Miracle*, 308-9; Palmer, *The River and the Rock*, 184-86; John McDonald, *Intelligence*, 16 December 1778, 11:103.41, Works Progress Administration History of West Point, USMA Library.

Clinton's ability to execute his plan for North America over the next two years. France's entry into the war complicated British plans, so the government stripped Clinton of five thousand troops to bolster the forces defending its West Indies colonies. Clinton claimed his army was one-third the size of Gen. Sir William Howe's force at the height of 1777, so he abandoned Philadelphia and consolidated his army in New York City. When the British withdrew to the east, Washington attacked. The Battle of Monmouth Courthouse ended as a tactical draw but American propaganda victory. The new commander-in-chief despaired his inability to pay his officers, much less successfully attacking Washington's forces. With Clinton reestablished on Manhattan, Washington arrayed his troops in a large arc near the southern base of the Highlands to both limit British freedom of movement and protect the still-vulnerable West Point.⁶⁸

The Hudson River still figured prominently in British strategy, but over the winter of 1778-79, Clinton added the objective of destroying the Continental Army as a mechanism to allow the population to come back into the imperial fold. The British still believed that most North American colonists were loyal to the king. To win their open

⁶⁸ Clinton to Henry Fiennes Pelham Clinton, 18 January 1779, 61:22, Sir Henry Clinton Papers; Germain to Clinton, 27 September 1779, 10: 35, Lord George Germain Papers, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan; Clinton, *American Rebellion*, 85-98; O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America*, 221-24; Ferling, *Almost a Miracle*, 313-14. For the impact of France's entry into the conflict, see Germain to Clinton, 8 March 1778, 18:1-14, and Germain to Clinton, 21 March 1778, 18:25-27, both in Germain Papers; For the overall plan in 1778, see George III, Speech at St. James Court, 21 March 1778, 18:17-22, Germain Papers.

support, the British Army needed to shield them from the threat of the Continental Army and New York militia.⁶⁹

The Continental efforts at West Point, combined with the Rebel troops stationed in and around the Highlands, deterred the British from attacking the post with their available resources. Thanks to frequent intelligence reports, the British were aware of developments there, and Clinton thought the works strong enough to preclude any attempt to take them with less than thirty-thousand men.⁷⁰

Instead, Sir Henry moved in force against Verplanck's and Stony Points May 1779 to draw Washington out of the Highlands for a decisive battle. Clinton aimed "to force Mr. Washington to a general and decisive action ... and leave the inhabitants of the open country at liberty to follow their inclinations."⁷¹ The British commander-in-chief intended to use sea power to move an army into Virginia, baiting Washington into moving out of the Highlands. Once the Rebels committed their fighting power to the Southern states, he planned to withdraw to New York and send an overwhelming force up the Hudson. Reinforcements from England and the West Indies would join the attackers in the summer and march on West Point. The loss of Grenada and the St. Vincent islands detained the reinforcements Clinton anticipated. When the additional

⁶⁹ Clinton, *American Rebellion*, 115-120; Egerton Leigh to Germain, 14 July 1779, 9:21-22, and Germain to Gen. Sir Henry Clinton, 5 August 1779, 9:23, both in Germain Papers.

⁷⁰ Charles Tornier, Intelligence 9 June 79, 60:25, Clinton Papers; Strength of Genl. Washington's Army at West Point, after November 1779, 78:24, Clinton Papers.

⁷¹ Clinton, *American Rebellion*, 118.

troops failed to arrive in time, Clinton resigned himself to improving his position at the southern edge of the Highlands.⁷²

Brig. Gen. Anthony Wayne recaptured Stony Point on 16 July 1779, but the Continental Army lacked the troops to garrison it. Instead, Washington destroyed the British-built works and fell back into the Highlands two days later. Washington then moved his headquarters to West Point because he believed “Sir Harry may wish to retaliate for the loss of that post.”⁷³ Washington personally supervised the completion of the post’s third defensive ring.

Meeting Standards: September 1779

The Continental Army built the most outward redoubts and batteries at West Point in the summer of 1779. Washington moved his headquarters to Steven Moore’s house just north of Fort Arnold on 21 July. He told Maj. Gen. Arthur St. Clair the day before that “the long Hill in front of Fort Putnam . . . appears to me essential to the preservation of the whole post and our main effort ought to be directed to keeping the enemy off of it.”⁷⁴ Washington was referring to Rocky Hill and the crude blockhouse Kościuszko built there in the spring.

⁷² Clinton, *American Rebellion*, 123-32.

⁷³ Washington to McDougall, 20 July 1779, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-21-02-0478>.

⁷⁴ Washington to St. Clair, 20 July 1779, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-21-02-0482>; Figure 19 from USMA, “Fortress West Point, 1780 with Contour Elevations,” *West Point Maps and Atlases*.

The final iteration of new construction began in late July 1779. Four new redoubts on the west side of the river guarded the two ridges emanating from Rocky Hill, which commanded Fort Putnam. On Constitution Island, Redoubts 5, 6, and 7 covered the two shore-side batteries from land and maritime attacks. Further to the east, North, Middle, and Sugar Loaf redoubts blocked overland approaches from the south. Washington directed Duportail to appoint engineers to oversee the new works, but the garrison made intermittent progress because of the recurring threat of the British attacking up the Hudson. Washington put several units under marching orders, diverting the workforce from construction to be ready to seize an opportunity to attack. When d’Estaing refused to sail further north than Savannah, Washington realized his planned offensive would not happen that year. The Continental Army, being in one place for five months, consumed most of the available foodstuffs, timber, and clothing. In November, Maj. Gen. Nathanael Greene, the quartermaster general, told Washington the Main Army would need to spend the winter away from West Point. Most Continentals moved into winter quarters around Morristown in late November 1779.⁷⁵

In the middle of all this, Washington took an entire day out to provide a personal tour of West Point to Anne-César de La Luzerne, who succeeded Conrad Alexandre Gérard de Rayneval as the French minister to the United States. Luzerne, a major general in the French Army before becoming a diplomat, arrived in Boston in early September

⁷⁵ Palmer, *The River and the Rock*, 186; Miller, Lockey, and Visconti, *Highland Fortress*, 143-45; General Orders, 20 July 1779, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 15:446; Mead, *Survey of Fort Putnam*, 35-65; Mead, *Survey of Constitution Island*, 7-48; Greene to Washington, 14 November 1779, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-23-02-0234>.

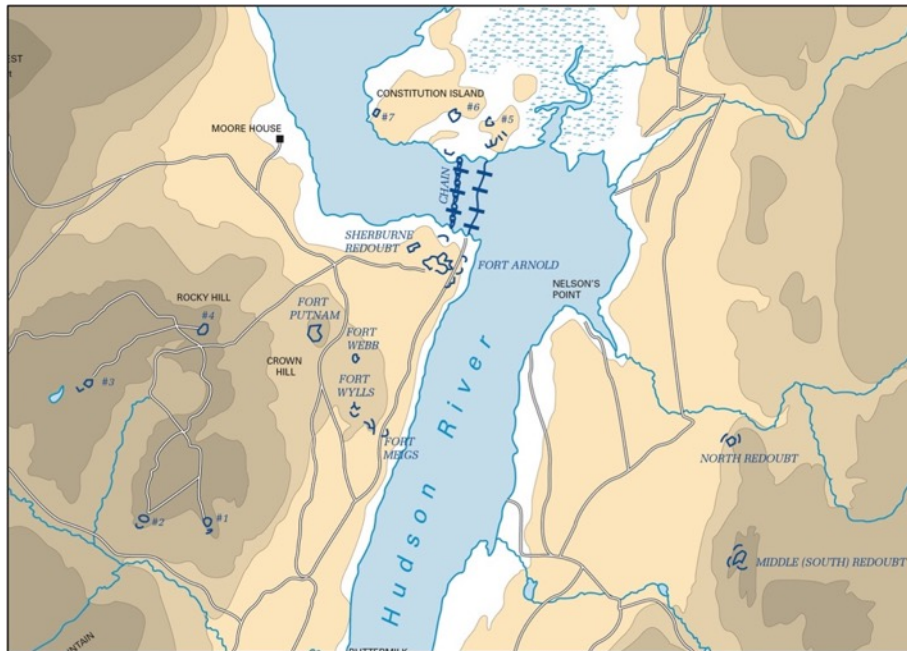


Figure 19: West Point, ca. 1780

and spent two nights and one day at West Point on his way to Philadelphia. Washington personally showed the delegation all the forts, redoubts, and batteries in existence and under construction on both sides of the river. François Barbe-Marbois, Luzerne’s secretary, commented on the stair-step topography and the number of posts at the site. He concluded: “Perhaps it is unfortunate that they have had to multiply these forts and complicate the defense in that way, but at the price of this inconvenience the position has been put in a respectable condition.”⁷⁶

Washington hoped to impress the militarily experienced Luzerne, and the only extant evidence available indicates the tour achieved its purpose. For the three days before the visit, preparations to attack the British in New York City consumed

⁷⁶ Eugene Parker Chase, ed. and trans., *Our Revolutionary Forefathers: The Letters of Francois, Marquis de Barbe-Marbois During His Residence in the United States as Secretary of the French Legation, 1779-1785* (New York: Duffield, 1929), 113-19.

Washington as rumors of d'Estaing arriving off the coast of New Jersey abounded. To take an entire day and visit every fort and redoubt in the complex was a tremendous investment of time for the commander-in-chief. French approval was important enough to command his personal attention. Washington undoubtedly highlighted the invaluable contributions of the French engineers to the fortifications' design and construction to show Luzerne that the United States was wisely profiting from France's investment in the war. Just as important, though, Washington proved to Louis XVI's representative that the Continental Army could construct a complex and effective defensive system. He was showing that the United States military could match European standards.

Conclusion

After Sir Henry Clinton retreated from the Hudson River Valley in 1777, lines of overlapping authority in the Continental Army and the Continental Congress continued to retard the development of the West Point post. Specific personalities and their relative political power drove the American military. For example, it was unclear who had permission to acquire resources like horses and building materials because Congress gave that power to an individual rather than an office. When Horatio Gates did not assume command of the Highlands project and became president of the Board of War, no one had the legal authority to act in his stead. Congress' empowerment of him specifically, therefore, delayed the Highlands' refortification. Similarly, when Duportail became chief of engineers in 1779, he continued to insist that French engineers enjoy a place of preference over other engineers, regardless of rank. Callow and still-forming institutions made the entire process personality-dependent because there was no precedent to guide decision-making.

Additionally, overlapping authority resulted in two engineers supervising the same project. Kościuszko and Radière did not work well together. Regardless of who was to blame, the snarled chain-of-command made problems inevitable because the Board of War and the Continental commander-in-chief assigned different men the project without informing the other. Congressional resolutions in 1778 alleviated some of the issues, but both civilian and military leaders continually explored and negotiated the limits of their relationship.

Continental officers in command of the Highlands rejected Radière's recommendations because they prioritized experience over education. Radière clearly explained what he considered the necessary elements to secure West Point: a large fort with an enormous glacis and covered way to mitigate the threat of approaching trenches. To build on a smaller scale invited ruin. When he began to execute his plan, his superiors appealed to Washington and Congress for more power to force him to adapt.

Kościuszko succeeded where Radière failed because he had credibility based on experience and adapted his design to prevailing circumstances. He gained prominence as the engineer for the Northern Department during the Saratoga campaign. At West Point, he combined multiple minor works into a mutually supporting whole, adapted construction techniques to the available materials and manpower, and created a fortification system with defense in depth to protect the river obstructions. The site underwent multiple versions as each element introduced new opportunities and vulnerabilities. The iterative process yielded a formidable defensive position that incorporated and adapted European styles into an American environment.

American leaders experienced pronounced anxiety over rejecting expert engineering advice from their European allies. For example, General McDougall lamented each of his assignments to West Point for fear of losing his reputation. Indeed, a large part of this was political. McDougall's consistent worry, however, indicated he was unsure the fortifications at West Point would survive an attack. Duportail did what he could to exacerbate this concern as part of his effort to lobby for higher ranks for him and his men. He declared he was not responsible if West Point failed to control the river and offered repeated insults to Kościuszko, which increased American fears that their best efforts would not be enough. He then offered to solve this problem by assuming greater direct control, but only if promoted. Duportail played on the Americans' dread of inferiority to advance his interests and was somewhat successful as his promotion demonstrated.⁷⁷

West Point served multiple purposes for multiple audiences. The fortifications reminded civilians of the Continental Army's continued efficacy and power. West Point was the key to securing the line of communication between New England and the rest of the country, so it was quite literally the link that held the country together. Further, at least by Sir Henry Clinton's calculations, the presence of the Continental Army depressed Loyalist sentiment in the region. For the British, the fortification of West Point deterred offensive action north of New York City. The constant threat from the garrison limited Clinton's freedom of action to forage north of New York City. The Highlands functioned as a staging area for potential offensive actions against the British garrison in the city,

⁷⁷ Duportail to John Jay, 11 May 1779, in Kite, *Duportail*, 128-30.

which forced Clinton to keep a sizable contingent of his army there to prevent the Continental Army from retaking the city. Washington's presentation of West Point during the Luzerne visit imparted two important messages to his French visitors. First, the tour demonstrated the importance of French military aid to the American war effort. Just as important, though, was the demonstration of Continental martial competence. West Point demonstrated that the United States was a worthy ally because it could construct fortifications as complex and formidable as Europe.

The Rebel and British theories of victory remained unchanged, but each altered the plan to achieve its goal. Washington desperately wanted to begin offensive action, especially after the establishment of the French alliance. West Point, however, needed to be defensible to act as a refuge if an attack on New York City failed. In addition, any operation Washington's Main Army undertook required the French Navy to negate Britain's advantage on the sea. Washington still believed that increasing the costs of the American War would compel the British to recognize American independence. After the victory of Saratoga and the open French alliance, however, he was more confident that another sizable American victory would produce the political change in Britain he desired.

On the other hand, limited resources forced Gen. Sir Henry Clinton to moderate his plans. Nevertheless, the British theory of victory was also unchanged—isolate radical agitators from the population to give the predominant Loyalist sentiment time and space to develop. The so-called Southern Strategy emphasized a different theater of operations but maintained the assumption of solid loyalist support. Sir Henry, however, would never

completely abandon the hope of controlling the Hudson Highlands, even though 1779 marked the last time he attempted it with direct force.

The Continental Army made significant progress in the two years between the loss of Forts Montgomery and Clinton and Luzerne's visit to the Highlands. Lack of trained engineers in the new country hobbled fortification efforts in the Highlands initially, but the Continental Army's third attempt to secure the region succeeded. The introduction of foreign officers led to power struggles revolving around the most effective means of protecting the river, and military commanders agonized over their decisions to favor Kościuszko over Radière. Nevertheless, as 1779 ended, West Point had grown to its full size and presented a significant barrier against any British attempt to take the region by force.

CHAPTER 4

BLIZZARDS, MUTINIES, AND TREASON: NOVEMBER 1779-JANUARY 1781

After Gen. Sir Henry Clinton withdrew from the Hudson Highlands in October 1777, the Continental Army significantly improved the region's defenses. In just over two years, Col. Thaddeus Kościuszko and his team transformed an undeveloped wilderness into a formidable defensive system with five forts, eleven redoubts, and seven independent batteries guarding the chain across the Hudson. The mutually supporting positions helped deter the British from attempting a direct assault on the main Continental Army position in the North. As importantly, the work impressed French representatives and furthered American claims to legitimacy.

The winter of 1779-80, however, undid much of the progress the Americans had made in the previous two years. The combination of the environment and Washington's desire for offensive action prevented repairs at West Point. All the structures at the post suffered considerable damage in the worst winter of the war. The works needed massive repairs in the spring, but Washington's fixation on attacking New York City drew hundreds of soldiers from West Point to the south. Even though an attack never materialized, the move cost the caretakers of the fortification valuable time in putting the defenses in order.

Maj. Gen. Benedict Arnold assumed command of West Point in August 1780. He delayed the necessary repairs and intentionally undermanned defensive positions to create further vulnerabilities, which provided the British an opportunity to gain control of the post and the river. The discovery of Arnold's treason threw the unpreparedness of West

Point into stark relief. For the next several weeks, Washington ordered men and supplies to undo the damage that Arnold and the winter caused.

Arnold's treason created multiple reactions. Initially, distrust and resentment spread as Americans struggled to understand how a hero like Arnold could turn against his country. Arnold argued he exhibited virtue by turning against the United States because it was not meeting the standard of a legitimate nation. Some outraged civilians burned him in effigy. Few followed his example. Within the opposing armies, the debate concerned the appropriate punishment for Arnold's captured co-conspirator. The two sides shared an understanding of acceptable actions for legitimate belligerents. Clinton and Washington both invoked the rules of "civilized warfare" to justify their actions. These dialogues reveal how the Americans accepted and strove to meet European expectations of behavior.

The winter of 1780-81 saw the embattled United States experiencing milder weather but increasingly severe turmoil. The Continental Army approached its breaking point as pay, clothes, and food grew scarce. Two different state lines mutinied in January. The civil-military relationship strained under the pressure of the situation. The uprisings in January, however, motivated the state governments and Congress to provide more aid for the army.

Most of the major military clashes of 1780 and early 1781 occurred in the South: Charleston, Camden, King's Mountain, and Cowpens. The Main Army largely remained in the Highlands, preparing for attacks it never executed. The presence of the Main Army in the North and the strengthening of the Highlands fortifications, however, were crucial

to wearing down the British means and will to continue fighting. West Point was vital in Washington's effort to win the war even as a decisive battle eluded him.

Misery: Winter 1779-1780

Washington's aggressive tendencies hampered the maintenance of West Point and preparations for the winter of 1779-80. In mid-September, rumors reported the imminent arrival of the French fleet under Vice Adm. Charles Henri Hector, Comte d'Estaing, in North American waters. Washington, believing the rumors and anxious to regain New York City, sent Brig. Gen. Louis Lebègue Duportail and Lt. Col. Alexander Hamilton to the New Jersey coast to coordinate with d'Estaing as soon as the French fleet arrived. He moved Continental soldiers with any experience as shipwrights to New Windsor to help construct boats for the attack. Washington halted construction at West Point so workers could make thousands of fascines in anticipation of an offensive against New York City.¹ He ordered extra rum and bread for the soldiers while explaining to the president of Congress that he was "waiting with the utmost anxiety for further accounts from the

¹ Washington to Matthew Mead, 12 October 1779, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 16:462; Washington to Anthony Wayne, 18 October 1779, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 16:482; Washington to Charles Scott, 19 October 1779, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 16:490; Washington to Jeremiah Wadsworth, 9 October 1779, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 16:446-47; Washington to McDougall, 13 November 1779, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-23-02-0229>. For the fullest explanation of Washington's plan, see Washington, *Loose Thoughts Upon an Attack of New York*, ca. 3 October 1779, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-22-02-0502-0001>; Benjamin L. Huggins, Editorial Note, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-22-02-0502-0000>.

Southward.”² He called up the Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey militias and made battalion-level exercises mandatory twice a day.³

As the days passed with no word from d’Estaing, Washington grew more anxious. The commander-in-chief wanted to use the Continental Army in the North during the campaign season. He amended his orders to Duportail and Hamilton on 18 October 1779 to relay to d’Estaing that Washington would “aid him in any plan of operations against the enemy at New York or Rhode Island in the most effectual manner, that our strength and resources will admit. He has nothing more to do, therefore, than to propose his own plan.”⁴ As desperate as Washington was to act, he knew he needed French naval support to have a moderate chance of success because Clinton had strengthened the city’s defenses over the previous two years.⁵ The fleet was “the Hinge, the One thing, upon which all Others must rest.”⁶ Rather than preparing West Point for the winter, much of the Continental Army idly waited for a French fleet that never arrived. On 11 November 1779, Washington finally admitted that his longed-for attack on New York City would not happen that year.

² Washington to President of Congress, 17 October 1779, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 17:473-74.

³ General Orders, 8, 10, and 14 October 1779, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 16:432-34, 449-51, 468.

⁴ Washington to Duportail and Hamilton, 18 October 1779, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 16:483.

⁵ Washington to Lafayette, 20 September 1779, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 16:374.

⁶ Washington to Duportail and Hamilton, 21 October 1779, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 17:4-5.

The garrison at West Point commenced a flurry of activity to compensate for the weeks wasted waiting on the French. Washington tasked Duportail and Brig. Gen. Henry Knox to design barracks, make recommendations for improvements to the structures on the Point, and assign the available cannons to specific posts. The commander-in-chief sent four Massachusetts brigades to the Highlands.⁷ Finally, he directed Maj. Gen. Alexander McDougall, still nominally the commander of the Highlands department but largely irrelevant because of Washington's residence in the region, to "put matters at this post in the best possible train."⁸ Short on forage, food, and building materials, the New Yorker faced a daunting challenge in remedying the eight preceding weeks of neglect.

McDougall lamented the poor state of West Point. The work required just to make the site habitable for the winter was considerable. Duportail recommended additions or modifications to every structure on both sides of the river. Minor improvements included the expansion of bombproofs to provide sleeping quarters for men or the construction of small guard huts at the posts that the Continental Army would not man overnight. Major projects, however, dominated Duportail's report. The chief engineer ordered the addition of two large barracks on the plain near Fort Arnold and three palisaded barracks for the

⁷ Washington to Duportail and Hamilton, 11 November 1779, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-0522>; Greene to Washington, 14 November 1779, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-23-02-0234>; Washington to Brig. Gen. Henry Knox, 23 November 1779, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-23-02-0328>; Washington to Samuel Huntington, 27 November 1779, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 17:202.

⁸ Washington to McDougall, 21 November 1779, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-23-02-0304>.

outlying redoubts. The garrison needed to construct or repair cannon platforms at every battery and redoubt.⁹

Shortages of livestock and building materials further complicated McDougall's task. Continental Army horses had devastated the local forage supplies, so fewer cows and horses could remain with the garrison. Meat shortages and transportation difficulties exacerbated the harsh living conditions at West Point. Further, masons and carpenters scrambled to erect housing, but building supplies trickled into the camp from upriver. Failing to construct adequate housing would force the troops to live in tents over the winter. McDougall warned that deficient provisions and inadequate shelter would decrease morale and hurt reenlistment efforts. He begged Washington to help lay in supplies for the coming season.¹⁰

Washington asserted he was powerless to correct the situation because the Continental Congress ordered the preparation of a coordinated attack with the French.¹¹ In actuality, Congress gave Washington extensive latitude "to concert and execute such plans of co-operation with the Minister of France, or the Count, as he may think

⁹ Washington to Duportail, 22 September 1779, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-22-02-0396>; Duportail to Washington, 24 September 1779, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-22-02-0409>; Knox to Lamb, 22 November 1779 in Isaac Q. Leake, *Memoir of the Life and Times of Gen. John Lamb*, [...] (Albany: Joel Munsell, 1857), 230.

¹⁰ McDougall to Washington, 6 November 1779, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-23-02-0169>.

¹¹ Washington to McDougall, 13 November 1779, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-23-02-0229>.

proper.”¹² The excuse Washington provided McDougall was disingenuous. The commander-in-chief’s nearly obsessive desire to retake New York City and not congressional indifference drove the neglect of West Point and set the stage for the suffering of its garrison in the coming winter. McDougall and the Massachusetts brigades under his command raced to construct lodgings and repair the fortification before cold weather arrived.¹³

Washington left for Morristown on 30 November 1779 as Kościuszko brought the chain in for the winter. Two days later, five inches of snow fell on West Point in the morning, but afternoon rain washed it away. McDougall had his subordinate commanders draw straws to see which units would move into the one completed barracks and which would endure in tents. The next day, however, six inches of snow blanketed the ground as a fierce north wind blew across the Highlands. Several tents collapsed, and the troops tried to cram into already overcrowded buildings. Those who could not fit sought shelter in the bombproofs of Forts Arnold and Putnam while their officers took refuge in sentry houses. McDougall realized the garrison had lost the race against the change in seasons.¹⁴

McDougall relinquished command of West Point and the Hudson Highlands to Maj. Gen. William Heath on 5 December as snow fell for the third time in five days. The severe weather burdened an already weak supply chain for the site, and the troops

¹² Ford, 26 September 1779, *JCC*, 15:1108.

¹³ For more on winter lodging construction during the war, see Steven Elliott, “Highlands War.”

¹⁴ Samuel Adams, Diary, 25 November-2 December 1779, Reel 1, Samuel Adams Papers, New York Public Library; Orderly Book of McDougall’s Brigade, Book 5, 20 November-5 December 1779, Orderly Book Collection, New York Historical Society.

suffered as a result. Despite McDougall's pleas, the Continental Army had not laid in supplies and provisions at West Point for the winter. Snow-clogged roads made resupply efforts difficult and ineffective. Meat and flour were in short supply by mid-month, but the lack of clothes and blankets caused more concern. Men and women clustered around meager fires. Those fortunate enough to have sufficient clothing ventured outside to get firewood, but mostly the garrison huddled together in the overcrowded buildings and struggled to stay warm.¹⁵

As McDougall predicted, the difficult winter environment directly impacted troop strength. Returns for the Highlands show the number of effective soldiers decreased by almost half throughout the winter due to disease, furloughs, and discharges.¹⁶ On 1 January 1780, about one-hundred men from the 4th Massachusetts Brigade decided their enlistments expired that day and marched out of the camp. Heath contained the mutiny, pardoned most offenders, and released ninety-two of the one-hundred, agreeing they had served their full term. Morale at West Point was precarious, and the punishing environmental conditions helped push some of the soldiers to risk mutiny rather than stay.¹⁷

The winter was the worst part of the war. One diarist reported severe storms or extreme cold for over two-thirds of December and January. The most intense storm, though, lasted from 2 to 4 January 1780. A massive blizzard dumped several feet of snow

¹⁵ Heath, *Memoirs*, 208-9.

¹⁶ Charles H. Lesser, *The Sinews of Independence: Monthly Strength Reports of the Continental Army* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 140-51.

¹⁷ Heath, *Memoirs*, 208; Adams, *Diary*, 1 January 1780, Reel 1, Adams Papers.

in the Highlands. The garrison had little wood for fires, and even those fortunate enough to occupy huts rather than tents stayed in their beds to keep warm. Several dozen tents blew away as the northerly wind swept across the plain, driving the occupants into the already overcrowded barracks. When the storm abated on 4 January, the garrison began digging out the men trapped in their tents for the first days of the new year. Heath warned Gov. George Clinton that the garrison was dangerously short on food and fuel. Men were dragging supplies by hand because horses lacked forage. He noted that “instead of raising magazines at this post, to enable the garrison to sustain a siege, . . . we can scarcely obtain our daily Bread.”¹⁸

Five days after the blizzard, the North Redoubt on the east side of the river caught fire at dusk. Portions of two brigades fought to contain the blaze because the magazines' powder, ammunition, and food were essential to the post. The redoubt's construction quality worked against the firefighters' efforts because “so strongly dovetailed and strapped were the timbers of the rampart” that they could not get to where the fire was burning. The crews finally extinguished the conflagration around 4:00 a.m. on 10 January. Less than three weeks later, another fire broke out. One of two completed barracks on the plain outside of Fort Arnold burnt to the ground, exacerbating the overcrowding in the remaining building. Washington suspected arson, but Heath found no evidence of intentionality. Instead, he increased chimney cleanings and commenced

¹⁸ Heath to Clinton, 25 January 1780, in Hastings, *Public Papers of George Clinton*, 5:464-67.

nightly fire-watch patrols. The measures worked, and there were no other structure fires at West Point.¹⁹

The weather also complicated typical winter maintenance. For example, after Kościuszko removed the chain from the Hudson, he stacked the links and floatation logs along the western bank. The repeated snowstorms kept the entire apparatus buried for most of the winter. When Kościuszko inspected the chain in the spring, he discovered several water-logged floats and some degradation of the chain links. Even had he detected the damage earlier, snow and ice precluded harvesting more logs in the immediate area. The frozen river prevented floating the logs to West Point from further upriver, and draft horses could not negotiate the snow-choked roads. Earth, timber, and fascines required regular repair and replacement. Absent that, the forts, redoubts, and batteries rapidly decayed. Ultimately, the storms' frequency, duration, and severity in the winter of 1779-80 prevented the usual repair work at West Point.²⁰

As the bitter cold weakened the defenses on the Hudson, it also opened new threats to the position. Even though winter offensives were uncommon in the eighteenth century, Washington recognized the frozen Hudson River presented an avenue of approach to the fortification for the British Army. If Sir Henry Clinton did not have to surmount the challenge of an amphibious assault, many of the river defenses were more

¹⁹ Heath to Washington, 10-11 January 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-24-02-0060>; Heath to Washington, 2-3 February 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-24-02-0278>; Washington to Heath, 16 February 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-24-02-0387>.

²⁰ Palmer, *The River and the Rock*, 228-29.

vulnerable. While Washington fretted over the possibility of a British attack over the ice, the weather closed lines of communication from his Main Army to the Point, rendering reinforcement impossible. No attack materialized, but the garrison stayed on heightened alert throughout the winter.²¹

Recovery: March-July 1780

Heath left West Point in late February on furlough. Washington gave the command to Maj. Gen. Robert Howe from North Carolina. Howe was a politician and planter who advanced through the Continental Army's ranks despite a marginal martial record. Born in 1732 to wealthy parents from New Hanover County, he inherited wealth, land, and enslaved people when his father, Job, died in 1748. Howe served in the North Carolina House of Commons, the colonial militia, and Gov. William Tryon's backcountry expeditions in 1768 and 1771. He commanded Fort Johnston at the mouth of the Cape Fear River, but Tryon's successor removed him because of suspicion of embezzlement in 1773. When hostilities erupted in New England in 1775, the North Carolina legislature commissioned Howe a colonel for the 2nd North Carolina Regiment. He led the occupation of Norfolk, Virginia, and the Continental Congress promoted him twice more in the following two years. As a major general, he clashed with civilian leaders in Georgia and South Carolina before the Continental Congress removed him from command in that region following the fall of Savannah in 1778. A court-martial acquitted Howe of any intentional wrongdoing, but his fellow general officers doubted his leadership ability. After his trial, he joined Washington's army and promptly bungled

²¹ Washington to Heath, 2 February 1780, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 17:478-79; Palmer, *The River and the Rock*, 225.

the attack on Verplanck's Point in support of Brig. Gen. Anthony Wayne's operation against Stoney Point. Despite repeated failures, Howe maintained social and political power because of his status as a gentleman. He took command of West Point on 21 February as winter still froze the area. He did not venture out from his headquarters at the Robinson house until the weather turned warmer several weeks later.²²

Booms reverberated through the hills of the Highlands in March 1780 as the ice on the river broke up in the warming temperatures. The transition to spring marked a time of renewed hope at the fort. Ice floes still prevented ships from sailing upriver, but the threat of an attack over the ice evaporated. Men returned from furloughs and recovered some of the boats that had frozen in place on the river. The snowdrifts had almost completely melted, leaving muddy but passable roads. Despite Howe's reservations about the chain's efficacy in its current form, the Highlands' commander directed Kościuszko to string it across the river. The waterlogged floats could not handle the weight, though, and it took until the beginning of April before the chain once again impeded the navigation of the river.²³

²² Janet Schaw, *Journal of a Lady of Quality: Being the Narrative of a Journey from Scotland to the West Indies, North Carolina, and Portugal, in the years 1774 to 1776* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1921), 167; Josiah Martin to Lord Dartmouth, 24 December 1773, in Philip Ranlet, "Loyalty in the Revolutionary War: General Robert Howe of North Carolina," *Historian* 53, no. 4 (1991): 725; William S. Powell, "Robert Howe (1732-1786)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, online ed., <https://doi-org/10.1093/ref:odnb/68607>.

²³ Howe to Washington, 7 March 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-24-02-0543>; Adams, Diary, 7 March 1780, Reel 1, Adams Papers; Howe to Washington, 16-17 March 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-25-02-0046>; Washington to Howe, 21 March 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-25-02-0080>.

The effects of the winter storms persisted into the spring. Gabions and fascines prepared the previous fall in preparation for an attack on New York City had rotted. Weather and short supplies drove the garrison to tear wood from several works to fuel their fires. Snow, ice, and wind eroded the stone ramparts and earthen parapets throughout the complex, and the garrison did not have enough lumber to rebuild the damaged wooden structures. The Continental Army lacked the funds to make any purchases, and state law prohibited it from seizing the required supplies. Without additional men and supplies, Kościuszko warned he could not repair the fortifications in time for the coming campaign season.²⁴

The West Point garrison made little progress in the spring. Kościuszko and French engineer Lt. Col. Jean-Baptiste Gouvion reported the state of the works to McDougall on 1 July 1780. Gouvion planned to complete one battery at Redoubt 1, another at Redoubt 2, and two more at Redoubt 3. Additionally, he sought to build platforms for eight cannon positions across the three sites. He estimated two hundred laborers, forty carpenters, six masons, and six teams of horses needed to work for one month to make the site defensible. Kościuszko inspected Redoubt 4, Fort Putnam, Fort Arnold, Fort Constitution, and Wyllys' Redoubt. He decided the repairs and extra construction required six hundred laborers, one hundred sixty carpenters, twenty masons, and twelve teams of horses working for two months. With only the men available,

²⁴ Howe to Washington, 10 April 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-25-02-0245>; Howe to Washington, 1 May 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-25-02-0372>; Kościuszko to Richard Kidder Meade, 23 March 1780, in Haiman, *Kościuszko*, 86.

Kościuszko estimated repair work would take six months. Howe passed the information along to Washington and concluded that the “Works ... want a great Deal to be done to them.”²⁵

Howe was ill-suited to lead the recovery efforts at West Point. The men routinely ignored his orders and faced little consequence for it. Howe seemed incapable of meting out harsher punishment. For example, a court-martial convicted an officer of being absent from his post for an extended period and sentenced him to a reprimand. Howe publicly denounced the sentence as insufficient in light of the gravity of the crime but did not order additional punishment. Instead, he immediately told Washington of the incident, claiming that “strictness was requisite here.” His only strictness, though, was to reprimand the officer and urge everyone else to do better in the future.²⁶ Two months later, West Point experienced its second mutiny of the year. On 25 May 1780, nearly 400 men from the Connecticut line assembled on the plain and announced their intention to leave. Col. Return Jonathan Meigs, the commander of one of the regiments, pleaded with them to abandon their course, but one of the men nicked him with a bayonet. Howe summoned the Pennsylvania line to block the march, but the mutineers faced no other repercussions.²⁷

²⁵ Gouvin Report, 1 July 1780; Kościuszko Report, 1 July 1780; and McDougall to Howe, 3 July 1780, all in Reel 3, McDougall Papers; Howe to Washington, 3 July 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-26-02-0481>.

²⁶ Howe to Washington, 8 March 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-24-02-055>.

²⁷ Washington to Henry Champion, Sr., 26 May 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-26-02-0126>; Joseph Plumb Martin, *Private Yankee Doodle: Being a Narrative of Some of the Adventures, Dangers*

Washington soon received requests to replace Howe in the Highlands. Maj. Gen. Phillip Schuyler, a native New Yorker, argued that the state wanted the hero of Saratoga, Benedict Arnold, to take charge of the region. Arnold himself coveted the command position.²⁸ Robert R. Livingston bluntly told Washington that “as he [Howe] has yet had no opportunity of acquiring a military character-that Confidence which is so necessary to inspire courage especially in militia I fear be wanting in him.”²⁹ Livingston also recommended Arnold for the job. The loss of Charleston and five thousand men under Maj. Gen. Benjamin Lincoln in late May increased the urgency to address West Point’s deficiencies because intelligence indicated Clinton planned to move against the Highlands next. In response, Washington sent Maj. Gen. Alexander McDougall back to the area as the commander of five brigades at the fort.³⁰

In addition to McDougall, Washington also dispatched Maj. Gen. Friedrich Wilhelm August Heinrich Ferdinand von Steuben to assist Howe in an unofficial capacity. Steuben, the Continental Army’s Inspector-General, oversaw the implementation of drills and discipline, which improved the capabilities of the garrison.

and Sufferings of a Revolutionary Soldier, ed. George F. Scheer (Boston: Little, Brown, 1962), 182-87.

²⁸ Carl Van Doren, *Secret History of the American Revolution: An Account of the Conspiracies fo Benedict Arnold and Numerous Others drawn from the Secret Service Papers of the British Headquarters in North America now for the first time examined and made public* (New York: Viking, 1941), 258-59.

²⁹ Livingston to Washington, 22 June 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-26-02-0373>.

³⁰ Washington to McDougall, 15 June 1780, note 6 of Washington to Howe, 15 June 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-26-02-0295>.

His purpose, however, was not to instill discipline for the sake of camp efficiency. Steuben was there to prepare the troops for a transition to offensive action. The Prussian general shared Washington's zeal for the attack. Most of Steuben's correspondence with the commander-in-chief concerned the creation of a light infantry force for the upcoming campaign. West Point, nominally Steuben's primary mission at the time, received scant attention. He even suspended fatigue duty in favor of more training, which only exacerbated the shortage of laborers for repair work.³¹

Steuben, though, increased the rigor of service at West Point. He imposed reporting standards, daily drills for all soldiers, and harsh discipline for offenses such as theft and desertion. He redistributed weapons so that combatants had priority over support personnel. Steuben explained to Washington that he had "as much as circumstances would permit exerted myself to introduce some discipline into this part of the Army which I am sorry to say was almost without."³² The post never saw the benefit of the Prussian's training regime. On 27 July, Washington ordered Howe to keep a single New Hampshire brigade and some militia while sending the rest of the garrison to Fishkill in preparation for an attack on New York City.

³¹ Alexander Hamilton to Baron von Steuben, 25 Jun 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-0734>; Steuben to Washington, 20 June 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-26-02-0352>; Steuben to Washington, 14 July 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-27-02-0094>.

³² Steuben to Washington, 28 July 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-27-02-0292>.

Washington believed that victory resulted from driving up the costs of the war for the British while maintaining public support for the cause. Howe's lackluster performance arguably hurt the American war effort in two respects. First, the continued poor state of West Point made the critical Hudson Highlands vulnerable to a British attack. Second, the population of New York lacked confidence in Howe and wanted someone different in command. A social code constrained Washington from firing Howe except in an emergency. Recovery under Howe had proceeded at a glacial pace, but Washington hesitated to remove him because of the impact that could have on Howe's reputation. Washington accommodated the competing imperatives by assigning Howe two assistants to mitigate his shortcomings while still giving the impression that Howe was in charge. His actions allowed a New York audience to see steps taken to ensure their safety. They also permitted Howe to save face despite his shortcomings.

The winter weather had damaged the defensive works. Washington had sapped the garrison of the manpower needed to repair the damage. The supply system failed to provide adequate materials for the work required. Those conditions allowed the turncoat, Maj. Gen. Benedict Arnold, to critically weaken West Point without raising suspicions.

Benedict Arnold

Before turning traitor, Benedict Arnold compiled an exceptional military career marked by instances of extreme courage and dazzling success. Personality conflicts with politicians and other general officers, however, overshadowed his exploits and resulted in delayed or denied recognition of his accomplishments. Born in 1741, Arnold was the fifth male in the family to bear the name Benedict. He overcame early financial struggles to become a sea merchant and trader and regained much of his family fortune. As the crisis

with Great Britain came to a head, the Second Company of the Governor's Foot Guard in New Haven elected Arnold as its captain.³³

Arnold achieved a string of battlefield successes in the early years of the war. He seized Fort Ticonderoga under a command sharing arrangement with Col. Ethan Allen of New Hampshire.³⁴ He led an overland expedition through Maine, arriving at Quebec to aid Maj. Gen. Richard Montgomery in an attack on the city.³⁵ In the retreat from Canada in 1776, he built the first US fleet and fought a successful delaying action against the British at Valcour Island.³⁶ The following year, he harassed British troops following their raid on Danbury, Connecticut, where he had his horse shot from under him. His most notable performance, though, came at Saratoga, where he charged the British position,

³³ Martin, *Benedict Arnold*, 11-54; Willard Sterne Randall, *Benedict Arnold: Patriot and Traitor* (New York: William Morrow, 1990), 82-88; James Thomas Flexner, *The Traitor and the Spy: Benedict Arnold and John André* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953), 41-43.

³⁴ James L. Nelson, *Benedict Arnold's Navy: The Ragtag Fleet that Lost the Battle of Lake Champlain but won the American Revolution* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006), 9-63; Flexner, *The Traitor and the Spy*, 43-55; Martin, *Benedict Arnold*, 64-99; Report of the Crowne Point Committee to the Massachusetts Congress, in Force, *American Archives, Fourth Series*, 2:1596-98.

³⁵ Thomas A. Desjardin, *Through a Howling Wilderness: Benedict Arnold's March to Quebec, 1775* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2006); Stephen Brumwell, *Turncoat: Benedict Arnold and the Crisis of American Liberty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 50-63; Nelson, *Arnold's Navy*, 74-167; Martin, *Benedict Arnold*, 105-209.

³⁶ Nelson, *Arnold's Navy*, 209-320; Barry K. Wilson, *Benedict Arnold: A Traitor in our Midst* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 130-35; Martin, *Benedict Arnold*, 246-314.

rallied Continental troops, and broke through the lines to ensure the defeat of the invading force.³⁷

Each of these successes, though, came with a setback. At Fort Ticonderoga, Arnold's abrasive personality aroused the hatred of New Hampshire troops, and the Massachusetts legislature removed him from command. In the attack on Quebec, the British defenders repulsed the American onslaught, and Arnold suffered a leg wound. Valcour Island was another defeat as the British destroyed most of the American fleet on Lake Champlain. In early 1777, the Continental Congress passed him over for promotion to major general, prompting Arnold to resign in disgust. After Danbury, Congress promoted him, but he was still junior to four generals he had once outranked. At Saratoga, Maj. Gen. Horatio Gates removed Arnold from command after the first day of fighting because of latter's vociferous criticism of his commander's conservative command style. Sustaining another leg wound in the final attack, Arnold languished in a hospital bed as Gates shaped the narrative of the battle to marginalize Arnold's heroics. His recovery took months, his left leg was now two inches shorter than his right, and he walked with a painful limp for the rest of his life.

In early 1778, Washington anticipated the British withdrawal from Philadelphia and named Arnold the city's military commander. His term was contentious as he clashed with civilian leaders in the Continental Congress and the Pennsylvania assembly. He declared martial law on 19 June 1778 and closed all the shops in the city to allow the quartermaster time to acquire goods that the Continental Army needed. The politicians,

³⁷ Brumwell, *Turncoat*, 83-120; Martin, *Benedict Arnold*, 316-423; Wilson, *Benedict Arnold*, 135-44.

who had fled from Philadelphia at the approach of Gen. Sir William Howe and the British Army, thought Arnold was too lenient on the alleged collaborators in the city. Arnold lived lavishly in Philadelphia, throwing many parties and socializing with the city's elite.³⁸ He included "numerous Tory ladies and the wives and daughters of persons proscribed by the State and now with the enemy at New York" in his social circle, to the dismay of more radical republicans.³⁹ His courtship and marriage to Margaret "Peggy" Shippen exacerbated the tension because the Shippen family allegedly had cooperated with the British Army during the occupation.⁴⁰

Arnold had spent most of his fortune supporting the units he had formerly commanded, and he now sought to reconstitute his wealth. He engaged in several schemes to profit from abandoned British goods and the access he could grant through passes. The Pennsylvania executive committee became aware of Arnold's questionable business dealings in late 1778. They asked for Arnold's censure and removal, but he demanded a court-martial. After a six-month delay, the body of officers found Arnold guilty of dereliction of duty on two counts: allowing a trading ship, in which he was an investor, to leave the Philadelphia port when others could not; and using Continental Army wagons to move personal goods. Two months later, a congressional committee

³⁸ Brumwell, *Turncoat*, 130-31.

³⁹ Joseph Reed to Nathanael Greene, 5 November 1778, in Brumwell, *Turncoat*, 137.

⁴⁰ John Shy, "Benedict Arnold (1741-1801)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, online ed., <https://doi-org/10.1093/ref:odnb/675>.

reviewing Arnold's finances declared that he owed the government nearly twenty-thousand dollars.⁴¹

Treason: August-September 1780

Arnold grew increasingly embittered because of what he thought were unwarranted assaults on his character and ingratitude on the part of the country and the Continental Congress. In May 1779, he first offered his services to Gen. Sir Henry Clinton through an intermediary. He began providing intelligence on the Continental Army's size, strength, movements, and plans. Arnold's British correspondent was Clinton's deputy adjutant general or chief of staff, Maj. John André. André told Arnold that such general information was not enough. The British still wanted to take control of the Hudson River, so Clinton needed information about West Point. Other sources surmised the British could overrun the stronghold, but Arnold had the opportunity to corroborate that opinion. Arnold balked at the offer because André would not respond to his request for payment and the protection of his property rights. Negotiations fizzled in late August.⁴²

After Arnold's court-martial and financial setback, he reopened communications with the British, but his concern over payment persisted. Arnold told André the arrival date, port, and overall strength of the incoming French forces. He also visited West Point

⁴¹ Brumwell, *Turncoat*, 145-54, 189-94; Martin, *Benedict Arnold*, 428-30; Randall, *Benedict Arnold*, 441-52, 485-97.

⁴² Arnold to John André, 23 May 1779, 18 June 1779, 11-12 July 1779, 59:1; John Vaughn to Clinton, 9 June 1779, 232:8; Stansbury to André, August or September 1779, 67:7; and André to Arnold, July 1779, 65:6, all in Clinton Papers; Randall, *Benedict Arnold*, 475-77. For a detailed discussion of Arnold's motivation, see Brumwell, *Turncoat*, 157-69.

and conveyed intelligence regarding the overall manning, layout, and condition of the fortifications there. Arnold assured André that Washington was about to give him command of the Hudson Highlands, and he would ensure the British could take the position “without loss.” Arnold demanded twenty-thousand pounds to surrender the fort and its garrison. Regardless of the outcome, though, he wanted ten thousand pounds and a pension of five hundred pounds per year to provide for his family.⁴³ He explained that “as Life and fortune are risked by serving His Majesty, it is necessary that the latter shall be secured as well as emoluments I give up.”⁴⁴ André told the major general that the British would reward him, even if the plan failed but added, “As to an absolute promise of indemnification to the Amount of 10,000 Pounds and Annuity of 500 whether Services are performed or not It can never be made.”⁴⁵ Arnold eventually accepted André’s terms.

The entire scheme rested on the assumption that Arnold commanded West Point. Four days after directing the vast majority of the garrison at West Point to march south, Washington announced that Arnold would command the left division in the New York City attack. Arnold protested he could not command in the field because of his leg. The commander-in-chief relented and assigned him to the Hudson Highlands. The plot

⁴³ Arnold to André, 12 June 1780, in Van Doren, *Secret History*, 460; Arnold to André, 16 June 1780, 105:1, and Benedict Arnold to Peggy Arnold, 30 July 1780, 113:35, both in Clinton Papers.

⁴⁴ Arnold to André, 12 July 1780, 111:2, Clinton Papers.

⁴⁵ André to Arnold, 24 July 1780, 113:12, Clinton Papers.

remained viable. By 5 August 1780, Arnold established his headquarters at the Robinson House on the east side of the Hudson, about two miles south of West Point.⁴⁶

Through happenstance and design, the West Point defenses became more vulnerable. Kościuszko left the day before Arnold arrived, and his replacement, Lieutenant Colonel Gouvion, needed time to acquaint himself with the operation. Arnold detached men from the post to cut firewood and rearranged the alarm procedures to underman critical posts. He also discovered essential equipment absent from the storehouses. A new engineer, a shrunken garrison, and a shortage of supplies gave Arnold a ready excuse for slow progress on repairs.⁴⁷ At the end of August, Arnold sent word to André that the time was ripe for an attack as only 1,500 poorly equipped, clothed, and fed Massachusetts militia manned the forts.

Arnold also agreed to meet André to arrange the ultimate surrender of his post. He aborted a planned rendezvous in early September because British ships fired on him as he approached the designated rendezvous. A second scheduled meeting failed because neither André nor Arnold dared to cross the river. Finally, in the early morning hours of

⁴⁶ Joseph Stansbury to André, 7 July 1780, 110:23, Clinton Papers; Flexner, *The Traitor and the Spy*, 315-17.

⁴⁷ General Orders, 16 August 1780, West Point Garrison Orderly Book 1780, Orderly Book Collection, New York Historical Society; Arnold to Pickering, 16 August 1780, Arnold Papers, New York Historical Society; Randall, *Benedict Arnold*, 522-40; Brumwell, *Turncoat*, 222-24; Benedict Arnold to Peggy Arnold, 30 July-5 August 1780, 113:35, Clinton Papers.

22 September, André rowed ashore from the sloop *Vulture* and joined Arnold near Haverstraw, about six miles south of Stony Point on the west side of the river.⁴⁸

Arnold and André undoubtedly agreed upon the plan to surrender West Point to maximize its effect on the war. Clinton intended to gain control of the Hudson, isolate or eliminate the recently arrived French force, and possibly strike a killing blow against the Continental Army. He planned to feign a significant troop movement to the South and wait for Washington to commit Continental and French troops to an attack on New York City. The British commander-in-chief assumed that the Americans would create a large supply depot at West Point to support such an effort. Once they committed to an attack on Manhattan, Clinton could move up the Hudson with the troops he pretended to send away. There, Arnold would hand over the forts and redoubts, the garrison, and the supplies on which the Continental Army depended to survive. Washington would withdraw, leaving the French vulnerable. A slightly more complicated version of the plan had Arnold requesting aid from Washington at the commencement of the attack on West Point and then turning the post over to the British. As Washington rushed to relieve the garrison, the British could potentially destroy the bulk of the American force. The conspirators also discussed when they could execute their scheme. Arnold recommended beginning in two days—on 24 September—because Washington would be at West Point, and the attack could result in his capture. More realistically, though, he and André

⁴⁸ Arnold to André, 30 August 1780, 119:26, and Clinton to Germain, 11 October 1780, 125:32, both in Clinton Papers; Greene to Washington, 29 September 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-03434>.

decided on the night of 25-26 September to allow more preparation time. With so much to discuss, the meeting lasted until dawn.⁴⁹

Rather than risk a daytime trip back to the *Vulture*, Arnold and André retired to the home of Joshua Hett Smith.⁵⁰ As they sat down to breakfast, the two officers heard cannons firing from Col. James Livingston's troops at Verplanck's Point. Having watched the *Vulture* at anchor for nearly a week, Livingston decided to drive it off that morning. Rebel gunners struck the ship several times and forced it to withdraw downriver. André would have to return to New York City overland. Arnold wrote him a pass, and the British major changed into civilian clothes. He hid documents about West Point in Arnold's handwriting in one stocking. On the evening of 22 September, André and Smith crossed the Hudson and began their journey toward the British lines. Smith, however, decided he would not cross the no man's land between the armies, and André faced the last twenty miles of his journey alone. The following morning, three "volunteer militiamen" stopped him. André asked if they were British. They lied. He then identified himself as an officer of the British Army, and they revealed their ruse and arrested him. After searching his horse, baggage, and person, the men located the documents in André's stocking. They realized he was a spy and turned him over to Col. John Jameson at North Castle. Jameson did not immediately understand that Arnold had turned, but he

⁴⁹ Clinton to Germain (draft), 11 October 1780, 125:31, Clinton Papers; Brumwell, *Turncoat*, 249-63.

⁵⁰ For a detailed discussion about Smith, his background, and the probability of his complicity in the treason, see Brumwell, *Turncoat*, 256-60; Van Doren, *Secret History*, 168-95.

was suspicious enough to send the papers to Washington and notify Arnold of the arrest.⁵¹

One of the papers the militiamen found on André was Arnold's assessment of West Point. The document detailed each structure's location, design, and vulnerability in the fortification system. Fort Arnold was "in a ruinous condition, incomplete and subject to take fire." Fort Putnam needed repairs with its collapsed east wall and the surrounding *chevaux de frise* broken. Fort Webb, Redoubt 3, North Redoubt, and South Redoubt were all made of fascines and wood, which were likely to catch fire. There were no bombproofs at Fort Wyllys or Redoubts 1, 2, or 4. The garrison had simply not done much of the work Kościuszko and Gouvion intended for those structures. West Point was incredibly vulnerable to an attack.⁵²

On the morning of 25 September 1780, Arnold greeted two members of Washington's staff as they arrived at his headquarters just in time for breakfast. Dr. James McHenry and Maj. Samuel Shaw announced that the commander-in-chief went to a pair of redoubts on the east side of the river and would be on his way to Arnold when he finished his inspection. As McHenry and Shaw joined Arnold at the breakfast table, Jameson's letter arrived. After reading the letter, Arnold calmly left the table, told Peggy of the development, and informed Washington's aides he would meet the commander-in-chief across the river because he had to attend an urgent matter at West Point. He rode to the river, boarded his barge, and ordered the crew to make haste downstream. The barge

⁵¹ Clinton to Germain, 11 October 1780, 125:31, Clinton Papers; Randall, *Benedict Arnold*, 528-57; Wilson, *Benedict Arnold*, 158-59; Van Doren, *Secret History*, 333-44.

⁵² Boynton, *History of West Point*, 112-16.

reached the *Vulture* a few hours later, and Arnold disclosed his treason to his men. He immediately wrote a message to Washington, the first attempt to justify his betrayal.⁵³

Jameson's messenger got lost on the way to Washington, so the commander-in-chief did not receive it until after he had visited the Robinson house, eaten, toured the defenses on the west side of the river, and returned. It was early afternoon when he read the documents, and Washington realized Arnold had turned traitor. West Point was in a precarious state.

Washington had to balance the urgency of organizing the post for a probable attack with the imperative to root out the depths of the conspiracy. First, he sent Lt. Col. Alexander Hamilton to Verplanck's Point to intercept Arnold. Next, he put Maj. Gen. Nathanael Greene's division in motion to King's Ferry with a cryptic hint that "transactions of a most interesting nature and such as will astonish you have been just discovered."⁵⁴ Washington also called in the militia Arnold sent out for firewood, increased the manning of the redoubts, moved Brig. Gen. Anthony Wayne's brigade to West Point, sent for Col. James Livingston to report to him, and had Jameson send André to West Point under a maximum security guard.⁵⁵

⁵³ Brumwell, *Turncoat*, 271-75.

⁵⁴ Washington to Greene, 25 September 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-03375>.

⁵⁵ Washington to William Betts, 25 September 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-03373>; Washington to Caleb Low, 25 September 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-03382>; Washington to Ebenezer Gray, 25 September 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-03374>; Washington to Anthony Wayne, 26 September 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-03404>; Washington to

Consequences: September-October 1780

Washington announced Arnold's betrayal to the Continental Army through his General Orders of 26 September 1780. "Treason of the blackest dye was yesterday discovered! Gen. Arnold who Commanded at Westpoint, lost to every sentiment of honor—of public and private obligation—was about to deliver that important Post into the hands of the enemy."⁵⁶ He lauded the army for their devotion to duty over the last several days. In addition, he framed the betrayal as evidence of the strength of the defenses at West Point. He reasoned that the enemy could not take the post by force, so they resorted to deception. Washington cast the circumstances that revealed the plot as evidence that the United States was under divine protection. Washington then dealt with Maj. John André.

Washington regarded André as a spy. Eighteenth-century European armies viewed spying as a necessary but ungentlemanly endeavor. A spy was anyone on a military mission, disguised or otherwise not in a uniform, operating in the enemy's territory. André met the criteria. When he changed out of his uniform on 22 September, he was behind the American front lines. Washington, however, was sensitive to the gravity of the situation, mainly because he knew André was the British deputy adjutant

John Lamb, 25 September 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-03379>; Washington to John Jameson, 25 September 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-03378>; Washington to New York Officer Commanding West Point, 27 September 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-03384>; Brumwell, *Turncoat*, 275; Van Doren, *Secret History*, 345-53; Randall, *Benedict Arnold*, 556-63.

⁵⁶ Washington, General Orders, 26 September 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-03388>.

general. Also, the punishment for spying was death by hanging.⁵⁷ He ordered a board of general officers to convene and determine “the light, in which [André] ought to be considered and the punishment that ought to be inflicted.”⁵⁸ While the American case seemed obvious, the British claimed the existence of exculpatory circumstances.

André’s defense held that his intent and Arnold’s pass proved the major was not a spy. André told Washington that he had gone to the western shore of the Hudson in uniform to gain intelligence at Clinton’s behest. Further, Clinton ordered him not to go beyond enemy lines or change out of his regimentals. Once dawn broke, though, “against my Stipulation my Intention and without my Knowledge before hand I was conducted within one of your posts.”⁵⁹ Because Arnold and Smith refused to return him via the river, he considered himself a prisoner and attempted to escape. In other words, André was “involuntarily an imposter.” In his statement to the board, André claimed that Arnold directed him to put the papers in his boot. At the end of the letter, he mentioned his awareness of being behind American lines when he changed out of his uniform. If Washington viewed André’s actions as a series of unintended accidents, then the major’s true intentions would exonerate him from the accusation of spying.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Van Doren, *Secret History*, 346-50.

⁵⁸ Washington to Greene, 29 September 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-03430>.

⁵⁹ André to Washington, 24 September 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-03366>.

⁶⁰ André’s Statement, 29 September 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-03429>.

On learning of André's capture, Clinton demanded Washington release his deputy adjutant general. Clinton fixed his attention on Arnold's pass as justification. Arnold told Clinton that the major traveled under a flag of truce and had a pass from the American commander to cross the lines. As a general in the Continental Army, Arnold claimed that he had "an undoubted right to Send my Flag of Truce for Major André." Further, Arnold had directed André to assume the false name. Because André was under orders, had gone ashore under a flag of truce, and had a pass for his safe return, the Americans could not consider him a spy. Moreover, Clinton warned that continuing even to hold André was a violation of the customs of war and the laws of nations.⁶¹

Washington judged the arguments for André's release invalid for three reasons. First, the circumstances of André's capture warranted summary execution. Washington had convened the board to ensure his judgment was correct, but the customs of war did not require him to do so. Second, André admitted to coming ashore without a flag of truce in his statement to the board. The accused, then, directly contradicted Arnold's assertion about the circumstances of the initial meeting. Third, even if André was under a flag, it was preposterous to think that coordinating desertion and treason was a legitimate purpose for it. Given those reasons, Washington confirmed the judgment of the board of general officers. André was a spy. The commander-in-chief would not release the major, but Washington discreetly offered to exchange André for Arnold. Clinton could not accept the proposal because the two men did not share the same status. André was a

⁶¹ Clinton to Washington, 26 September 1780, and Arnold to Clinton, 26 September 1780, quoted in Clinton to Germain, both in 124:32, Clinton Papers.

prisoner. Arnold was a defector. British policy was never to return defectors, so Clinton refused the trade.⁶²

Clinton and Arnold tried again to persuade Washington. The British commander-in-chief sent three prominent officials from New York's Loyalist regime—the governor, Lt. Gen. James Robertson; the lieutenant governor, Andrew Elliot, and the chief justice, William Smith—to explain “all the circumstances on which a Judgement ought to be formed.”⁶³ When Washington did not reply, Clinton tried again. He said that André operated under the direction and orders of a Continental Army general. Because Arnold did not leave the American side until after André's capture, the adjutant general was not a spy but a messenger. After reviewing this interpretation of the case, Clinton closed with three points. First, he warned of creating a precedent that would “render the future Progress of this unfortunate War liable to a Want of ... Humanity.” Second, he appealed to Washington's sense of honor. André was a trusted aide and well-regarded gentleman, so Clinton trusted Washington's “good Sense and ... Liberality for a speedy Release.” Finally, he offered to exchange the lieutenant governor of South Carolina, Christopher Gadsen, or any military prisoner for the major.⁶⁴

⁶² Washington to Clinton, 30 September 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-03439>; Brumwell, *Turncoat*, 286-87; Randall, *Benedict Arnold*, 565-67.

⁶³ Clinton to Washington, 30 September 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-03440>.

⁶⁴ Clinton to Washington, 4 October 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-03472>.

On the other hand, Arnold threatened to retaliate on anyone he captured in the future, “that the Respect due to Flags and to the Law of Nations may be better understood and Observed.” He warned Washington that if anything happened to André, “your Excellency will be justly answerable for the torrent of blood that may be spilt in consequence.”⁶⁵

After his capture, André seemed most concerned with his reputation as an officer and gentleman. He wrote to Washington that it was not his safety but to prevent “an imputation of having assumed a mean character for treacherous purposes that motivated” him to write directly to the American commander-in-chief. Even when condemned to die, his only request was to “adapt the mode of my death to the feelings of a Man of honour.” Hanging was an ignominious way to die, and André requested a firing squad as befit a soldier. The penalty for spying, however, was death by hanging, and Washington abided by that convention.⁶⁶

Some Continental Army officers were likewise concerned about the appearance of acting honorably according to European standards of warfare. For example, Hamilton bragged that André wrote in glowing terms about his treatment at the hands of the Americans. He reported that André said his experience removed his remaining prejudice

⁶⁵ Arnold to Washington, 1 October 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-03451>. Historians disagree about whether Arnold carried out this threat. Arnold’s attacks in Virginia and Connecticut were bloody affairs, but they arguably operated within the laws of war. See Mark Edward Lender and James Kirby Martin, “Target New London: Benedict Arnold’s Raid, Just War, and ‘Homegrown Terror’ Reconsidered,” *Journal of Military History* 83 (January 2019): 67–85.

⁶⁶ André to Washington, 24 September 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-03366>.

against the Americans, and he “died universally esteemed and universally regretted.”⁶⁷ André’s testimony that denied the presence of a flag of truce relieved Col. Benjamin Tallmadge because it removed the grounds for censure of the Continental Army. Dr. James Thacher compared the American treatment of André with the alleged British treatment of the American spy Nathan Hale, who ascended the gallows mere hours after his capture without trial. In contrast, the Americans extended every courtesy to André and deeply regretted the outcome. Thacher repeatedly argued that the court members and commander-in-chief had no choice but to find André guilty. He concluded that “the laws and usages of war must be obeyed, and in all armies it is decreed, that the gallows shall be the fate of spies from the enemy.”⁶⁸ The West Point garrison witnessed the execution on 1 October 1780. André’s composure as he faced his death awed those present.⁶⁹

Clinton’s decision to pursue Arnold’s offer of West Point fit within the British theory of victory. Clinton and Lord George Germain remained confident that most Americans were loyal to the king. British armed forces, then, only needed to remove the rebellious minority population to allow loyal subjects to resume control of the government. The allegiance Charleston, South Carolina residents readily pledged to the

⁶⁷ Hamilton to John Laurens, 11 October 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-0896>.

⁶⁸ James Thacher, *A Military Journal During the American Revolutionary War, from 1775 to 1783*; [...] (Boston: Richardson and Lord, 1823), 263-77. Quote on 275.

⁶⁹ Thacher, *Military Journal*, 272-75; Benjamin Tallmadge to Samuel Webb, 30 September 1780, in Benjamin Tallmadge, *Memoirs of Colonel Benjamin Tallmadge*, reprint of 1858 ed. (New York: New York Times, 1968), 133; Hamilton to John Laurens, 11 October 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-0896>.

crown after Maj. Gen. Benjamin Lincoln's surrender encouraged Germain and Clinton in their conviction. Furthermore, both men believed the Rebels' will to fight was low and steadily decreasing. Another significant victory for the king would compound the crisis and inspire more support for ending the war. Clinton still valued control of the Hudson to degrade support of the Continental Army and control the communication between the colonies. Arnold's betrayal allowed Clinton to purchase a significant positional advantage with money rather than powder and blood. Even if the scheme failed, the British reaped a benefit because Arnold's defection could further degrade the will of the American people to continue fighting.⁷⁰

Arnold enthusiastically joined the British effort to persuade the Rebels to give up the war, but he also defended his choice to defect as honorable. Arnold started with his old commander and benefactor, Washington. From onboard the *Vulture*, Arnold wrote that love of country motivated his defection. He omitted any further explanation of that claim because the rest of the world "Seldom Judge right of any Man's Actions."⁷¹ Instead, he assured Washington that Peggy was innocent, and, as a postscript, he vouched for the innocence of his staff.

About two weeks later, Arnold took his case to the civilian population. In his "Address to the Inhabitants of America," Arnold essentially repeated common arguments

⁷⁰ Egerton Leigh to Germain, 14 July 1779, 9:27-28; Germain to Clinton, 5 August 1779, 9:23-26; Clinton to Germain, 4 June 1780, 12:24-27; and John Smith to Germain, 8 March 1780, 12:4-7, all in Germain Papers; George Mathew, "Mathew's Narrative," *Historical Magazine* 1, no. 4 (1857): 102-6; Clinton, *American Rebellion*, 462-64.

⁷¹ Arnold to Washington, 25 September 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-03372>.

for reconciliation and added a condemnation of the French alliance. He asserted he had only ever fought to gain redress of grievances, and Britain offered to meet those terms with the 1778 peace commission. The Continental Congress had no authority because the Articles of Confederation remained unsigned, so its continuation of the war amounted to tyranny. The French alliance was “a dangerous Sacrifice of the great Interest of this Country to the Partial Views of a Proud, Antient, and Crafty Foe.”⁷² The attendance of many members of Congress at a requiem Mass in St. Mary’s Catholic Church in Philadelphia appalled him. For Arnold, this was more evidence of Congress’ corruption and France’s intent to subjugate America when given a chance. Arnold concluded the war was wrong and attempted to use his position to end it.

Arnold’s second public letter attempted to recruit American soldiers into a corps under his command. He mentioned the futility of the fighting against the British, the corruption of the Continental Congress, and the lack of liberty in the service. Arnold focused, however, on the well-funded, well-supplied, and well-fed British Army in America. The suffering Americans could have reliable pay, new clothes, and plentiful food instead of degradation and insults. To sweeten the deal further, he offered an

⁷² Benedict Arnold, "To the Inhabitants of America," *New-York Gazette and Weekly Mercury* (New York City), 16 October 1780, *Readex: America’s Historical Newspapers*, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.libproxy.temple.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANX&docref=image/v2%3A10DBEBC4F3862B98%40EANX-10DF7DF633F13DC0%402371481-10DF7DF665B0B650%401>.

enlistment bonus of three guineas to anyone with prior military service in the Continental Army.⁷³

The veracity of Arnold's statements notwithstanding, the correspondence revealed his conception of Americans' anxieties. Arnold understood the propensity of his fellow Americans to pursue self-interest over the rigors of virtuous public service. He assumed that material rewards motivated them more than exhortations to virtue. To Germain, he claimed that "the principles I have avowed in my address to the public of the seventh instant, animated the greatest part of this continent."⁷⁴ Arnold asked Continental soldiers to "reflect on what you have lost, - consider to what you are reduced, and by your courage repel the ruin that still threatens you."⁷⁵ He assured his former comrades that taking care of themselves was, in fact, virtuous. Self-interest as a virtue flipped republican ideology on its head, and it appears to have persuaded few Americans. Arnold's Loyalist regiment scrambled to fill its ranks, and a London newspaper wryly noted: "Not one man has come over with General Arnold to the British standard."⁷⁶ When he left New York for Virginia, only about one-half of the fifteen hundred men he led hailed from America.

⁷³ Benedict Arnold, *A Proclamation To the Officers and Soldiers of the Continental Army* [...], 20 October 1780, 111:2, Printed Ephemera Collection, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/rbpe.11100200>.

⁷⁴ Arnold to Germain, 28 October 1780, 127:9, Clinton Papers.

⁷⁵ Arnold, *A Proclamation*, October 1780, Printed Ephemera Collection.

⁷⁶ *London Courant and Westminster Chronicle*, 15 November 1780, quoted in Brumwell, *Turncoat*, 310.

In the immediate aftermath of Arnold's treason, initial estimates gave Clinton and Germain reason to hope the affair had the desired consequences. Intelligence reports claimed that Continentals thought "it is now time for them to look and take care of themselves." Suspicion ran rampant in the ranks as everyone looked for the next traitor. The civilian population also grew anxious because of Arnold's defection. The three losses of 1780 – Charleston, Camden, and Arnold – demoralized the supporters of independence. The Continental Congress grew even more fearful of the army and revealed what one British spy called "their distrust of themselves."⁷⁷

Arnold pointed out the weakness in the American union and the best ways to exploit it to his British superiors. He noted that Washington's Main Army only had about 6,000 troops "who were Illy Clad, badly fed, and worse paid." The best Continental officers resigned over their treatment and diminishing hope of success in the war. Arnold claimed the Continental Congress feared the army's power, and the army lacked trust in Congress because it had "excluded the Army from every Appointment of honor, or profit in the Civil Line." Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the Rebels lacked money and credit. Arnold concluded that the dissatisfaction with state and national legislatures combined with the soldiers' living conditions was an opportunity for the British. He recommended cash rewards and land grant offers to degrade the manpower of the

⁷⁷ State of Intelligence from the Connecticut Shore, 9 October 1780, 13:44, Germain Papers; Andrew Elliot to William Eden, 4-5 October 1780, in *Facsimilies of Manuscripts in European Archives Relating to America, 1773-1783 With Descriptions, Editorial Notes, Collations, References, and Translations*, ed. B.F. Stevens, 25 vol. (Wilmington: Mellifont Press, 1970), 7:739.

Continental Army further and convince more civilians of the benefits of rejoining the empire.⁷⁸

In addition to the obvious military consequences of Arnold's treason, the betrayal troubled Americans because it revealed a weakness in their public virtue, which endangered the cause of independence and national survival. Privately, some American Rebels became guilt-ridden over their lack of service to the country and suspicious of who would turn next. After the *rage militaire* of 1775 faded, many Americans returned to self-interested behavior based on a belief the war would soon be over. As the conflict dragged on, the Americans drifted further from the ideal of personal virtue in service to their country. As Charles Royster noted, "the reaction to Arnold's treason revealed that in his crimes, as in his achievements, he shared many attributes with his countrymen."⁷⁹ The vehement denunciations of Arnold hinted at a level of guilt over their shortcomings concerning devotion to the cause of independence.

Arnold's treason also made Americans suspicious of each other. When the great hero of Fort Ticonderoga, Quebec, Valcour Island, Danbury, and Saratoga abandoned the cause, the people in Connecticut suspected that other Continental troops would do the same. Worse, anyone could conspire with the enemy. The distrust in other community members fueled the guilt from falling short of the virtue required for the country to succeed.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Arnold to Germain, 28 October 1780, 127:9, Clinton Papers.

⁷⁹ Charles Royster, "'The Nature of Treason': Revolutionary Virtue and American Reactions to Benedict Arnold," *William and Mary Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (1979): 184.

⁸⁰ State of Intelligence from Connecticut, 9 October 1780, 13:44-46, Germain Papers; Henry Lee to Anthony Wayne, 27 September 1780, in Henry B. Dawson, ed., *Papers*

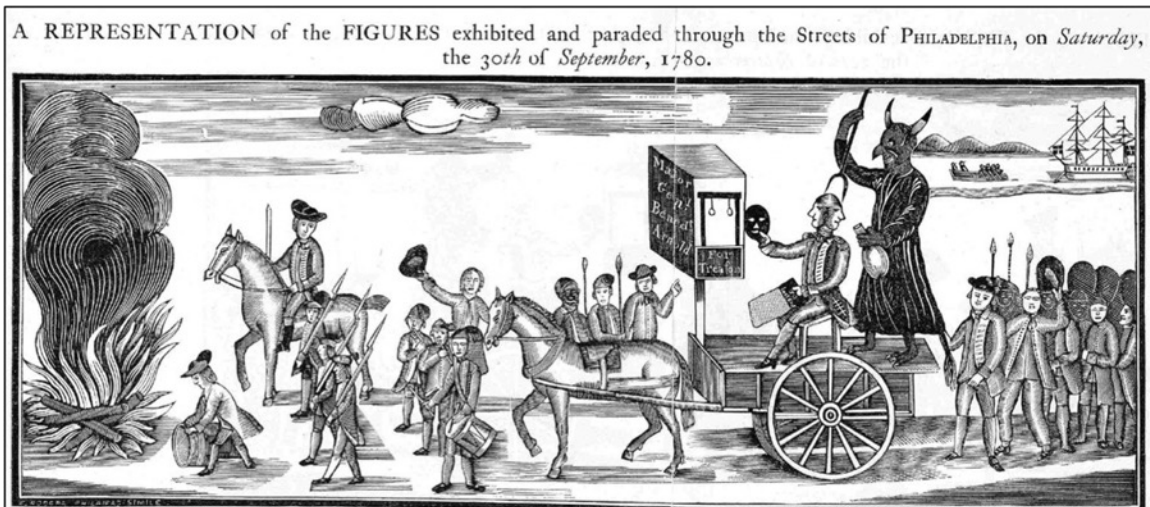


Figure 20: Arnold Paraded and Burned in Effigy

Publicly, the colonists responded to Arnold's betrayal with outrage. Several communities burned effigies of him in elaborate parades and ceremonies. In Philadelphia, demonstrators placed a two-faced representation of Arnold holding a mask on a portable stage. A black-robed devil stood behind him with a purse of money and a pitchfork, driving the figure forward. Locals, Continental Army officers, noted politicians, and the city guard paraded with the scene through the streets, announcing, "The crime of this man is HIGH TREASON ... The treachery of this ungrateful General is held up to public view, for the exposition of infamy."⁸¹ Similar displays occurred throughout the country

Concerning the Capture and Detention of Major John André (Yonkers, NY, 1866), 66; Alexander Scammel to Stephen Peabody, 3 October 1780, in Dawson, *Papers Concerning*, 66; Royster, "'The Nature of Treason,'" 190-93; Royster, *Revolutionary People*, 284-87.

⁸¹ "A Concise Description of the Figures Exhibited and Paraded Through the Streets of This City Saturday Last," *Pennsylvania Packet* (Philadelphia), 3 October 1780, *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.libproxy.temple.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANX&docref=image/v2%3A10CEB9BDCC081400%40EANX-10E0D70A50ABAB70%402371468-10E0D70A81F962E8%40>. Figure 20 from same source.

over the next year.⁸² When Arnold's British troops captured an American officer in Virginia in 1781, the prisoner informed Arnold that "if my countrymen should catch you ... they would first cut off that lame leg, which was wounded in the cause of freedom and virtue, and buy it with the honors of war, and afterwards hang the remainder of your body in gibbets."⁸³

To distance themselves from Arnold, some Americans reinterpreted all his previous deeds through the lens of his treason. His supposed bravery was just a fit of passion or drunkenness. The *Pennsylvania Packet* declared, "his whole Command appears to have been a scene of the basest traffick and publick plunder."⁸⁴ Congress took similar action and struck Arnold's name from the rolls of officers in the Continental Army. The message was clear: Arnold had never been a real patriot. All of this allowed

⁸² "Philadelphia," *New-Hampshire Gazette* (Portsmouth), 21 October 1780, *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*, [https://infoweb-newsbank-com.libproxy.temple.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANX&docref=image/v2%3A103709D225B248A8%40EANX-103F105F23F63ED5%402371486-103F105F9A132E3F%402](https://infoweb-newsbank-com.libproxy.temple.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANX&docref=image/v2%3A103709D225B248A8%40EANX-103F105F23F63ED5%402371486-103F105F9A132E3F%402;); "Printers" *Connecticut Courant* (Hartford), 12 December 1780, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.libproxy.temple.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANX&docref=image/v2%3A1080E0D856AD30E8%40EANX-10864C47D932D9F8%402371538-10864C4B69A05B58%401>.

⁸³ "An Anecdote," *Boston Gazette*, 13 August 1781, *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.libproxy.temple.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANX&docref=image/v2%3A1036CD2E61FB47A0%40EANX-104455C51B62FFA3%402371782-104455C522BFC7DB%400>.

⁸⁴ "Philadelphia, September 30," *Pennsylvania Packet* (Philadelphia), 30 September 1780, *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.libproxy.temple.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANX&docref=image/v2%3A10CEB9BDCC081400%40EANX-10E0D708AFFE2200%402371465-10E0D708C39B2FF0%400>.

the Americans to alleviate some of their guilt. Arnold was not a sign of weakness because he had never been like them.⁸⁵

Mutiny: November 1780-January 1781

In the wake of the Arnold treason, a relatively minor but symbolic change happened at West Point. After Maj. Gen. Nathanael Greene took command on 9 October 1780, he renamed the main fort in honor of Brig. Gen. James Clinton, the commander of the regiment that built it. Greene, however, would only be at the post for eight days until he left to take over the Southern Army from Maj. Gen. Horatio Gates. Maj. Gen. William Heath returned to the Highlands, marking the fifth commander at the position in four weeks. A month before Arnold's treason initiated this command parade, Maj. Sebastian Bauman of the 2nd Continental Artillery at West Point told Hamilton that these repeated shakeups harmed the Continental Army's mission in the Highlands and impaired the discipline of the West Point garrison. "There is no Nation at War which pursues the like mode," Bauman complained, "Excepting us." He warned the constant changeover prevented progress on the structures because the commander never had an opportunity to organize the work.⁸⁶

Greene surveyed West Point in his first days as commandant and found Bauman's assessment accurate. The Rhode Islander lamented that "the works of the garrison are

⁸⁵ Ford, 4 October 1780, *JCC*, 18:899.

⁸⁶ Sebastian Bauman to Hamilton, 13 August 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-0811>.

very incomplete; indeed very little has been done to them this campaign.”⁸⁷ Greene complained to Washington that he needed more men to complete the work because he lacked the numbers needed to both stand guard posts and rebuild.

The troops were in worse condition than the works because of inadequate supplies. Alexander McDougall, briefly in command immediately following Arnold’s defection, noted a dearth of flour on 2 October. Greene followed up eleven days later and reported to Washington that no flour remained on the post. Heath observed the same problem two weeks later. Two months later, beef and rum also ran out. The garrison lacked enough clothing and blankets for the coming winter. Washington went so far as to discharge nearly 200 troops without adequate clothing replacements to allow them to go home before their uniforms wore out completely.⁸⁸ In a sardonic rebuke of Gouverneur Morris’ suggestion to attack the British near King’s Bridge, Washington observed, “it would be well for the Troops, if like Chameleons, they could live upon air.”⁸⁹ An accurate assessment of the Main Army’s strength, Washington noted, revealed the impossibility of offensive action until the Continental Congress and the several states met

⁸⁷ Greene to Washington, 13 October 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-03560>.

⁸⁸ McDougall to George Clinton, 2 October 1780, in Hastings, *Public Papers of George Clinton*, 6:273; Greene to Washington, 13 October 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-03560>; Heath, *Memoirs*, 275; Heath to Washington, 18 January 1781, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-04573>.

⁸⁹ Washington to Gouverneur Morris, 11 December 1780, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 20:457-59.

the basic needs of his soldiers. Fortunately for the garrison, the winter of 1780-81 was extremely mild, especially compared to the previous year.

In late November, Washington put his Main Army into winter quarters. He opted against concentrating the soldiers as he had in 1779-80 at Morristown. Instead, he spread the camps over a wide arc from Colchester, Connecticut (fifteen miles southeast of Hartford), in the east, extending to West Point, and then turning south through Pompton and Morristown, New Jersey. Cavalry units covered the southern flanks of the line from Lancaster, Pennsylvania. The bulk of the Army went to West Point and the surrounding area and built log huts for their housing.⁹⁰ New Windsor, about five miles north of West Point on the Hudson, became Washington's headquarters.

Washington intended to “not only cover the Country and our communication with the Delaware, but as much as possible to ease us in the article of transportation.”⁹¹ Placing the bulk of his force in the Highlands also enabled him to guard against potential attacks from British-aligned Native American nations to the north and west. From a different perspective, though, the Continental camp alignment served as a theater-level siege line around New York City. Washington's forces confined Sir Henry Clinton's army to Manhattan and the immediate surrounding area, which limited the area from which the British could procure provisions and forage. Instead, Clinton relied on maritime supply chains, but France challenged their naval superiority and increased the

⁹⁰ See Elliott, “Highlands War” for an examination of the Continental Army's winter quarters, especially, 216-65.

⁹¹ Washington to Huntington, 28 November 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-04092>.

cost of keeping the king's army fed and supplied. Also, with troops in Albany and Schenectady, the American position closely resembled a Vauban-style siege with lines formed to prevent relief from reaching New York City from the north.

Washington, however, wanted to attack the British because of his "Earnest desire ... of closing the campaign with some degree of eclat."⁹² Even after the Arnold affair threatened the security of the Highlands, Washington still vacillated on which means to employ. He settled for persevering and steadily increasing the cost of the war for the British, but he longed to fight a single battle that would decide the contest. Nevertheless, he understood ultimate success derived from the erosion of British will through the escalation of costs on the army.

Whose will would falter first remained an open question. Like the previous year, 1781 began with mutiny. The Pennsylvania Line, stationed in Jockey Hollow near Morristown, mutinied on 1 January 1781, arguing that their terms of enlistment expired. As the Continental Congress, the brigade commander, and some troops from West Point dealt with the uprising, Washington worried mutiny would spread to the Highlands post. The troops defending the fortress experienced the same deprivations as the Pennsylvania Line, but an uprising at West Point invited a British thrust up the river to seize the Rebel works. Washington, therefore, had to stay at nearby New Windsor to ensure the more critical garrison remained on duty. His actions reemphasized the importance of the position to his vision of a successful conclusion to the war. He also revealed his

⁹² Washington to Morris, 10 December 1780, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 20:457-59.

conviction that without congressional and state support for the troops in winter quarters, another revolt was likely.⁹³

To mitigate the danger of mutiny, Washington needed provisions and supplies. He wrote directly to Gov. George Clinton of New York and Gov. Jonathan Trumbull of Connecticut requesting flour and beef from their states. He sent a circular letter to the New England states explaining the mutiny, its causes, and warning that if the states did not immediately begin to provide regular pay, clothing, and food to the troops, the Continental Army would dissolve. Once the Pennsylvanians were back at their post, Washington continued to sound the alarm about the potential for more uprisings based on the lack of support from the various states.⁹⁴

Even as the Pennsylvanians returned to duty, the New Jersey Line proved Washington prescient. On 20 January 1781, the New Jersey units near Pompton followed the Pennsylvanian example and left their post to march on Philadelphia.⁹⁵ Washington

⁹³ Washington to Huntington, 6 January 1781, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 21:64-66. For more on the Pennsylvania Line mutiny, see Carl Van Doren, *Mutiny in January* (New York: Viking, 1943); Royster, *Revolutionary People at War*, 302-8; Ferling, *Winning Independence*, 307-11; E. Wayne Carp, *To Starve the Army at Pleasure: Continental Army Administration and American Political Culture, 1775-1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 181-87.

⁹⁴ Washington to George Clinton, 4 January 1781, in Hastings, *Public Papers of George Clinton*, 6:547-51; Washington to Jonathan Trumbull, 19 January 1781, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 21:116-17; Washington to Hancock, 19 January 1781, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-04579>; Washington to Oliver Phelps, 20 January 1781, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-04590>.

⁹⁵ Israel Shreve to Washington, 20 January 1781, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-04594>; Howe to Washington, 25 January 1781, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-04653>; Howe to Washington, 27 January 1781, Founders Online,

dispatched Howe to put the New Jersey mutiny down decisively. By the time the North Carolinian returned to West Point, Washington was confident enough to say, “the spirit of Mutiny is now completely subdued and will not again shew itself.”⁹⁶ The successive mutinies, though, motivated the Continental Congress and the states to act for a time. The overall conditions around West Point slowly improved through the spring.⁹⁷

Conclusion

Competing sources of authority complicated the recovery efforts at the Highlands fortifications following the winter of 1779-80. Harsh storms had damaged the garrison and structures at West Point. Howe failed to lead the reconstruction process effectively. In addressing the problem, Washington navigated the competing imperatives of military necessity and social norms. He settled on a compromise solution to allow Howe to save face while giving him subordinates to complete the repairs and instill discipline in the garrison.

Neither Clinton nor Washington changed their theories of victory during this time, although both experimented with different means to achieve their goals. The British maintained that Southern Loyalists outnumbered the Rebels significantly, and the army

<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-04665>; and Thacher, *Military Journal*, 302-304. Shreve did not specify how many troops mutinied. Returns from December 1780 show three New Jersey Brigades at Pompton totaling 725 soldiers and noncommissioned officers. Lesser, *Sinews of Independence*, 192.

⁹⁶ Washington to Jean-Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, comte de Rochambeau, 29 January 1781, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-04693>.

⁹⁷ Washington to Greene, 2 February 1781, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-04731>.

merely needed to give them space and time to recover the local governments. South Carolina became the center of most armed confrontations. Clinton, however, still sought to gain control of the Hudson River to isolate New England and cut the lines of communication between the middle and eastern states. Arnold's dissatisfaction with the Continental Congress' treatment of him provided Clinton with an opportunity to compound the Americans' troubles and further isolate the Rebels.

Washington argued that driving up British war costs would eventually force the enemy to the negotiating table where American diplomats could secure independence. Maintaining the Continental Army as a threat to the crown's forces facilitated that effort, but Washington desired a battlefield victory. He knowingly sacrificed the readiness of West Point to prepare for offensive action against New York City. Arnold's betrayal revealed the weakness of the American position. Washington accordingly changed tactics, but his theory of victory, his strategy, remained unaffected.

In response to Arnold's defection, Washington communicated to two different audiences. On the domestic front, he used the fortuitous discovery of the treason as evidence of divine protection for the United States. He also crowed that the strength of the Continental Army's Hudson defenses forced Clinton to revert to subterfuge. For a foreign audience, including the British, Washington emphasized the legitimacy of the Continental Army through strict adherence to the customs of war and the law of nations. Washington confirmed André's death sentence because it observed those norms. His implied argument was that the United States met and would continue to meet European standards governing the proper behavior of an army at war. His country was not just a

mélange of rebellious provinces. Rather, the actions of the Continental Army showed the United States to be a legitimate nation.

Civilians supporting the cause of independence reacted to Arnold's treason with a mixture of shock, guilt, and indignance. They worried about what their former hero's betrayal said concerning the viability of a republic built on the virtue of its citizens. Arnold had seemed virtuous before, but he clearly was not. They saw in Arnold a reflection of themselves because their own virtue had waned since the heady days of 1775. In response, they recast Arnold as a duplicitous villain whose lust for money and power motivated his battlefield actions. Civilians throughout the country burned Arnold in effigy to emphasize that they were different than this fallen hero.

On the other hand, Clinton and Arnold sought to exploit the Americans' anxiety. They focused on the certainty of a British victory and the virtue of pursuing self-interest. Arnold excoriated Congress as tyrannical for continuing the war even after Britain had offered to meet its original demands. He implored his fellow Americans to reclaim their identity as subjects of the king within the safety of the empire. His message was only marginally effective.

In the winter of 1780-81, the Continental Army teetered on the edge of dissolution because of a lack of pay, clothes, and food. The resulting mutinies motivated states and the Continental Congress to increase their material support for the war. As the location for the bulk of the army, West Point began to see an influx of supplies and provisions in the late winter and early spring. From 1781 until the end of the war, the system of fortifications in the Hudson Highlands transitioned from a critical defensive site to a home and supply hub for the Continental Army.

CHAPTER 5

WINDING DOWN AND FLARING UP, JANUARY 1781-JUNE 1784

Arnold's treason in 1780 and the Pennsylvania Line mutiny in 1781 revealed the precarious state of the United States and Washington's Main Army. Popular fervor waned throughout the war, and material support for the army likewise steadily declined. In 1780, Washington dreamed of reclaiming New York City, but he eventually bowed to the inhibiting effects of his army's supply and provision shortages. As winter gave way to spring, though, the condition of the Main Army slowly improved until Washington could again cast his gaze toward the British on Manhattan. The French fleet sailed for the Chesapeake, though, and Washington turned away from New York to pursue the destruction or capture of Lord Cornwallis' force in Virginia.

Despite popular mythology, the British surrender at Yorktown in 1781 did not end the war, nor did it signal to the commanders of the American and British armies the conclusion of open combat. The defeat of Cornwallis was significant, but the Americans had forced the surrender of another British army four years earlier, and the war raged on. Washington continued to develop schemes to take New York City, and Gen. Sir Henry Clinton scrambled to counterbalance the loss of Cornwallis' troops. The garrison at West Point maintained and repaired its fortifications in anticipation of a campaign in 1782, unaware of the peace negotiations that began in Paris in April. By the time news of the talks reached American shores, the Main Army had started transforming West Point into a permanent outpost. Washington faced the challenge of maintaining readiness for combat operations while preparing for a shift to peacetime.

Civil-military tensions increased during the last two years of the war. The dire financial situation of the United States resulted in a significant portion of the army going without pay for months or even years. The lack of payment increased the difficulty of keeping the army together as soldiers confronted both the neglect of civilian authorities and the uncertainty of impending peace. The officers found themselves in an untenable position. Unable to attend to personal business because of their duties with the army, many officers fell into crushing debt, threatening their status as gentlemen. The resentment threatened to boil over just as peace arrived.

The purpose of West Point evolved between Arnold's treason and the dissolution of the Continental Army in 1784. That post's strength in 1781 ultimately enabled Washington's movement of the Main Army to trap Cornwallis at Yorktown. After Washington returned to the Highlands in April 1782, West Point shifted from a defensive position to a supply depot. As civilian politicians debated the virtue of a standing army, Continental troops in the Hudson Highlands reconfigured West Point as if it would become the permanent home of the United States military.

The Continental Army used West Point to communicate with a foreign and domestic audience. Americans showed off the fortifications to visiting dignitaries, politicians, and French Lt. Gen. Jean-Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, comte de Rochambeau. These tours helped demonstrate the legitimacy of the US military and, by association, the United States. Eventually, the Continental Army gained grudging respect from European enemies and allies. Still, it could not convince the Continental Congress to invest in the future of a standing army. A myriad of contingent decisions and the flow

of events from 1781 to 1783 shaped the size, function, and character of West Point and the army of the United States.

A Neglected Army: Spring 1781

In late spring 1781, Washington's Main Army emerged from winter quarters and began to consolidate in the Highlands. It lacked many essentials, but the absence of flour for bread was most pressing. Washington observed that three factors contributed to the current state of affairs. First, the seat of the war was no longer in the North. Supplies and provisions from Maryland, Virginia, and the Carolinas went to the troops in the Southern Department under Maj. Gen. Nathanael Greene. Second, New Jersey and New York lay stripped of resources after their efforts to provide for the army over the past several years. New York had ruined its credit, and "the Government have strained their exertions to that height, that the people have almost been driven to open resistance."¹ Finally, New England did not grow wheat, so it could not provide the flour the army so desperately needed. The burden thus fell to Pennsylvania and Delaware as "their supplies are ample and means must be found to draw them out - or the Army must disband, as there is no other resource."² Washington understood the Continental Congress had little power to compel the states to comply with the requisitions and even less purchasing power because of the poor financial situation of the United States. Despite the resurgent interest in

¹ Washington to Reed, 5 May 1781, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-05645>.

² Washington to Reed, 5 May 1781, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-05645>.

virtuous public service after the Arnold treason, the Continental Army still suffered significant depredations.³

The Continental Army became embittered because of its meager rations and non-existent pay. In the autumn of 1780, Greene and six brigadier generals, the commanders of units from New England, took advantage of the overlapping lines of authority, bypassed the Continental Congress, and wrote to all the governors of their home states. They explained the public appreciation for their sacrifice mediated their dashed expectations of a short war in 1775. More than four years into the conflict, however, the army suffered from a lack of support, and the generals faced accusations of impropriety from politicians and other civil servants. The neglect endangered the cause of independence because “there is no ground of hope, that the enemy will relinquish their object, till they find the Country prepared to defend itself, that is, until they see an Army opposed to them as regular as their own, and on as permanent a Basis.”⁴ The men concluded that the states must rectify the supply and pay issues, or the United States would lose the war and its independence.⁵

The letter from the generals revealed increasing tension between the army and civilians, a subtle amendment to US strategy, and the men’s lingering anxiety over their

³ General Officers to Congress, 11 July 1780, Reel 3, McDougall Papers; General Officers to New England Governors, Autumn 1780, Reel 3, McDougall Papers.

⁴ Nathanael Greene, Samuel H. Parsons, John Patterson, John Glover, John Stark, Jedediah Huntington, and Henry Knox to New England Governors, Autumn 1780, Reel 3, McDougall Papers.

⁵ General Officers to Congress, 11 July 1780, Reel 3, McDougall Papers; Greene, et. al, to New England Governors, Autumn 1780, Reel 3, McDougall Papers.

social status. First, Greene and his fellow generals implied that officers contributed more virtuous service than their civilian counterparts. When politicians refused to provide for the bare necessities of life, the generals took umbrage. Enduring the hazards of war was bad enough without “the Mortification, of receiving his pittance from a reluctant hand.”⁶

Second, the generals identified another mechanism through which the United States would achieve its political objectives for the war. Specifically, they claimed that creating a regular, standing army was the only way the Continental Congress could convince the British to recognize the United States as a legitimate country. In other words, the British would not realize the cost of continued fighting outweighed the benefits of potential victory until the United States fielded an army like those in Europe. Members of Congress, already leery of the officers’ power, grew more suspicious.

Finally, the officers shared their concerns about their inability to meet the standards of their station for want of funds. Societal expectations compelled these men, who claimed gentry status, to purchase a certain quantity and quality of goods.⁷ The material items were available, but the officers could not afford them because of Congress’ negligence in paying the army. Brig. Gen. Samuel H. Parsons concluded that “the states never design to make us any compensation if they can avoid it.”⁸ As the army concentrated at West Point in the spring of 1781, the men and officers struggled with

⁶ Greene, et. al, to New England Governors, Autumn 1780, Reel 3, McDougall Papers.

⁷ Cox, *A Proper Sense of Honor*, 21-26; Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, xi-xv, 61-79.

⁸ Parsons to McDougall, 12 August 1781, Reel 3, McDougall Papers.

competing imperatives to fulfill their military obligations and respond to the perceived indignities emanating from the population they defended.

The Continental Congress' dire financial straits caused its nonfeasance. A lack of hard currency (specie) compelled Congress to print paper money. The value of the currency, however, depreciated rapidly, causing massive inflation. Because Congress lacked the authority to tax directly, the national revenue stream was weak and unreliable. In 1780, Congress officially transferred the responsibility for paying and provisioning officers and soldiers of the Continental Army to the states that raised the regiments. The response was, at best, uneven.⁹ As Lt. Col. Alexander Hamilton noted, the "whole system is in disorder. ... Congress have been responsible for the administration of affairs, without the means of fulfilling that responsibility."¹⁰ The multiple lines of authority over state troops in Continental Army service further complicated an already tenuous system.

West Point to Yorktown: Summer-Fall 1781

In the summer of 1781, Gen. Sir Henry Clinton recognized his tactics in the South had failed to produce the desired political outcome. He told Lord George Germain that merely marching an army through an area would not have a lasting effect. North Carolina remained in rebellion despite Cornwallis' campaigning there. The sheer size of Virginia's population and territory prevented British Army control without significant Loyalist

⁹ Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence*, 288-96; Charles Rappleye, *Robert Morris: Financier of the American Revolution* (New York City: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 164-65.

¹⁰ Alexander Hamilton, "The Continentalist No. 3," 9 August 1781, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-1186>.

support, and Clinton noted its conspicuous absence.¹¹ He predicted that “without our friends join us heartily, tho’ we may conquer, we shall never keep.”¹² Instead, the British should have a “permanent and settled Plan of Conquest, by securing and preserving what has been recovered.”¹³ Clinton planned for operations around Baltimore to block support to Virginia from the Northern states. His theory of victory still relied on Loyalist assistance to control, rather than just subdue, the rebellious provinces.

Clinton intended to couple interdiction of Northern supplies en route to the South with operations in New York to divide the rebellious colonies further. He still wanted to attack West Point, but he needed first to protect a potentially vulnerable New York City. Clinton estimated Washington opposed him with at least seven thousand Continental soldiers and an unknown, but significant, number of the militia who were “as well apportioned and as formidable as the best of the Continentals.”¹⁴ Clinton fretted that the defenses of New York City were understrength because of the number of troops he had sent to Cornwallis in Virginia. British naval superiority, however, soothed Clinton’s fears and enabled him to consider offensive action seriously.¹⁵ He assured Germain he “would not slip any favorable Opportunity of ... securing (even by a regular Attack) the

¹¹ Clinton to Germain, 5 April 1781, 151:36, Clinton Papers; Ferling, *Winning Independence*, 373-76.

¹² Clinton to Germain, 9 July 1781, 158:41, Clinton Papers.

¹³ Clinton to Germain, 18 July 1781, 165:15, Clinton Papers.

¹⁴ Clinton to Germain, 18 July 1781, 165:15, Clinton Papers.

¹⁵ Clinton to Cornwallis, 8 June 1781, 158:6, Clinton Papers.

important Post of West Point, whenever the Attempt can be made with Propriety.”¹⁶ The challenge was to find or create that opportunity.

A Franco-American siege of New York City was Washington’s fondest dream for 1781. A French army under Rochambeau landed in Rhode Island in 1780, but it remained relatively inactive for nearly a year. In March and May 1781, Washington met with Rochambeau to coordinate the long-anticipated offensive. The French general had orders to defer to Washington’s decisions, but there was little chance Washington would make a choice with which the French strongly disagreed. Rochambeau preferred an offensive in the Chesapeake region to expel the British from Virginia. Securing the lines of communication between the Northern and Southern states gave the rebellion a better chance for continued unified action and provided Rochambeau with an opportunity to defeat a British army. Washington, however, fixated on New York City. He contended that an attack against Manhattan would indirectly aid Virginia because it would force Clinton to withdraw troops to defend his only major winter seaport in the North. Rochambeau reluctantly agreed and marched to the Hudson Highlands to rendezvous with the Main Army on 10 June 1781 with about three thousand troops fit for duty.

The campaign’s target changed in the ensuing months because any offensive operation depended on naval superiority. The commander of the French fleet, Vice Adm. François Joseph Paul, comte de Grasse ultimately decided the theater of operation. In late

¹⁶ Clinton to Germain, 5 April 1781, 151: 36, Clinton Papers.

July 1781, De Grasse notified Rochambeau he was sailing for the Chesapeake Bay, and Washington once again abandoned his plans to retake Manhattan.¹⁷

Meanwhile, the West Point garrison prepared the post for its role as the fallback position for the upcoming campaign. Maj. Gen. Robert Howe replaced Maj. Gen. William Heath as commander in May 1781 to allow the Massachusetts native to lobby New England governors and legislatures for supplies. A month later, Maj. Gen. Alexander McDougall replaced Howe. Each general stockpiled food, ammunition, gunpowder, and clothing in case the British launched a counterstrike into the Highlands. Such preparations were critical because Washington intended to decrease the West Point garrison to just 440 troops during an attack on New York City. The relative weakness of the British Army and the position of the Main Army, interposed between the post and the enemy, gave Washington confidence the depletion of the garrison was an acceptable risk.¹⁸

¹⁷ Ferling, *Winning Independence*, 397, 459-64; Washington, Diary, 22 May 1781, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/01-03-02-0007-0001-0021>; Washington to Reed, 27 May 1781, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-05877>; Washington to Greene, 1 June 1781, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-05926>; Rochambeau to Washington, 12 June 1781, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-06039>; Washington to Stirling, 12 June 1781, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-06033>; Washington to Rochambeau, 13 June 1781, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-06050>.

¹⁸ Washington to Howe, 7 May 1781, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 22:51; Washington to Howe, 2 June 1781, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 22:151.

To further mitigate the risk, Washington ordered the Corps of Invalids to West Point in June 1781. Congress established the corps in 1777 and assigned to it wounded soldiers unfit for field duty but capable of performing tasks in garrison. Washington reasoned that moving the unit to West Point would benefit the soldiers because of the salubrious mountain air in addition to the accommodations available at a semi-permanent post. For West Point, the corps provided additional veteran manpower to perform guard duties. The corps staggered into West Point in early August.¹⁹ Its arrival displeased McDougall, who judged the soldiers “fitter Subjects of a good Hospital, than to compose part of this Garrison.”²⁰ Nevertheless, the Corps of Invalids made West Point their home until the war’s end.

As West Point reached its full development in 1781, it became a showpiece for domestic and international audiences. So many “strangers of Rank and people upon business who are generally entertained” visited the works that Congress approved an additional stipend for the garrison commander to compensate for the extra expense.²¹ Before the French arrived, Washington nervously reminded his troops: “We shall be daily under the Eyes of officers of the first distinction improved by long service, and there is

¹⁹ Ford, 13 June 1781, *JCC*, 20:637; Ford, 16 July 1777, *JCC*, 8:554-56; Washington to Lewis Nicola, 21 June 1781, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 22:241-42; Washington, *Diary*, 10 August 1781, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/01-03-02-0007-0004-0007>.

²⁰ McDougall to Washington, 3-6 August 1781, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-06581>.

²¹ Washington to Huntington, 1 May 1781, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-05591>; Ford, 8 May 1781, *JCC*, 20:488-89.

nothing which contributes more to establish military character of a people than a performance of their duties with Alertness precision and uniformity.”²² When the French army arrived, the garrison stood for an inspection from Washington and Rochambeau. Just before the two armies began the march to Virginia, Washington hosted Rochambeau on a tour of the works.

French reports of the tour provide mixed evidence of their impressions. One of Rochambeau’s aides, Capt. Marie François Joseph Maxime, Baron de Cromot du Bourg, critiqued the fortifications as too spread out and susceptible to fire. On the other hand, Rochambeau’s nephew and aide-de-camp, Capt. Louis-François-Bertrand du Pont d’Aubevoye, comte de Lauberdière, praised the design and judged it “a respectable post.” It is doubtful that Rochambeau shared the unvarnished opinion of his experts with any Americans, but he commissioned a map of West Point to commemorate the tour (figure 21). Washington did not record his reaction to the visit, but he clearly desired to show off West Point to the American ally.²³

²² Washington, General Orders, 27 June 1781, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 268-69.

²³ Marie François Joseph Maxime, Baron de Cromot du Bourg, “Diary of a French Officer 1781,” *The Magazine of American History* 4 (1880): 307-08; Louis-François-Bertrand du Pont d’Aubevoye, comte de Lauberdière, *The Road to Yorktown: The French Campaigns in the American Revolution 1780-1783*, ed. and trans. Norman Desmarais (El Dorado Hills, CA: Savas Beatie, 2021), 34, 128-130. Figure 21 in Lauberdière, *Road to Yorktown*, 130 and Cromot du Bourg, “Diary,” 304.

reaction to the news of missing the expedition, but his memoirs focus almost exclusively on the movements of the Main Army and reports concerning operations in the Chesapeake. The exceptions include a few brief descriptions of his men's minor offensive actions, which indicate he was more concerned with attacking from West Point than preparing to defend it.²⁴

Washington offered McDougall a field command in the campaign, but he also asked if the New Yorker would prefer to remain as the garrison commander because of "domestic concerns, or for any other reason."²⁵ McDougall, a strong political presence in the state, chose to stay behind. Heath, the senior general and departmental commander, queried the New Yorker on the status of the garrison and immediately asserted his position of authority over McDougall. As the bulk of the Main Army marched south in hopes of trapping Cornwallis' army on the coast of Virginia, tension rose between the two major generals remaining in the Highlands.²⁶

The West Point defenses had recovered from the doldrums of 1780, but Heath still appeared apprehensive about the condition of the works. In his first letter to McDougall, Heath had little to say about the actual structures at the post. Heath claimed, "the completion and repair of the works, magazines, etc. are an object which requires

²⁴ Washington to Heath, 19 August 1781, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-06729>; Heath, *Memoirs*, 278-96.

²⁵ Washington to McDougall, 19 August 1781, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-06730>.

²⁶ Heath to McDougall, 24 August 1781, Reel 3, McDougall Papers.

immediate attention.”²⁷ He did not, however, identify what those deficiencies were.

Given that Heath had not been to West Point since he left in May that year, his directives likely assumed that the fortifications required constant construction and repairs.

The generals clashed over the number of men available for fatigue duty at the forts. Heath showed little interest in garrisoning the fort with soldiers to perform repairs and maintenance. For McDougall, siphoning off manpower, especially artificers, prevented the restoration of the works. Further, he reassured Heath that West Point was only vulnerable to a surprise attack. McDougall placed a substantial number of his troops in the outer layer of the defensive system to warn the main garrison of approaching danger. Insufficient manning, therefore, increased the risk to the site.²⁸

The tension between McDougall and Heath escalated over supply issues. In his first letter to McDougall, Heath gave specific instructions on where and how to collect firewood. McDougall condescendingly responded that poor transportation through the Highlands forced the garrison to collect the fuel within the local area. By November, despite McDougall’s repeated efforts to acquire a sufficient quantity of wood through Heath’s chosen method, West Point remained dangerously short of fuel for the winter.²⁹ McDougall bitingly observed, “we have failed in what I always knew we should fail in; transportation to the water. . . . Had not this been the case we should by this have an

²⁷ Heath to McDougall, 24 August 1781, Reel 3, McDougall Papers.

²⁸ McDougall to Heath, 1 September 1781, 21 September 1781, 26 September 1781, all on Reel 3, McDougall Papers.

²⁹ Heath to McDougall, 24 August 1781; McDougall to Heath, 1 September 1781, 26 September 1781, 20 November 1781, all on Reel 3, McDougall Papers.

ample Supply.”³⁰ He implored Heath to use the authority the New York Legislature gave to the Highlands commander to impress teams into service, but Heath demurred. The problem of overlapping lines of authority thus continued to plague the area despite civilian efforts to resolve them.

Complacency and boredom ran rampant in the late summer and early fall of 1781. Dr. Samuel Adams unhappily returned to the Highlands and remarked that “time rather hangs heavily on one’s hands.”³¹ The daily routine revolved around drum signals. Every morning at 8:30 a.m., drummers marked the beginning of the workday with the “Pioneers March.” Another drum roll at noon sent the workers to lunch, yet another called them back an hour later. “Retreat” announced the end of work, and “Tattoo” signaled the men to return to their huts at the end of the day. Hiking between the redoubts helped some men pass the time, but the days passed slowly.³² Adams dryly annotated on 18 October that he checked on his patients that day, which was “a thing done every day but only mentioned for want of more interesting occurrences.”³³ Finally, at the end of October, rumors of Washington’s victory at Yorktown brought relief to the garrison’s interminable waiting.³⁴

³⁰ McDougall to Heath, 7 November 1781, Reel 3, McDougall Papers.

³¹ Samuel Adams, Diary, 1 September 1781, Adams Papers.

³² Samuel Adams, Diary, 30 August, 18 September, 30 September 1781, Adams Papers.

³³ Samuel Adams, Diary, 18 September 1781, Adams Papers.

³⁴ Samuel Adams, Diary, 24 October 1781, Adams Papers.

A shortage of rations at West Point overshadowed the official notice of Washington's success in Virginia. The garrison went without bread for five days in October and eight days in November. McDougall complained that the garrison's food supplies were inadequate because of the amount of fatigue work his diminished division performed. He hinted that other posts within the Highlands did not suffer from the same kinds of deprivations, implying favoritism on the part of the commissary or even Heath himself. In a line that foreshadowed future complaints against the civilian population, McDougall wrote, "those in the public service in any capacity not at this Post, have many advantages over this Garrison in the article of Subsistence or exchange of provisions."³⁵ Heath rejected all McDougall's recommendations, though, and a month later, the two were still arguing over the best method of feeding the troops. McDougall begged Heath to set their differences aside to keep the soldiers from suffering. Heath indignantly responded that he was the regional commander, the entire department was his responsibility, and McDougall was wrong because local transportation could move more supplies than the army had available. Regardless of the source of difficulties, West Point faced another winter without adequate food, which the return of the Main Army from Virginia exacerbated.³⁶

As the winter months approached, food was not the only thing in short supply. A lack of building materials, specifically boards and nails, prevented artificers from completing the huts needed for winter housing. Most of the structures on the plain outside

³⁵ McDougall to Heath, 20 November 1781, Reel 3, McDougall Papers.

³⁶ McDougall to Heath, 20 November 1781, Heath to McDougall, 26 November 1781, both on Reel 3, McDougall Papers.

of Fort Clinton lacked doors, floors, and roofs. Fortunately, the barracks provided shelter for most of the troops. Engineers anticipated two weeks of work could complete the huts if Heath provided sufficient manpower and the quartermaster sent supplies. McDougall and Heath exchanged even more terse and angry letters throughout November and December, but the garrison finished the repairs before the season's first snowstorm.³⁷

Meanwhile, the Continental Congress asserted more direct control over the army in an effort to ameliorate their financial troubles. In November, Congress decreased the number of general officers to only those "absolutely necessary for the command of the troops in service."³⁸ As commander-in-chief, Washington could recommend his desired number, but the Secretary at War, Benjamin Lincoln, had the final word.³⁹ Also, the Board of War decreed every three infantry regiments warranted a brigadier general while a major general would command two brigadiers. The lower-ranking officers also came under scrutiny. On 31 December 1781, Congress retired all officers (effective the next day) below the grade of brigadier general who "do not belong to the line of any particular State or separate corps of the army."⁴⁰ Combined with a later resolution that eliminated

³⁷ McDougall to Heath, 20 November 1781; Heath to McDougall, 26 November 1781; McDougall to Hugh Hughes, 26 November 1781; Heath to McDougall, 12 December 1781; John Paterson, Report of Hutts and Barracks at West Point, 15 December 1781; Paterson to McDougall 15 December 1781; McDougall to Heath, 16 December 1781, Heath to McDougall 19 December 1781, all on Reel 3, McDougall Papers.

³⁸ Ford, 20 November 1781, *JCC*, 21:1127.

³⁹ Ford, 30 October 1781, *JCC*, 21:1087. Congress appointed Lincoln eleven days after he accepted Cornwallis' sword at Yorktown from the British general's second-in-command, Lt. Gen. Charles O'Hara.

⁴⁰ Ford, 31 December 1781, *JCC*, 21:1186-87.

regimental quartermasters, recruiters, and aides-de-camp, the measures gutted staff positions and increased the workload of the remaining army administrators. The following month, Congress overhauled the structure and reporting requirements for the inspector general's office but retained Maj. Gen. Friedrich Wilhelm August Heinrich Ferdinand von Steuben in the position. Later, congressmen cut the Continental Army quartermaster's pay by 45 percent. The representatives couched the justification for these resolutions in terms of cost-savings, stressing that "the most strict economy in public expenditures is absolutely necessary for a vigorous prosecution of the war."⁴¹ For the officers suddenly without a commission or forced to perform additional administrative tasks, the actions implied Congress viewed them as expendable.

As the new year arrived, the French engineer, Maj. Jean Louis Ambroise, Chevalier de Villefranche took stock of the structures at West Point. A few minor repairs remained, but most of his recommendations involved new construction or completing existing projects. For example, Villefranche suggested enlarging Fort Clinton's bombproof and resurfacing it with dry stone. Fort Putnam also needed dry stone walls to replace the flammable timber. He saw the need for a bombproof, a powder magazine, a provision magazine, and barracks at all seven numbered redoubts, but he judged the North Redoubt and South Redoubt on the east side of the river complete.⁴²

⁴¹ Ford, 14 March 1782, *JCC*, 22:129-33; Ford, 23 April 1782, *JCC*, 22: 211.

⁴² Jean Louis Ambroise, Chevalier de Villefranche, Report of Work to be Done, 13-14 January 1782, Reel 4, McDougall Papers. Figures 22 and 23 in Unsigned, Drawings and Plans, 13 January 1782, Reel 4, McDougall Papers.

The most significant new project for West Point was the hospital. The Corps of Invalids' arrival made previous improvised arrangements insufficient. The return of the Main Army to the Highlands further strained medical resources in the Highlands. Building materials were scarce, though, and the hospital called for over five thousand

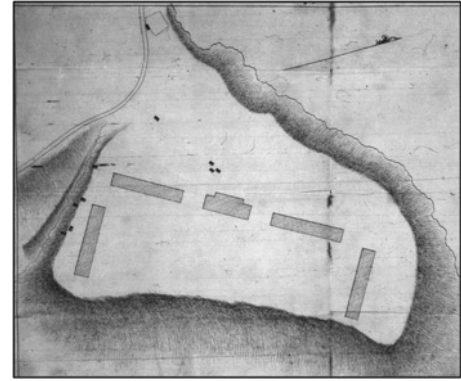


Figure 22: Hospital Plans

boards, two thousand pounds of nails, and thirteen hundred window pains. Villefranche's drawings indicated five different buildings: four long buildings and the main building. The main building was a two-story structure approximately one-hundred eighty feet wide by sixty feet deep. The long buildings were just over two hundred feet long but only twenty-five feet wide. Villefranche proposed a site on the west side of the river about half

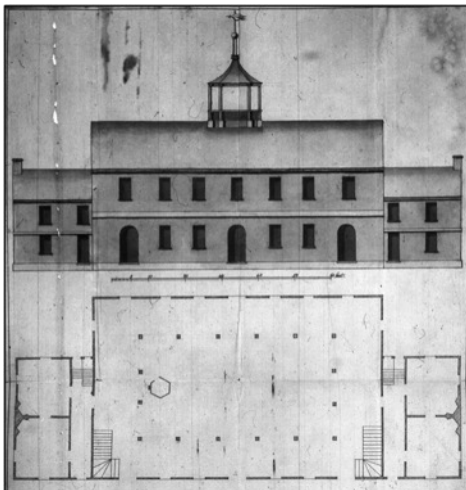


Figure 23: Main Building

a mile north of Fort Clinton. A mile further north, a separate encampment of huts served as the smallpox ward for actual cases and units receiving inoculations. The garrison completed the hospital sometime in 1782 as Dr. James Thacher gave the first reference to it as a finished structure in December of that year.⁴³

⁴³ Jane G. Brister, *History of Army Medical Service at West Point* (West Point: United States Military Academy Archives, 1950), 26-27; Unsigned, Drawings and Plans, 13 January 1782, Reel 4, McDougall Papers; Thacher, *Military Journal*, 324; Heath, *Memoirs*, 301; Heath to McDougall, 1 January 1783, Reel 4, McDougall Papers.

During the winter of 1781 and 1782, the garrison at West Point did not suffer as much as in previous years as supply chains slowly improved. In December, the sergeants of Brig. Gen. John Paterson's brigade appealed to him for clothing, food, and pay. McDougall had already lobbied assistant clothier David Brooks for more items, using the direst terms to describe the sufferings of the men. The actual request, however, was relatively small for the 1,012 troops in Paterson's unit, amounting to forty hats, eighteen coats, eleven pairs of shoes, thirty-eight shirts, twenty-three pairs of stockings, twenty-four pairs of overalls, and twenty-one blankets. The men had not received pay in months, but they possessed the basics of food, shelter, and clothing.⁴⁴ In late January 1782, McDougall reported the troops had been uneasy for several weeks, but "all is now quiet, and they are in good humor."⁴⁵

Maj. Gen. William Heath did not share his troops' mood. The departmental commander quarreled with McDougall again in December over orders Heath gave to officers within McDougall's command. On two separate occasions in January, McDougall hosted several of his subordinate commanders at his headquarters and made several unflattering remarks about Heath. When Heath found out, he placed the New Yorker under arrest and charged him with seven total crimes, including dereliction of duty, overstepping his authority, disobeying orders, and conduct unbecoming an officer. Addressing the gatherings specifically, the last two articles accused McDougall of

⁴⁴ Paterson to McDougall, 15 December 1781; McDougall to Brooks, 11 December 1781, both on Reel 3, McDougall Papers; Lesser, *Sinews of Independence*, 212.

⁴⁵ McDougall to Washington, 27 January 1782, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-07741>.

undermining Heath's authority and "tending to excite sedition, create division, subvert good order and discipline, and wound the service."⁴⁶ Eight months passed before the court-martial convened.⁴⁷

McDougall immediately reached out to the officers who attended the meetings in question and requested their recollections of their conversations. On 7 January, McDougall hosted an informal gathering where he explained his disagreement with Heath over how to supply West Point and generally run the department. McDougall claimed he knew his way was safe and effective while Heath's was not. The garrison commander reasoned that another traitor like Arnold could be using Heath's plan to weaken the fort, so he felt compelled to guard against such a possibility. Furthermore, McDougall proclaimed that he considered Heath a "double-faced man" ever since Heath's recommendation to defend New York City in 1776 despite knowing it was untenable.⁴⁸

The gathering on 16 January was not a social event like the one nine days earlier. McDougall complained that Heath circumvented the chain-of-command and issued orders directly to men at the post instead of through the garrison commander. Heath forbade Col. John Crane, 3rd Continental Artillery Regiment commander, from accessing the powder stores on the post without his personal authorization. McDougall directed

⁴⁶ Heath to McDougall, 18 January 1782, Reel 4, McDougall Papers.

⁴⁷ MacDougall, *American Revolutionary*, 141-46; Champagne, *Alexander McDougall*, 173-80.

⁴⁸ Charges, Specifications, and Defence Relating to the Trial by Court-Martial on Charges presented by Maj. Gen. Heath, January-August 1782, Reel 4, McDougall Papers.

Crane to provide him access to the magazine. The West Point commander elaborated that Heath had no right to order him to do anything that would compromise the security of the post. McDougall argued he had to follow merely “doubtful” orders, but he must disregard “unmilitary and injurious ones.”⁴⁹ Because access to powder was necessary for the fort’s defense, Heath had no right to forbid McDougall free access to it. Ultimately, McDougall and Heath disputed the extent of the other’s jurisdiction. Once again, overlapping lines of authority hampered the defenses at West Point.

McDougall delayed his court-martial through procedural objections and evidence accumulation. The defendant objected to nearly every detail of the trial, from its location to its presiding officer to the panel members. He spent months interviewing witnesses and requesting recollections in writing from a variety of officers in the Highlands. Shortly before the trial began, McDougall asked Washington to place Heath under arrest for incompetence, dereliction of duty, neglect, and tyranny. He later dropped the charges over concerns the continued spat would diminish the Continental Army in the eyes of the French. McDougall’s trial concluded in August, and the court found him guilty on only one charge of insulting Heath in front of junior officers. Washington issued a mild reprimand in the general orders of 28 August and moved McDougall to command two Connecticut brigades at Verplanck’s Point. Concluding the matter, the commander-in-chief chose recently promoted Maj. Gen. Henry Knox to replace Heath at West Point

⁴⁹ Rufus Putnam, Narrative of Conversations on 16 January 1782, n.d., Reel 4, McDougall Papers.

because his experience as the Continental Army's chief of artillery best suited him for managing the build-up of ordnance and artillery stores at the post.⁵⁰

British Strategy After Yorktown

King George III; Prime Minister Frederick North, 2nd Earl of Guilford; and the Secretary of State for America, Lord George Germain, received the news of Cornwallis' surrender in November 1781. The revelation especially distressed Lord North, who reportedly paced the room and repeatedly exclaimed, "Oh God, it is all over."⁵¹ The king and Germain remained determined to fight on. Britain could not provide replacements for Cornwallis' defeated army, so the depleted strength of Clinton's forces required a new plan. Germain instructed the British commander-in-chief to abandon the direct approach and conduct a series of raids against the coastal cities from the three British strongholds of Savannah, Charleston, and New York City.⁵²

British strategy was in disarray. Germain never articulated how the application of force through naval raids would lead to the capitulation and reintegration of the colonies. If determined to continue the war, Germain needed to develop a new theory of victory that incorporated the inability to act militarily against the Continental Army or the

⁵⁰ McDougall to Washington, 15 Jun 1782, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-08696>; McDougall to Washington, 23 August 1782, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-09219>; Duane to McDougall, 28 August 1782, Reel 4, McDougall Papers; Washington, General Orders, 28 August 1782, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 25:76-84; Washington to McDougall, 28 August 1782, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 25:73.

⁵¹ Alan Valentine, *Lord North*, 2 vols. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967), 2:274.

⁵² Germain to Clinton, 2 January 1782, 18:300-305, Germain Papers.

individual provinces. Instead, he communicated a plan seemingly limited to harassing the Americans.

As Clinton prepared for the 1782 campaign, the British political dynamic changed dramatically. In late February, after two failed attempts, the opposition party garnered enough support to pass a resolution prohibiting offensive military action anywhere in North America. The prime minister replaced Germain as American secretary of state with Welbore Ellis, but North's administration did not survive March. Clinton also lost his position as George III recalled him to England. Gen. Sir Guy Carleton assumed command of the British forces in North America on 8 May 1782 and prepared to wait for a renewed offensive or the end of the war.⁵³

Waiting for Peace: Spring-Fall 1782

In the spring of 1782, the Main Army consolidated in the Highlands, the garrison at West Point grew, and the soldiers looked toward New York City as the target for the next campaign. Clothes and food, but not pay, arrived at the post in record quantities. Uncertainty over the object for 1782 increased anxiety throughout the camp until the troops learned peace negotiations between the United States and Great Britain had begun in April. The officers strove to maintain readiness in the event those talks failed while not taking any offensive action to give the peace process the best chance for success.⁵⁴

⁵³ Clinton, *American Rebellion*, 352-67; Resolution Passed by the House of Commons, 4 March 1782, in Clinton, *American Rebellion*, 595-96; Thomas Fleming, *The Perils of Peace: America's Struggle for Survival After Yorktown* (New York City: Harper Collins, 2007), 135-58.

⁵⁴ Benjamin Gilbert to Daniel Gilbert, March 1782 and 26 April 1782; Benjamin Gilbert to Jesse Ware, 1 May 1782, all in Benjamin Gilbert, *Winding Down: The Revolutionary*

Washington resumed direct control of the Highlands Department in late April. He ordered Villefranche to conduct another inspection of the works and discovered no difference between the January and April reports. The French engineer requested 214 men, including carpenters, masons, miners, and blacksmiths, for two months to make the necessary repairs.⁵⁵ Washington gave Villefranche precisely what he asked for because “it is essentially necessary that these repairs should be done before the Army assembles in the field.”⁵⁶ Washington’s insistence on rapidly repairing the fort evinced his belief that hostilities had not concluded and there would be a campaign in 1782.

For Washington, British intentions determined the type of operation he would wage in the coming months. As usual, the commander-in-chief asked his generals for their opinions, but he gently prodded them toward an attack on New York City, explicitly asking under what circumstances a siege would be possible. Washington received his generals’ advice, but he made no immediate decision. Instead, he outlined four possible attack options for the Main Army. In order of significance and difficulty, they were New York City, Savannah-Charleston, Canada, and Halifax. He explained the lines of operation, support and supply plans, the number of troops required, and the risk of each. The campaigns in New York and the South depended on close cooperation with the

War Letters of Lieutenant Benjamin Gilbert of Massachusetts, 1780-1783, ed. John Shy, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 53-55.

⁵⁵ Washington, General Orders, 4 April 1782, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 24:101; Washington, General Orders, 13 April 1782, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 24:117; Villefranche to Washington, 15 April 1782, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-08168>.

⁵⁶ Washington, General Orders, 18 April 1782, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 24:133.

French fleet because Washington's plans assumed local maritime superiority. The last two options placed a smaller burden on the French navy. In each plan, West Point played the critical role of staging point and main supply base. Washington concluded there were too many unknown factors to make a definitive choice at that time. Throughout the rest of the year, however, he looked for opportunities to take the offensive, primarily because he doubted the sincerity of Britain's peace overtures.⁵⁷

Unrelated to fighting but important for the Franco-American alliance, West Point played host to an extravagant gala on 1 July 1782 to celebrate the birth of the Dauphin of France. Villefranche employed one thousand men for ten days to build a six hundred-foot-long and thirty-foot-wide pavilion. Over one hundred tree trunks acted as pillars supporting a roof of interwoven branches that cascaded down the two long sides of the structure. French and American colors decorated the scene, and Dr. James Thacher judged that "in symmetry of proportion, neatness of workmanship, and elegance of arrangement, has seldom perhaps been surpassed on any temporary occasion."⁵⁸

Washington gathered the entire Main Army on the hills surrounding Fort Clinton. Gov. George Clinton and his wife led a procession including General and Mrs. Washington,

⁵⁷ Washington to Lincoln, 12 April 1782, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 24:115-16; Washington to Greene, 23 April 1782, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 24:152-53; Washington, Memorandum, 1 May 1782, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 24:194-215; Stirling to Washington, 19 April 1782, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-08203>; Washington to Rochambeau, 28 May 1782, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 24:293-94; Washington to Elias Dayton, 2 May 1782, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 24:229-30; Washington to Heath, 22 May 1782, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 24:275-76; Washington to Benjamin Franklin, 18 October 1782, Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 25:272-73.

⁵⁸ Thacher, *Military Journal*, 373.

politicians from New York and New Jersey, and the general officers of the Main Army from McDougall's headquarters to the structure. A lavish dinner with thirteen toasts, multiple cannon salutes, and music concluded with a *feu de joie* or musketry and cannon salute and "three shouts of acclamation and benediction for the Dauphin."⁵⁹ The festivities lasted well into the night as the officers attended a grand ball while the men enjoyed a fireworks display.⁶⁰

The time, effort, and resources Washington invested in the celebration indicated the importance of the French alliance and allowed the commander-in-chief to display the civility of the young country. Even in the absence of the Continental Army's French allies, who remained in Virginia, the celebration demonstrated the gratitude of the United States to France. On the same day Washington announced the event to the troops in the Highlands, he expressed his concern about the supply levels at West Point. Nevertheless, Villefranche had enough men, equipment, and materials to erect the grand scene.⁶¹

Upon hearing the news of the Dauphin's birth, Washington sent French minister Anne-César de La Luzerne his "respect and veneration for your royal Master ... [and] the very particular pleasure I feel in every event which affects the happiness of his Most Christian Majesty."⁶² Although the letter was essentially a formality, Washington also

⁵⁹ Thacher, *Military Journal*, 374.

⁶⁰ Benjamin Gilbert to Daniel Gilbert, 1 June 1782, in Gilbert, *Winding Down*, 59.

⁶¹ Washington to Lincoln, 28 May 1782, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 24:295-97.

⁶² Washington to La Luzerne, 5 June 1782, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 24:312-13.

subtly asserted the legitimacy of the United States through the example of his Main Army. As Washington extolled the cooperation between the French and Americans at Yorktown, he claimed: “the only contention lay in endeavors to exceed each other in acts of emulation.”⁶³ The implication that French soldiers benefitted from friendly American competition demonstrated that the young republic was worthy of inclusion in the international community. Just six weeks earlier, La Luzerne flattered Washington with high praise from the Court of Versailles but indicated that the weakness of the Continental Army concerned the king. Washington’s parade of military power, even in the absence of a large French audience at the event, helped reassure the French minister that America could uphold its obligations in the alliance.⁶⁴

In the summer of 1782, the commander-in-chief faced the extraordinary challenge of maintaining the Main Army’s readiness for combat despite the ongoing peace negotiations. In June, he and Steuben initiated monthly inspections of the brigades per congressional mandates. Washington generally approved of the state of the troops, but he emphasized the need for deliberate, focused, and realistic training to instill habit patterns the men could rely on in battle. At the end of August, the Main Army moved from Newburgh to Verplanck’s point to have easier access to firewood sources. Washington

⁶³ Washington to La Luzerne, 5 June 1782, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 24:313-14.

⁶⁴ Anne-César de La Luzerne to Washington, 18 April 1782, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-08195>; for more on the impact of the American Revolutionary War experience on the French Army, see Jonathan R. Dull, “Military Nationalism in Europe in the Aftermath of the American Revolution,” in *Peace and the Peacemakers: The Treaty of 1783*, ed. Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1986), 171-189.

used the opportunity to train for an amphibious assault. He organized the eight hundred officers and approximately twelve thousand men into eight infantry brigades, one infantry regiment, two artillery regiments, a legionary corps, and various specialist units. Five brigades moved downriver on boats and deployed into battle formations once onshore. The rest of the army moved overland and arrived at the rendezvous point on time and in position to fight.⁶⁵ Washington reported that “the considerable move that has been attempted by water was made with the utmost regularity and good order.”⁶⁶ The success of the exercise proved the feasibility of an amphibious assault on New York City.⁶⁷

Congress reduced the size of the Continental Army in August 1782, ordering the states to fold newer regiments into older ones to provide a full complement of five hundred soldiers per unit beginning the next January. Previously, a full regiment had 612 rank and file, so the congressional order decreased the army’s strength by over 20 percent. Furthermore, Connecticut and Massachusetts each fielded two fewer regiments of infantry in 1783. Congress released the surplus officers but included a clause in their discharges obliging them to return if called on before the end of the war.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Washington, General Orders, 8, 12, and 18 June 1782, all in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 24:322, 333-35, and 358-59.

⁶⁶ Washington, General Orders, 31 August 1782, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 25:92.

⁶⁷ For a detailed description of the movement and supply plan, see Washington, General Orders, 31 August 1782, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 25:93-96.

⁶⁸ Ford, 7 August 1782, *JCC*, 22:451-55; Ford, 3 October 1780, *JCC*, 21:894-95; Wright, *The Continental Army*, 176; Charles Thomson, Notes of Debates, *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress*, ed. Edmund Cody Burnett, 7 vols. (Washington, DC: The Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1921), 6:431.

Washington also oversaw initial efforts to transform West Point into a supply depot. In April 1782, the Continental Congress designated West Point as one of four locations in the country to serve as ammunition magazines. Three months later, Washington tasked Maj. Gen. Henry Knox to find a suitable site for such an installation. The chief of artillery chose a slight depression on the plain just to the west of Fort Clinton. Villefranche, however, objected and recommended a place on Constitution Island instead. Washington concurred with the engineer, and preliminary work began at the end of August. In his memoirs, Heath noted with pride that the principles of Vauban guided the design and construction of the magazine. Even in such mundane matters, the need to meet European standards and styles rarely strayed far from the forefront of the Americans' minds.⁶⁹

Villefranche made steady progress on the new powder magazine, but a dearth of skilled workers and supplies forced alterations in his schedule. The workers completed the foundation near the end of August, but then Villefranche confessed he could not complete the magazine by the end of the year. He recommended building the walls and letting them settle over the winter. Ten days later, further setbacks forced Villefranche to advise abandoning the work on the magazine entirely in favor of repair and construction of winter housing. Washington agreed because he anticipated even more significant

⁶⁹ Ford, 26 April 1782, *JCC*, 22:216; Knox to Washington, 9 July 1782, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-08871>; Knox to Washington, 31 July 1782, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-08977>; Washington to Villefranche, 6 August 1782, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-09052>; Heath, *Memoirs*, 323.

supply problems over the winter. He looked to preempt the troops' distress. Knox suggested using Redoubt 7 on the west side of Constitution Island as an interim storage building for the powder with the understanding that Villefranche would resume work in the spring. Work on the powder magazine never resumed, and the expedient solution became permanent.⁷⁰

The supply of food, clothes, and pay for the army fell precipitously in autumn 1782. The reformed supply system relied on contractors to provide the essentials for the army, but it did not prevent graft, theft, negligence, or incompetence. Throughout 1782, Heath and Knox raised the alarm about the poor state of provisions at West Point, but Washington and Congress seemed powerless to answer the need.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Washington to McDougall, 28 August 1782, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-09292>; Villefranche to Washington, 11 September 1782, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-09459>; Villefranche to Knox, 15 September 1782 in Knox to Washington, 16 September 1782, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-09490>; Washington to Knox 17 September 1782, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-09510>.

⁷¹ Washington to Robert Morris, 28 March 1782, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 24:93-94; Stirling to Heath, enclosed in Heath to Washington, 2 May 1782, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-08314>; Washington to Comfort Sands, 25 May 1782, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-08527>; Heath to Washington, 6 April 1782, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-08093>; Heath to Washington, 27 April 1782, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-08274>; Heath to Washington, 27 May 1782, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-08534>; Knox to Washington, 11 September 1782, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-09451>. For more on the supply system and Robert Morris, the superintendent of finance responsible for the changes, see Rappleye, *Robert Morris*, 225-52; Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War*,

In October, Washington explained to the secretary at war that “the patience and long sufferance of this Army are almost exhausted.” The officers most lamented a lack of pay because it prevented them from maintaining their social status. They were “mortified ... when they cannot invite a French officer - a visiting Friend - or traveling acquaintance to a better Repast than stinkg Whiskey (and not always that) and a bit of Beef without Vegetable.” Washington warned that as the officers returned to civilian life “soured by penury and what they call the ingratitude of the Public, involved in debts, ... after having spent the flower of their days ... in establishing the freedom and Independence of their Country, and suffered every thing human Nature is capable of enduring on this side of death ... without one thing to sooth their feelings or brighten the gloomy prospects, I cannot avoid apprehending that a train of Evils will follow, of a very serious & distressing Nature.”⁷² After another winter in the Highlands, Washington’s prediction nearly became a reality.

An Army on the Brink: Winter 1782-Spring 1783

The winter of 1782-83 saw significant changes in the political relationship between Great Britain and the United States. On 30 November, a team of American ministers in Paris reached a preliminary agreement with British ambassadors to end the war based on British recognition of American independence. On 5 December, in an address to Parliament, George III explained he had offered “to declare them [thirteen

309; and E. James Ferguson, *The Power of the Purse: A History of American Public Finance, 1776-1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), 125-45.

⁷² All quotations from Washington to Lincoln, 2 October 1782, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-09633>.

North American colonies] free and independent states by an article inserted in the treaty of peace.”⁷³ Two months later, France, Britain, and Spain signed a preliminary treaty and armistice to take effect in North America on 20 March 1783. United States’ strategy had prevailed, but West Point and the Continental Army remained on duty.⁷⁴

Domestically, the winter also proved eventful. In November 1782, Rhode Island rejected a resolution for a national import duty, preserving Congress’ inability to raise revenue directly. The contractor system gained initial success in early 1782, but the end of the year saw food, clothing, and material shortages plaguing the army again. The news from Paris and London indicated the United States would soon have a peace treaty, so some congressional delegates viewed the Continental Army as an unnecessary expense. Worse, Washington’s army in the Highlands presented a potential threat to the republic, and civilian politicians were especially wary of the officers.⁷⁵

Washington’s personnel, meanwhile, grew increasingly frustrated with the insufficient provisions. The inability of Congress to pay the army only exacerbated its resentment and hostility. The impending peace treaty brought relief to the men, but many

⁷³ *Pennsylvania Packet* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), 15 February 1783, *Readex: America’s Historical Newspapers*. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.libproxy.temple.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANX&docref=image/v2%3A10CEB9BDCC081400%40EANX-10E685A85BFED6F0%402372333-10E685A87A07F8E8%401>.

⁷⁴ David Head, *A Crisis of Peace: George Washington, the Newburgh Conspiracy, and the Fate of the American Revolution* (New York City: Pegasus Books, 2019), 11-15; Fleming, *Perils of Peace*, 240-42.

⁷⁵ Rappleye, *Robert Morris*, 310-11, 322-27; Ferguson, *Power of the Purse*, 152-55; Washington to Sands, 25 May 1782, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-08527>; Head, *Crisis of Peace*, 17-21, 41-45; Carp, *To Starve the Army at Pleasure*, 215-216.

of the officers viewed a cessation of hostilities with great trepidation. If Congress demobilized the army without paying it, the officers feared they would never recover their financial footing. The officers had a role in society as gentlemen and maintaining the trappings of their status without the pay Congress owed them had consumed all their credit. Maj. Gen. Henry Knox and thirteen other general and field-grade officers wrote a petition warning of dire consequences if Congress refused to honor its commitments to the army. They recruited Maj. Gen. Alexander McDougall, Col. John Brooks, and Col. Matthias Ogden to deliver the document to Congress in late December 1782.⁷⁶

This address to Congress identified the source of the officers' distress, offered a solution to the problem, and made a thinly veiled threat should Congress not comply. The officers noted, "we find our embarrassments thicken so fast, and have become so complex, that many of us are unable to go further." The absence of income had created a financial burden not just for the men but also for their friends and family who loaned or gave money to the officers. Rations and clothes remained short in the army at large, and "wherever there has been a real want of means, any defect in system, or neglect in execution, ... we have invariably been the sufferers, by hunger and nakedness, and by languishing in an hospital." Just as egregious to the officers was the sense they had fallen behind their peers who had not served. They bemoaned that "shadows have been offered to us while the substance has been gleaned by others." Knox and his fellow officers knew Congress likely could not fulfill its promise of half-pay pensions for life, so they offered a solution: one lump sum payment equal to five years of full pay. Knox implored

⁷⁶ Head, *Crisis of Peace*, 31-37, 53-79.

Congress to “convince the army and the world that the independence of America shall not be placed on the ruin of any particular class of her citizens.” In case the exhortation to behave honorably in front of the domestic and international audience failed to persuade the representatives, Knox included unsubtle hints as to what could come next. “The uneasiness of the soldiers, for want of pay, is great and dangerous; any further experiments on their patience may have fatal effects.”⁷⁷ Congress met with McDougall, Brooks, and Ogden on 10 January and approved one month’s pay to the army two weeks later. The issues of back pay, pensions, rations, and clothing remained unresolved. Brooks returned to the Highlands with the money and news of the undecided matters in early February.⁷⁸

A few weeks passed before a letter circulated among the officers in the Highlands encouraging them to take a more forceful stand with Congress. Maj. John Armstrong, Maj. Gen. Horatio Gates’ aide, anonymously published a blistering indictment of Congress and a call to action for the officers. He noted that the army had reached the limit of neglect that manly virtue could tolerate. Despite suffering the most during the struggle for independence, military men would not benefit from the political independence their sacrifice made possible. Congress had repeatedly mistreated the army even when it desperately needed them to fight the British. When peace arrived, the officers would find themselves with “no remaining mark of Military distinction left, but your wants infirmities, and Tears.” Politely asking Congress to honor their commitments

⁷⁷ Knox et al. to Continental Congress, December 1782, in Ford, *JCC*, 24:291-93.

⁷⁸ Head, *Crisis of Peace*, 79-83, 87-91, 94-101.

failed in the past and had no hope of success in the future. The officers needed to declare that “the slightest mark of indignity from Congress now, must operate like the Grave, and part you forever.” If Congress did not provide the compensation the officers deserved, Armstrong offered two options. First, if the war continued, the army should trek to “some unsettled Country, Smile in your Turn and ‘mock when their fear cometh on.’” If peace negotiations succeeded, the men should keep the army together as a threat to the legislative body.⁷⁹

Accompanying Armstrong’s 10 March 1783 letter was a call for all officers to meet the next day in the “Temple,” a large wooden building at the Newburgh encampment. The officers could consider Congress’ response to Knox’s memorial and determine “what measures (if any) should be adopted to obtain that redress of Grievances, which they seem to have solicited in vain.”⁸⁰ Washington found out about the proposed meeting and postponed it until Saturday, 15 March. He implied he would not attend the gathering but arrived shortly after it commenced.

Washington walked to the front of the room and asked to address his officers. Denouncing the sentiments of Armstrong’s letter, he implored his commissioned

⁷⁹ Armstrong, Letter to the Officers, 10 March 1783, in Washington to Elias Boudinot, 12 March 1782, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-10818>. For a full discussion of the Newburgh Conspiracy, see Richard H. Kohn, “The Inside History of the Newburgh Conspiracy: America and the Coup d’Etat,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (1970): 187-220; C. Edward Skeen and Richard H. Kohn, “The Newburgh Conspiracy Reconsidered,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (1974): 273-98; and Paul David Nelson, “Horatio Gates at Newburgh, 1783: A Misunderstood Role,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (1972): 143-58.

⁸⁰ Armstrong, Meeting Request, 10 March 1783, in Washington to Boudinot, 12 March 1782, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-10818>.

subordinates “not to take any measures, which, viewed in the calm light of reason, will lessen the dignity, and sully the glory you have hitherto maintained.” His words did not seem to sway the officers’ opinion. To prove Congress’ goodwill, he produced a letter from Virginia representative Joseph Jones, but he struggled to read the first few lines because of Jones’ cramped handwriting.⁸¹ Washington famously paused and donned a pair of reading glasses. He said, “Gentlemen, you will permit me to put on my spectacles, for, I have grown not only gray, but almost blind in the service of my country.”⁸² Those words moved Washington’s audience to tears. They unanimously adopted resolutions rejecting the proposals in Armstrong’s letter and pledged their continued loyalty to the country. In the letter, the officer corps expressed “an unshaken confidence in the justice of Congress and the United States, and are fully convinced that the representatives of America will not disband or disperse the army until their accounts are liquidated.”⁸³

The Newburgh Conspiracy demonstrated that the terms of the civil-military relationship in the United States were open to debate. The officers believed they had endured more in the service to the country than their civilian counterparts. These gentlemen could no longer afford the lifestyle their social status required, and they also found themselves scorned by the public they protected. The officers understood that some of their compatriots “who retired from service on half-pay, under the resolution of

⁸¹ William M. Fowler Jr., *An American Crisis: George Washington and the Dangerous Two Years After Yorktown, 1781-1783* (New York City: Walker Books, 2011), chap. 10, Kindle; Head, *Crisis of Peace*, 144-49.

⁸² Head, *Crisis of Peace*, 149; Fowler, *An American Crisis*, chap. 10.

⁸³ Ford, 29 April 1783, *JCC*, 24: 310-311; Fowler, *An American Crisis*, chap. 10, Kindle; Head, *Crisis of Peace*, 150-55.

Congress in 1780, are not only destitute of any effectual provision, but are become the objects of obloquy.”⁸⁴ West Point and the army gathered around it were sources of power and influence in international and domestic affairs. Anderson argued that the military should use that power to redefine the relationship between the army and the Continental Congress. Inaction stained the officers’ honor and manhood because it left them destitute and a burden on their relatives. Washington replied that both a domestic and international audience would respond with justified contempt if his officers menaced their civilian overlords with military force or threatened to withhold their services before the war came to a formal close. Such conduct would sully the reputation his officers and men had earned.

Although the meeting ended with a unanimous acclamation of Congress’ good intent and devotion to the country, officers and politicians continued to view each other with resentment and suspicion. The officers understood Washington was doing everything he could to motivate the reluctant states and impoverished Continental Congress to meet their obligations. They remained unpaid, however, with little hope of restitution. Congress and state legislatures, on the other hand, still looked on the army at West Point with abiding concern. Contemporaries like Thomas Jefferson argued Washington’s character prevented the United States from devolving into a military dictatorship. If the army continued to exist after the war, Congress reasoned, there was no guarantee its next leader would be as virtuous as the Virginian general.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Knox, et. al to Continental Congress, December 1782, in Ford, *JCC*, 24:292.

⁸⁵ Jefferson to Washington, 16 April 1784, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/04-01-02-0215>.

Winding Down: Summer 1783-Summer 1784

In the wake of the Newburgh Conspiracy, news of the conclusion of a preliminary peace treaty arrived. Congress forwarded the announcement to Washington, who informed the Main Army on 25 March 1783. Celebrations spontaneously erupted throughout the Highlands, and Congress officially declared an end to hostilities a few weeks later. Washington, however, decided to wait until 19 April 1783 to announce the war's end on the eighth anniversary of the Battle of Lexington and Concord.⁸⁶

The absence of combat accelerated the challenges facing Washington because of the tension between maintaining discipline and his soldiers' desire to return to civilian life. Congress began to disband the Continental Army between May and October. Soldiers who enlisted "for the duration" received their furloughs first. Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia troops went home a month later. In September, Congress authorized Washington to furlough those medical, general, staff, and engineering officers he no longer required. After these moves, Congress hesitated to diminish the force in the Hudson Highlands further because Gen. Sir Guy Carleton still occupied New York City. The troops who remained on duty knew the war was over and watched their comrades leave. Camp discipline slackened, and Washington and Knox struggled to keep the army focused on the maintenance of West Point while convincing them their presence was necessary.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Benjamin Gilbert to Daniel Gilbert, 26 March 1783, in Gilbert, *Winding Down*, 103; Washington, General Orders, 18 April 1783, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 26:334-37.

⁸⁷ Ford, 26 May 1783, *JCC*, 24:364-65; Ford, 11 June 1783, *JCC*, 24:390; Ford, 9 August 1783, *JCC*, 24:495-96; Ford, 26 September 1783, *JCC*, 25:620-21; Ford, 18 October

In a larger sense, Washington realized the end of the war presented an opportunity to the United States. He explained to Theodorick Bland, a representative to Congress from Virginia, that “we have now a National character to establish. And it is of the utmost importance to stamp favourable impressions upon it.” Washington argued that justice and gratitude should be the nation’s founding principles. The United States should do justice to its creditors by honoring their debts and gratitude to the army for the hardships of military service over the previous eight years. As creditors to the republic, Army officers claimed both categories, and Washington emphasized that the officers had a more persuasive case than any other group in the country. They understood Congress was incapable of paying the entire sum due to them at once, so they decided to accept a down-payment of three months salary before disbanding. Washington argued such a demand was eminently reasonable since disbanding the army would alleviate the necessity of supply and provision purchases.⁸⁸ Failure to show gratitude or justice to military officers would alienate them and most likely lead to a dissolution of the union, which would result in the United States becoming little more than “a ball in the hands of European powers bandied against each other at their pleasure.”⁸⁹

Congress wrestled with a dilemma over its authority regarding the back pay of the Continental Army. Alexander Hamilton, now a representative from New York, explained

1783, *JCC*, 25:703; Washington to Knox, 8 October 1783, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-11911>.

⁸⁸ Washington to Theodorick Bland, 4 April 1783, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 26:285-91.

⁸⁹ Hamilton to Washington, 24 March 1783, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-03-02-0191>.

that Congress lacked the means to eliminate the debt because it could only request funds, not demand them. To delay disbandment of the army until Congress could fulfill its obligations would create a *de facto* standing army, which “would excite the alarms and jealousies of the states and increase rather than lessen the opposition to the funding scheme.”⁹⁰ Washington replied that disbanding without some form of payment would result in “unhappy consequences.” The commander-in-chief warned Hamilton that officers viewed Congress with suspicion because it appeared to begrudge the debt it owed “to men who certainly have contributed more than any other class to the establishment of Independency.”⁹¹ In short, Washington told his former aide to find a way to meet the officers’ expectations. After much political wrangling and tying the payment to the personal credit of superintendent of finance Robert Morris, the officers received a lump sum of three months’ pay with promises to repay the amount still owed in the future.⁹²

Meanwhile, Congress created a committee to provide recommendations on the peacetime army’s size, composition, and function. Hamilton approached Washington for his thoughts concerning the military in the postwar United States.⁹³ Washington made four recommendations. First, he argued a standing army was necessary to provide

⁹⁰ Hamilton to Washington, 25 March 1783, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-03-02-0195>.

⁹¹ Washington to Hamilton, 4 April 1783, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-03-02-0202>.

⁹² Rappleye, *Robert Morris*, 355-57.

⁹³ Hamilton to Washington, 9 April 1783, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-03-02-0206>. The committee members were James Madison, Samuel Osgood, James Wilson, and Oliver Ellsworth.

security against Native American nations and European colonies to the south, north, and west. Four regiments of infantry, supported by a dispersed artillery regiment, should occupy posts around Lake Champlain, Niagara, Detroit, Fort Pitt, and in the Carolinas and Georgia. West Point was “pre-eminently advantageous to the defence of the United States, and is still so necessary in that view, as well as for the preservation of the Union, that the loss of it might be productive of the most ruinous Consequences.” The outposts could defend against encroachment, but West Point was the key to ensuring that no invading force could disrupt the lines of communication between the states.⁹⁴

Second, Washington recommended the standardization of state militias so “they may appear truly respectable in the Eyes of our Friends, and formidable to those who would otherwise become our enemies.” Washington saw the geographic isolation of the United States from Europe as a unique advantage. In the event of invasion, a small force could rapidly respond, delay the enemy, and enable the militia to organize, equip, and deploy in the country’s defense. Regular training and inspections would keep the militia ready for any contingency and allow it to support the regular army much more quickly and successfully than in the late war. Washington’s envisioned sequence of military response drove his recommendations, but he also wanted a response force that helped legitimize the United States to other countries.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Washington, *Sentiments on a Peace Establishment*, 1 May 1783, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 26:374-98. Quoted material on 382.

⁹⁵ Washington, *Sentiments on a Peace Establishment*, 1 May 1783, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 26:374-98. Quoted material on 388.

Next, Washington promoted the construction of federal arsenals. He kept his comments brief as he believed Congress was already implementing a plan of magazines, but he specifically mentioned West Point's role in the program. The position on the Hudson served as a storehouse and vital post for the security of the country. Washington assumed, therefore, that an enemy would make it the object of early attacks to seize or destroy the stores there. West Point was critical enough to the nation's security that placing a massive supply of military goods there could invite an overwhelming attack. To mitigate the risk, the general suggested consolidating military stores in three grand arsenals in the country's interior to serve the southern, northern, and western outposts, respectively. The fortifications on the Hudson would transition to a peacetime garrison rather than a central supply depot for the army.⁹⁶

Finally, the commander-in-chief remembered the critical need for trained engineers and artillerymen in the Revolution's early days. Washington intended the United States to emulate the European model of academic institutions to maintain and disseminate knowledge of artillery techniques and military engineering. Both Steuben and Duportail strongly encouraged Washington to create a military academy for the United States. Expertise in military engineering and gunnery took years to develop. Although unmentioned in Washington's memorial, the debacle of the first two years of the war in the Highlands exemplified the dangers associated with an absence of qualified engineers. A military academy provided a consistent flow of trained officers to the army.

⁹⁶ Washington, *Sentiments on a Peace Establishment*, 1 May 1783, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 26:374-98.

Absent such an institution, the young country would again be utterly dependent on foreign aid to defend itself.⁹⁷

Congress rejected almost all of Washington's proposals because of republican fears of a standing army. Moreover, the Atlantic buffer between the United States and Europe reinforced the belief in the sufficiency of the militia to defend the country. The Continental Army slowly dwindled through the remainder of 1783 until only the Corps of Invalids, five hundred infantry, and one hundred artillerymen stationed at West Point remained.⁹⁸

Life for the soldiers at West Point continued to focus on maintaining the works and waiting for their furlough or discharge. Washington sent the troops who had enlisted for the duration of the war home on 6 June 1783. Lt. Benjamin Gilbert noted his angst in the wake of their departure because he felt the war had robbed soldiers, himself included, of the ability to earn a living. In August, Washington handed over the daily administration of the army to Henry Knox. As winter approached, the garrison performed the usual preparations for winter: repairing their huts, gathering firewood, and laying in supplies. Unsure of the number of men Congress would authorize for the West Point garrison, Washington directed Col. Timothy Pickering, the quartermaster general, to send

⁹⁷ Duportail to Washington, 30 September 1783, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-11871>; Steuben to Washington, 15 April 1783, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-11071>. Duportail wrote his recommendation for the combination of the artillery and engineering corps almost five months later, but it seems unlikely that the French officer had not shared this opinion with Washington in meetings before that time.

⁹⁸ Washington to Knox, 3 December 1783, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 27:256-58.

West Point enough clothes, blankets, and provisions for three thousand men. Sir Guy Carleton's evacuation of Manhattan and the Main Army's return to the city on 25 November made those preparations unnecessary. Washington and Knox paraded with some of the remaining soldiers through the streets of New York. Washington said farewell to his officers a week later, and Knox returned to the Highlands. Washington resigned his commission two days before Christmas in Baltimore.⁹⁹

Representatives from the United States and Great Britain signed the Paris Peace Treaty on 3 September 1783. The Continental Congress ratified the agreement four months later, and the war officially ended. The reduction of the Continental Army, however, continued. Congress rejected multiple peace establishment proposals through the spring and early summer of 1784. Finally, on 2 June, it decided fifty-five privates and an officer no higher ranking than captain to command them would maintain the fortifications at West Point.¹⁰⁰ Once the center of the armed defense for the United States, the fortifications on the Hudson sat all but abandoned.

Conclusion

The tension within the civil-military relationship in the United States increased significantly during the last two years of the war as the Continental Army grew more convinced of its superior virtue. The letters of the general officers to Congress and the

⁹⁹ Benjamin Gilbert to Daniel Gilbert, 6 June 1783, in Gilbert, *Winding Down*, 106-07; Gilbert to Charles Bruce, 10 June 1783, in Gilbert, *Winding Down*, 107-08; Washington, General Orders, 9 August 1783, in *Writings of Washington*, 27:111; Washington to Pickering, 8 October 1783, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-11914>;

¹⁰⁰ Ford, 14 January 1784, *JCC*, 26:23-28; Ford, 2 June 1784, *JCC*, 27:520-24.

New England governors based their claims on the sacrifice and hardships the men endured throughout the war. For example, they insisted that “the Army have given such ample and unequivocal Proofs of their patriotism and Self Denial, as to entitle them to the generous rewards of a gratefull people.”¹⁰¹ Washington reminded Lincoln the troops had received no public assistance in building fortifications, constructing winter quarters, or harvesting firewood every year. The neglect and ingratitude the public showed the army exacerbated the perception that the men who sacrificed for the cause of independence did not benefit from it. The Continental Army believed itself marooned on an island of want in a sea of plenty.¹⁰²

Officers’ anxiety about their status after demobilization also contributed to the tension with civilian authority. While the enlisted men wanted overwhelmingly to go home to begin what historian John Ruddiman called the “life course” that their war service had delayed, the officers feared losing their power and status.¹⁰³ William Duer, a former New York representative to the Continental Congress, observed that “a return to private life was to a majority of the American officers a prospect of obscurity if not of actual misery. ... Their respectability would be lost by separation and their pretensions derided. They were without wealth or family influence and their military situation was

¹⁰¹ Greene, et. al, to New England Governors, Autumn 1780, Reel 3, McDougall Papers.

¹⁰² Washington to Lincoln, 2 October 1782, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-09633>; Armstrong, Letter to the Officers, 10 March 1783, in Washington to Boudinot, 12 March 1782, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-10818>.

¹⁰³ John A. Ruddiman, *Becoming Men of Some Consequence: Youth and Military Service in the Revolutionary War* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014), 117-46.

more inviting and pleasant than any that they could expect or hope.”¹⁰⁴ The Newburgh Conspiracy was, therefore, an attempt to either prolong military service or cement the means to maintain the social status the officers had earned in the army. The anxiety over the loss of status and the potential difficulties in civilian life motivated officers to openly question the norm of military subordination to civilian authority. Washington’s intervention halted the discussion of leveraging military force to compel Congress to pay them, but it did not mitigate the uneasiness of most men in the lower grades.

Meanwhile, the Continental Congress viewed the army with increasing suspicion. The war was over, so the country no longer required a standing military. The delegates returned to a belief that the militia was the proper type of defense force in a republic and the geographic advantages of the United States rendered a standing army unnecessary. Furthermore, Americans in military service during previous wars reintegrated into the society at the end of it. Henry Knox’s formation of the Society of the Cincinnati exclusively for Continental Army officers and their children heightened Congress’ fears of an emerging aristocracy with its base in the officer corps. Finally, the Newburgh Conspiracy demonstrated the danger a permanent armed force posed to a country with a contested understanding of the appropriate civil-military relationship.¹⁰⁵

The Continental Army’s desire to win the approval of its European allies shaped its actions. Washington made time to show off West point to Rochambeau, and the

¹⁰⁴ Duer to King, 12 October 1783, in *The Life and Correspondence of Rufus King; Comprising His Letters, Private and Official, His Public Documents, and His Speeches*, ed. Charles R. King, 6 vols. (New York City: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1894), 1:621-22.

¹⁰⁵ Ford, 2 June 1784, *JCC*, 27:518-19; Jefferson to Washington, 16 April 1784, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/04-01-02-0215>.

approval of the French general was important to the American commander-in-chief. The celebration of the Dauphin's birth for even a tiny European audience at West Point was important enough for Washington to allocate scarce resources to the occasion.

McDougall invoked the potential for French disapproval as partial justification for dropping his charges against Heath, and Heath commented approvingly on the design for a powder magazine because it fit the European model. Washington acknowledged the importance of the French at Yorktown, but he subtly asserted the legitimacy of the United States by claiming that the French tried to emulate some American characteristics as well. The performance of the Continental Army in battle and garrison served as proof for the United States' claim to inclusion in the international order.¹⁰⁶

Ultimately, Washington's strategy worked, and West Point played a critical role in its success. Washington intended to use the Continental Army to accomplish two things: maintain unity among the states and increase the cost of the war for Great Britain. He theorized that, as British expenditures escalated and the United States remained committed to its goal of independence, the enemy would lose the will to fight and offer to negotiate a peace on the basis of American independence. West Point fostered continued interstate cooperation because it secured a critical line of communication between New England and the other states. The presence of a sizable force at or near West Point forced the British to invest significant resources in defense of New York City. The garrison on

¹⁰⁶ Martin and Lender, "*A Respectable Army*", x-xi, 210-16; McDougall to Washington, 23 August 1782, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-09219>; Heath, *Memoirs*, 323; Washington to La Luzerne, 5 June 1782, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 24:313-14.

the Hudson limited the ability of Clinton's army to maneuver or forage, which forced its reliance on sea routes for resupply. Moreover, the constant threat of Rebel troops in the Highlands decreased the number of soldiers Clinton could send to aid Cornwallis in his campaigns, and it enabled the Continental and French armies to slip away and achieve victory at Yorktown. Finally, West Point served as the foundation for Washington's proposed peacetime military establishment because of its geographic importance.

The imperial expansion of the United States west of the Appalachians introduced the requirement for armed protection of citizens against the indigenous people they displaced. The Continental Congress created the United States Army the day after it drew the Continental Army down to less than one hundred men. The West Point garrison remained, but the seven hundred soldiers in the new army functioned primarily as a frontier constabulary. Congress levied the militias of Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania to provide men for one-year enlistments. The army received assignments to occupy evacuated British forts in the west, but the British did not abandon the posts in the Northwest Territory for more than a decade. Instead, the United States established new positions in the Ohio River Valley and occupied the former Continental works of Fort Pitt. It would take another seventeen years before the United States committed to providing formal education in the military arts to potential officers. When President Thomas Jefferson created the United States Military Academy in 1802, he located it at West Point. The Highlands once again became the core location for the

country's defense, but s as an institution of learning rather than a defensive fortification.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Ford, 3 June 1784, *JCC*, 536-40. For more on the founding and development of the United States Military Academy, see Richard H. Kohn, *Eagle and Sword: The Federalist and the Creation of the Military Establishment in America, 1783-1802* (New York: Free Press, 1975); and Sidney Forman, *West Point: A History of the United States Military Academy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950).

CONCLUSION

This dissertation emphasized the enduring importance of West Point in the Revolutionary War. First, it applied a new definition of strategy to the construction of the defenses in the Hudson Highlands to demonstrate Washington's consistent approach to the war. Second, the preceding pages explained how overlapping authorities created and exacerbated tensions in civil-military relations during the Revolutionary War. Finally, this study explored the lingering imprint of the colonial experience on the Continental Army at the fort. West Point evolved slowly throughout the conflict and responded to the influence of adversaries, allies, and defenders.

An examination of the Highland defenses provides a unique lens to view the dynamics of the Revolutionary War. West Point became a site and source of power struggles within the young republic. The defenses also played a critical role in the armed conflict with Great Britain. The effort to control navigation along the Hudson River through the Highlands predated and outlasted the Continental Army. It was a national project, wholly contained within the territory of a single state. George Washington and the British commanders-in-chief confronting him considered West Point critical to the war's outcome. It was perhaps the most important site in the country that did not host a battle. Nevertheless, its ongoing importance illuminates Washington's strategy, the development of civil-military relations in the United States, and the aftermath of colonialism on the Continental Army.

The essence of strategy is the translation of military force into political success. Although unfamiliar with the term, Washington practiced strategy by employing the

Continental Army to achieve independence for the United States. The historiography of the United States' strategy in the American Revolution generally debates whether Washington's strategy was more offensive or defensive. In such a formulation, though, West Point presents a conundrum. If Washington's strategy was offensive, the works on the Hudson wasted time and resources that he could have used to bolster his attacks elsewhere. If it was defensive, the neglect of a critical fortification defies reason.

Understanding strategy as a theory of victory reveals the consistency in Washington's actions. As priorities shifted throughout the war, Washington invested his limited resources to drive up the cost of the conflict for the British and maintain the unity of the states. Both offensive and defensive actions furthered those objectives. The problem lay not in Washington's alleged inconsistency but in historians' definition of the word.

Historian Jack Greene argued that the survival of the United States during and after the war "would be heavily dependent upon the resolution of the old problem of the allocation of authority in an extended polity composed of many distinct corporate entities."¹ The Continental Army, as the Revolution's most prominent example of a unified national institution, participated in that contest. Federal, state, and military powers competed with each other for influence throughout the war, and the Hudson Highlands became a venue for that competition. The patchwork quilt of authorities that

¹ Jack P. Greene, *Peripheries and Center: Constitutional Development in the Extended Polities of the British Empire and the United States, 1607-1788* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 154.

vied for control of West Point highlights the iterative development of an answer to the problem of layered jurisdictions.

As the thirteen rebellious colonies fought for independence, their former subordinate relationship with Great Britain shaped emerging policies and expectations. The United States derived its heritage, traditions, and standards of behavior largely from the British. The Continental Army, and by association the fledging country it served, labored to meet the standards of a “treaty-worthy country” and stake claim to equal membership in the international order.² West Point became part of a performance of legitimacy for foreign and domestic audiences. Those efforts, however, created significant anxiety within the army as Washington and his officers worried if they could meet expectations. As a result, the Continental Army invested substantial time and resources in hopes of obtaining external approval for its work.

The initial attempts at constructing fortifications in the Hudson Highlands failed because of overlapping lines of authority between the New York Provincial Congress, the Continental Congress, and the Continental Army. After the New York Provincial Congress selected a defensible site at the double bend in the Hudson, a lack of legislative oversight resulted in a delayed start of construction. New York authorities did little beyond identifying the area around West Point as the fortification site. The Continental Congress only inquired into the matter after rumors of a British move against New York City arose in August 1775.

² Gould, *Among the Powers of the Earth*, 12-13.

In response to that emerging threat, the New York Provincial Congress hired engineer Bernard Romans to supervise the work of fortification, but it failed to delineate the extent of his authority in relation to its oversight commission. Romans envisioned an elaborate defensive complex on Constitution Island, about three hundred feet lower in elevation than West Point directly across the Hudson River. He designed a large stone-and-masonry, Vauban-style fort, reasoning that massed cannon fire would pose the most effective deterrent to ships sailing north. The commissioners from the New York Provincial Congress objected because of the cost and time required to complete such extensive works. Multiple investigative teams from New York and the Continental Congress noted the deficiencies of the location, but a stubborn Romans persisted.

Further arguments between the engineer and New York's civilian oversight body resulted in multiple delays. Romans asserted his expertise and military exigencies entitled him to unfettered control of construction, but the commissioners countered that their authority as representatives of the legislature took precedence. The New York Provincial Congress unsurprisingly sided with the commissioners, fired Romans, and decided to build a smaller fort to the south of Constitution Island where Popolopen Creek emptied into the west side of the Hudson. In early 1776, however, the New York Provincial Congress ceded authority for obstructing the river to the Continental Army.

Conflicting lines of authority would hamper efforts to control the Hudson in 1776-77. The Continental Army constructed two forts at the mouth of Popolopen Creek and christened them Fort Clinton and Fort Montgomery. Two months after giving Washington the authority to erect whatever defenses he deemed necessary in the Highlands, the New York Provincial Congress created the Secret Committee for

Obstructing the Hudson River. More than a simple bureaucratic nuisance, the committee actively inserted itself into the Continental Army's supply chain and decision-making process. The Continental Army decided to use a chain-and-boom system to block ships on the river and spent most of 1776 building defensive works to guard that barrier. In October 1776, though, the Secret Committee directed the installation of the chain between West Point and Constitution Island, ignoring the previous nine months of work. The resulting confusion in the Highlands grew worse when Gen. George Washington appointed Maj. Gen. William Heath as the commander of a *de facto* military department without the approval of his congressional masters. The Secret Committee, the New York Provincial Congress, the Continental Congress, the New York militia, and the Continental Army each had some say over the construction of the forts, and these competing claims to power caused needless confusion and delays.

The Declaration of Independence and the British occupation of Manhattan in 1776 forced Washington to alter the Continental Army's strategy. Because Congress changed the political goal to recognition of independence in the international order, military force sought to increase the costs of the war to Britain to compel the king to relinquish his claim on the North American colonies. Washington announced an intention to fight a "War of Posts" in which the Continental Army and militia could face the British Army from behind defensive works. Offensive actions, however, still appealed to the American commander-in-chief, and he set priorities based on where his forces could meet the British Army in open battle. In 1777, as Lt. Gen. John Burgoyne pressed south from Canada and Gen. Sir William Howe threatened Philadelphia, Washington deployed the bulk of his regulars to oppose Howe. Maj. Gen. Horatio Gates fought against Burgoyne

with another sizable force. Consequently, Maj. Gen. Israel Putnam in the Highlands retained a meager contingent to counter Gen. Sir Henry Clinton's advance up the Hudson Valley. Washington's choice to defend Philadelphia and fight Burgoyne put the Highlands at risk. The decision aligned with his strategy, however, because of the importance of maintaining the confederation of states. The Continental Army could not abandon upstate New York or Pennsylvania to the ravages of an advancing army without threatening the dissolution of the union.

The newly christened Forts Clinton and Montgomery in the Highlands possessed multiple defects, including incomplete structures and no outposts to warn of oncoming attacks. The Rebel officers who testified at the inquiry into the loss of the posts, though, blamed the disaster on insufficient manning. Washington and Putnam relied on the local militia to mitigate the absence of Continental Army soldiers, but the militia failed to respond in time to thwart the British attack. Clinton's advance took the posts in only a few hours, but Burgoyne's defeat at Saratoga prevented the British from capitalizing on the success. Clinton withdrew to New York City less than a month after capturing the American positions.

After Clinton retreated from the Highlands, the Americans constructed another chain and started new protective fortifications on the Hudson. Washington assigned French engineer Lt. Col. Louis Guillaume Servais Deshayes de la Radière to oversee that undertaking. Putnam, Brig. Gen. James Clinton, Col. Hugh Hughes, and New York's Gov. George Clinton recommended relocating the obstructions to West Point, but Radière argued in favor of rebuilding Fort Clinton. Putnam delayed his decision and asked the New York Legislature to send a committee to investigate the position and make

a recommendation. The prospect of rejecting Radière's advice created significant anxiety for Continental Army commanders because it broke with the views of recognized experts in fortification and risked casting the United States as militarily backward. Instead, Putnam shifted responsibility for the choice onto the same state entity that gave the Continental Army authority over the project almost two years earlier, implicitly returning control over Highland defenses to New York.

Overlapping authorities at the national level also plagued the fortification efforts. In November 1777, the Continental Congress made Gates the commander of the Northern District, including the Highlands. Congress also authorized him, personally, to procure supplies and directly liaise with states for troops, which prevented officers succeeding him from exercising that authority. A few weeks later, Congress made Gates the president of the Board of War, effectively creating two chains of command because he was simultaneously Washington's military subordinate and civilian superior. Gates announced that Governor Clinton held ultimate discretion over the fort's design and construction, further complicating the command situation at West Point. Finally, Gates sent a second engineer, Col. Thaddeus Kościuszko, to the Highlands to oversee the project.

Kościuszko's arrival at West Point in March 1778 created a dilemma for the post's commander, Maj. Gen. Alexander McDougall. On the one hand, Kościuszko possessed the imprimatur of Congress and experience in rapid fort construction under Gates in the Saratoga campaign. Alternatively, Radière had graduated from the prestigious French engineering academy and represented Washington's desires for the post. Because Kościuszko proved more agreeable to work with, McDougall ultimately

requested that Washington recall Radière to the Main Army. McDougall and Washington were ambivalent about prioritizing experience in America over European credentials because of the risk associated with disregarding advice from representatives of their new French allies. Once Kościuszko assumed control of the project, though, the Continental Army made rapid progress, completing five forts, eleven redoubts, and seven independent artillery batteries over the next two years to protect the chain across the Hudson.

The treason of Maj. Gen. Benedict Arnold in September 1780 exposed the potential weakness of West Point and fueled arguments over the legitimacy of the United States. Despite the British transition to operations in the South in 1779, West Point remained a critical post because it deterred attacks while limiting British options for maneuver in the North. The extreme weather during the winter of 1779-80 degraded the defenses on the Hudson, and Maj. Gen. Robert Howe, the latest commander of the Highlands, failed to repair the damage in time for the campaign season of 1780. Washington, however, kept Howe in command until June because removing him earlier would harm the North Carolinian's reputation. When Arnold took over West Point in August, the fort's debilitated state made his plan to surrender the works to the British more likely to succeed.

After Arnold's plot failed, British and American apologists offered competing interpretations of his treason. Americans desiring independence reacted with shock and indignation while privately questioning the viability of a country founded on virtue. Arnold's duplicity reflected their shortcomings in supporting the cause of independence during the first five years of the war. To mitigate such feelings, these Americans recast Arnold as a villain whose allegedly virtuous actions had been secretly self-serving all

along. British supporters, on the other hand, emphasized the hopelessness of the American cause. If the hero of Ticonderoga, Quebec, Lake Champlain, Danbury, and Saratoga acknowledged the inevitability of British victory, they reasoned, the wise decision was to lay down arms before the consequences worsened.

Washington exploited the events surrounding Arnold's betrayal to demonstrate the legitimacy of the Continental Army and the United States. He emphasized the fortuitous capture of British Maj. John André to support his contention that God still kept the embattled young republic in His care. In response to Sir Henry Clinton's entreaties to release André, Washington invoked the customs of war and laws of nations to justify his decision to execute the major as a spy. The United States, as a sovereign state, upheld international norms through the Continental Army.

The American victory at Yorktown did not signal the war's end to the belligerent armies. Clinton looked for ways to pursue the political objectives of the British Empire despite the loss of an entire army. Washington again explored options to attack the British at New York. Even after news of peace talks in Paris arrived at his headquarters in the Highlands, Washington assumed fighting would continue in 1782, primarily because he doubted the sincerity of the British negotiators. The Continental Army's challenge, however, became maintaining combat readiness while peace appeared imminent.

After Yorktown, civil-military tensions escalated because Congress could not pay the army. The Continental Congress lacked the authority to impose or collect taxes directly and relied on requests to states for contributions, but the states often ignored those entreaties or gave less than Congress asked. As peace talks progressed, Congress eagerly anticipated the dissolution of the Continental Army. Republican ideology held

that a standing army constituted a threat to liberty. In addition to the costs of maintaining an army, many congressmen also feared that Washington's officers would establish a new aristocracy in the United States. With the Atlantic Ocean to protect the country from the prospect of a surprise invasion, Congress reasoned that it could get along with a small constabulary force with one-year enlistments.

Soldiers and officers feared the impending transition to civilian life. Enlisted men worried about leaving the army because they felt they had failed to complete the steps required to achieve manhood within American society. Similarly, officers had gone into debt funding a gentlemanly lifestyle befitting their status and faced financial ruin if the army disbanded before they received their pay. These frustrations festered until March 1783, when the officers met in Newburgh to discuss potential courses of action to ensure they received proper compensation for their service. Washington's personal example quelled the anti-congressional sentiment, and the officers reaffirmed their allegiance to civilian control of the military. Some members of Congress, however, remained suspicious of the officers' intentions.

As the war wound down, West Point served as the home for Washington's Main Army and a showpiece for American and foreign dignitaries. The Continental Army served as one of the republic's few tangible symbols of national unity, and West Point demonstrated the army's capability to perform military functions. Washington recommended that West Point become a permanent base for the defense of the United States, but Congress disagreed and reduced its garrison to fifty-five soldiers in 1784. The works remained in varying states of disrepair until President Thomas Jefferson established the United States Military Academy on the grounds in 1802. Throughout the

Revolutionary War, West Point served as a tool to deter the British, a site of contested lines of authority, and a source of pride and anxiety as the United States sought to create an identity separate from its colonial past while gaining the approval of its European counterparts.

Strategy

Previous scholarly definitions of strategy created confusion regarding how George Washington operated during the War of Independence. This dissertation argued that strategy is a theory of victory that emphasizes the mechanism through which force generates a new political relationship. Such a definition reveals the coherence in Washington's various tactical decisions.

West Point could lead to the defeat of the British Army and, consequently, achieve independence for the United States through military and symbolic means. Militarily, West Point ensured American control of the Hudson River crossings, allowing people and materiel to flow between New England and the Middle and Southern states. An ample garrison created a secure base of operations from which the Continental Army could threaten New York City. It was the keystone in a long arch of American and French positions from Rhode Island through Pennsylvania that effectively created a theater-level containment area surrounding Manhattan and limited British maneuver options. Symbolically, keeping the states united in opposing the British was critical to gaining foreign allies. Even after the Treaty of Amity and Commerce, France worried about the potential for some states to sue for peace separately. Rochambeau voiced this concern as an argument for attacking in Virginia instead of New York during the 1781 campaign season. The fortifications at West Point provided tangible evidence of the

capabilities of the various states to contribute to a national project. These complementary outcomes helped keep the union together and drive up the costs of the war for the British until they became too expensive to bear.

After the Declaration of Independence, American strategy remained unchanged through the rest of the war. Maj. Gen. Lord Stirling (née William Alexander) summarized its goal as “the establishment of this independent Empire acknowledged by G. Britain as well as all the rest of the Maritime powers in Europe.”³ The addition of other means, like the French forces, did not create a new strategy because the predicted causal relationship between military force and political objectives remained unchanged. The Highland defenses experienced changes in prioritization for manning and supplies, but those changes did not signal the development of a new strategy. Instead, Washington shifted resources based on conditions like the situation of the Continental Army and the immediacy of the threat against the fort. At no point did Washington’s tactical decisions alter his theory that maintaining communications between the states and increasing the costs of the war for the British would lead to victory. The strategy was consistent even as the ways and means employed evolved. The proffered definition of strategy supports a picture of Washington adhering to strategic consistency throughout the war.

Civil-Military Relations

Multiple sources of authority competed for primacy in the American Revolution. The British Empire asserted its authority to levy taxes on its colonies. Colonial legislatures countered that their power to regulate internal colonial matters took

³ Stirling to Clinton and Heath, 3-6 November 1781, Box 3, Schoff Revolutionary War Collection, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

precedence. The Continental Congress claimed the right to speak for all British colonies in North America. Colonial society exerted pressure on individuals to meet the expectations associated with their status. The Continental Army became another source of influence in the rebellious colonies and the United States. These lines of authority clashed and interacted with each other throughout the Revolutionary War.

Overlapping lines of political authority hindered the obstruction of the Hudson River in the New York Highlands. This jurisdictional contest caused significant construction delays in the first years of the war. The project challenged the Continental Congress because it was wholly within the state of New York, but the security of multiple colonies and future states depended on American control of that great waterway. As such, the Continental Congress and New York Provincial Congress both attempted to exercise control over the scheme. The Continental Army built and occupied the works, so it took great interest in forts' placement, design, and construction. The authority to decide matters implied the responsibility to pay for them, but neither state nor national legislators desired to assume that burden. With so many stakeholders intruding, the conflicting efforts and resultant confusion were unsurprising.

In the later years of the conflict, the absence of unified authority strained civil-military relations. The Continental Congress lacked the power to guarantee revenue, which resulted in material and provision shortages for its army. Officers and soldiers went for months or years without pay. The lack of support fueled the soldiers' mutinies at West Point in 1780 and Jockey Hollow in 1781. The officers' ability to maintain gentry status became suspect because of their accumulated debt. That anxiety combined with the imminent dissolution of the army fueled a significant challenge to civil authority from

some military leaders in the form of the Newburgh Conspiracy. In both cases, the lack of material support led the army to challenge the authority of their superiors.

Washington's response to the Newburgh Conspiracy restored military deference to civil powers, but the argument he made on 15 March 1783 only briefly mentioned the importance of civilian control of the military. He blasted the proposed plan as impractical and emphasized that Congress continued to search for ways to compensate the army for its service. The centerpiece of his speech, however, was an appeal to the officers to refrain from action against Congress because of the negative impact it would have on their honor and the reputation of the army. Only at the end of the address did Washington caution against turning against civil authority because it would "overturn the liberties of our Country, ... open the flood Gates of Civil discord, and deluge our rising Empire in Blood."⁴ Washington framed that warning, however, in terms of the stain it would smear on the personal honor of the men present. As a bedrock principle, civilian control was at least an open question to the war's end.

Colonial Aftermath

The Continental Army emulated European militaries because of their effectiveness and the message such emulation sent to the international community. European tactics could provide the battlefield victories over the British Army that Washington sought. Through rigorous training, the commander-in-chief attempted to instill the discipline of a traditional European army in the belief that it was the best way to achieve tactical success. Beyond the battlefield, though, a competent military

⁴ Washington to Officers of the Army, 15 March 1783, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-10840>.

organization that maintained the customs of war and fought in a recognizable manner signaled that the nascent country was worthy of inclusion in the international order. The Continental Congress and Washington understood that the legitimacy of the United States derived from another country's recognition. The Declaration of Independence asserted that the new country would take its place "among the powers of the earth." The Treaty of Amity and Commerce with France, however, was more important for establishing the United States in the international order because it was the first time a significant European power acknowledged the existence of the country.

Continental Army officers worried that European nations would not take the United States seriously and went to great lengths to emulate the behaviors of European militaries. Washington and his officers uncritically accepted the standards of Europe as correct. The commander-in-chief desperately wanted to make his army a fighting force on par with its European counterparts. Maj. Gen. Nathanael Greene and other general officers asserted that only a regular army like those in Europe could convince Britain to abandon the war. Other officers appealed to the European example as authoritative when advocating for things as diverse as organizational priorities, command turnover, and building design.⁵ Washington argued that international laws of war compelled him to execute Major André as a spy. The lavish party at West Point celebrating the birth of the Dauphin of France demonstrated the gratitude of the United States as well as the might of

⁵ Duportail to Washington, 30 September 1783, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-11871>; Sebastian Bauman to Hamilton, 13 August 1780, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-0811>; Heath, *Memoirs*, 323.

the Continental Army. Throughout the war, the Continental Army looked to Europe for guidance and approval.

Intersection

The United States' strategy also increased the anxiety associated with striving for international recognition. To achieve independence, the young republic needed other countries to acknowledge its legitimacy. Modeling military tactics and organizations after those from European powers was one of the best ways to demonstrate the civility and capability of the nascent republic. Those tactics and organizations, however, often did not work or were beyond the resources of the nation. Washington and the Continental Army chose to adapt European practices to the geography of the Hudson Highlands and the limits of American resources. Because these adaptations deviated from European methods, the commander-in-chief and his officers remained unsure and anxious. Washington personally led French dignitaries around West Point to reassure them that the United States could play its part of the alliance.

As one of the largest national projects in the nascent United States, West Point also served to communicate the power and competence of the federal government to a domestic audience. The commandant of West Point received countless visitors to the fortifications, especially in the later years of the war. The Continental Army cited the successful deterrence of the British in New York City as evidence of the position's potency. Ultimately, West Point constituted part of a performance of legitimacy for United States citizens and the international order.

This dissertation offered a reconceptualization of strategy that provided explanatory power for Washington's actions and foregrounded the political objectives motivating the military conflict. If understood as a theory of victory, Washington's strategy was consistent throughout the war. West Point ensured the lines of communication remained open so that troops and material support could flow between New England and the other states. It also retained control of the Hudson Highlands to limit British options for maneuver and supply after they took New York City in 1776. Finally, the fortifications enabled the Main Army to move against Yorktown by fixing Clinton's forces in place. This examination of West Point in the American Revolution demonstrated the utility of the proposed definition and opened up avenues of inquiry for other conflicts.

The preceding pages explained how overlapping lines of authority created delays in the obstruction of navigation on the Hudson River. West Point was the Continental Army's third attempt to interrupt shipping on the river. State and federal oversight committees recognized the ineffectiveness of the developing defenses, but it took months for them to rectify the situation. In contrast, the Continental Army operated essentially without oversight after it began the works at West Point. The varying levels of supervision hindered the fort's development, but the absence of reliable supplies hurt the garrison more. As the war continued, supply, provision, and pay shortages escalated the tension between the army and civilians. The Newburgh Conspiracy indicated an ongoing negotiation over the appropriate relationship between the army and Congress. The civil-military relationship was an open question throughout the war because of the inefficiencies of overlapping authorities.

Finally, this dissertation attempted to take seriously the anxiety Continental officers experienced as part of the independence process. The rebellious North American colonies reflexively adopted European standards and models. Still, the aftermath of colonialism caused the officers to fret over their rejection of European methods and the potential inadequacy of their efforts. Because West Point was a national project, it proved the United States was a legitimate country. The sporadic support it received indicates that a unifying national identity developed in fits and starts as the security and financial situation of the various states allowed. Because the site was essential to the case for acceptance into the international order, though, West Point, like the Continental Army that built it, was a symbol of the potential for the United States to meet the European model of a civilized country.

In the evolution of West Point, the American theory of victory intersected with the development of civil-military relations in the United States and the anxiety of a group of people declaring independence from the most significant source of authority and legitimacy they had previously known. Since 1777, soldiers from the United States have continuously occupied West Point on the banks of the Hudson. Its contested, messy, and uncertain development illuminates the myriad of choices that went into the country's founding.

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