

DUTCHESS COUNTY IN THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR

By Louise Tompkins

The fires of the Revolution smoldered for years under the oppression of the rule of King George III over the colonies. The embers burned brighter with the passage of the Stamp Act which required a colonist to purchase a stamp with his marriage license as well as with other articles.

The Quartering Act enraged the colonists further because it required them to provide food and lodging for the British Militia sent to keep order among them. These soldiers were often of an unprincipled type. They stole, burglarized houses, and raped the women when an opportunity permitted it.

The taxes were increased. The colonists resented the taxation without representation in Parliament, and showed their resentment at the Boston tea party. That was the match that set fire to the smoldering embers which burst into flames at the Battle of Lexington on April 19, 1775. And the war was on.

Eventually General George Washington set up his Headquarters at Newburgh, New York. There is no doubt that he rode across Dutchess County during the eight years of the Revolution to direct the officers on the Continental Line. It is said that he made camp one night under a huge cottonwood tree that once stood near where Cottonwood Inn stands in 1975 in the Town of Washington.

With the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the war effort gained in strength. Women everywhere knit socks, and wove cloth for shirts for soldiers. At Hart's Village (a part of Millbrook in 1975) Philip Hart made in his mill the dark blue cloth used in making the officers' uniforms.

However, many Americans remained loyal to King George III, and they did all in their power to hinder the other Americans in their struggle for independence. For instance, in Dutchess County there was an island in a swamp (in the Town of LaGrange) where the loyalists, or Tories, hid the horses that they stole from the farmers until they could get the animals into the hands of the British soldiers. One dark night, they were raided, but they escaped leaving their camp fires still burning, and they never returned. The American men made more gun powder and bullets, and prepared to protect their property as well as to drive off the invaders.

The year of 1777 was the critical one in the struggle for American independence. The decisive action took place in New York State because the armies of King George III of England were sent to win the war by separating New York from the rest of the American colonies. But the Americans upset the British master plan when they displayed surprising military ability. Their ability influenced France to become their ally, and thus the war reached its turning point.

In October, 1777, the British decided to attack the Americans along the Hudson River. After a week of preparation and reconnaissance, a fleet of thirty sailboats, commanded by Sir James Wallace, and carrying about 1600 troops under Major General Vaughn started up the Hudson River on October 14, 1777, bent on destroying as much as possible of the property of the prosperous river folks.

The Livingstons and the other wealthy river families had been warned that the British would attack them. They did not think that event was likely. Winter was coming on when the

Hudson would be frozen over, and sailing on it would be impossible. The warm autumn sunshine brought out the gorgeous coloring of the autumn foliage. The white clouds in the bright blue sky were reflected on the blue water of the Hudson. A sense of peace and contentment was everywhere. It seemed incredible that danger lurked around the bend in the river.

Suddenly alarm guns boomed from the towns, and echoed through the mountains. Signal beacons flared from hilltops as the hated white sails moved steadily northward. Poughkeepsie was in a panic. The roars of the big guns on the frigates terrified the people. Cannon balls ripped through the houses of well known people as though the walls were made of cardboard.

The Livingstons and the other river families were caught unprepared. They had only a few hours to load their most precious belongings on to wagons, and flee as fast as their horses could travel on the rough roads winding across Dutchess County to Sharon, Connecticut. In one of the wagons sat stalwart Margaret Beekman Livingston, laughing at the antics of her three year old grandson, performing with a long handled toasting fork.

The attack along the Hudson was designed to draw the attention of the Americans away from General John Burgoyne who was marching with his army toward Saratoga, New York. General Burgoyne apparently thought that putting down the revolt would end in a ball since he brought along thirty wagons loaded with his personal wardrobe. General Horatio Gates and his army met him at Saratoga on October 7, 1777, and defeated him in a spectacular battle. General Burgoyne tried to retreat in the dark of night, but a pouring rain came down, and his wagons and war equipment got stuck in the mud. The American army swooped down, and easily captured them all. A smashing victory for them!

In 1778, an army of British soldiers, more than 5,000 in number, marched across the Town of Washington. They were prisoners of war, and troops of General Burgoyne who had surrendered to General Gates on October 7, 1777, at the battle of Saratoga, New York. The terms of surrender were that these troops were to embark from Boston, Massachusetts to England under the promise not to serve the King "against the United States during this war."

For some reason, General Gates sent his report to Congress instead of to General Washington, and Congress did not ratify the terms made by General Gates. After a while the prisoners were marched from Boston to Charlottesville, Virginia, where the most of them were held as prisoners until the end of the war.

In sending such a large number of men across the country, it was necessary to keep them within the lines of the American Army. To do this, they had to be taken across the Hudson River above the Highlands.

After the battle of Monmouth, General Washington had distributed his army along the south side of the Highlands from the Hudson River to Danbury, Connecticut, and at a corresponding latitude on the west side of the river. The prisoners were marched across Dutchess County through Amenia, Mabbettsville, Little Rest, Verbank, Arthursburgh, Hopewell Junction, to Fishkill Landing, and from there, they were taken across the river to Newburgh.

Stephen Deuell remembered hearing his grandmother say

that she saw them pass through Little Rest, and that they were Hessians. Some of them lay down beside the road to rest. Probably they were Hessians, or at least some of them, since General Burgoyne was assisted by Baron Riedesel and General Specht who commanded the German troops. Madam Riedesel was among the prisoners, and her diary mentioned the principal places through which the captives marched.

The late Tristram Coffin of Millbrook often said that his grandfather told him about the prisoners who could not keep up with the rest of them. They were kept in a winter camp near where the old district schoolhouse stood in the Town of Union Vale. The prisoners who were very ill were kept in an old Dutch barn which stood just north of the entrance to Greer School at Verbank. The barn was still standing when Mr. Coffin was a boy. He said that it was well built with huge hand-hewn beams, and a thatched roof, but it was remarkable that sick soldiers survived in it during the cold of winter.

It must have been about this time, although there is no known record of it, that there was a skirmish at Pond Gut between the Americans and the British. Pond Gut is a strip of water connecting the upper and lower part of Tyrrel Lake. In quite recent years a large old tree was cut down on the Innis-free property at Tyrrel Lake, and a cannon ball was found imbedded in the aged trunk at such an angle that it must have been fired across the lake in battle action.

General Washington spent the winter of 1778 at Pawling, New York, where he had his Headquarters at that time. He directed his officers on the Continental Line from there. He must have visited his friend the Marquis De LaFayette, who was spending the winter at Old Drovers Inn at Dover Plains, New York. He was the Americans' French ally and he had his staff with him to help in the struggle for independence. It was an honor for Dutchess County to have such great men living within its borders.

The war dragged on, and one-third of the battle action in it, took place in what is now New York State. The Americans were able to withstand the ordeal mainly because so many of their farmsteads were very nearly self-sufficient. Then, too, their fierce desire for independence spurred them on to victory when the odds seemed all against them.

Their sense of humor also did much to keep up their courage. They even developed the following folklore of the Revolution: thirteen - the total of the states in the new nation - was a magic number; it had taken General "Mad Anthony" Wayne thirteen hours to capture Stony Point; General Washington had thirteen teeth in each jaw, and since the Declaration of Independence, he had grown three extra toes! Folklore had it that Mrs. Washington had a mottled tomcat with thirteen rings around his tail; and General Schuyler had a topknot of thirteen stiff hairs that stood straight up on the crown of his head when he saw a Britisher!

There was great rejoicing in the land when, on April 19, 1783, exactly eight years after the Battle of Lexington, General Washington issued an order declaring that peace had come with the end of the war.

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