The Scarsdale Inquirer

Founded in 1901

VOLUME 90, NUMBER 26 | FRIDAY, JUNE 29, 2012 | REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION

Westchester, July 4, 1781: A pivotal point for the revolution

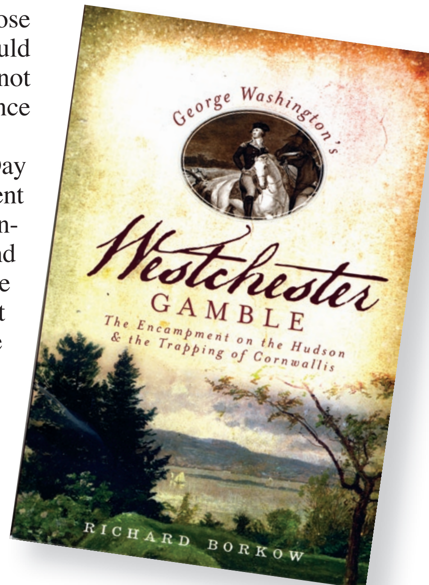
As we prepare to celebrate the 236th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Dobbs Ferry historian Richard Borkow takes us back to the summer of 1781 and the secret plans that led to the final defeat of the British at Yorktown in October of that year — plans General George Washington made right in our backyard.

By RICHARD BORKOW

By July 4, 1781, the fifth anniversary of Independence Day, the Revolutionary War had entered its seventh year, and American independence was far from assured. The warring sides were locked in stalemate. Despite the great promise that had attended the French alliance of February 1778, subsequent joint operations by the Americans and the French had repeatedly failed.

There were two powerful British armies in the United States in the summer of 1781, and it seemed that neither could be dislodged. The larger enemy force was in New York. In September 1776, British and Hessians had seized Manhattan, and since then their garrison on the island had acquired formidable defenses. By 1781 it was serving as the headquarters of Gen. Sir Henry Clinton, commander-in-chief of British forces in North America. The other major enemy force was in the South, under the command of Gen. Cornwallis, whose troops were rampaging through Virginia, pillaging the state, and devastating its economy. Unless one or the other of those powerful British armies could be defeated, the war could not be won, and true independence would remain a chimera.

The fifth Independence Day was also the first encampment day in lower Westchester County for General Washington and his Continental troops since 1778. (The 1781 encampment is traditionally known as the "Philipsburg Encampment.") The American commander-in-chief selected high ground in present-day Ardsley as the main campsite for his 4,500 troops. A mile south of the main camp he deployed Col. Alexander Scammel's light infantry unit on a ridge that rises from the Saw Mill River, the site of Children's Village today. The Dobbs Ferry heights that overlook the Hudson were selected for Col. Elisha Sheldon's light dragoons, also known as "Sheldon's Horse" or "Washington's Eyes."



The American regiments were positioned almost entirely to the west of the Sprain Brook. Washington reserved the hills east of the Sprain Brook, in present-day Hartsdale and White Plains, for Gen. Rochambeau's 5,000 French troops, who were due to arrive in lower Westchester on July 6. The French had left Newport, R.I., in late June, and on Independence Day were still on the march.

Washington chose lower Westchester for the allied encampment because of its proximity to British-occupied Manhattan. He intended to probe for weaknesses in Sir Henry Clinton's defenses, with its perimeter at Kingsbridge, just 12 miles to the south of the encampment. Having identified British vulnerabilities, Washington hoped, with the help of the French, to drive the enemy from New York.

The encampment in lower Westchester would be the first occasion that the allied armies had ever been deployed side by side. To assure adequate domicile for the French officers, Washington gave explicit orders to his quartermaster: "Take particular care that no house on the other side of the Wood and stream of Water on the left of the encampment [the Sprain Brook] are taken up for officers of the American Army; all on that side are to be appropriated to the officers of the French Army."

That July 4 was the anniversary date for the Declaration of Independence did not go unnoticed by the American soldiers. The password for the day was "Independence" and the countersigns, "glorious" and "America." Uplifting words, which seemed to reflect a hopeful mood among the Continental troops — yet, when we study their actual circumstances, we can only marvel at their buoyant spirit.

The American army was destitute. It was an army in rags. Washington was appalled by the privation of his men, at their chronic shortages of food and clothing and their chronic arrears of pay. He did not blame the penniless Congress for the sorry condition of the troops, but rather the states, for they had the wherewithal to provide support, yet were holding back. He told the president of the Congress that the states, by withholding assistance for the army, were endangering the cause of liberty and risking dishonor and disgrace.

In a circular letter to the governors of the four New England states in January 1781, the commander-in-chief wrote: "The aggravated calamities and distresses that have resulted to the soldiers from a total want of pay for nearly 12 months, the want of clothing at a severe season, and not infrequently the want of provisions, are beyond description. I give it decidedly as my opinion that it is vain to think that an army can be kept together much longer under such a variety of sufferings."

There was a general understanding that 1781 would be

Continued on next page

© 2012 S.I. Communications, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

Westchester, July 4, 1781: A pivotal point for the revolution

Continued from previous page

America's last chance. If the war could not be decided on the battlefield, it would end it in a different way, at a proposed conference in Vienna, where the imperial Russian and Austrian courts would act as mediators and dictate cease-fire terms. To determine cease-fire lines, the Vienna conferees were expected to apply the principle of *uti possidetis* ("as you possess it"), in theory basing their decisions on the "possessions" of the warring armies in 1781. But it was probable that the mediators would bias their decisions in favor of Great Britain and against the 13 upstart American republics, who would not even be represented in Vienna.

The most likely *uti possidetis* settlement would grant the trans-Allegheny west to the British Crown, as well as Manhattan, Staten Island, Long Island, Virginia, the Carolinas and Georgia, confining the so-called United States to a vulnerable, truncated swath near the coast, entirely north of the Potomac. Moreover, the Vienna settlement would most likely not recognize American independence. Yet Congress, without resources, tiring of the long and seemingly inconclusive war, and seeing no alternative, was ready to accede to this arrangement.

It was these grim circumstances that brought Washington to lower Westchester in the summer of 1781. To avert the looming danger to his country, he needed to break the military stalemate with a dramatic victory, and he hoped, with the help of Rochambeau's troops, to gain that victory by defeating Clinton in New York. No greater triumph could be imagined. It would render a Vienna conference moot and almost surely end more than six terrible years of war, gaining unchallenged independence for the United States.

The allied American and French armies remained encamped on the hills of lower Westchester for more than six weeks, launching reconnaissance missions from time to time to study the British and Hessian positions along Spuyten Duyvil and the Harlem River. The largest mission, a reconnaissance in force from July 21 to 23, succeeded in disrupting Loyalist troop concentrations in Morrisania (present-day Mott Haven and Port Morris in the Bronx), but failed in its larger purpose, for no vulnerabilities in British defense lines could be found. In his diary entry for Aug. 1, Washington acknowledged that there was little reason to expect a successful attack against New York.

Throughout this period Washington kept in reserve a contingency plan (one that Rochambeau preferred), the possibility of leaving the Hudson and marching hundreds of miles south, to confront Gen. Cornwallis's army in Virginia. The probability of failure of a march to Virginia was high, and the American commander was averse to taking such a risk. On the other hand, by August the potential benefits of an operation in the South had increased greatly. For intelligence reports were arriving at the encampment from Lafayette, who was in Virginia, that Cornwallis had placed himself in a potentially trappable situation at Yorktown near the Chesapeake Bay.

On Aug. 14, 1781, a communication was received at the lower Westchester encampment from French Adm. de Grasse in the West Indies which convinced Washington to adopt the Virginia contingency plan. De Grasse's communication, which has been called by historian Robert Leckie, "possibly the most momentous message of the entire war," informed the allied commanders that the admiral was bringing his strong French fleet to the Chesapeake Bay, and called for Washington and Rochambeau to leave New York and cooperate with de Grasse in a joint land and sea attack against the British in Virginia.

Washington decided to abandon his plans to attack Manhattan and to risk all on a march to Virginia. Success would require coordination of multiple land and sea movements at great distances, including Gen. Lafayette in Virginia, Adm. de Grasse, and also French Adm. de Barras in Newport. Success would also require an elaborate deception, to convince the British that Manhattan, not Virginia, remained the target of the allied armies.

Washington's new strategy, adopted and designed in mid-August 1781, at the encampment of the allied armies in lower Westchester, would win the war. The allied armies were ordered to break camp on Aug. 19, 1781: on that date the Americans "were paraded (assembled) for the march" in Dobbs Ferry, en route to victory over Gen. Cornwallis at the Battle of Yorktown.

Two months later to the day, on Oct. 19, 1781, Cornwallis surrendered his entire Yorktown army, 7,500 British and Hessian troops, to the combined American and French forces. The allied triumph at Yorktown would lead to victory in the Revolutionary War, uncontested American independence and a vast territory for the young republic, including the trans-Allegheny region as far west as the Mississippi River.

A brief and fascinating video interview with renowned historian, David Hackett Fischer, "American Revolution: The Decision Which Won the War" provides more information about these events: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GxX0Kzfyeyk.

Richard Borkow, M.D. is a physician at Blythedale Children's Hospital in Valhalla, village historian of Dobbs Ferry and author of "George Washington's Westchester Gamble: the Encampment on the Hudson and the Trapping of Cornwallis" (The History Press, May 2011).

© 2012 S.I. Communications, Inc. All Rights Reserved.