

Giffin's Diary  
The first fortification of West Point  
Edited by Merle Sheffield

Introduction

A photo-copy of a Revolutionary War Diary was being reviewed at the Connecticut state library in Hartford a few months ago as part of a research project regarding West Point's part in that war. It is almost axiomatic to think that all of the primary sources on this subject have long since surfaced. In this case at least, the axiom is wrong. The diary of Quartermaster Sergeant Simon Giffin was found to contain colorful and detailed accounts of the first months of 1778 when West Point was first occupied and the familiar fortification begun – a period full of question marks because of the dearth of information previously available. The day-to-day minutia of fatigue details of an early mutiny among the Connecticut troops and the exact days that first stones were laid on the breastworks. The comings and goings of the officers are interspersed with daily weather readings and the status of the ice in the river. All-in-all it recreates the flavor of those times in a way that makes it as valuable for background material as it is for the new facts brought to light.

Giffin belonged to the regiment of Samuel Blatchley Webb, the young stepson of Silas Deane from Wethersfield, Connecticut. Webb, then 25, had already been aide to Washington and, before that, to General Israel Putnam. He formed his own regiment in early 1777, choosing as his second-in-command 21 year old Billy Livingston from the wealthy New York family. The story of this regiment would be a fascinating study by itself but it forms the background against which this diary must be viewed. Livingston had been captured at the fall of Fort Mifflin in October 1777 and Webb himself fell into enemy hands in an attack against British positions on Long Island in early December 1777. This attack may have liberated Livingston where he had previously been held. The remainder of Webb's regiment rallied near their homes in Connecticut and were set in motion toward the Hudson River on the 13<sup>th</sup> of January<sup>1</sup> from their encampment at Wethersfield. Webb had been released on parole by his captors in an effort to arrange for an exchange of prisoners and was also in Wethersfield at this time. He was unable to affect his own exchange, however, and spent more than three years in the hands of the enemy before returning to command these troops – by then known as one of the finest regiments in the Continental service.

The regiment marched across Connecticut and into New York State under the command of Captain Jonathan Wyllys whose brother, Samuel, commanded another Connecticut regiment soon to join them at West Point. Captain Wyllys was a friend, at Yale, of the recently martyred Nathan Hale and was destined to become the first officer in the United States Army to be killed in action after the Revolutionary War.<sup>2</sup> During the 10-day trek to the Hudson the Captain had the able support of four lieutenants and three ensigns. There were eight companies in the regiment, averaging at that time, 30 men per company. Their route led them through Hartford,

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<sup>1</sup> Details of the march to the Hudson are carefully set down in the diary of Nathan Beer, one of Webb's lieutenants. Beer's unpublished diary is in the manuscript collections of the Stirling Library, Yale University.

<sup>2</sup> John Palsgrave Wyllys served throughout the Revolutionary War to include the command of the Connecticut troops in LaFayette's Light Infantry at Yorktown. His wife died not long after he returned from the war and in 1785 he resumed his commission in the newly formed United States Army. He was killed in action in October 1790 in General Harmar's expedition against the Indians. Johnston, H.P. Record of Connecticut Men in the War of the Revolution, Hartford, 1889.

Harrington, Litchfield and Dover to Fishkill where they paused to prepare for the move across the river on the ice.

General Israel Putnam had been ordered to start fortifying West Point in preparation for the defense of the new chain which was to be located there. Putnam was a believer in “leadership-by-example” and Giffin’s record of the river crossing is amplified in the following account by a drummer-boy from the same regiment:<sup>3</sup>

“When General Putnam was ready to go over on the ice he called me to him. He then loaded me with tools for building huts and took a heavy load himself and bade me follow him, so I followed behind him; when we got about half a mile on the ice, he went on some shelly ice, began to slip about, and down he went with his load of tools and made the ice crack so that I thought he would go down, but the ice held him up again. We then went on and arrived safe on the point.”

Crossing the ice of Hudson River on a bleak day in late January was only one of the many problems plaguing Giffin as a sergeant in the under-staffed unit. His penmanship, spelling and grammar were incidental details, which had to take a back seat in comparison with the events, which his foresight recorded. The reading of the manuscript is a task in itself. Every effort has been made to retain the original flavor of the diarist’s construction but this is not to say that the original intent has been discovered in every case. It is a “remarkable” document.

Diary of Quartermaster Sergeant Simon Giffin  
Contains daily entries from spring 1777-fall 1779  
This excerpt starts in January 1778.

Jenny 23 Friday Marched about 2 miles then drew Rum marched three miles & Made a halt  
Lodged there made a weekly Return Nothing Strange.  
Jenny 24 Saturday Lay at Fishkills<sup>4</sup> 5 miles Back from the town Nothing Remarkable.  
Sabbath Jenny 25 Lay at the same Place had to go to the Officers Quarters to Role Call Rec’d 3  
Dollars of Lieut Wells<sup>5</sup> Nothing Strange Lay at Mr Lasee  
Jenny Munday 26 a cold morning Lay still till 2 o’clock then we Marched towards North River  
about 6 miles Lay at fishkills coll Livingston<sup>6</sup> joined us here  
Jenny Tuesday 27 a cold morning but clear marched down to a place that Fort Constitution<sup>7</sup> was  
built on there made a halt marched over the River on the ice marched back a gain for that was no

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<sup>3</sup> This quote is taken from an “anonymous Journal of a Revolutionary Soldier,” unpublished manuscript in the collections of the Connecticut Historical Society. Evidence contained within the journal entries allows the author of this interesting relic to be readily identified as drummer-boy Elijah Porter.

<sup>4</sup> Fishkill is located about five miles east of the Hudson and ten miles north of West Point. It was an early garrison and hospital area as well as the seat of the state government for a time. It continued as a supply depot for much of the Revolutionary War.

<sup>5</sup> Roger Welles of Newington, Connecticut. Johnston

<sup>6</sup> William S. Livingston, Lieutenant Colonel, second-in-command of Webb’s regiment but senior officer due to Webb’s capture. Though he is noted here as joining the regiment in January the returns of the regiment indicate that it was May before he spent any time at West Point. Captain Wyllys signed a letter on 10 February 1778 at West Point as “Commanding Officer, Col. S.B. Webb’s Reg.” The letter is from the Wadsworth Papers, Connecticut Historical Society.

<sup>7</sup> Fort Constitution was located on Constitution Island opposite West Point. The east end of the Great Chain was anchored here from 1778 to the end of the war. The original barracks and batteries dating from 1775 were destroyed when the British forced their way up the river in October 1777.

Place to Loge theor on the West side of the Rever So we had to go into the Woods and mack fiers & mach ouer Rads on the snow we mad a hut that 15 of us Lay Prity worm considering the wether being so very cold

Jenny wensday 28 This morning crossed the North rEver on the ice and went to work to mak huts in the ground by diging in a side hill wheor they ware a Going to Bild a fort & at Night Returned to ouer old huts in the wods a Gain

Jenny Thirsday 29 This morning Raned hard as it had dun all Night But it clared up about Newn I went over the Rever to work on my hut worked hard all day & at Night returned to my old hut that I had on this side of the Rever Loged Very well considern the badness of the wether

Jenny Fryday 30 This Morning I wen tot work over the Rever at my hut and got it so that I loged in it Mad a weekly Return 29 Men<sup>8</sup> Besides them that was tacken Prisonor the Rever was a good deel Roten

Jenny Saturday 31 Rened all day & all night which made it uncomfortable for us for the rane came down main on us not having good covering

Saboth Februy 1 Lay at west point Drawed 4 day Ptrovision and a gill of Rum a day Nothing hapned Remarkbell

Munday Februy 2 This day I worked on my hut Nothing Remarkbell

Tuesday 3d this day I worked for Capt Wyils a Bulding his Chimely to his but the Ise gose of very fast I had to send 6 men for gaurd & fortague

Wensday Februy 4<sup>th</sup> Lay at wist Point wint to work at the officer huts a helping to Buld chemelys Nothing Remarkbell

Thirsday Februy 5 I went to work a Bulding of the officers hut Genl Parsons<sup>9</sup> Came hear this day & Genl Putnam and went throw all the huts to see how thay Lived – a bout fore o clock theor was a Negor Man was whipped 23 Lashes he be longed to Coll Wyillis<sup>10</sup> Regt

Friday Februy 6 This day I went to work at the officers hut and I had to leve of work Becase it Snowed I had a Forlow given this night to go hom & a Packet of Leters Snowed very hard

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Six week furlough to Connecticut, entries omitted.

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Friday March 20 This morning marched from kent about 24 milds Nothing Remarkbell

Saterdag March 21 Marched as far as Fishkill mad a hlaat eat Breafast march as far as Fort Constitution had to wad a crosse the S. Meddow about half lege deep in mud & water and cold not get a Cross so that we had to march Back a Gain a bout 4 milds down the North Rever in

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<sup>8</sup> Giffin was a sergeant in Captain Caleb Bull's company before being appointed to Quartermaster Sergeant for the regiment in May of 1778. According to Johnston there were five of this company taken prisoner with Webb in December 1777.

<sup>9</sup> Brig. General Samuel Holden Parsons had been commanding his Connecticut brigade under Putnam for many months. The visit to the huts at west point mentioned above was only five days prior to Putnam's letter to Congress (National Archives) wherein he reported "Barracks for the artificers and huts for about three hundred men are completed . . ." It had been a busy two weeks since they crossed the river on the ice. Parsons and Putnam both used the Robinson House on the east side of the river as their headquarters at that time.

<sup>10</sup> Colonel Samuel Wyllys's regiment came across the river at approximately the same time as did Web's regiment. The field officers (and captains as well) were all absent and the regiment was led by Lieutenant Samuel Richards. He has given an excellent description of the winter encampment in Personal Narrative of an Officer in the Revolutionary War, United Service, October 1903. Richards soon became a part of Parsons' staff at brigade headquarters when Parsons moved to the west point side.

order to Cross But cold not the wind blowed so hard Sat up by the fire all night a cold night Last Night Sawell got away from the Provost Corde a Solger in Coll Samll Webb (illegible)  
Saboth March 22 This I went to the fery and haled for the Boat but they did not come after us till about newn I got a crost the Rever and joined the (illegible)  
Munday March 23 This day I worked on the Fort<sup>11</sup> at west point as Colentere all the ofofcers worked  
Tusday March 24 This morning I went on the Main Guard Had 15 prisinors to keep under Gaurd I was ordered to tack six men and go about a mild down the rever to a ferry and stoped men and go about a mild down the rever to a ferry and stoped all Travelers with out a Pase or Lyberty from the Genll had won man brout under Gard with had cofes for in Listing in two Devernt Regtmt Leuit Wells had the command of the guard  
Wensday March 25 I was releved from gaurd about 9 o clock in the morning this Day thenr was 2 field pieses & won howet brot to west point and the first gun that ever was fiered on west Point was fierd this Evining cannon I mean  
Thrsday March 26 this morning at Trup Beeting thear a man had Forty Seven Lashes for Listing in two Diferant Regtm I Reef my wages 2 munt from the first of Noevember Snowed sum and Raned in the after newn Nothing Remark  
Fryday March 27 Lay still all day snowed sum in the fore newn the militia worked on the Fort very briefly  
Saterday March 28 Lay still Nothing Remarkbell

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<sup>11</sup> "The Fort" apparently means the main fortification, later called Fort Arnold and, finally Fort Clinton. The smaller forts, or redoubts, received their names early in April of 1778 and Fort Arnold was so designated in orders of the 4<sup>th</sup> of May according to the orderly book kept in Sherburn's regiment. This orderly book is presently located in the manuscript collection of the Connecticut State Library, Hartford.