

Remembering the Revolution
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The worst winter of the 18th century maintained its hold on the Hudson Valley as 1780 dawned. Soldiers in Gen. Washington's Main Army huddled in their huts at Morristown, New Jersey. From there, Surgeon James Thacher reported: "On the 3rd instant, we experienced one of the most tremendous snow-storms ever remembered; no man could endure its violence many minutes without danger of his life." Over the next week, six feet of snow accumulated; soldiers went up to eight days without meat and bread.

Brig. Gen. John Paterson, commander of Fortress West Point, made clear the level of misery there in a letter of January 8: the soldiers' "distress is really very great a number are frozen...if this severe Season continues I am afraid we shall perish. To add to Paterson's difficulties, North Redoubt (above present-day Garrison) burned on January 9 and 10. Heroic efforts extinguished the blaze after an unknown sergeant saved every barrel of powder.

Soldiers from both armies reacted to the conditions in different ways. Dr. Thacher wrote in his journal that "Notwithstanding the numerous difficulties and discouragements with which our army have been compelled to struggle, we are happy to find a considerable proportion whose terms of enlistment have lately expired, have reenlisted during the continuance of the war." At the same time, he reported that 100 soldiers from Massachusetts, "pretending that their term of enlistment had expired, marched off with the intention of going home." Gen. Paterson dispatched troops after them. After they were returned to West Point, some were punished and most returned to duty. Thacher also noted that "a considerable number" of British and Hessian deserters had thrown their lot in with the Americans, indicating that conditions in the enemy garrison were also less than ideal.

Despite the severity of the weather, the Americans mounted military operations around the perimeter of New York. Maj. Gen. William Alexander, Lord Stirling, led a raid against Staten Island with 2,500 men transported across the ice from Elizabeth Town, New Jersey, on some 500 sleighs. Since the enemy had learned of the attack, they avoided open battle by "occupying the grounds near to and in front of the redoubts." Stirling had to be content with capturing much-needed tents, blankets, and stores, including wine and spirits. Since his men were in the open for 24 hours, some 500 were "slightly frozen," reported Thacher. On January 18, a Connecticut militia of 80 men led by Capt. Samuel Keeler and Samuel Lockwood attacked the headquarters of Loyalist Lt. Col. Hatfield near New Rochelle, capturing him and 14 of his men after setting fire to the house. Unfortunately, they withdrew too slowly and a force of Loyalist light horsemen under Maj. Thomas Huggeford (who had escaped the burning house) attacked them, killing a number and capturing up to 40 of them. On the 21st the fighting escalated as Loyalist Lt. Col. James DeLancey led members of his brigade against Continentals at Williams Bridge, near West Greenwich, suffering 16 killed, 32 wounded, and 17 captured. (There was no report of American casualties.) New Year 1780 thus foretold more bloodshed in the civil war in New York.

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