

In April 1781, the military rituals of spring played out at Fortress West Point. As ice disappeared from the Hudson, the garrison at West Point completed the backbreaking and dangerous task of refloating the Great Chain across the river from below Fort Clinton to Constitution Island. At the same time, Gen. Sir Henry Clinton, the British commander in chief, once again contemplated the possibility of taking West Point, Gen. George Washington's "key of America."

Maintaining and deploying the Great Chain were formidable tasks. Over the winter, work details felled white pine and tulip poplars upriver. To construct the rafts that would support the chain, the trees were then cut into pieces 10 to 40 feet long, and up to two feet in diameter; these were moved to the river so they could be floated to West Point once the ice melted. On February 27, Washington (then headquartered in New Windsor) wrote Maj. Gen. William Heath, commander in the Hudson Highlands, that "The logs (at a landing about two miles above Newburgh) for the Chain are in tolerable forwardness." Washington ordered Heath to assign additional carpenters and "fatigue men" to help with the detail so the logs "will be ready in good season."

The late Col. Merle Sheffield, a former physics professor at the United States Military Academy, estimated that the iron links of the chain weighed at least 35 tons. Each of the 30 rafts that allowed the chain to float across the 1,590-foot channel had to bear about 2,500 pounds. It was anchored at both ends to log cribs or "mud blocks," each eight- to 10-foot square and filled with boulders. In 1784, Venezuelan revolutionary Francisco de Miranda wrote in his diary that "By means of... four strong capstans [windlass] that were fixed on both sides, it was kept stretched on the surface of the water."

The elaborate operation began on March 30. In the day's General Orders, Washington commanded that "A Sub[altern], Sergeant, and twenty watermen to be sent immediately to Newburgh to assist Cap-

tain Nivens [Daniel Niven] in floating the rafts to and stretching the chain at Westpoint." Heath reported on April 10 that "The great chain was hauled off the beach near the red [Moore's] house at West Point, and towed down to the blocks, in order to its being laid across the river — about 280 men were ordered on this duty." The next day, he reported that "The chain was properly fixed with great dexterity, and fortunately without any accident." With the Hudson blocked to British warships, spring had officially arrived at West Point, no matter what the climate indicated. (To learn more about the chain and boom, visit www.hudsonrivervalley.net/books/Chainandboom/pdf and read Lincoln Diamant's *Chaining the Hudson*.)

In New York City, Clinton weighed his options for taking the fortress that Washington's troops



were working so hard to secure against the news from Maj. Gen. William Phillips and Brig. Gen. Benedict Arnold in Virginia and Gen. Charles Lord Cornwallis in North Carolina. In an April 20 letter to Lord George Germain, secretary of state for the American Department, he wrote: "And may I with truth presume to say your lordship does but justice to my zeal in supposing that I shall not let slip any favourable opportunity of rendering His Majesty and my country so essential a service as the securing (even by a regular attack) the important post of West Point whenever the attempt can be made with propriety." Arnold's alleged arguments notwithstanding, Clinton remained unconvinced "that the rebel forts in the Highlands can be reduced by a few days regular attack.... However, if General Arnold convinces me now in the present reduced state of the rebel army that success is probable (for to fail would

be death to our cause in the present state of the war) I shall most likely be induced to make the attempt." Nothing would come of this thinking, and Clinton would follow his preferred alternative of supporting operations in the Southern Theater with the manpower that he could spare.

Back in the Hudson Highlands, Dr. James Thacher of the 16th Massachusetts Regiment continued his inoculations against Variola, or smallpox. He reported that after passing the night at the hospital at the Beverley Robinson house, he rode to Peekskill to check on an officer and his family who had been inoculated. Later he returned to West Point to dine with Gen. Heath. While there, he observed the hanging of a soldier for desertion and the spectacle of another who "was pardoned under the gallows with a rope round his neck." He summarized the campaign against Variola in positive terms, noting that of the 500 who had been inoculated, only four had died. This was remarkable, since "Many of our patients were improper subjects for the disease, but we were under the necessity of inoculating all, without exception, whatever might be their condition as to health." Meanwhile, the chess game between Washington and Clinton continued as the campaign season neared in the Middle Department. Soon another player, French Gen. Jean Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, Viscount de Rochambeau, would join the contest at Washington's side.

To learn more about the Revolution in the Hudson River Valley during the 225th anniversary of the War for Independence, log onto www.hudsonrivervalley.net and www.hudsonrivervalley.com. The most recent issue of the *Hudson River Valley Review* spotlights the Civil War, the second American Revolution; to subscribe, visit www.hudsonrivervalley.net/hrvr/subscribe/index.php.

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