

By the end of 1778, as General George Washington moved the Main Army to winter quarters at Middle Brook, New Jersey, from Fredericksburgh, Fortress West Point had taken shape. Chief of Engineers Brigadier General Louis Duportail and Colonel Thaddeus Kosciuszko had added details to fellow engineer Colonel Louis de la Radière's vision. Four water batteries, Sherburne's Redoubt, and Forts Arnold, Putnam, Wyllys, and Meigs protected the western end of the chain. They also were working to secure the eastern end on Constitution Island with Greaton's Battery backed by three redoubts. To man the fortifications, Major General Alexander McDougall returned to the Highlands Department with three brigades of Continentals.

General McDougall first reacted to a British naval raid on Stony Point and a crisis closer to home: the chain and its rafts were almost lost to ice in the river. On November 8th, Washington had already advised McDougall to remove "the Chain and Boom" as soon as an attack could be discounted. After the short panic ended, General John Paterson, commanding at West Point, set December 21st as the removal date, allowing for the arrival of two extra sloops that would assist in the operation. However, the vessels did not arrive on time, and as luck would have it, the river started to freeze. The only recourse was to disconnect the obstacles from Constitution Island and swing both chain and its rafts in a wide arc toward the western shore where they were secured to the rocky bank. Later the chain could be hauled out of the water for winter storage by Moore's House. It had snapped in a few places when the ice had formed and had shifted with the current and tide, but once the river was solid, the chain was safe. Colonel Kosciuszko planned to take it out in pieces as soon as the next thaw allowed such activity.

On December 29th the cold abated, and Kosciuszko was able to begin that task. On January 2, 1779, he reported to McDougall: “I find many of the Logs at the Chain that are rotten, should think it best to send up the River to Cut white Pine to replace them, which are much better for that purpose, but shall want more Carpenters to prosecute the Plan. We have taken up and got on shore three Hundred links of the Chain with about one hundred of the small one[s] where it was fastened to the Mudblock.” With the chain secured and the military works well underway, West Point would serve, in Duportail’s words, as “the Key of the North River.”

The 225th anniversary celebration of the Fredericksburgh Encampment held at Pawling on September 20th and 21st was a great success. Hundreds of people came to observe activities typical of those followed by Washington’s army from September to November 1778. Co-Chair Paul Everett passed the historical torch to future generations as he, Co-Chair Nada Davis, and Congresswoman Sue Kelly unveiled the plaque to memorialize the observances. The highlight of Twin Forts’ Day on October 4th at Forts Montgomery and Clinton was the firing of the replica 32-pounder cannon made possible by grants from Heritage New York and the Peter Jay Sharp Foundation. Great things continue to happen in the Hudson River Valley thanks to the Hudson River Valley National Heritage Area. To keep track of events related to the 225th Anniversary of the American Revolution, see the Hudson River Valley Institute’s Digital Library at www.hudsonrivervalley.net. Huzza from the Hudson Highlands.