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## Scholar finds motivation in 'living history' **By Shaileen Kopec** **For The Poughkeepsie Journal**

March 24, 2008

Not since the Marquis de Lafayette rallied troops for the American cause has Gen. George Washington had such a staunch ally.

James M. Johnson, 60, is a zealous promoter of New York's Revolutionary War history and the regional role of America's first commander in chief.

A scholar and career soldier who serves as executive director of the Hudson River Valley Institute at Marist College, Johnson is in his ninth term as military historian of the Hudson Valley, a position instituted by the Hudson River Valley National Heritage Area - one of 27 original designations made by Congress in 1996. (There are 37 National Heritage Areas).

"Our past shapes how we think and act," Johnson said. "We need to understand it in order to protect it. We need to soak it up to grow as citizens and human beings."

Johnson has a particular interest in military history and Washington as a military commander.

"Washington called the Hudson River 'the key of America.' As long as he was commander in chief, he would never lose sight of the strategic consequences that the Hudson River and New York had for the outcome of the Revolution." Johnson said. "Washington understood that the river was the nexus of population, industry, agriculture, commerce, communication and logistics. He was an early advocate for Fortress West Point, believing it would help protect the Hudson from British control that could have split the colonies."

Johnson's military knowledge may rival that of Washington.

He graduated from West Point, earned master's and doctoral degrees in American history from Duke University and holds a master's in national security and strategic studies from the Naval War College.

"I was a soldier for 30 years, so my perspective is shaped by my military experience," said Johnson, who commanded field artillery batteries and served as battalion operations officer for Lt. Col. Tommy R. Franks. He had tours of duty in Korea and Europe, and served in the Pentagon under Chief of Staff of the Army Gen. John A. Wickham Jr.

### **Member of military family**

Johnson, a Georgia native, is the son of two World War II Army veterans - his father was an infantry rifle company commander in Europe, his mother a nurse in Iran and Germany - and has a brother who served to the rank of colonel and another brother who is a reserve major general on active duty.

"I guess serving was in my genes," Johnson said.

His commitment to the military and love of history intersected in 1987 when Johnson began a 15-year teaching career at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, rising to the rank of professor and chief of the military history division. Retiring from the Army in 1999, Johnson's passion for the American Revolution brought him to Marist College, where he continues to teach history while leading the Hudson River Valley Institute's varied educational and cultural programs.

"The best part about this job," Johnson said, "is that I am living history every day. I do what it takes to make history come alive. That's what motivates me as a teacher, an educator, a re-enactor."

*Neighbor appears each Monday. To suggest a candidate, phone 845-437-4877.*

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**Neighbor:** James M. Johnson

**Age:** 60.

**Occupation:** Affiliate professor of History and executive director of the Hudson River Valley Institute at Marist College.

**Education:** Bachelor of science, United States Military Academy at West Point; Ph.D. Duke University.

**Family:** Wife, Lois.

**Hobby:** Revolutionary War re-enactment, usually dressed as an ensign in the 5th New York Regiment.

Johnson is executive director of the Hudson River Valley Institute at Marist College.

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