

THE HUDSON RIVER VALLEY REVIEW

A Journal of Regional Studies

MARIST



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Gezicht op Nieuw Amsterdam by Johannes Vingboons (1664),
Library of Congress

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The Hudson River Valley Institute periodically publishes Notes and Documents to share significant new research and other scholarship that may not otherwise reach its audience.



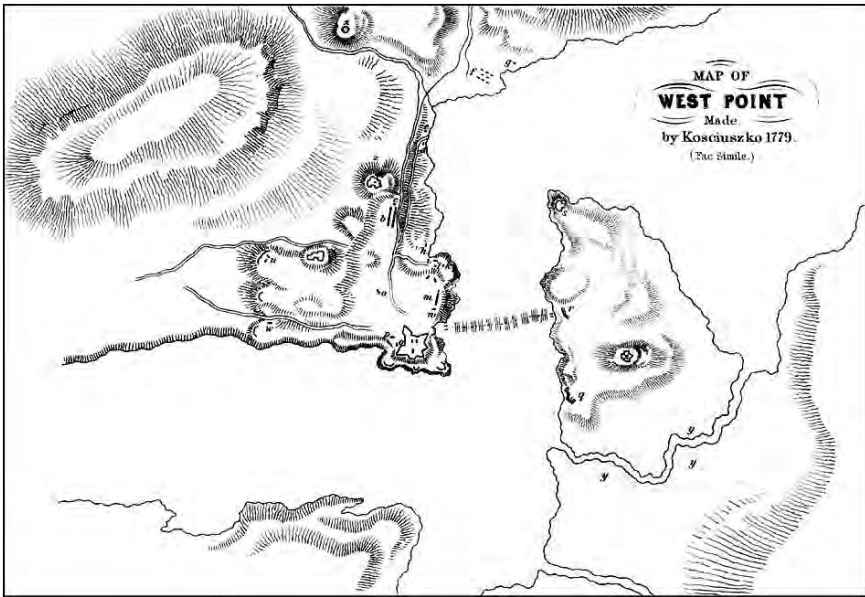
Photograph of the historical marker on Fort Clinton today

Who Planned Fort Arnold?

Merle G. Sheffield; adapted by James M. Johnson

Historians and biographers are always assigning credit or blame to individuals caught up in the great events of history. The contributions of two engineers, Colonels Thaddeus Kosciuszko and Louis Guillaume Servais Deshayes de la Radière, in the construction of Fortress West Point, General George Washington's "key of America," have been debated over the last 236 years. Kosciuszko, the Polish-American hero in the American War of Independence, has generally come out on top. Since 1828, the main fortification at West Point, Fort Clinton/Arnold, has been graced with a monument—and since 1913 a sculpture—honoring him. Kosciuszko's name is closely woven into the whole tapestry of forts and redoubts that guarded the Hudson Highlands during the war. In particular, he was the resident engineer at West Point for a period of two years between his service in other theaters of the war.

Lieutenant Colonel Merle G. Sheffield was a faculty member in the Department of Physics at the United States Military Academy from 1965 to 1971; during my time as a cadet, he became captivated by the role of the other foreign engineer, French Colonel de la Radière. He eventually wrote essays about West Point's Great Chain and boom and la Radière's role in the design of Fort Clinton/Arnold. Based on his research, he



Map of Fortress West Point Defenses from Guide to West Point, and the U.S. Military Academy, with Maps and Engravings (1867) by Edward Carlisle Boynton

decided he needed to clarify who actually planned Fort Clinton: a little-known French-American patriot who gave his life for America's cause. This adaptation of his essay "Who Planned Fort Arnold?" honors Sheffield's historical passion and his service as a soldier and, in retirement, a Peace Corps volunteer. It is a posthumous recognition of his scholarly contributions; LTC Sheffield died in 1991.¹

The reader should understand from the beginning that this is a controversial subject of great interest to a limited number of people. It does, however, highlight how important documentary evidence is in illuminating historical controversies. While some will see this study as an attempt to detract from Kosciuszko's fine record, this is not the case. The authors' interest is to give credit where it is due. La Radière's service with the Continental Army was cut short by his untimely death from consumption on 30 October 1779. He should be honored for what he did, and one of his accomplishments was to draft the plan that would result in the main fort—Fort Clinton/Arnold—and its nearby supporting batteries and redoubt at West Point.

Washington's army suffered from the lack of trained military engineers until Kosciuszko arrived late in 1776 and a number of French officers early in 1777. The need for competent engineers meant that the Continental Congress had to attract Europeans to the Patriot cause. Although numerous soldiers of fortune sought high pay and rapid promotion, qualified engineers were not so plentiful. To fill that void, the Continental Congress directed Benjamin Franklin, Minister to France, to "engage skilful [sic] engineers not exceeding four."² Not yet openly allied with the United States,

France selected Major Louis Le Bègue de Presle Duportail to go to America and serve in the Continental Army. Duportail chose three others to accompany him: Captain de la Radière, Captain Jean Baptiste Joseph de Laumoy, and Lieutenant Jean Baptiste de Gouvion.

After the British ended their expedition in the mid-Hudson River Valley in October 1777, Washington sent la Radière to plan the defenses of that region and to get the work started as quickly as possible. Major General Israel Putnam commanded the troops in the Hudson Highlands Department, while Governor George Clinton oversaw New York State's participation from the temporary capital at Poughkeepsie on the eastern shore of the Hudson north of West Point. The general and the governor both agreed that the new fortifications should be sited at the "west point" of the Hudson. La Radière disagreed and argued for an area to the south, where Forts Montgomery and Clinton had been located before the British destroyed them in their 1777 campaign. The French engineer lost the argument; against his better judgment, he was forced to lay out his fort at West Point. Just as the fort was beginning to take shape in March 1778, la Radière left the post for two weeks and came back to find that Kosciuszko had taken up the duties of engineer. For the next six weeks, a dismal game of "What do we do about this?" was allowed to drag on until la Radière finally left on General Washington's orders.

With these facts in mind, it only remains to say a few words regarding the personalities of the two men before we spell out the documentation that proves the case.



Letter and original plan of Fort Arnold "traced out" by la Radière

There is no doubt that la Radière could not get along with people in general and Americans in particular. On the other hand, Kosciuszko was cordially received and worked extremely well with all ranks.

Why has it taken so long to establish the credit for planning this large fort? The answer is linked to the old saying that “Truth is the daughter of time.” Our knowledge of things past often hinges upon chance, whim, and even prejudice. Certain facts are written down, others are not. Remembered facts may be recorded at a later date—or they may not. Memories can be faulty, and documents may be destroyed, lost, or misplaced.

The events of spring, 1778, at West Point left a faint trail for those who became interested in them years later. You might say that time granted another crumb to truth around 1972, when a curious sheet of paper in the possession of a Connecticut family

Transcriptions of the handwritten letter

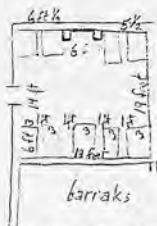
Cube of the breastwork 5 fathoms or 1080 cubique feet. The dith about 32 feet on the top and 24 feet in the bottom, the deepness according to the ground which will be wanted. If we can make this little glacis it would be the best to cover the breast work () so that we can fire early against the {van} up this glacis. Breast work from A in C 20 feet when it will be 9 feet high and a little less when it will be higher. This is no material thing. From A in C the earth must be beaten every foot or 18 inches to make the breast work stronger. None stones must be in the breast work above the banquette. The sticks must be sunk in the ground as in A every two feet. If we have time and fascines enough we must put a rank of fascines perpendicularly to the breast work with sticks in the ground or we must at less put fascines in this manner in

(Gate)

Barbette

the place where the braces join the posts, three sticks for each fascine at less. We must take care for the ground in all saillant angles because we will get too much ground for them. The embrasures must be 2 feet in the inside and () in the outside and their bottom () from 6 inches since the inside () to the outside (vide the figure. The line of their middle must be perpendicular to the flanc.

The barracks must be two story high. Each room 19 feet by 19 feet the story in the outside. Each room will contain 9 beds about upon the floor and 9 above them so each room will contain 18 beds, 36 men; the two story, 72 men; and in case of great necessity, more. So we want for a garrison of 600 men about 18 rooms of 19 feet by 19 or 9 with storeroys, or barracks 180 feet long besides the barracks for the officers. I suppose that my barrack will be enough for them and part of these of the quarter master.



I think that we must keep the ground for the pouldre magasin and the store house to put them parallel to the curtain if it is possible, or one as the garde house should (). Each magasin should be 20 feet weidth and 40 feet long in the wid at less. If we had time we could make them bombeproof and so that we could rake use of them like traverse and like citadels.

We must have a gate of 3 or 4 inches thick in which there must be a little door about three feet weidh the great must be 10 feet or 12 and the place through the breastwork about 14 or 16. We must have niquets with sharp above the gate so that the enemy could not put ladder. We must have a cheval de frise upon the bridge 4 feet before the gate and one in the outside of the bridge with some palinados in the two sides of the bridge in it end. So that the enemy would not come early upon this bridge we must cover the bridge at less with an entrenchement of pickets. If we had time we could make one gate on the inside of the breastwork with planks of three inches and loopholls.



With should have a well. If we have not place enough for all barracks we may put some upon the rock in a covered place.

The little parapet round the brinke of the hill must be very small, about so:



Captain Chempion knows the thickness of the other breastwork. That is - about 12 feet and the ditch 18 on the top and deep according to the ground. If we make the redoute he knows the place. We may make the two communication with small parapet if we had not time that is 12 feet thick with palinados.



came to light. It was untitled, unsigned, and a bit hard to decipher, but it was covered with a lot of writing, some sketches, and one large drawing of a fort, obviously Fort Arnold. This plan, and a letter written in 1837 that accompanied it, assures la Radière's rightful credit for the design.³

The faint trail of previous knowledge regarding the plans for the fort comes from many sources and will be outlined here in the briefest manner:

<i>Date</i>	<i>Correspondence</i>
12 January 1778	la Radière to member of Congress "I am going to trace a fort... It is better to fortify less good than to do nothing." ⁴
5 February	Governor Clinton to Major General Horatio Gates, Board of War: "Engineer who has the direction of the works is deficient in point of practical knowledge." ⁵
10 February	Major General Israel Putnam to Congress: "The batteries near the water and the fort to cover them are laid out... I am apprehensive the public service will be delayed by this Engineer." ⁶
24 February	Brigadier General Samuel H. Parsons (acting commander, Hudson Highlands Department) to Clinton: "We have the works going on now, with some order & Spirit. One 1000 sticks of Timber are cutt [sic.] & many got out of ye mountains. I believe I shall this week have them mostly drawn to the Place where the Fort is to be built..." ⁷
5 March	Parsons to Clinton: "La Radiere I am informed intends asking leave to retire from the Post..." ⁸
7 March	Parsons to Washington: "Col. Radiere finding it impossible to complete the fort and ... has desired leave to wait on your Excellency and Congress, which I have granted him..." ⁹
10 March	Parsons to Clinton: "We shall begin to break ground in two days..." ¹⁰
16 March	Parsons to Washington: "I hope to have Two Sides and one Bastion of the Fort in some State of Defence in about a fortnight; the other Sides need very little to Secure them..." ¹¹
21 March	Washington to Major General Alexander McDougall (new commander of the Hudson Highlands Department): "This will be delivered by Colonel de la Radiere..." ¹²
26 March	Clinton to Parsons (still at West Point): "Colo. Kuziazke [sic.] ... will deliver you this..." ¹³

In addition to this chronology, we have two memoirs written by a participant in these events—Samuel Richards of Farmington, Connecticut. Richards was a lieutenant in one of the Connecticut regiments that crossed the frozen Hudson early in January 1778 to begin work on the fort. In 1832, at the age of seventy-nine, he wrote of those

early days for the benefit of interested West Point cadets:

A week or ten days was spent in erecting temporary huts for our covering... In a short time a site was traced out for a fort by the engineer La Radiere, ... the snow was removed from the spot where the principal work now remains and the rest of the winter was spent in drawing timber and stone for the erection of the fort which was begun as soon as the frost was out of the ground.... Poor Col. La Radiere's delicate health was not equal to sustaining those hardships which were so familiar to the soldiers of the revolutionary army; he caught a severe cold which ended in consumption, of which he died about midsummer following. On the removal of La Radiere, occasioned by his illness the well known Kosciusko came to the post and served as Engineer....¹⁴

The second memoir from Richards, dated 1837, is a letter to the daughter of deceased Revolutionary War veteran Henry Champion. Richards had been asked by Champion's daughter if he could tell her anything of her father's war service. The family that owned this letter and the accompanying plan of Fort Clinton/Arnold apparently were descendants of Henry Champion's.

Then eighty-four years old, Richards replied in part:

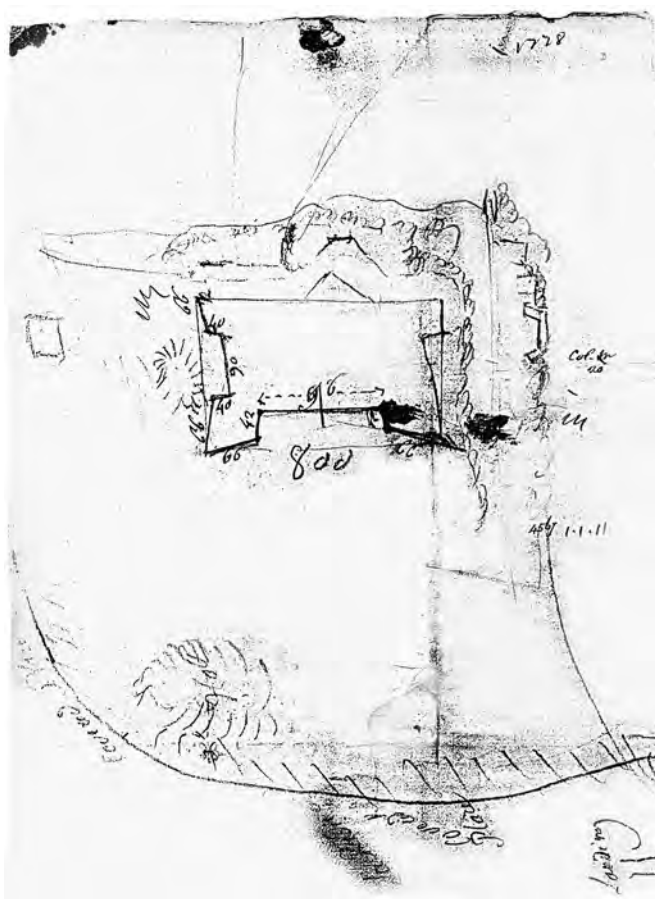
In 1777 I was attached to the company he commanded, in which I continued the remainder of the war.... In '78—February—the regiment moved on to West Point on Hudson river a Col La Radier—a french engineer was appointed to lay out the works; he being recently from a military school in France—possessing the science—but not conversant with the practical part—he succeeded in engaging Kosciuszko to execute the plans he had sketched out in his log hut....¹⁵

From these two memoirs two facts emerge distinctly: The first is that la Radière “traced out” Fort Arnold. The second is that the detailed plan found in 1972 is directly linked to la Radière through Henry Champion.

The Champion plan contains this statement just to the left of the sketch of the fort: “Captain Champion knowes the thickness of the other breastwork. ... If we make the redoubt he knows the place.” It was common for an officer in garrison to be assigned the responsibility for coordinating work to be done on a particular fortification. He acted as a go-between in translating the engineer's design into useful effort by the troops doing the work. Captain Champion signed a muster roll of his company at West Point dated 17 February 1778¹⁶ and the Orderly Book of his company shows that it left Fort Arnold on 26 June 1778.¹⁷ He had previously served in the same unit with Colonel Rufus Putnam, who was chosen to construct the other major fort at West Point, later named Fort Putnam. Champion's name has not been well known in this connection, but he obviously deserves a portion of the credit for the construction of Fort Arnold.

From the chronology, we can see that the planning for the fort and its initial construction was done by early March, about the time that la Radière asked to be excused. Kosciuszko arrived at the end of March, too late for major input. The best date for the plan would appear to be late February or early March, when la Radière was preparing for his departure and leaving the works in the capable hands of Captain Champion while he was gone.

Finally, we come to the difficult question of handwriting. Several experts compared la Radière's penmanship with that of Kosciuszko's and concluded that "the so-called 'Champion Plan' was done by la Radière. Kosciuszko's penmanship is not close enough to question his possible authorship."¹⁸ It is not hard to find material signed by la Radière that is not in the same hand as the plan. He had a clerk to help him, a prisoner taken at Saratoga, and we do not know just what the clerk wrote. There is also at least one example of a letter written by la Radière that was signed by another officer. The "Sketch of Fort Arnold and Water Batteries at West Point" has la Radière's signature on it, although it appears that someone tried to rub it out. Rather than going into more detail in this study, suffice it to say that there is no question in the authors' minds as to the handwriting on the plan. It was done by Louis de la Radière himself.



Hand sketched drawing of Fort Arnold with la Radière's name scratched out at the bottom center. Original in the Alexander McDougall Papers, the Manuscript Department, the New York Historical Society, New York, NY; copied from Reel 2, Special Collections and Archives, USMA Library, West Point, NY.

Colonel la Radière has his place secured in the annals of West Point. A plaque installed on the scarp of Fort Clinton credits him with the fort's planning. In addition, a street in the Academy's Stony Lonesome Housing Area is named for him. It is fitting that la Radière be remembered, as he died au camp du général Washington and is buried somewhere in New Windsor. He gave his life for his adopted country, leaving behind Fort Clinton, Sherburne's Redoubt on present-day Trophy Point, and the water batteries along the Hudson as his legacy.¹⁹

Endnotes

1. Merle Sheffield tenaciously sought in his lifetime to get La Radière and Champion their due; for his tentative argument upon which I have built, see his unpublished "Who Planned Fort Arnold?", Sheffield Research File, Box 6, Merle Sheffield Papers, Special Collections, USMA Library, West Point, NY
2. Resolution of Congress, 2 December 1775, in Worthington C. Ford, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 34 vols. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1905-1937, 3: 400-401.
3. Merle Sheffield Papers, Special Collections, USMA Library, West Point, NY
4. Quoted in Elizabeth S. Kite, *Duportail: Commandant of Engineers in the Continental Army, 1777-1783* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1933), 2, 19, 31. Kite included the correspondence from Duportail to Benjamin Franklin; I changed Radière to La Radière because that is the way he personally signed his letters; see La Radière to COL William Malcolm, n.d. [1778], Massachusetts Historical Society.
5. George Clinton to Major General Horatio Gates, George Clinton, *Public Papers of George Clinton, First Governor of New York 1777-1795 – 1801-1804*, ed. Hugh Hastings, 10 vols. (New York and Albany: State printers, 1899-1914), 2:712.
6. Major General Israel Putnam to Congress, *Papers of the Continental Congress and Journals of the Continental Congress*, 10:204.
7. Samuel H. Parsons to Clinton, 24 Feb. 1778, *Public Papers*, 2: 789 and 803.
8. *Ibid.*, 2:859.
9. Washington to Parsons, 7 Mar. in Charles S. Hall, *Life and Letters of Samuel Holden Parsons* (Binghamton, NY: Otseango Publishing Company, 1905), 153-155.
10. Parsons to Clinton, 10 Mar., *Parsons*, 149-50.
11. Parsons to Washington, 16 Mar., George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, 1741-1799: Series 4. General Correspondence, 1697-1799, 1157.
12. Washington to McDougall, 21 Mar., *ibid.*, 113.
13. Clinton to Parsons, 26 Mar. 1778, *Public Papers*, 3: 85-86.
14. From a two-page hand-written document dated April 1832 entitled "West Point" and signed by Samuel Richards. Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, CT.
15. From a typed copy of a letter to Mrs. Maria Watkinson from Samuel Richards signed at Farmington, 17 June 1837. Original is privately owned. Copy provided the author through the courtesy of The National Society of the Colonial Dames of America in the State of Connecticut.
16. Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, CT. Captain Henry Champion Sr. (1723-1797) served in Colonel Samuel Wyllys' 3rd Connecticut Continental Line. He was from Colchester, Connecticut. His record during the American Revolution indicates he was a very capable officer. He joined the Revolution as a 2nd Lieutenant on 1 May 1775. During 1776 he was the adjutant of the 22nd Connecticut Regiment. He later served also as the 1st Connecticut Brigade Major. He was the acting major of Colonel Meigs' regiment during the successful storming of Stony Point on 15 July 1779. He led a detachment of 46 rank and file light infantry during the early morning attack. He resigned his commission on 1 March 1780 and was appointed the Commissary General of the Eastern (Connecticut) Department.
17. *The Record of Connecticut Men, War of the Revolution*, edited by Henry P. Johnson, Hartford, Connecticut, 1839.
18. Alan C. Aimone, Dr. Kip Muir, and the authors analyzed the handwriting on the plan and compared it to Kosciuszko's, 11 January 1990. Champion Plan is the plan for the construction of the soon-to-be-

named Fort Arnold and had to have been drawn early in 1778 before McDougall's first visit. While the previous authors surmised that the handwriting was Kosciuszko's, it appears to be that of La Radière; he wrote his "y" and "g" with a curl at the end of the tail while Kosciuszko placed a curl at the end of his "d." Work was well underway on the fort before the Pole arrived at West Point. La Radière, not Kosciuszko, put primary emphasis on the fort on the plain. In Jan. 1778, Champion's regiment moved to West Point "and later began the construction of permanent works there." In the summer of 1778, the regiment moved to White Plains. The winter of 1778-79 was spent at Redding, CT, and during 1779 the regiment was under Heath on the east side of the river; Henry P. Johnston, ed., *The Record of Connecticut Men in the Military and Naval Service During the War of the Revolution, 1775-1783* (Hartford: The Case, Lockwood & Brainard Company, 1889), 168-69. Thus, Champion was at West Point and would have been mentioned in the plan for the period January through June or July 1778. In addition, the plan contains the sentence, "If we make the redoubt he [Champion] knows the place," which clearly refers to Sherburne's Redoubt. Since Sherburne's Redoubt was begun on or about 11 April, during or shortly after McDougall's first visit to West Point, then the date of the plan would have to be prior to 11 Apr. and after 27 Jan. 1778. See McDougall's Diary, 7-12 Apr., in McDougall Papers and McDougall to Parsons, 11 Apr., McDougall Manuscripts File, No. 7525). La Radière had made this plan to flesh out his earlier sketch used to trace out the fort on the ground. Troops had been building according to this pattern since their arrival at West Point. La Radière would even convince McDougall to prepare a final plan that he could supervise, 10 Apr. 1778, McDougall Diary.

19. See la Radière's sketch of these works, "Sketch of Fort Arnold and Water Batteries at West Point," n.d., New York Historical Society in Alexander McDougall Papers, Reel 2, Special Collections and Archives, USMA Library, West Point, NY.; Des Hayes de la Radiere, Gilbert Bodinier, *Dictionnaire des officiers généraux de l'armée royale: 1763-1792*. (Paris: Ministère de la Défense, Etat-Major de l'Armée de terre, Service historique, 1982).