unguided attempts to find these remains would be most unwise. [They] are well guarded by thickets of brambles, thorny berry bushes, and, at certain times of the year, copperheads. Everywhere there are unexpected piles of rock underfoot ready to twist an ankle, stretch a tendon, or break a bone...

That’s how the site of Fort Montgomery, in Orange County, was described in The Bicentennial Guide to the American Revolution, published in 1974. As recently as three years ago, the words were still apt: the scene of some of the bloodiest fighting in the Valley during the war—and one of the most intact Revolutionary War sites anywhere—was blanketed by a tangled mass of blowdowns and clothes-ripping briers, its treasures unknown to all but the most ardent history buffs. Only a state historical marker along Route 9W, which bisects the fort’s remains, alerted passersby to the area’s past. But even the sign was misleading: in a final indignity, it gave the wrong date for the battle that had raged there on October 6, 1777.

Today, the Fort Montgomery State Historic Site is a different place entirely. Sun shines through the trees, which have been thinned considerably without destroying the woodland’s natural beauty. A gravel walkway passes by the restabilized foundations of buildings—including barracks, a storehouse, and powder magazine—as well as the fort’s Grand Battery, built on a bluff on the Hudson to rain shot down on British ships, and its North Redoubt, where the Americans may have put up their last stand against a bigger and better-trained enemy. Wooden platforms allow visitors an optimal view of each of the remains. Everywhere there are panels that explain the events of that fateful day.

What isn’t explained, however—and should be—is the history of how this historic site came to be. It’s a remarkable tale of perseverance, dedication, and cooperation against odds that, for a while, seemed nearly as formidable as those faced by the men who built and defended the fort.

“I give lectures about Fort Montgomery, and I always talk about how the fort was built, lost, how nature took over, how it was rediscovered, and then lost again,” says archaeologist Edward Lenik, who first became involved with the site in the mid-60s. That’s its history in a nutshell.

Recovering from a hardy growth of brush, the site was finally cleaned and restabilized in the early 70s. The National Park Service and the State Historic Preservation Office were led to the site by the central figure in the rediscovery of the fort, Jack Mead, who as an amateur archaeologist first began digging in 1967.
from West Point, and the other sat at the southern gate of the Hudson Highlands due north of Popolopen Creek. The latter site was chosen because the river there is very narrow — only 500 yards wide — and canoes had a straight line of fire downriver at approaching ships, whose sailors would have their hands full with the treacherous winds and currents. The site was named in honor of Gen. Richard M. Montgomeroy, who was killed leading the unsuccessful attack on Quebec that December.

Work on the 14.4-acre citadel (and a sister fort, Clinton, erected on higher ground across the creek and connected via a stone bridge) began in March 1776 and was finished 17 months later. While the riverside battery was formidable, the fort’s rear was wide open to attack, despite the construction of three redoubts. “There would take 2,000 men, standing almost shoulder to shoulder, to effectively defend the fort,” explains Col. (Ret.) Jim Johnson, military historian to the fort’s defenders, years after the battle. Leggett made his stand within the North Redoubt, which was overrun by Robinson’s Loyal American. “This was an all-New York fight,” says Johnson, standing beside the time-worn rampart and stressing an important fact about the fighting there. “You have Loyalist regiments attacking New Yorkers on the American side. This is civil war.”

The struggle continued until nighttime, when many of the Americans, including Gen. George Clinton, New York’s governor and the fort’s commander — and a distant cousin of Henry Clinton — managed to escape. “They did not surrender,” says Johnson. “They were pushed out at the point of the bayonet. American casualties at the two forts (Fort Clinton fell on the same site) were high: some 350 dead, wounded, or captured. The British had 40 killed and 150 wounded; “the men of the fort exhaled a high price for the British victory,” notes Johnson. All of the buildings were put to the torch by the victors before they returned to Manhat- tan on October 26, nine days after Burgoyne, his situation hopeless, had surrendered.

For nearly 150 years, the fort’s remains were undisturbed, despite some attempts at iron mining on the land around them in the 1850s. The historical importance of the site was finally recognized in 1916, when the Palisades Interstate Park Commission bought its land from the heirs of John D. Rockefeller Sr., purchased the land to protect it from development. That year, and again in the 1930s, some archaeology work was done, but it wasn’t until 1967 that a full-scale dig at the fort was begun. Heading up the dig was Jack Mead, who was staff art director at Bear Mountain State Park.

Although Mead had no formal training in archaeology, “his techniques were the best,” says Lenk, who worked with him at the fort. “He certainly had the knowledge and the skills that would match any archaeologist of the day.” Just as important, he was devoted to the region’s history. Every year through 1971, and his staff began their field work “as soon as the weather broke” in the spring, according to Lenk, and kept at it until the ground froze. Throughout the winter, Mead would make drawings, perform research, and catalogue the more than 140,000 artifacts that he and his crew unearthed — everything from musket balls and rusty bayonets to regimental but tons and, most fascinating, pewter spoons with their owners’ initials etched onto them. (One spoon had a small hole drilled into the bowl, one soldier’s idea of a practical joke.) You’ll probably never see a massive type of excavation like this ever again, certainly not in New York State,” says Lenk proudly.

It was Mead’s dream that the fort’s buildings would be reconstructed on their original foundations. That didn’t come to pass; in fact, nothing happened, even though the site was named to the National Register of His toric Places in 1972. Instead, “nature took over,” recalls Lenk. “Trees grew back, brush grew back.” Why was the fort forgotten again? In large part, many feel, because of the battle and viewing the brush-choked remains. “It was like a kid in a candy store,” recounts Ash. (History buff Pataki later admitted that though he lived just upriver from Fort Mont gomery, he had never heard of it.) Following the tour, the governor and others, including Johnson, Ash, and Bernadette Castro, commissioner of the state’s Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historical Preservation (OPRHP), retired to a nearby deli and mapped out plans to create the Fort M ontgomery State Historic Site. Four months later, on the 223rd anniversary of the battle, Pataki pledged $1 million toward the project. It’s what Johnson calls “the historical symmetry.”

“Here you had a governor defending this fort, and now you have a governor ensuring the future of this.”

“Think historic preservation has seldom been the top priority for many administrators. When [Governor Pataki] realized that this was there, he viewed it as an absolute necessity.”

Creating a visitor-friendly site has been a real collaborative effort: PIPC workers, as well as inmates and parolees provided by the state Department of Correctional Services, cleared the land of fallen trees and brush and felled standing trees that were deemed to be rotting internally. (The prisoners and parolees were excited to be restoring a piece of history, says Johnson: “A lot of them really took this on as a mission.”) Every effort was made to protect both the land’s natural beauty and the fort’s remains. “In respect for the trails and the archaeology, we didn’t bring in heavy equi pment,” says Ash. “All of the trees and debris were burned and cut right there.”

The OPRHP’s Bureau of Historic Sites, located on Peebles Island, north of Albany, was in charge of interpreting the site, its experts developed the platforms that afford visitors a bird’s-eye view of the fort’s hearths and foundations, all of which were painstakingly reset stone by stone. Visitors can walk right into the Grand Battery to get a full-scale sanguine survey of the fort and its many stories.
A WOman’s Place

While the Battle of Fort M Montgomery is thought to have been a men-only affair, there was at least one woman nearby who acted heroically, and her great-great-granddaughter, Jan Conley, is a charter member of the Fort M Montgomery Battle Site Association. The following is a treasured piece of her family’s history.

“My grandmother told me this story,” she recalls. “She enjoyed reminiscing about it.”

According to Conley, as darkness settled over the fort and the American cause was lost, her ancestor, David Rose, along with several other members of the Orange and Ulster County militia who had been in the thick of the fight, escaped to his farm about a mile away. There his wife, Hannah, hid the soldiers in an underground cold storage compartment.

Not long afterward, some British soldiers approached the farm and demanded to know where their quarry was hiding. Declaring that “my husband fought for my liberty — and the liberty of my farm,” she refused to give him and the others up.

Incensed, the British lifted Hannah onto a horse and strung a noose around her neck. They were preparing to hang her when a superior officer arrived. “Cut the woman down,” he ordered. “There’s been enough bloodshed today.” Her life was spared, and the hidden men eluded capture.

The story, as well as lots more information about the battle and the site, will be featured in Fort Montgomery: A Short History (Purple Mountain Press, $6.50), written by Conley and available next month.

— R.S.

A close-up look at the embrasures where the six 32-pound cannons passed through the parapet. At the arrowhead-shaped North Redoubt, it’s possible to see the original fire step, which the defenders climbed up on to shoot over the earthen walls.

None of the additions in any way compromises the integrity of the ruins. Even the gravel walkway that connects the points of interest was laid upon fabric, so it could be easily removed. “They’re trying to be very careful about the archaeological remains here,” explains Johnson about the OPRHP’s work.

“If, in 200 years, someone comes along and knows a better way to do this, then they can.”

What makes the site so important — and such a treat to visit — adds Johnson, is its completeness: “You have almost every ruin available for interpretation. There are not many places where you can do that.”

What is also special is that the site is being interpreted as a ruin, with no attempt at reconstruction. “I’m tickled pink about that,” says Richard Koke, co-author of Twin Forts of the Popolopen, who participated in the 1930s excavation of the remains. “A lot of this reconstruction, it’s guesswork. If you don’t know what the place looked like, just leave it the way it is and enjoy it.”

Although a planned visitors’ center will not be ready by the site’s official opening on October 6, one other key element of the project will be in place: a footbridge spanning Popolopen Creek that will join the site of Fort Clinton, which was located where the Bear Mountain Zoo is today, with Fort Montgomery. “This will allow us to re-establish the twin forts of the Popolopen, to have the two forts connected the way they were,” says Johnson.

The New York State Bridge Authority is in charge of the span, on which construction began last month. Suggestions to recreate a pontoon bridge like the 18th-century original were dismissed because of the effect the tides would have on it. The size of the bridge was also an issue. “The park’s department was very concerned about a big structure destroying the bucolic setting,” says Bill M oreau, the Bridge Authority’s chief engineer.

The final result is a 350-foot-long suspension bridge with a twist: “It won’t have the tall towers you usually see,” explains M oreau. “We’re going to take advantage of the rocks.”

In other words, the cables holding up the bridge will be tied to the cliffs on each side of the creek. The 10-foot-wide span, with steel truss and floor systems and a fiber-reinforced plastic walkway, will sit 25 feet off the water.

“It should look pretty interesting,” says M oreau. “I expect we’ll get more engineers to look at it than historic people.”

Members of the FMBSA were almost giddy on a recent walk through the site. Jim Bailey sounded optimistic about the fort’s potential to attract visitors. “People are starting to take a look at the losses that it took to get to the victories,” he says. Near the ruins of the powder magazine, Garry Lent paused for a moment to take in all of the hard work that has brought about such a mind-boggling transformation. “Like the Baileys and Wort, he’s a charter member of the FMBSA, and as much as anything, the completion of the project is a testament to the association’s commitment and zeal. “It amazes me what a few people got started,” he muses. “Someday, this will be a busy place.”

On the War Path

Beginning with the September issue, Hudson Valley will feature a monthly column by Jim Johnson highlighting events scheduled to commemorate the 225th anniversary of the Revolution.