

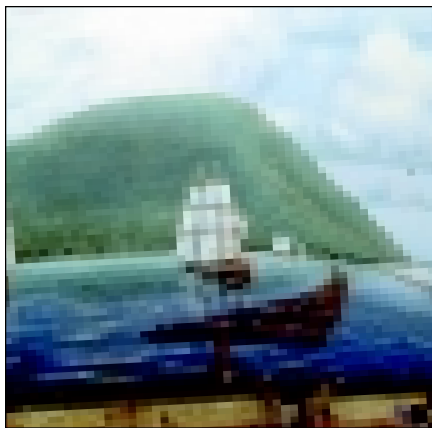
A Warm Reception in the Hudson Highlands

by Dr. James M. Johnson

American forces in New York essentially won the war against Britain by preventing British forces in New York City and Canada from meeting in the Hudson Valley and thereby cutting off communications, supply and military movement between New England and the rest of the rebelling colonies.

Most American schoolchildren learn that the Battle of Saratoga in October 1777, in which John Burgoyne surrendered his army—one quarter of the British troops in North America—to Horatio Gates, was the turning point in the American Revolution. Few know, however, that American warships on the Hudson River contributed to Gates's victory in the north country of New York. The two key ships in the small flotilla that opposed the British in October 1777 were the American frigates *Congress* and *Montgomery*, built at the Continental Shipyard in Poughkeepsie, New York. Their quest for glory would be brief, ending when their crews scuttled them to keep them out of the enemy's hands.

On 13 December 1775, Congress passed a resolution authorizing the construction of a fleet of thirteen frigates to challenge the Royal Navy, to be built at a cost of \$66,666.67 each. New York would build and outfit two of the thirteen, *Congress* and *Montgomery*. The 682-ton *Congress* was rated at 28 guns and had a deck length of 126 feet and a beam of 34 feet; the 563-ton *Montgomery* was rated at 24 guns with a deck length of 119 feet and a beam of 32



A Continental frigate guards the entrance to the Hudson Highlands north of the chain below Fort Montgomery. (From a diorama at the Trailside Museum, Bear Mountain NY)

feet. Superintendents Jacobus Van Zandt, Augustus Lawrence, and Samuel Tudor would oversee the work in Poughkeepsie, on the eastern shore of the Hudson, north of the City of New York.

Despite *Congress's* deadline of March 1776 for the ships to put to sea, the superintendents did not launch *Montgomery* and *Congress* until November of that year. Delayed by work stoppages, material shortages, and the diversion of naval stores to Brigadier General Benedict Arnold's fleet on Lake Champlain, the shipyard worked to complete and outfit the frigates even as the British landed at Staten Island and HMS *Phoenix* and HMS *Rose* ranged north as far as Peekskill Bay in July, ostensibly in

search of the warships. When they were finally launched, the two new frigates spent the winter on Rondout Creek near Kingston.

The Defense of the Highlands

On paper, General Israel Putnam, the commander of the Hudson Highlands, had enough forces to give British commander Sir Henry Clinton a fight and well-placed fortifications substantial enough to make any expedition against them difficult should Clinton venture north from New York City. Fort Montgomery on the west side of the Hudson, just north of Popolopen Creek, had been established in 1776. The heart of its defenses against an attack from the river was the 100-foot-long Grand Battery with walls eighteen feet thick. According to First Lieutenant William A. Patterson of the 15th Regiment, the battery, with its six 32-pounders, "Rakes the River Pretty Well For Three Miles." The landward ramparts were "comparatively open with the works poorly situated and incomplete."

On higher ground to protect Fort Montgomery's southern approach, and connected to it by a bridge across Popolopen Creek, was Fort Clinton. While the rear of the fort facing its sister was incomplete, this circular work was anchored by two star-redoubts, one of four points or bastions and the other of eight. Fifteen cannon, manned by 40 artillerymen, protected the fort itself, including the eight-pointed redoubt; the four-pointed redoubt to the southwest had three 6-pounders fired by

Awaiting the British at the entrance to the Hudson Highlands were Forts Montgomery (below, at right), on the north side of Popolopen Creek, and Clinton (below, at left), the chain (bottom, center) that

was intended to bar a British fleet from the upper Hudson, and a small flotilla. (Painting by Jack Mead; all images courtesy New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation)



nine men. Colonel Lewis Dubois estimated that a garrison of 2,000 men was needed to defend both forts properly; unfortunately, on the day the British attacked fewer than 700 were present.

A chain, designed to stop or to damage any English warships that attempted to barrel through it, had been put in place across the Hudson River at this point in March 1777. Stretching 1,700 feet from a cove just north of Popolopen Creek to the base of a rocky promontory called Anthony's Nose on the eastern shore of the Hudson, it was guarded by the sprawling Fort Montgomery.

As early as 12 May 1777, Washington had personally taken steps to increase the odds against the British when he sent Major General Nathanael Greene to the Highlands to inspect the defenses and correct any errors he might find. He charged Greene with insuring that the defenses were ready to defeat an attack from either land or water and to guard against a "coup de main" from the west.

Greene and his committee—Brigadier Generals Alexander McDougall, Henry Knox, George Clinton, and Anthony Wayne—reported that additional water obstacles were all that was needed to complete the defenses. In their collective judgment, the addition of a boom and cables to bolster the chain and the presence of two armed galleys and the two New York frigates would combine with the batteries of the forts to "render it impossible for the Shipping to operate there." If the river remained blocked and if "the Passes into the Highlands be properly guarded, which can be done with about four or five thousand troops, the rest of the Army will be at liberty to operate elsewhere."

The Continental Marine Committee acted almost immediately on Greene's recommendations by ordering *Montgomery* and *Congress* southward from Poughkeepsie in June. And, in July, absent a boom to protect the chain, General (and New York Governor) George Clinton, in command of the fort, placed a large cable south of the chain spliced from three smaller cables from the frigate *Montgomery* in July. By the end of July, the frigates, the New York sloop *Camden*, and the Continental row galleys *Shark* and *Lady Washington* were anchored near Popolopen Creek. By scouring the region for armament, each of the ships had acquired some cannon: *Mont-*

gomery, with a crew of 36, had eight 12-pounders; *Congress* had at least nine 9-pounders from Fort Constitution, farther north across from West Point; *Camden*, with a crew of 18, had six 6-pounders, four 4-pounders, and twelve swivel guns; *Shark*, with a crew of 18, had four 9-pounders; and *Lady Washington*, with a crew of 20, had one 32-pounder and eight 3-pounders. Captain John Hodge of *Montgomery* and Captain Thomas Grennell of *Congress* had scraped together crews from experienced sailors, soldiers, and even "Deserters, Boys, &ca."

Put to the Test

Undermanned and undergunned, the Hudson's navy suffered from its organization and the mission that senior leaders had assigned it. The Continental Marine Committee had established a workable command relationship that linked its ships with the ground force: Grennell and Hodge were "to follow and obey such orders as they may receive from General Washington or the Commanding officer who may direct the operations in that quarter." Because the mission of the ships was to protect the chain, they had "become a part of the work itself." This meant that George Clinton, rather than Israel Putnam, exercised authority over the ships. One other twist complicated the issue: *Congress* had been ordered by Clinton to sail north on 5 October to Fort Constitution "lest she should meet with a Disaster."

Although Hodge rated the galleys "manned and in a proper state of defence" and his own ship "in great forwardness," he would find that his inflexible mission and the actual state of his small force limited the contribution he would be able to make to the outcome of the upcoming battle. Nonetheless he predicted that "we shall be able to give the enemy (when they approach) a warm reception."

Sir Henry Clinton set the Hudson River Campaign of 1777 in motion on 2 October when he and Commodore William Hotham transported 3,000 men aboard some 56 warships, transports, and flatboats, landing first at Tarrytown on 4 October, at Verplanck's Point the next day, and finally at Stony Point on the 6th. Some 700 Continental infantrymen, artillerymen and militiamen opposed the two-pronged attack from the south and west. By nightfall, however, following vio-

lent assaults on Forts Montgomery and Clinton after a twelve-hour march overland, Sir Henry occupied both fortifications. The march through the mountainous terrain had prevented the use of artillery, so this British attack was made by the infantry and what cannon fire Captain Sir James Wallace (formerly of HMS *Rose*) could bring to bear from his row galleys. In the face of a fierce cannonade from the American row galleys, frigates, and sloop north of the chain, HMS *Dependence* fired ninety-five 24-pound shot and six 4-pounders against the vessels and the forts. Despite inadequate crews and too few guns, *Montgomery* and her consorts made a gallant if futile fight of it.

By 8PM Henry Clinton knew that he owned the two forts. At the cost of some 70 killed, 40 wounded, and 240 taken prisoner, the Americans had exacted a substantial price, killing 40 and wounding 150 of the attackers. While British forces won the battle, these fortifications and their ships disrupted Clinton's timetable, complicating any attempts to relieve Burgoyne's trapped army. At 10PM, Clinton and Hotham nonetheless had the pleasure of observing the blazing *Montgomery*.

George Clinton reported to George Washington on 9 October that:

by some Fatality the two Continental Frigates were lost. . . . being badly manned they could not be got off in Time, though I ordered the Ship *Congress* to proceed to Fort Constitution the Day before the Attack, lest she should meet with a Disaster; and the Ship *Montgomery*, which lay near the Chain, having neither Anchors nor Cable to secure her, it being the Tide of ebb, and the Wind failing, she fell down so near the Chain, that Capt'n Hodge was constrained to set her on Fire to prevent her falling into the Hands of the Enemy, and the *Congress* unfortunately getting aground on a Flat near Fort Constitution shared the same Fate.

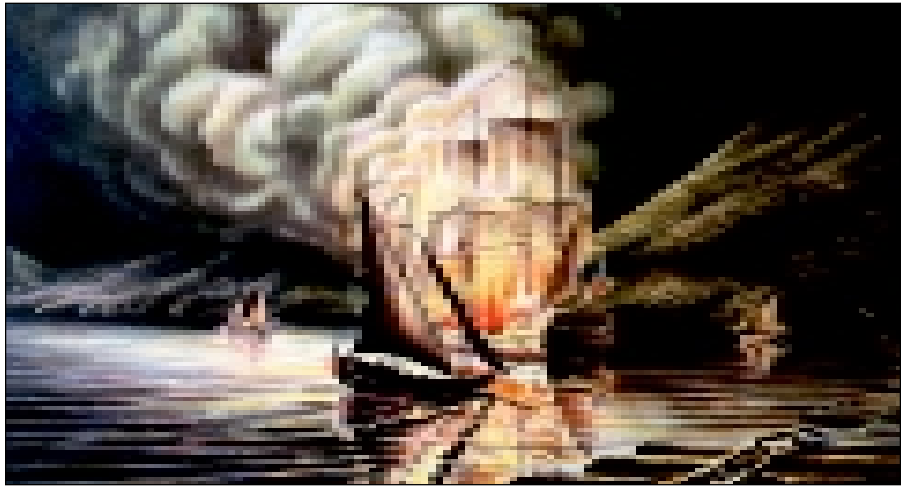
Congress's acting commander, First Lieutenant Daniel Shaw, with the assistance of some sixteen artillerymen from Fort Constitution, burned her on 7 October. *Camden* ran aground and became a British prize. The American crews set fire to *Shark* and *Lady Washington* as well. (*Lady Washington* later sailed up to Kingston, where she helped in the defense of the city but was scuttled during the attack.) With the forts reduced,

The frigate Montgomery was burned by her own crew the night of 6 October. (Jack Mead)

the ships dispersed, and Putnam's forces withdrawing northward to protect the pass to Fishkill, Henry Clinton completed his control of the Highlands.

With the river clear of enemy ships and the shores barren of organized troops, by 8 October Clinton had taken Fort Independence on Peekskill Bay, broken the chain across the river, occupied Fort Constitution to the north, and passed the *chevaux de frise* anchored on Pollepel's Island. Hotham's advance squadron, under Wallace, ranged the river unimpeded as far north as Poughkeepsie. From 16–26 October Major General John Vaughan and Wallace sailed even farther to the north in a vain attempt to link up with Burgoyne's ill-fated army. The highlight of this expedition was a naval landing at Rondout Creek that culminated in Vaughan's burning of Kingston, the capital of New York.

George Clinton's forces resisted this attack to no avail. Putnam, however, finally massed enough forces on the west bank of the Hudson to give Vaughan pause. This fact plus the knowledge that Burgoyne had surrendered and orders from Sir Henry made up Vaughan's mind, and he and his



force slipped back down the river on 26 October. With no navy left, American forces could only harass the departing flotilla with cannon fire and musketry from the shore as it withdrew.

Despite their successful attack on American forces in the Highlands, Clinton's half-hearted efforts to save Burgoyne's army had been in vain. The sacrifice of American sailors and soldiers at Popolopen Creek had helped to turn the war around. The British would now have to confront French armies and navies in a world war that they ultimately could not win. †

Dr. James M. Johnson, COL, USA (Ret)—formerly in charge of the military history division in the Department of History of the United States Military Academy—is the Executive Director of the Hudson River Valley Institute at Marist College and the Military Historian of the Hudson River Valley working on the American Revolutionary interpretation for the Hudson River Valley National Heritage Area. (For information on the events commemorating the 225th anniversary of the American Revolution contact HRVI at 845 575-3052 or go to www.nps.gov/revwar)