

In June 1780, Gen. George Washington feared for the safety of Fortress West Point. Lt. Gen. Wilhelm von Knyphausen, commander in New York in Gen. Sir Henry Clinton's absence, had raised Washington's anxiety by landing a large force of some 5,000 men at Elizabethtown, New Jersey, on June 6. Washington's strategy to counter Knyphausen's force and, by extension, to protect West Point led to the battle of Springfield, New Jersey, and started in train his appointment of Maj. Gen. Benedict Arnold to the command of the Highlands Department in August 1780.

By June 1780, Fortress West Point had reached its final form as Washington's "key of America." Should Clinton decide to attack it, his naval flotilla would face the firepower of six river batteries, then the obstacle of the Great Chain blocking the river. Arrayed around the chain were 13 redoubts or small forts. Rising above the Plain was Fort Putnam, which protected Fort Arnold below. Despite its seeming impregnability, West Point's ultimate defense depended upon the troops of the Continental Army and the militia of nearby states that Washington could mobilize. Thus, even as he faced Knyphausen, he worried about the possible threat that British forces posed on the Hudson.

Knyphausen marched his force from Elizabethtown toward Morristown thinking that he would confront a relatively weak Continental Army and rally the support of the populace. He quickly found out that his intelligence was flawed on both counts. Col. Elias Dayton's 3rd New Jersey Regiment, "with fixed bayonets," rebuffed his vanguard at the battle of Connecticut Farms. Knyphausen's subsequent withdrawal led Washington to interpret the operation as a feint "to amuse us here" while the British "make an attempt upon the Highlands." As he wrote on the 15th, "My apprehensions are up for West point. Clinton is every moment expected, and may push up the North River." He instructed the commander of the Highlands, Maj. Gen. Robert Howe, "to collect all your force to the immediate defence of the Posts," hoping that the troops there could be supplemented with militia to constitute a force of at least 2,500. His concerns grew when he learned that Clinton and "a considerable part of the Southern Army" had returned to New York on the 18th and that a force of six British ships had sailed to King's Ferry and then dropped back down the river. Washington left Maj. Gen. Nathanael Greene in command of some 1,000 men at Springfield while he moved the rest of the army by stages toward Ramapough (Suffern).

On June 23, Clinton ordered Knyphausen, with a force four times as large as Greene's, to attack. After skirmishing with Greene's advance guard, Knyphausen refused to attack the main American position and withdrew to Staten Island. Clinton subsequently landed forces north of Kingsbridge, in Westchester County, to make, in Washington's words, "demonstrations towards our posts in the Highlands...as if a visit was intended them." In reality, the earlier naval foray towards King's Ferry and Clinton's own movements were not aimed at West Point, but were designed to prevent Washington from crossing the Hudson and linking up with the French in Newport, Rhode Island. Clinton had been alerted to the imminent arrival of "a French fleet and army" at Newport by no

less an authority than Benedict Arnold, whom he noted “had some time before made me an offer of his service.” Coincidentally, Chancellor Robert R. Livingston Jr. had written Washington on June 22 recommending Arnold for the command of the Highlands Department because, ironically as it turned out, the post might “most safely be confided” to the courageous general.

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