

West Point Becomes a Fortress

January 1778, 236 years ago, would prove to be the official birth month for a garrison at the “west point of the Hudson” across the river from Fort Constitution. Decisions by General George Washington, Governor George Clinton, and the New York Convention would lead to the construction of Fortress West Point, which guarded the Hudson Highlands—and thus the central artery of New York—for the remainder of the American Revolution and into the twentieth century. Although French engineer Colonel Louis Guillaume Servais Deshayes de la Radière would make a compelling case for rebuilding Fort Clinton on Popolopen Creek (near the present-day Bear Mountain Bridge), a five-man commission appointed by the New York Convention recommended West Point as the proper site. Governor Clinton concurred: “I have already given my Opinion in favour of West Point & have heard hitherto no sufficient Reasons to change my Sentiments.”¹ Washington himself resolved the issue by writing to la Radière that “As the Majority of the Council were for erecting the new works upon West Point, in preference to the place upon which Fort Clinton was built, I desire that they may be carried on with all dispatch.”²



Figures 1 & 2: Panoramic View of West Point showing American Encampments on the Hudson River by Pierre Charles L’Enfant , 1754-1825, courtesy of The Library of Congress

¹ 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: 653.

² Washington to La Radière, 25 Jan. 1778, George Washington, *The Writings of Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources 1745-1799*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick, 39 vols. (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1931-1944), 10: 348-349; quoted in Elizabeth S. Kite, *Duportail: Commandant of Engineers in the Continental Army, 1777-1783* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1933), 81-89.

Prodded by the Commander in Chief's directive on 25 January 1778 to have the works in the Highlands "in a respectable State before the Spring," Major General Israel Putnam, commander of the Highlands Department, ordered Colonel Samuel Blachley Webb's Additional Continental Regiment (Connecticut) of Brigadier General Samuel Holden Parsons' Connecticut Brigade from Fishkill across the ice at Fort Constitution two days later. Quartermaster Sergeant Simon Giffin of the regiment, commanded by Captain John Plasgrave Wyllys in the absence of his captured colonel, described what happened:

marched down to a place that Fort Constitution was bult on theor mad a halt marched over the Rever on the ise marched back a gain fro thar was no Place to Loge theor on the West side of the Rever So we had to go into the Woods and mack fiers & mach ouer Rads on the snow we mad a hut that 15 of us Lay Prity worm considering the wether being so very cold

Jenny wensday 28 This morning crossed the North rEver on the ice and went to work to mak huts in the ground by diging in a side hill wheor they ware a Going to Bild a fort & at Night Returned to ouer old huts in the wods a Gain.³



³Washington to Putnam, 25 Jan. 1778, *The Writings of Washington*, 10:348; 27 Jan. 1778, Simon Giffin, "Diary of Quartermaster Sergt. Simon Giffin," Sheffield Research Files, Special Collections, USMA Library; Sheffield transcribed and annotated the diary. CPT John Wyllys to CPT Nehemiah Hubbard, 16 Feb. 1778 (filed as 10 Feb.), Jeremiah Wordsworth Correspondence, the Connecticut Historical Society (CHS), Hartford, CT, Box 126.

For the next several days the troops, reinforced by Colonel Samuel Wyllys' 3rd Connecticut Regiment, crossed the ice to West Point to build their huts. At night they returned to the eastern side of the river. By Friday, 30 January, the huts were far enough along to shelter the men, and they camped on the western side of the river.

Putnam believed in leading by example, and Giffin's record of the river crossing is amplified in the following account by drummer-boy Elijah Porter:

When General Putnam was ready to go over on the ice he called me to him. He then loaded me with tools for building huts and took a heavy load himself and bade me follow him, so I followed behind him; when we got about half a mile on the ice, he went on some shelly ice, began to slip about, and down he went with his load of tools and made the ice crack so that I thought he would go down, but the ice held him up again. We then went on and arrived safe on the point.⁴

First Lieutenant Samuel Richards, who as the senior officer present marched the 3rd Connecticut over the ice that first day, recalled years later what West Point was like:

Coming on to the small plain surrounded by high mountains, we found it covered with a growth of yellow pines ten or fifteen feet high; no house or improvement on it, the snow waist high. We fell to lopping down the tops of the shrub pines and treading down the snow, spread our blankets, and lodged in that condition the first and second nights. Had we not been hardened by two years of previous service, we should have though[t] it difficult to endure this. The pines not being large enough for logs for huts, we were under the necessity of making temporary covers of those scanty materials until we could draw logs from the edge of the mountain and procure the luxury of log huts; this we effected but slowly, the winter continuing severe. In two or three weeks we had erected our huts, and a French engineer, by the name of La Radier[e] arriving, the snow being removed for the site of the present main fort, the works were traced out, and parties sent out every fair day up the river to cut timber and drag it on to the ice, to be ready to float it down to the Point when the river should be clear of ice. This service was rather fatiguing to the men, but as they had a cabin to lodge in at night, and provisions served out with tolerable regularity, they thought themselves comparatively happy, though their work was incessant. . . . La Radier[e], the engineer, was very assiduous in planning and laying out the Fort, and as soon as the frost was out we broke ground under his direction.⁵

Once the soldiers from Connecticut had occupied their huts at West Point by 30 January, they became the fort's first garrison, which remains the longest continuously occupied post of the U.S. Army.

⁴ Elijah Porter, "Journal of a Revolutionary Soldier," Am. Rev. Box III, Journals & Orderly Books, CHS, 36-37.

⁵ Samuel Richards, "Personal Narrative of an Officer in the Revolutionary War," *The United Service* 3, 4 (September, October 1903): 235, 361-62; also in USMA, *Centennial of the United States Military Academy*, 1: 154-56.