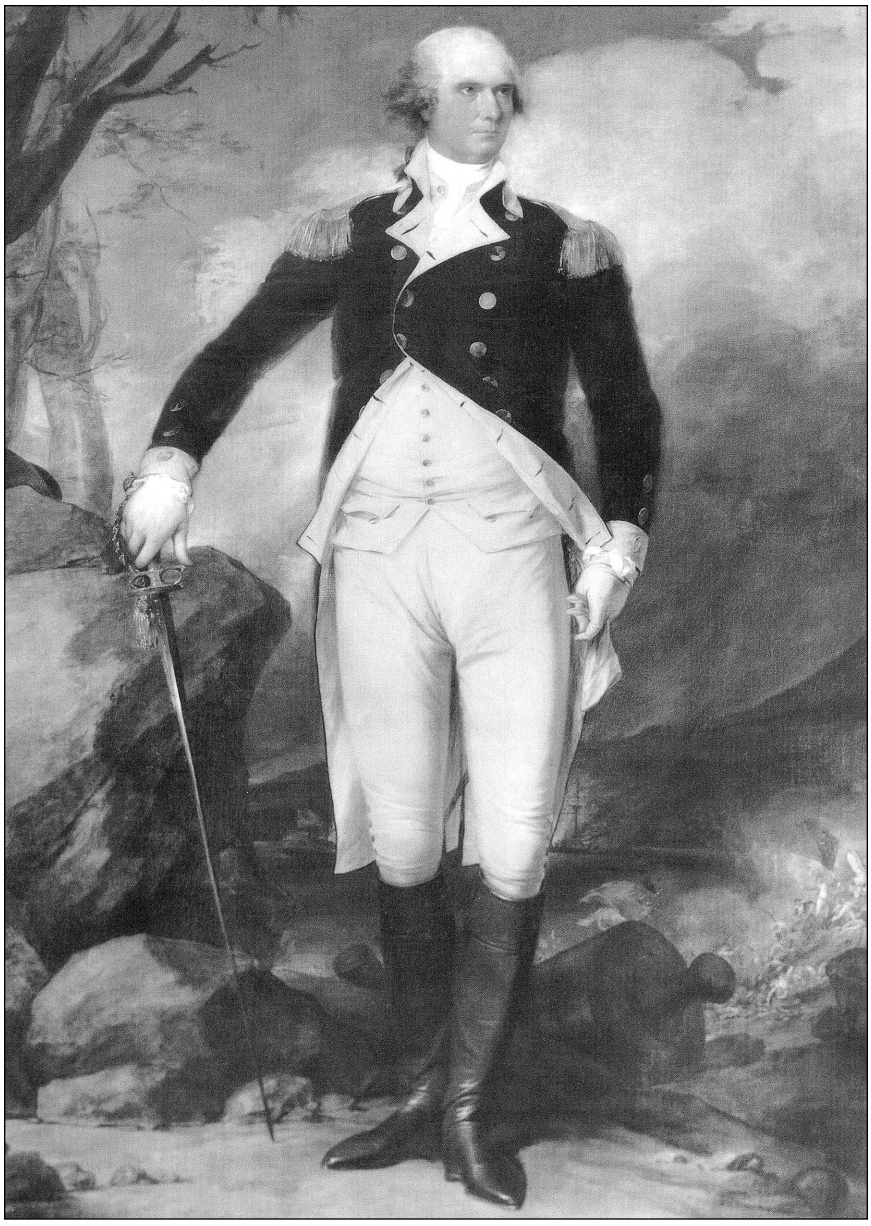


Governor George Clinton amid the ruins of Fort Montgomery
(Painting by John Trumbull; courtesy of the City of New York)

Interpreting the Battle for the Hudson River Valley: The Battle of Fort Montgomery

Gregory Smith & James M. Johnson

The remains of Fort Montgomery are situated in the Hudson Highlands, the most dramatic stretch of the Hudson River Valley National Heritage Area. They sit 120 feet above the Hudson River on the west bank of Popolopen Creek, and are surrounded by Bear Mountain Bridge, Anthony's Nose, and Bear Mountain State Park. With Fort Clinton, its sister work to the south, Fort Montgomery played a decisive role in the Saratoga campaign of 1777, "the turning point of the American Revolution."

When Governor George E. Pataki dedicated the Fort Montgomery State Historic Site on October 6, 2002, he guaranteed that the ruins of one of the nation's important Revolutionary War battlegrounds would be forever preserved. This essay will explain how the Fort Montgomery Plan Team approached the challenge of interpreting this National Historic Landmark.

Two hundred twenty-five years to the day of the governor's dedication, Forts Montgomery and Clinton earned their place in history. On October 6, 1777, 1,500 Continental soldiers and New York militiamen confronted 3,000 British soldiers, sailors, and marines under Major General Sir Henry Clinton, in what was the beginning of the British attack against the fortifications of the Hudson Highlands. Sir Henry had designed his plan to support Major General John Burgoyne's expedition into New York from Canada. He began the operation with a feint against Verplanck's Point at King's Ferry, twelve miles south of the forts. His goal was to keep the forces of General Israel Putnam, commander in the Highlands, on the east side of the Hudson. The ruse was a success: American Brigadier Generals George and James Clinton would wind up defending the twin forts of the Popolopen, Clinton's main objective, with only 700 men.

Fort Montgomery was a sprawling work overlooking an iron chain that stretched 1,700 feet across the river, from a cove below its Grand Battery to the base of Anthony's Nose. Until he could place booms in the river to protect the chain, George Clinton, the state's governor and Fort Montgomery's commander, had substituted a cable made by splicing together three smaller cables from the

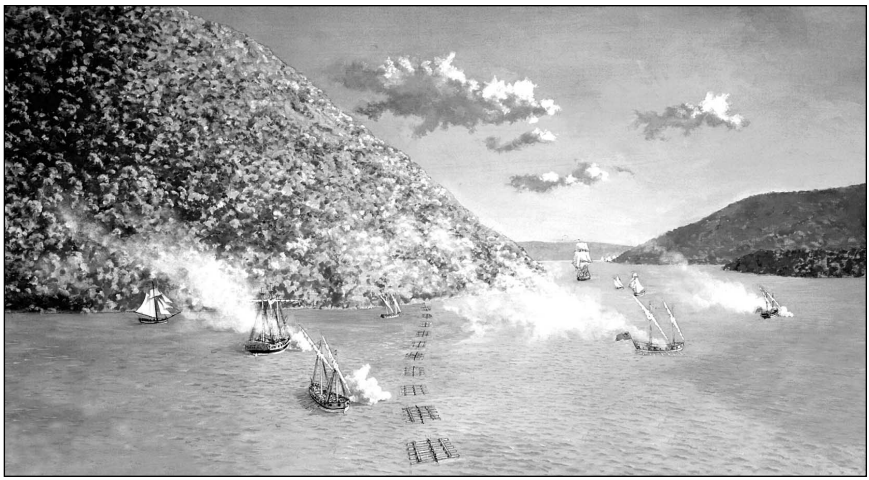
Continental frigate *Montgomery*.[1] The length of the fort itself, from the tip of "Round Hill" redoubt on the northwest to the Grand Battery on the southeast, was over 1,400 feet. The heart of these defenses against an expected attack from the river was the 100-foot-long Grand Battery, with walls eighteen feet thick. According to first Lieutenant William A. Patterson of the 15th Regiment, its line of five 32-pounders "Rakes the River Pretty Well For Three Miles."[2] The rest of the fort had one more 32-pounder, ten 12-pounders, fourteen 6-pounders, and two 3-pounders. The landward ramparts were "comparatively open with the works poorly situated and incomplete."[3]

On higher ground to protect its southern approach, and connected to Fort Montgomery by a pontoon bridge across Popolopen Creek, was Fort Clinton. Two star-shaped redoubts were the key defensive works in what could only loosely be called a fort. Colonel Lewis Dubois, commander of the 5th New York Regiment, estimated that a garrison of 2,000 men was needed to defend both forts properly.[4]

General Putnam did have one other trump card to play: a naval flotilla was present north of the chain to provide firepower and support in case of attack. A committee of Continental generals had recommended this step in its report in May, and the Continental Marine Committee had acted almost immediately, ordering two frigates—the *Montgomery* and the *Congress*—south from Poughkeepsie.[5] By July 13, they had been joined by the New York sloop *Camden* and Continental row galleys *Shark* and *Lady Washington*. Captain John Hodge of the *Montgomery* and Captain Thomas Grennell of the *Congress* had scraped together crews from experienced sailors, soldiers, and even "Deserters, Boys, &ca."[6]

Undermanned and under-gunned, this small 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 (who was in overall charge of the flotilla) were "to follow and obey such orders as they may receive from General [George] Washington or the Commanding officer who may direct the operations in that quarter."[7] Because the mission of the ships was to protect the chain, they had "become a part of the work itself." This meant that it was not Putnam but George Clinton, as overall commander of Forts Clinton and Montgomery, who exercised authority over them.

One other twist complicated the issue of authority: Hodge did not assume command over the *Congress*, which was ordered by General Clinton to sail on October 5 to Fort Constitution, near West Point, "lest she should meet with a Disaster." Although Hodge rated the galleys "manned and in a proper state of



The naval battle during the attack on Forts Montgomery and Clinton (Painting by Dahl Taylor; courtesy of NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation)

defence" and his own ship "in great forwardness," he would find that his inflexible mission and the actual state of his small force would limit 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."[8]

At dawn on October 6, under cover of fog, Henry Clinton began his overland attack against the two forts by landing all but 400 of his troops at Stony Point. (The British ships and transports anchored off Peekskill so they would be in position to support the final assaults.) [9] His plan of attack, designed with the assistance of Loyalist Colonel Beverly Robinson—who had lived nearby prior to the war—involved a two-prong advance over some twelve miles on Fort Montgomery from the west and Fort Clinton from the south. Lieutenant Colonel Mungo Campbell led an advance guard of 500 regulars from the 52d and 57th regiments and 400 provincials under Colonel Robinson from the Loyal Americans, New York Volunteers, and Emmerich's Chaussers. He was to seize the pass through the Dunderberg, march behind Bear Mountain, and attack Fort Montgomery. Major General John Vaughan, with 1,200 soldiers, led the main attack through the Dunderberg Pass and Doodletown against Fort Clinton.

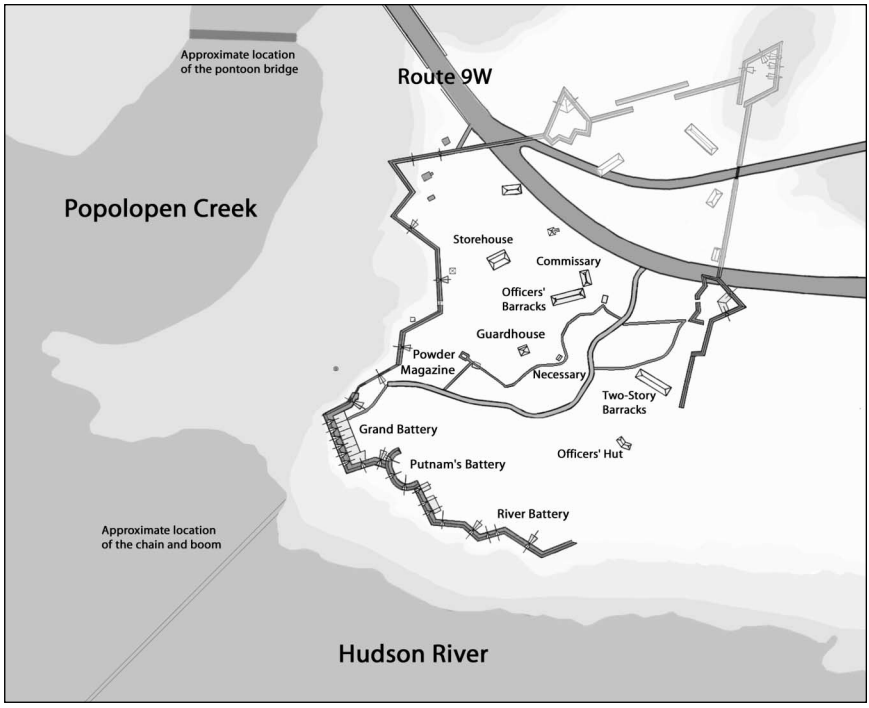
Colonel Campbell had a difficult task. After taking the morning and part of the afternoon to complete the long march, he and his troops had to fight their way past a fieldpiece and 70 militiamen that George Clinton had sent out at about 1 or 2 p.m. Around 4 p.m., Campbell triggered the main offensive. According to

Captain-Lieutenant Thomas Machin, who had commanded the fieldpiece, the Americans were deployed "in three redoubts formed by three bastions of the fort—the men were in a single rank behind the parapet and were not sufficient in number to occupy those lines of the redoubts from whence opposition might have been made to the assailants—the garrison at first gave the assailants a regular fire by platoons or divisions—but soon run into a promiscuous fire as did the enemy—the assailants frequently changed their ground, but still continued their approach." In fact, "the enemy came up several times—within 80 paces of the fort and were broke and repulsed, finally they formed a solid column from the center by files under cover of a rock at about 100 paces from the fort and in that form run up the parapet. . . ." Although Campbell was killed leading his 52d Foot into the works, the momentum of his assault carried Fort Montgomery in about forty-five minutes. Still, the firing of "the artillery and small arms continued until dark."[10] Henry Clinton waited "a favorable Moment" following the start of Campbell's fight at Fort Montgomery and then ordered Vaughan to launch his attack against Fort Clinton—using the bayonet only—across an open area of 400 yards filled with abbatis and covered by the fire of ten cannons.[11]

The mountainous terrain had prevented the British from using artillery, so the attacks were supported by what cannon fire could be brought to bear from row galleys. In the face of a fierce cannonade from the American ships, the H.M.S. *Dependence* fired ninety-five 24-pound shot and six 4-pounders against these vessels and the forts. Despite inadequate crews and too few guns, the *Montgomery* and her consorts made a gallant if futile fight of it.

Despite the determined efforts of the American Clintons, the unfinished twin forts fell to overwhelming British attack by nightfall. By 10 p.m. the victors had the pleasure of observing the blazing *Montgomery*, which had been torched by its crew to prevent it from falling into British hands. The *Shark* and the *Congress* would suffer similar fates near Fort Constitution. Only the *Lady Washington* escaped; it would oppose the British at Rondout Creek two weeks later. With the forts reduced, the ships dispersed, and Putnam and his forces withdrawing northward to protect the pass to Fishkill, Sir Henry would complete his control of the Highlands in a matter of days.[12]

At the cost of some 70 killed, 40 wounded, and 240 taken prisoner, the Americans nonetheless exacted a substantial price, killing 40 and wounding 150 of the attackers. While the British won the battles of Forts Clinton and Montgomery, the stubborn defense put up by the Americans caused the British to delay their northward thrust to join General John Burgoyne, who surrendered at Saratoga less than two weeks later. The results might have been different had



Map showing Fort Montgomery; stabilized and interpreted ruins are labeled (Map by Jack Mead; courtesy of NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation)

Henry Clinton's substantial forces arrived in time. Most historians credit the American victory at Saratoga as being the turning point of the war: the French recognized that Washington's army possessed the ability and the desire to win a major engagement.

Since the historic battle in the autumn of 1777, Fort Montgomery has lain in ruins, awaiting the proper recognition of its contribution to victory. For the last five years, Governor Pataki; the Hudson River Valley Greenway; the Palisades Interstate Park Commission (PIPC); the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP); and the Fort Montgomery Battle Site Association have worked to preserve, stabilize, and interpret the fort that helped change the course of American history. Their efforts made it possible for New York to open the site to the public last year.

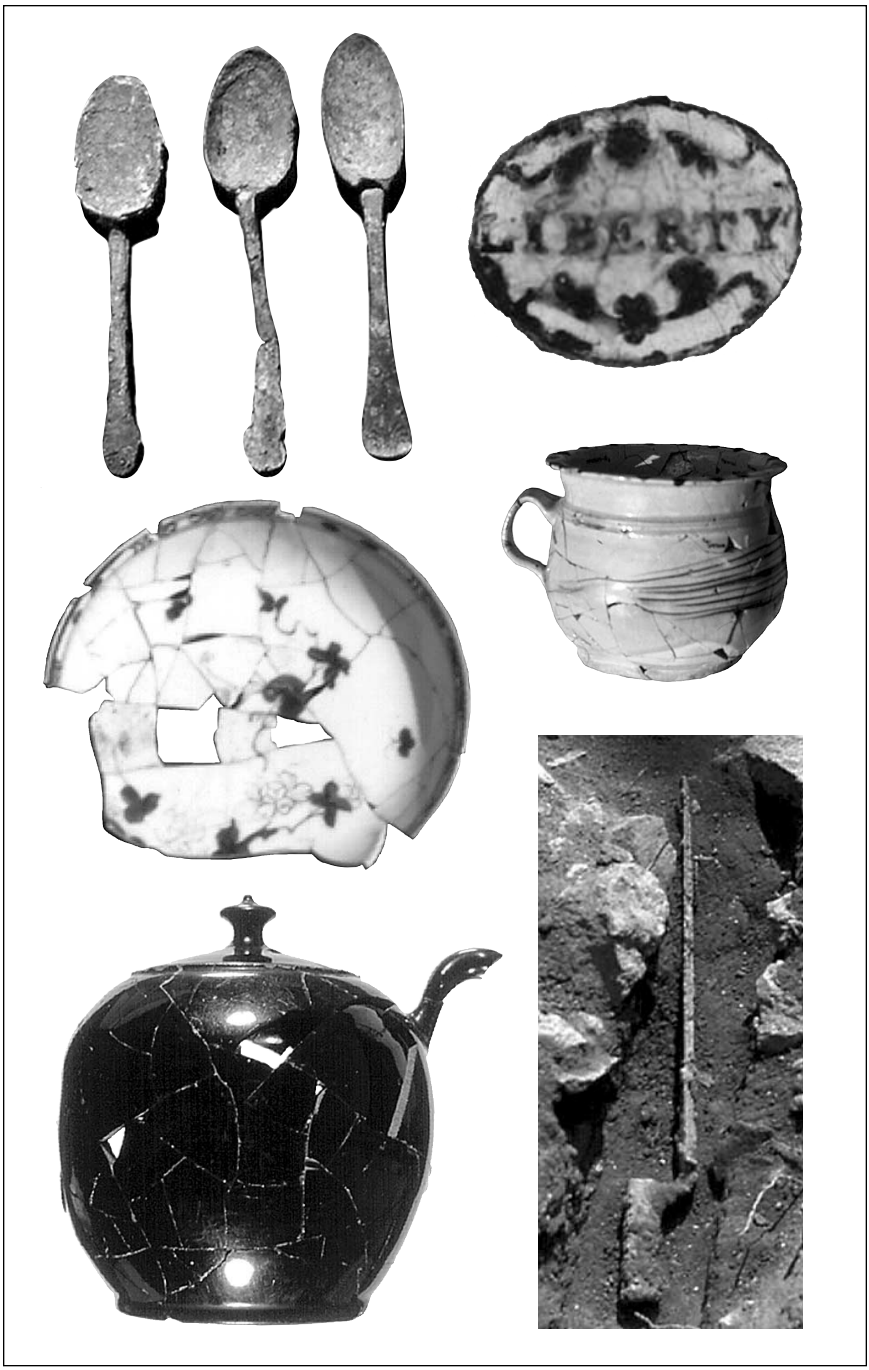
Visitors now have a remarkable opportunity to tour the fort, whose stone foundations have survived largely intact. Fort Montgomery comprises some twenty-five archaeologically significant features on 14.42 acres of land owned since 1914 by the PIPC. As shown on the map above, the ramparts of the irregu-

larly shaped fortification follow the contours of the bluffs overlooking the Hudson River and Popolopen Creek and connect three landward redoubts (South, Round Hill, and North) and three river batteries (Grand, Putnam's, and River). Thomas Machin constructed gun batteries on the lower riverbank to protect the chain and boom. A stone wharf on the north bank of Popolopen Creek provided access to the fort and to the bridge connecting the twin forts. Within the fort itself, soldiers built structures to support the outerworks and its garrison, including the guardhouse, powder magazine, main barracks, officers' commissary, a second barracks, storehouse, bake house, soldiers' necessary, provision stores, soldiers' hut, a "spring head," and four additional barracks. The remains of almost all of these structures are clearly visible and are in the process of being stabilized.

Interpreting a fort with the foundations of almost all of its features preserved proved challenging. Fortunately, the team had a wealth of archaeological data to rely upon. In 1916, archaeologists working for the New-York Historical Society began the first excavations at Fort Montgomery. More excavations were conducted in the 1930s, 1950s, and in the late 1960s/early 1970s by staff at Trailside Museums, located where Fort Clinton once stood. Much of what we know about the fort comes from the work done by these dedicated "diggers," particularly by the late Jack Mead, who supervised the last of these excavations. Although not formally trained as an archaeologist, Mead kept meticulous records of all of the excavations, which yielded well over 100,000 artifacts. (In 2002, archaeologists from the state's Peebles Island Resource Center conducted some additional, limited explorations in conjunction with the development of the site.)

Why did Mead and his predecessors do so much work? Their vision was one that many people in the 1960s and 1970s shared: They wanted to reconstruct the fort. It was not a new idea; in fact, it dates to at least 1930, when Arthur P. Abbott, a local author and friend of the PIPC, wrote the commission expressing his thoughts regarding reconstructions.[13] Even then, reconstructing Revolutionary War forts was an old concept; the rebuilding of Fort Ticonderoga dates to 1908. So when the Fort Montgomery Plan Team began meeting in the late 1990s, it had to address whether or not to reconstruct the fort.

The idea appealed to some members of the team. A reconstruction would help visitors envision and appreciate structures that no longer existed. Reconstructions set the scene for the imagination to take over. They have their place, but they are problematic. It is almost never possible to know all of the details of a building, a fort, or a hut. This is certainly true for eighteenth-century buildings for which there are no photographs or neat blueprints. Although historians know a great deal about Fort Montgomery, both from a wealth of documentary sources and



Artifacts unearthed during archaeological digs at Fort Montgomery (Courtesy of NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation)

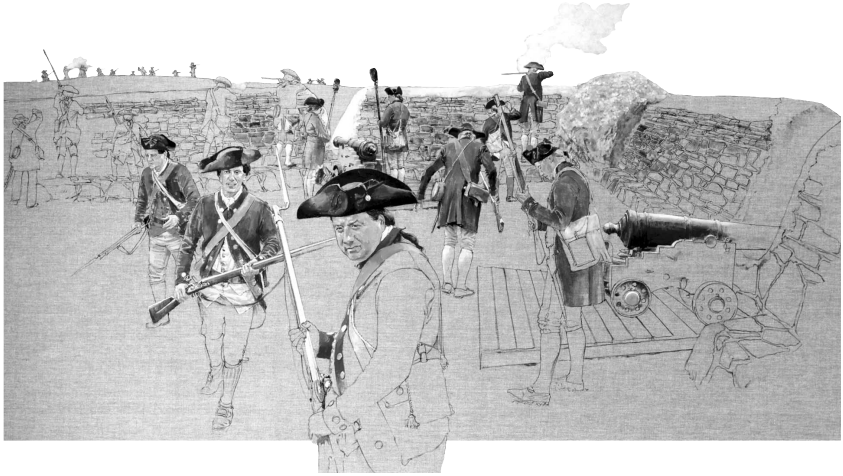
from the archaeological excavations, they know precious little about the buildings themselves. Because reconstructed buildings tend to be permanent, they cannot be changed easily to reflect advances in scholarship. And no matter how clear the interpretation that a building or a feature is a reconstruction, there are always visitors who either believe it to be the real thing or come away with the mistaken impression that the reconstruction is based on specific knowledge of the original structure.

Weighing the pros and cons of reconstruction, the Fort Montgomery Plan Team decided not to rebuild Fort Montgomery, but it recognized the need to help visitors imagine and appreciate those parts of the fort that no longer exist. The challenge, therefore, was to help present the story of the fort and the battle so visitors can imagine what took place, but in a manner that is flexible enough to address new information that may come to light. The team chose to tell the story of Fort Montgomery through a variety of media, including interpretive signs, commissioned artwork, an audio tour, three-dimensional exhibits, and, most important, professional interpretive staff.

Interpretive signs are used effectively at many parks and historic sites. Computer design and advances in printing processes have made it possible to create full-color panels that can withstand weather, ultraviolet fading, and moderate attempts at vandalism for at least a decade. Signs are made of phenolic resin in which a computer-generated image is embedded. At Fort Montgomery, there are twenty interpretive panels, in kiosks and adjacent to foundations, earthworks, and other features. Each sign includes color images and concise, descriptive text that explains not only what the visitor is viewing but also the story of the construction of the fort, significant archaeological discoveries, the battle, etc. The first phase of these signs was installed in October 2001. The second phase was added in September 2002, just in time for the site's grand opening.

Many of the signs incorporate interesting, high-quality images. In addition to being an archaeologist, Jack Mead was a talented artist. He left numerous sketches and paintings of the fort's buildings and scenes from the battle. To those, the plan team added other artwork and historic images to create visually engaging panels.

In cases where no images were obtainable, the OPRHP commissioned local artist Dahl Taylor to paint four scenes that highlight certain details of each feature but leave others to the imagination. For example, his painting of the guardhouse leaves a clear impression that this was a place where soldiers who had done something wrong were brought. It suggests that there was a building there, but its details are intentionally sketchy. Taylor's painting of the North Redoubt depicts this feature during the early part of the battle. It suggests what the redoubt looked like, but



Soldiers manning a redoubt at Fort Montgomery (Painting by Dahl Taylor; courtesy of NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation)

it does not make a definitive statement about the details of its construction. Visitors are left with an impression—a "mental snapshot"—of what happened there, yet it is clear that there is no definitive record of what the actual scene looked like.

The "one-story" barracks, another of Taylor's illustrations, is a perfect example of why reconstructions are problematic. When Jack Mead excavated this building in the late 1960s, he concluded, based on the chimney found by his excavation team, that this building was one story tall. However, while Taylor was working on preliminary sketches of the building for his painting, he forced a re-examination of the documentary evidence relating to the forts' barracks. In the past, historians had been guided by Colonel Thomas Palmer's description of "…one barrack, eighty feet by twenty, two stories high, with a cellar under half of it." [14] Like Mead, they assumed that Palmer's letter referred to the other 80 x 20 barracks building, located just to the north of this one.

But just as Taylor was about to begin painting the "one-story" barracks, a colleague made a crucial observation—that the key documents correspond with two historic maps of the fort drawn contemporaneously with Palmer's letters.[15] When the documents are put together with the maps, it becomes very clear that the "one-story" barracks was actually described by Colonel Thomas Palmer and others as a two-story building. In the first of two maps drawn by Colonel Palmer, there is only one 80 x 20 barracks shown. This map was drawn in April or May of 1776. Palmer's letter, describing a "barrack, eighty feet by twenty, two stories high," dates to April 27, 1776. Palmer's letter goes on to say that this two-story barracks was completed, and that another barracks was planned. Furthermore, the dotted outline of another barracks different from the "one-story barracks" is faintly visible on this map, as if to indicate that this is the barracks to be built next.

Palmer's second map of Fort Montgomery, which accompanied advice written by Lord Stirling and incorporated in instructions issued by George Washington on June 10, shows a second 80 x 20 barracks.[16] Conveniently, the "new" building is labeled "E." In his instructions, Stirling writes that "The barracks E, which are begun and considerably advanced, should also be finished." Clearly, this cannot be the same building that Palmer had previously described as two stories high and completed.

The connection made between the documents and the maps caused a flurry of activity at the Peebles Island Resource Center, as archaeologists and architectural historians carefully examined all of the documents and Mead's field notes and debated whether the barracks was the "one story" or "two-story" building. In the end, they agreed that the documents in hand painted a convincing picture that this barracks had, in fact, been two stories tall. However, since all of the information that Mead left behind has not been examined, they may yet discover in his voluminous notes something that convinces them he was right. So, Taylor reoriented his final artwork of the barracks from one story to two. This is a good example of how information and interpretations can change over time. Fortunately, the Fort Montgomery Plan Team has chosen interpretive methods that can change as new information is discovered.

Although interpretive signs and paintings do a marvelous job of helping visitors envision what Fort Montgomery might have looked like, the plan team felt it was important to add another dimension to the fort's interpretation. Acoustiguide in New York City has helped develop an audio tour of the site. The tour combines music and sound effects with narration, dramatic readings, and interviews with experts. There are thirteen stops planned for the tour. Each stop has a main message that explains a particular feature of the fort. Most stops have four additional thematic messages that interpret the daily routine, military history, archaeology, and major personalities associated with Fort Montgomery. Because the audio players use random access .mp3 technology, they will allow visitors to choose those layers of information that appeal most to them.

The third form of interpretation will be a visitors' center to exhibit many of the archaeological artifacts recovered from the fort. These treasures tell the story in a way that no media can. What kind of people garrisoned the fort? Based on the many ornate buckles and buttons recovered from the enlisted men's barracks, we get the sense that many of the common soldiers were comfortably well off. Are there items that we can connect with specific people? Nearly all of the spoons recovered from the fort bear the initials of their owners. Why were these men here? The inscription "Liberty" on a pair of cufflinks is certainly part of the

answer. Because so many artifacts were excavated from the fort, there is a large pool from which to choose. Currently, the New York State Museum is completing a report on these items to help us better interpret them.

Interpretive signs, an audio tour, and exhibits will go a long way toward helping visitors appreciate what the men who built and defended the fort experienced. However, there is no substitute for knowledgeable interpreters who can interact with visitors, answer questions, and truly bring the fort to life. Some of the interpreters will wear period costumes and provide hands-on activities and demonstrations to engage children and adults. But they will also continue to research and assemble more information on the fort, and this is critical. Although historians and archaeologists have been studying the fort for almost a century, they have only scratched the surface of the potential sources of information that are available for further research. For example, the pension records of the soldiers who served at the fort have not yet been studied. And who knows what may be hiding in the Public Records Office in England?

As research expands our understanding of Fort Montgomery, the OPRHP will update its interpretation to keep pace. Interpretive signs, illustrations, audio tours, and even exhibits can be changed much more readily than reconstructed buildings. And just as important, these media will convey—in a way that reconstructions cannot—one of the most important facts about the site: that there is a great deal yet to learn about Fort Montgomery. Readers should come to experience the treasures of this great site themselves to understand Fort Montgomery and the men who fought there for America's independence.

Notes

1. Brigadier George Clinton to Washington, July 11, 1777; Captain John Hodge to New York Council of Safety, July 13, 1777; William Bell Clark, William James Morgan, and Michael J. Crawford, eds. *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, 10 vols. to date (Washington: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1964-), 9: 260, 281.
2. "W^{m} A. Patterson to Hon. &c," April 22, 1776; "A Plan of the Intended Works at Fort Montgomery By W^{m} A. Patterson 1st Lieut of the 15th Reg^{t}—April 22 1776," Sheffield Research files, from originals in the Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Mass.
3. William H. Carr and Richard J. Koke, *Twin Forts of the Popolopen: Forts Clinton and Montgomery, New York, 1775-1777,* Historical Bulletin no. 1. (Bear Mountain, N.Y.: Commissioners of the Palisades Interstate Park and the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society, July 1937), 29. (It is unclear how many of these might have been at Fort Clinton.) "A Return of Ordinance Stores at Fort Montgomery this twentyeth Day of June 1777," *Public Papers of George Clinton, first Governor of New York, 1777-1795–1801-1804,* 10 vols., ed. Hugh Hastings (Albany: State printers, 1899-1914), 2: 45.
4. "Genl. Putnam, N^{o}. 25," ibid.; George Clinton to Washington, Oct. 9, 1777, *Naval Documents*, 10: 94.
5. Continental Marine Committee to the New York Council of Safety, June 26, 1777, *ibid*., 9: 177.

6. Aug. 14, 1776, "Memorandum of Stores Necessary for the Sloop Hudson & . . . Camden," Papers of the Secret Committee; George Clinton to Putnam, June 15, 1777; Captain John Hodge to the New York Council of Safety, July 13, 1777, ibid., 9: 118, 281; "Capt Hodge's Evidence, N 7," "Report of the Court of Inquiry on the Loss of Fort Montgomery" to Washington, April 5, 1778, McDougall Papers, United States Military Philosophical Society Records, 1789-1813, microfilmed by the New York Historical Society, Reel 2, USMA Library, West Point, N.Y., hereinafter cited as "Court of Inquiry."

7. Continental Marine Committee to the New York Council of Safety and to Captains Grennell and Hodge, June 26, 1777, *Naval Documents*, 9: 176-77.

8. Putnam to the New York Council of Safety, June 5, 1777; Phil. Livingston and Wm. Duer to Pierre Van Cortlandt, President of the New York Council of Safety, May 31, 1777; Hodge to Council of Safety, July 13, 1777; Cortlandt to the President of Congress, June 11, 1777, *ibid*., 9: 24, 42, 90, 281.

9. Orderly Book, King's American Regiment, 18 December 1776-12 November 1777, typescript, USMA Library, West Point, N.Y.; Hon. J.W. Fortescue, *A History of the 17th Lancers (Duke of Cambridge's Own)* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1895), 43-44; S. H. F. Johnston, *The History of the Cameronians (Scottish Rifles) 26th and 90th*, vol. 1, *1689-1910* (Aldershot, UK: Gale & Polden Limited, 1957), 148; W.S. Moorsom, ed., *Historical Record of the Fifty-Second Regiment (Oxfordshire Light Infantry from the Year 1755 to the Year 1858* (London: Richard Bentley, 1860), 16; H.H. Woollright, *History of the Fifty-Seventh (West Middlesex) Regiment of Foot, 1755-1881* (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1893), 64-65; Colonel H. C. Wylly, C. B., comp. *History of the Manchester Regiment (Late the 63rd and 96th Foot)* (London: Forster Groom & Co., 1923), 65; W. Wheater, *Historical Record of the Seventh or Royal Regiment of Fusiliers* (Leeds: Private circulation, 1875), 72; journals, Oct. 5, *Mercury, Dependence*, and *Diligent*, Hotham to Admiral Howe, Oct. 9, and Clinton to General Howe, Oct. 9, *Naval Documents*, 10: 42-43, 96, 98.

10. Captain Machin's Evidence, N 5, "Court of Inquiry."

11. Commodore William Hotham to Admiral Howe, Oct. 9, 1777; Clinton to General Howe, Oct. 9, 1777; journal of *Dependence*, Oct. 6, 1777; George Clinton to New York Council of Safety, Oct. 8, 1777, *ibid*., 10: 42-43, 47, 70, 96, 98-99.

12. Hotham to Admiral Howe, Oct. 9, 1777; Clinton to General Howe, Oct. 9, 1777; journal of *Dependence*, Oct. 6, 1777; George Clinton to New York Council of Safety, Oct. 8, 1777, *ibid*., 10: 42-43, 47, 70, 96, 98-99; "Capt. Hodge's Evidence," "Court of Inquiry."

13. Arthur P. Abbott to Commissioners of the Palisades Interstate Park Commission, Feb. 16, 1930, and March 11, 1930. Palisades Interstate Park Commission files. Abbott's letters seem to be contradictory, at least without more information regarding the context of the letters. His first letter seems to support reconstructing the forts' buildings, while the second letter warns that "The desecration of these works by the obliteration of their most valuable and interesting features by 'restorations' is wrong and must not be done."

14. Thomas Palmer to New York Committee of Safety, April 27, 1776, in *American Archives*, by Peter Force, 4th series, vol. 5, pp. 1095-96.

15. Thomas Palmer Map Number One of Fort Montgomery, in *Twin Forts of the Popolopen*, pg. 23. The original of this map was in the possession of the New York State Library when it was destroyed by fire in 1911.

16. Lord Stirling's advice, incorporated in General Washington's directions to the Commissioners in the Highlands, in *American Archives*, 4th series, vol. 6, pp. 792-93.