The American Revolution in the Hudson Valley—An Overview

Thomas S. Wermuth & James M. Johnson

Although the "shot heard 'round the world" that ignited the American Revolution occurred a few miles outside of Boston and the campaign that ended it took place in Virginia, the nexus of the conflict was New York's Hudson River Valley. Throughout the war, officers on both sides made it their top priority to gain control of the Hudson River—and to keep hold of it at any cost.

As a result, the Hudson Valley—the virtual center of the colonies—hosted many key figures, battles, and political events throughout the eight years of war, and its final drama was played out here with the British evacuation of New York City on November 25, 1783. In the years leading up to the Revolution, the Sons of Liberty, as active in New York as they were in Massachusetts, printed broadsides, encouraged boycotts, rallied, rioted, and dumped British tea into New York Harbor. Patriot housewives throughout the Valley threw their own "tea parties" at the expense of merchants and Loyalist neighbors. The region's social fabric was ripped apart, first by the struggle between the powerful coalitions of DeLanceys and Livingstons, and then by the clash between the Loyalists and Whigs (or Patriots).

The New York Provincial Congress established itself at the courthouse in White Plains in July 1776 and created the State of New York with its acceptance of the Declaration of Independence on July 9. New York adopted its constitution in Kingston on April 20, 1777, and on February 6, 1778, it ratified the Articles of Confederation, tying its fate to the rest of the United States of America.

Prelude to War

On the eve of the American Revolution, the Hudson River Valley was among the most fertile and productive regions in North America. Its grain, flour, and dairy products were sent all over the world. The port towns of Albany, Poughkeepsie, and Kingston were thriving commercial entrepôts that served as regional hubs in the vibrant agricultural trade with New York City.

The Hudson Valley had been settled primarily by the Dutch in the mid-seventeenth century, and the English soon thereafter, with some French Huguenots and Germans following. Much of the Hudson's west bank was still ethnically

Timeline

1763	Treaty of Paris concludes French and Indian War
1765	Stamp Act Riots in New York, Albany, and Boston
1766	Stamp Act Repealed
1770	Boston Massacre
1773	Boston Tea Party
1774	Coercive (or Intolerable) Acts
	Quebec Act
1775	Battle of Lexington (April); Battle of Bunker Hill (June)
1776	British Invasion of New York City
1777	Campaign for the Hudson River Valley
1778	Washington's Encampment at Pawling (Fredricksburg)
1779	Battle of Stony Point
1780	Fortress West Point opened
1781	Battle of Yorktown
1782	Washington's army encamped at New Windsor
1783	Evacuation Day (November 1783)

and culturally Dutch, perhaps three generations removed from leaving Europe. Dutch customs prevailed, the Dutch Reformed Church dominated, and while the Second Continental Congress was approving the Declaration of Independence, Dutch was spoken more regularly in many Hudson Valley towns than English. Indeed, through 1774 the Ulster town of Kingston (a mere three years away from being the state capital) kept its official records in Dutch.

As late as 1763, residents of the Hudson Valley still felt strong bonds to the king of England and his empire. A typical outpouring of this affection was the celebration in Kingston of George III's ascension to the throne in 1761. Hundreds of residents paraded through the streets and offered toasts and cannonades to "His most Royal and Sacred Majesty." [1] Similar celebrations were held throughout the region.

Nevertheless, relations between England and the colonies began to sour. Following the French and Indian War, the British government levied new taxes on the American colonies that were intended to defray its large war debt. The Stamp Act of 1765, which imposed a tax on a variety of goods and services, was viewed suspiciously by Valley inhabitants, as well as other colonists. In towns throughout the region, residents resisted the implementation of the act, and in

Albany and New York City riots broke out in order to prevent the tax from going into effect.[2]

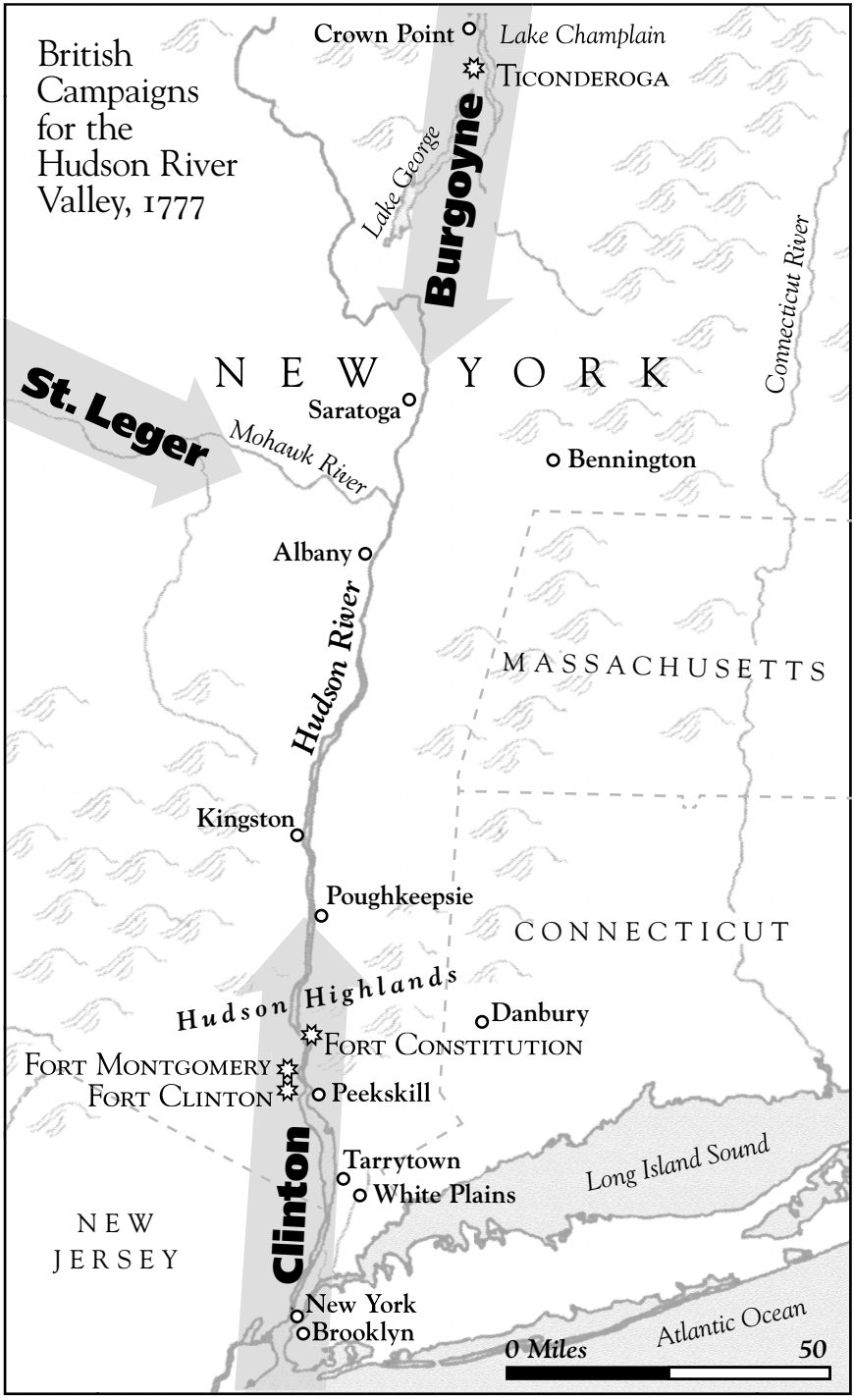
Calm returned to North America following the Stamp Act's repeal in 1766, and over the next several years there was a rapprochement of sorts between England and her colonies. Nevertheless, the quartering of British troops in Boston and New York inflamed tensions in both cities, leading to sporadic outbursts of violence. The Boston Massacre further ignited anti-British sentiment.

The primary debate in the 1770s continued to be over Britain's authority to tax the colonists. Britain asserted this right as essential to the process of governance. Although the colonial argument varied, in essence it recognized the empire's right to tax to regulate imperial relations, but not to raise revenue. Colonists generally agreed with Patrick Henry's famous declaration of "no taxation without representation." Such sentiment led to a variety of responses from British officials, one of the most interesting being the distinction between "actual" and "virtual" representation: The colonists were not physically represented in Parliament (and neither were many English subjects). However, the colonists *were* represented, so the argument ran, in the sense that Parliament represented the interests of all subjects of the realm.[3]

From 1770 through 1773, relations between the colonies and Britain were relatively stable, but events in late 1773 changed that. The newly enacted Tea Act, offering East Indian tea at reduced prices (and including a tax), inspired "tea parties" throughout the colonies, including the Hudson Valley. The most famous, of course, occurred in Boston, where members of the Sons of Liberty dressed as Mohawk Indians and dumped British tea overboard.[4]

The Coercive Acts of 1774, implemented to punish Boston following its Tea Party, ignited resistance throughout the colonies. New Yorkers had their own tea party on April 22, when "Mohawks" dumped tea from the ship *Hook* into New York harbor, forcing another ship, the *Nancy*, to return to England. In communities up and down the Hudson, committees of safety, observation, and inspection sprang into action to challenge recent British policies.[5]

Characteristic of this resistance was the Kingston Committee of Safety's anger over Parliament's attempt to establish "the Romish Religion in America," a feature of the Quebec Act of 1774. The Kingston committee was equally shocked by the "avowed design of the [British] ministry to raise a revenue in America." The New Windsor Committee of Observation articulated its fear of Parliament's desire to levy taxes "on us without our consent" and for asserting absolute legislative authority over the colonies. The committee resolved that such powers were "subversive of our natural and legal rights as British subjects, and that we would


British Campaigns for the Hudson River Valley, 1777
Crown Point
Lake Champlain
Ticonderoga
Lake George
Burgoyne
Connecticut River
N E W Y O R K
St. Leger
Mohawk River
Saratoga
Bennington
Albany
Hudson River
MASSACHUSETTS
Kingston
Poughkeepsie
CONNECTICUT
Hudson Highlands
Danbury
Fort Constitution
Fort Montgomery
Fort Clinton
Peekskill
Clinton
Tarrytown
White Plains
Long Island Sound
NEW JERSEY
New York
Brooklyn
Atlantic Ocean
0 Miles
50

be deficient in point of duty to our King and the British Constitution were we to yield in tame submission to them."[6]

As war began in New England in 1775, the people of the Hudson Valley began to choose sides. Throughout the war, there were pockets of Loyalism in the region, but devotion to the Revolutionary cause remained strong. The Valley was able to muster several Continental and militia regiments.

The Campaigns for the Hudson River Valley

Control of the Hudson Valley was one of the primary strategic objectives of the British high command. The Valley's defense was equally important to General George Washington, whose army was to spend more than a third of the war in (or in close proximity to) the region. In 1776, Washington stated that "the importance of the river in the present contest and the necessity of defending it, are so well understood that it is unnecessary to enlarge upon them." Whereupon he proceeded to enlarge upon those reasons, citing its strategic significance for transportation and communication, as well as the importance of its agricultural production.[7]

That July, the largest armada the British Empire had ever sent abroad entered New York Harbor. Five hundred ships carrying more than 34,000 British Regulars, sailors, and German mercenaries under the joint command of the brothers Howe, Admiral Richard and General Sir William, landed at the southern tip of Manhattan Island. Facing them across the East River, atop Brooklyn Heights, were some 20,000 Continentals and militia under Washington's command.[8]

In late August, Howe's army slipped around Washington and attacked from the rear. The Americans were driven across the river to Manhattan. In mid-September the two armies clashed again near Kip's Bay, sending Washington's army reeling northward up the island. In early October, the British again seized the advantage, striking Washington at Pell's Point; later that month, the two armies battled to a draw at White Plains. In just three months, the Continental Army had been pushed out of New York City and into the lower Hudson Valley.[9]

The British engaged in several small raids in the mid-Valley in 1776 and early 1777. Their subsequent campaign to control the region consisted of an elaborate three-pronged invasion. The main force, under General John Burgoyne, was to depart from Canada and push its way south through the Adirondacks to Albany, where it was to meet up with a combined British-Indian force pushing eastward along the Mohawk Valley. The third force was to be an expeditionary unit under the command of Sir Henry Clinton, who had been left in command of New York

City when General Howe unexpectedly sailed south to Philadelphia in July 1777. Clinton's push up the Hudson aimed at either meeting with, or giving support to, Burgoyne's forces. Military scholars have often noted the lack of proper planning and coordination of this major invasion, whose failure led directly to the British defeat at Saratoga, "the turning point of the war."[10]

As Clinton's army made its way up the Hudson, about 1,500 soldiers from the 5th New York Regiment, Lamb's Artillery, and the Ulster and Orange county militia garrisoned Forts Montgomery and Clinton. The state's new governor, Brigadier General George Clinton, commanded the posts. His brother, James, commanded the troops at Fort Clinton. On the morning of October 6, after a day of fierce fighting, British troops captured both forts and spent the next several days destroying them, along with an iron chain that had been stretched across the Hudson there. The main part of the American force was able to escape.[11]

Despite the British victory, Henry Clinton's troops suffered almost 200 casualties and were delayed by the action. They resumed their movement upriver and stopped at several points along the way, landing small units for limited forays against local militia units. British forces reached Kingston, the state capital, ten days later.

Advance British units approached Kingston before dawn on October 16. Many residents had already escaped in the days before the British arrival, and local militia were prepared to conduct a delaying action if large numbers of troops came ashore. Major General John Vaughan led a British raiding party of several hundred men that quickly drove local militia units west from the town in pre-dawn fighting. Determined to punish the region, British troops burned large portions of the town before departing later that afternoon. Henry Clinton pushed another ten miles upriver over the next few days, dropping landing parties at various points (including the Livingston estate at Clermont, which, with the nearby Belvediere, was burned to the ground) before heading back to New York City. By this time, Burgoyne had surrendered and Clinton's northward movement had been made irrelevant.[12]

Although there was limited military action in the mid-Valley in 1778, the Hudson remained the primary target of both British and American strategists. In May 1779, Henry Clinton attempted a second invasion, seizing Stony Point. However, Washington kept his army between Clinton and the northern stretches of the Valley, and on July 15 he sent a force under General "Mad" Anthony Wayne to drive the British from Stony Point. The surprise nighttime attack was a huge success, and all British troops in the vicinity retreated downriver in the fall.[13]

It was the importance of maintaining control of the Hudson that had led Washington, in 1778, to order construction of fortress West Point—a complex of forts and redoubts that he dubbed "the key of America." A feature of the fortress was an iron chain, which was laid across the river to prevent any future British naval incursion upriver. In 1780, the British made one more attempt on the Hudson, when Henry Clinton opened secret negotiations with General Benedict Arnold, recently appointed commander of West Point, to gain control of the fort. Arnold's plans were discovered when Clinton's aide-de-camp, Major John Andre, was captured. He was hanged as a spy in Tappan; Arnold escaped to safety in New York City.[14]

In the last years of the war, the mid-Valley remained central to Washington's plans. After the British were defeated at Yorktown, they continued to occupy New York City for two more years, and their continued threat to the Valley kept Washington and his army stationed nearby. The Continental Army encamped in southern Ulster County, in and around the town of New Windsor, while Washington himself took up headquarters a few miles north, at Newburgh. In the summer of 1781, the French commander, the Comte de Rochambeau, marched his 5,000-man army from Rhode Island to Philipsburg, in Westchester, to join the Continental Army, first in the siege of New York and then in the pivotal Yorktown Campaign in Virginia.

War and the Home Front

With the gradual collapse of New York's colonial government, the committees of safety, observation, and inspection emerged to fill the vacuum of power. In most towns, these developed alongside existing town boards and governments. In many communities, they maintained a strong presence by exerting their influence not only in the political sphere, but also in the economic arena. The committees regulated prices, controlled the importation and exportation of goods, and set maximum- and minimum-wage rates for local labor.

Often the powers invested in the committees were greater than those that town officials possessed. In 1776, the Provincial Congress gave the committees the authority to tax and appoint tax collectors and assessors. During the war, the committees gradually gained additional powers and became the de facto governing authority in many Valley towns. Besides control over local taxation and legislation, they also assumed judicial and police powers. The committees could use their authority over local militia units to enforce their rulings.[15]

Usually, the committees did not have to resort to displays of power; they were able to employ community pressures against those suspected of unpatriotic actions

or of any activity seen as threatening. These punishments included public denunciations of those who were considered to be enemies of the cause, symbolic burnings of effigies, or boycotts of shopkeepers and tradesmen who seemed lukewarm to the Revolution. Committees instructed residents not to patronize businesses whose patriotism was suspect because "every shilling of property we put in their hands...enable them to purchase the chains to bind us in slavery."[16]

The issues upon which committees expended the most energy tended to be economic. Food shortages, inflated prices, currency of questionable value, rising taxes, and, on the Hudson's east bank, tenants demanding land redistribution all helped to shape some of the most revolutionary aspects of the Revolution. On the eve of the war, the local committees of observation supervised economic activities in their counties and towns. Initially, the role of the committees was to promote non-importation and the boycott of British goods. Once the war began and shortages and inflation became rampant, the local committees started to scrutinize and regulate the trade and economic activities of local shopkeepers to ensure that they engaged in business practices that promoted the war effort and supported a vibrant local economy.[17]

The End of the War

Following the American victory at Stony Point, the British never directly threatened the Hudson Valley again. (The last engagement in the region occurred in the summer of 1779, when Chief Joseph Brant, leading a mixed band of Mohawks and Loyalists, conducted a raid on Minisink.) Following their dramatic victory at Yorktown, Washington and the Continental Army spent the last two years of the war encamped at New Windsor and Newburgh. On November 25, 1783, Governor George Clinton led the Americans into New York City after the British evacuation. And on December 4, the commander in chief bid a tearful farewell to his officers of the Continental Army at Fraunces Tavern in Manhattan. The war that started in Massachusetts and had centered in New York at last ended there.

Notes

1. *New York Gazette*, February 1761
2. Edward Countryman, *A People in Revolution: The American Revolution and Political Society in New York*, 1760-1790 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 37-39; Joseph Tiedemann, *Reluctant Revolutionaries: New York City and the Road to Independence*, 1763-1776 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 15-26.
3. Bernard Bailyn, *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 166-71; Edmund S. Morgan, *The Birth of the Republic*, 1763-89 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 23-24.
4. Alfred Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution* (Boston: Free Press, 1999), 99-107.
5. Countryman, 137-43.
6. "Resolves of the New Windsor Committee" in Peter Force, American Archives (Washington, D.C.: 1837-1853), 2:131-33.
7. Washington's comments are cited in Louis V. Mills, "Attack in the Highlands, the Battle of Fort Montgomery," *Hudson Valley Regional Review* (Sept. 2000), 39-40.
8. Barnet Schecter, *The Battle for New York: The City at the Heart of the American Revolution* (New York: Walker, 2002), 112-16.
9. William Polf, *Garrison Town: The British Occupation of New York City* (Albany: New York State Library, 1976), 5-7.
10. Mark Lender and James Kirby Martin, *A Respectable Army: The Military Origins of the Republic* (New York: Harlan Davidson Press, 1981), 83-7.
11. Robert Venables, *The American Revolution in the Hudson Valley* (Albany: New York State Library, 1975), 12-13.
12. Schecter, 286-299.
13. Venables, 18.
14. Willard Sterne Randall, *Benedict Arnold: Patriot and Traitor* (New York: Morrow, 1990), 526-37.
15. Countryman, 137-40.
16. "Minutes of Committee of Ulster, May 11, 1775" in Force, 2:833.
17. Thomas S. Wermuth, "The Central Hudson Valley and the American Revolution," in Joseph Tiedemann and Eugene Fingerhut, *The Other New York: The Revolution Outside New York City* (forthcoming, SUNY Press).