Rescuing Hallowed Ground

Fort Montgomery finally gets the recognition it deserves.

by Reed Sparling

Schoolchildren storm Fort Montgomery's North Redoubt. Above: Jack Mead, who led an archaeological dig at the fort site from 1967 to 1971.

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"Unguided attempts to find these remains would be most unwise. [They] are well guarded by thickets of brambles, thorny berry bushes, and, at certain times of the year, copperheads. Everywhere there are unexpected piles of rock underfoot ready to twist an ankle, stretch a tendon, or break a bone...."

That's how the site of Fort Montgomery, in Orange County, was described in *The Bicentennial Guide to the American Revolution*, published in 1974. As recently as three years ago, the words were still apt: the scene of some of the bloodiest fighting in the Valley during the war — and one of the most intact Revolutionary War sites anywhere — was blanketed by a tangled mass of blowdowns and clothes-ripping briers, its treasures unknown to all but the most ardent history buffs. Only a state historical marker along Route 9W, which bisects the fort's remains, alerted passersby to the area's past. But even the sign was misleading: in a final indignity, it gave the wrong date for the battle that had raged there on October 6, 1777.

Today, the Fort Montgomery State Historic Site is a different place entirely. Sun shines through the trees, which have been thinned considerably without destroying the woodland's natural beauty. A gravel walkway passes by the restabilized foundations of buildings — including barracks, a storehouse, and powder magazine — as well as the fort's Grand Battery, built on a bluff on the Hudson to rain shot down on British ships, and its North Redoubt, where the Americans may have put up their last stand against a bigger and better-trained enemy. Wooden platforms allow visitors an optimal view of each of the remains. Everywhere there are panels that explain the events of that fateful day.

What isn't explained, however — and should be — is the history of how this historic site came to be. It's a remarkable tale of perseverance, dedication, and cooperation against odds that, for a while, seemed nearly as formidable as those faced by the men who built and defended the fort.

"I give lectures about Fort Montgomery, and I always talk about how the fort was built, lost, how nature took over, how it was rediscovered, and then lost again," says archaeologist Edward Lenik, who first became involved with the site in the mid-'60s. That's its history in a nutshell.

Realizing the importance of maintaining control of the Hudson River, which divided New England from the rest of the 13 colonies and was the quickest route to Canada, the Continental Congress in May 1775 authorized the construction of two riverside forts. One was located on Constitution Island, across

from West Point, and the other sat at the southern gate of the Hudson Highlands due north of Popolopen Creek. The latter site was chosen because the river there is very narrow — only 500 yards wide — and cannons had a straight line of fire downriver at approaching ships, whose sailors would have their hands full with the treacherous winds and currents. The fort was to be named in honor of Gen. Richard Montgomery, who was killed leading the unsuccessful attack on Quebec that December.

Work on the 14.4-acre citadel (and a sister fort, Clinton, erected on higher ground across the creek and connected via a pontoon bridge) began in March 1776 and was finished 17 months later. While the riverside battery was formidable, the fort's rear was wide open to attack, despite the construction of three redoubts there. "It would take 2,000 men, standing almost shoulder to shoulder, to effectively defend the fort," explains Col. (Ret.) Jim Johnson, military historian to the Hudson River Valley National Heritage Area and a prime mover in the site's revitalization. When the British came upriver in 1777, there were only 700 men deployed between the twin forts. "You can see what a terrible dilemma that would be," adds Johnson.

Leading a force of 3,100 — British regulars, Hessian mercenaries, and Loyalists — British Gen. Henry Clinton was on a last-ditch mission to support his counterpart, Gen. John Burgoyne, whose army, heading south from Canada, was stalled near Saratoga. Anchoring off Verplanck's Point on October 5, Clinton made a feint on the east side of the river to throw the Americans off guard. The next day, under cover of fog, he landed 2,100 men on the western shore, near Stony Point. They began a rigorous seven-mile march over the Dunderberg, where they encountered minimal resistance, and then split, with 1,200 soldiers heading directly for Fort Clinton and 900 skirting Bear Mountain and crossing the Popolopen to attack Fort Montgomery.

The plan was the brainchild of Beverley Robinson, who prior to siding with the British had been a resident of Garrison, Putnam County, and now commanded a regiment marching on Fort Montgomery known as the Loyal Americans. Many of his soldiers had also called the Valley home before the war.

Around five o'clock, the British arrived outside Fort Montgomery. Waiting for them was the Fifth New York Continental Regiment and members of the Orange and Ulster County militias. The ensuing battle occurred on two fronts — the Grand Battery trading cannonballs with British warships, and fierce, often hand-to-hand combat at the rear. "[T]hey Came on Very Furiously and was Beat back and the Second and third Time," recalled Maj. Abraham Leggett, one of the fort's defenders, years after the battle.

Jack Mead's drawing of the "Twin Forts of the Popolopen" — Clinton, on the left, and Montgomery. Stars denote Fort Montgomery's North Redoubt (at upper right) and Grand Battery.

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Leggett made his stand within the North Redoubt, which was overrun by Robinson's Loyal Americans. "This was an all-New York fight," says Johnson, standing beside the time-worn rampart and stressing an important fact about the fighting there. "You have Loyalist regiments attacking New Yorkers on the American side. This is a *civil war*."

The struggle continued until nightfall, when many of the Americans, including Gen. George Clinton, New York's governor and the fort's commander — and a distant cousin of Henry Clinton — managed to escape. "They did not surrender," says Johnson. "They were pushed out at the point of the bayonet." American casualties at the two forts (Fort Clinton fell at about the same time) were high: some 350 dead, wounded, or captured. The British had 40 killed and 150 wounded; "the men of the fort exacted a high price for the British victory," notes Johnson. All of the buildings were put to the torch by the victors before they returned to Manhattan on October 26, nine days after Burgoyne, his situation hopeless, had surrendered.

For nearly 150 years, the fort's remains were undisturbed, despite some attempts at iron mining on the land around them in the 19th century. The historical importance of the site was finally recognized in 1916, when the Palisades Interstate Park Commission (PIPC), largely with funds donated by John D. Rockefeller Sr., purchased the land to protect it from development. That year, and again in the 1930s, some archaeological work was done, but it wasn't until 1967 that a full-scale dig at the fort was begun. Heading it up was Jack Mead, who was then staff art director at Bear Mountain State Park.

Although Mead had no formal training in archaeology, "his techniques were the best," says Lenik, who worked with him at the fort. "He certainly had the knowledge and the skills that would match any archaeologist of the day." Just as important, he was devoted to the region's history. Every year through 1971, he and his staff began their field work "as soon as the weather broke" in the spring, according to Lenik, and kept at it until the ground froze. Throughout the winter, Mead would make drawings, perform research, and catalogue the more than 140,000 artifacts that he and his crew unearthed — everything from musket balls and rusted bayonets to regimental buttons and, most fascinating, pewter spoons with their owners' initials etched onto them. (One spoon had a small hole drilled into the bowl, one soldier's idea of a practical joke.) "You'll probably never see a massive type of excavation like this ever again, certainly not in New York State," says Lenik proudly.

It was Mead's dream that the fort's buildings would be reconstructed on their original foundations. That didn't come to pass; in fact, nothing happened, even though the site was named to the National Register of Historic Places in 1972. Instead, "nature took over," recalls Lenik. "Trees grew back, brush grew back."

Why was the fort forgotten again? In large part, many feel, because of the battle's outcome.

"It was an American defeat; success has a thousand fathers, but defeat is an orphan," says Dave Palmer, former superintendent of the U.S. Military Academy and author of *The River and The Rock*, the definitive history of the Revolution in the mid-Hudson Valley. "It was excavated...but was promptly covered over to prevent curious diggers from destroying archaeological evidence. Out of sight, out of mind."

"We lost," says Stella Bailey bluntly. "All the money and attention went to where you won."

Bailey was among a group of local residents who refused to let the site go ignored. They banded together in 1997 as the Fort Montgomery Battle Site Association (FMBSA) and began a push to gain recognition for this "Alamo of the East," as Stella's husband, Jim, also a FMBSA founder, calls it. Since then, some 300 people have joined.

All involved in the project admit that the association's efforts were pivotal. "It was a serious group of citizens dedicated to making sure that, one, the site was protected in terms of archaeology, so pot-seekers didn't disturb it; and, two, they worked the community so those people interested in the Revolutionary War and local history knew it was there.... If all their work hadn't been done, we'd be 10 years behind," says Carol Ash, executive director of the PIPC.

"We were the flea in the elephant's ear, to get things going," admits John Wort, the FMBSA's treasurer. Johnson agrees: "They put the project on the state's radar screen."

The former head of the military history program at West Point and now the executive director of the Hudson River Valley Institute at Marist College, Johnson was no stranger to the site when the association contacted him to help in their quest. Shortly before retiring in 1987 after 40 years at Bear Mountain (the last 13 as director of its Trailside Museums), Mead gave Johnson a tour of the fort's remains and presented him with his annotated copy of the booklet *Twin Forts of the Popolopen*, the best account of the Battles of Forts Montgomery and Clinton. That gesture marked a symbolic passing of the torch.

"I know that Jack's dedication and passion for the interpretation of the site have guided my own actions," says Johnson, an authority on the Revolution. "Those of us involved in the project are helping to fulfill Jack Mead's dream." (Mead died in 1992.)

As more and more people, especially influential politicians such as Rep. Sue Kelly, toured the site, often with Johnson as their compelling guide, the dream started to inch closer to reality. Then on June 16, 2000, Governor Pataki came for a look.

What was supposed to be a 15-minute stop turned into a stay of several hours after the governor started learning about the battle and viewing the brush-choked remains. "He was like a kid in a candy store," recounts Ash. (History buff Pataki later admitted that though he lives just upriver from Fort Montgomery, he had never heard of it.) Following the tour, the governor and others, including Johnson, Ash, and Bernadette Castro, commissioner of the state's Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation (OPRHP), retired to a nearby deli and mapped out plans to create the Fort Montgomery State Historic Site. Four months later, on the 223rd anniversary of the battle, Pataki pledged $1 million toward the project. It's what Johnson calls "historical symmetry": "Here you had a governor defending this fort, and now you have a governor ensuring the future of this fort."

"I think historic preservation has seldom been the top priority for many administrations. If it's not a top priority, you're not going to devote the money to it," says Ash, explaining another reason why the fort lay unrecognized for so long. "When [Governor Pataki] realized that this was there, he viewed it as an absolute necessity."

Creating a visitor-friendly site has been a real collaborative effort. PIPC workers, as well as inmates and parolees provided by the state Department of Correctional Services, cleared the land of fallen trees and brush and felled standing trees that were deemed to be rotting internally. (The prisoners and parolees were excited to be restoring a piece of history, says Johnson: "A lot of them really took this on as a mission.") Every effort was made to protect both the land's natural beauty and the fort's remains. "In respect for the trails and the archaeology, we didn't bring in heavy equipment," says Ash. "All of the trees and debris were cut and burned right there."

The OPRHP's Bureau of Historic Sites, located on Peebles Island, north of Albany, was in charge of interpreting the site. Its experts developed the platforms that afford visitors a bird's-eye view of the buildings' hearths and foundations, all of which were painstakingly reset stone by stone. Visitors can walk right into the Grand Battery to get

Youngsters survey the foundation of one of Fort Montgomery's barracks.

a close-up look at the embrasures where the six 32-pound cannons passed through the parapet. At the arrowhead-shaped North Redoubt, it's possible to see the original fire step, which the defenders climbed up on to shoot over the earthen walls.

None of the additions in any way compromises the integrity of the ruins. Even the gravel walkway that connects the points of interest was laid upon fabric, so it could be easily removed. "They're trying to be very careful about the archaeological remains here," explains Johnson about the OPRHP's work. "If, in 200 years, someone comes along and knows a better way to do this, then they can."

What makes the site so important — and such a treat to visit — adds Johnson, is its completeness: "You have almost every ruin available for interpretation. There are not many places where you can do that."

What is also special is that the site is being interpreted *as* a ruin, with no attempt at reconstruction. "I'm tickled pink about that," says Richard Koke, co-author of *Twin Forts of the Popolopen*, who participated in the 1930s excavation of the remains. "A lot of this reconstruction, it's guesswork. If you don't know what the place looked like, just leave it the way it is and enjoy it."

Although a planned visitors' center will not be ready by the site's official opening on October 6, one other key element of the project will be in place: a footbridge spanning Popolopen Creek that will join the site of Fort Clinton, which was located where the Bear Mountain Zoo is today, with Fort Montgomery. "This will allow us to re-establish the twin forts of the Popolopen, to have the two forts connected the way they were," says Johnson.

The New York State Bridge Authority is in charge of the span, on which construction began last month. Suggestions to recreate a pontoon bridge like the 18th-century original were dismissed because of the effect the tides would have on it. The size of the bridge was also an issue. "The parks department was very concerned about a big structure destroying the bucolic setting," says Bill Moreau, the Bridge Authority's chief engineer.

The final result is a 350-foot-long suspension bridge with a twist: "It won't have the tall towers you usually see," explains Moreau. "We're going to take advantage of the rocks." In other words, the cables holding up the bridge will be tied to the cliffs on each side of the creek. The 10-foot-wide span, with steel truss and floor systems and a fiber-reinforced plastic walkway, will sit 25 feet off the water. "It should look pretty interesting," says Moreau. "I expect we'll get more engineers to look at it than historic people."

Members of the FMBSA were almost giddy on a recent walk through the site. Jim Bailey sounded optimistic about the fort's potential to attract visitors. "People are starting to take a look at the losses that it took to get to the victories," he says. Near the ruins of the powder magazine, Garry Lent paused for a moment to take in all of the hard work that has brought about such a mind-boggling transformation. Like the Baileys and Wort, he's a charter member of the FMBSA, and as much as anything, the completion of the project is a testament to the association's commitment and zeal.

"It amazes me what a few people got started," he muses. "Someday, this will be a busy place." ■

A Woman's Place

While the Battle of Fort Montgomery is thought to have been a men-only affair, there was at least one woman nearby who acted heroically, and her great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-granddaughter, Jan Conley, is a charter member of the Fort Montgomery Battle Site Association. The following is a treasured piece of her family's history. "My grandmother told me this story," she recalls. "She enjoyed reminiscing about it."

According to Conley, as darkness settled over the fort and the American cause was lost, her ancestor, David Rose, along with several other members of the Orange and Ulster County militias who had been in the thick of the fight, escaped to his farm about a mile away. There his wife, Hannah, hid the soldiers in an underground cold storage compartment.

Not long afterward, some British soldiers approached the farm and demanded to know where their quarry was hiding. Declaring that "my husband fought for my liberty — and the liberty of my farm," she refused to give him and the others up.

Incensed, the British lifted Hannah onto a horse and strung a noose around her neck. They were preparing to hang her when a superior officer arrived. "Cut the woman down," he ordered. "There's been enough bloodshed today." Her life was spared, and the hidden men eluded capture.

The story, as well as lots more information about the battle and the site, will be featured in *Fort Montgomery: A Short History* (Purple Mountain Press, $6.50), written by Conley and available next month.

— R.S.

On the War Path

Beginning with the September issue, *Hudson Valley* will feature a monthly column by Jim Johnson highlighting events scheduled to commemorate the 225th anniversary of the Revolution.