

The American Revolution – Stony Point, New York

Of the many residents of this area who fought either in General Washington's Continental Army or in the Colonial Militia, at least three from Colebrook served in New York's highlands, and one, Nathaniel Bass died there on September 10, 1776. Perhaps to many readers this is a gray area with no exact location readily recognized as this historic district. What is meant by this description is the mountainous area embracing the Hudson River that is located north of the Tappan Zee Bridge and south of Newburgh with West Point being the center of importance. Thirteen miles south of West Point lies a small promontory jutting out from the west bank of the Hudson River named Stony Point. Prior to the spring of 1779, Stony Point and the point directly opposite on the east bank of the Hudson named Verplanck's, was in the possession of the Continental forces. This was to change in the spring of 1779 when British forces moved northward from their headquarters in New York City and captured both sides of the river at this point with the intention of forcing Gen. Washington to move part of his army away from West Point, thus falling into a trap that would endanger the American forces and possibly enable the British to fulfill their desire to separate New England from the rest of the colonies and to do serious damage to the American army at the same time. Washington saw through the plan and did not fall victim to it. Stony Point remains one of the highlights of the successful military campaigns of the War of Independence. As some of our native sons took an active part in this episode, one of whom we know by name – Lewis Hurd, and as we are currently in the midst of the 225 anniversary of the great War of Independence, now is a good time to retell the exploits that took place that summer 223 years ago.

The storming of Stony Point July 15, 1779 was one of the highlights of the War of Independence. It took place at the mid-point of the war in a year without a pitched battle or memorable campaign. It was the year England realized that most of Europe was aligned philosophically and militarily against her with France having taken the most prominent role, a fact that infuriated the British. The French factor was what led the British political leader, Lord North, to offer in February 1778 all that the Americans were asking for except total independence, if they would renounce the French alliance. The plan was quite obviously an attempt by the British to pacify the Americans, and then fight France.

A three-man commission was dispatched to Philadelphia to present these views, but they were turned away with derision. England therefore had to reassess her policies in this relatively quiet military year of 1778. She had some successes in the southern colonies, but the north was where the power of the colonies lay and things did not go well with their plans. To begin with, one of the most telling of events was the partial depletion of Britain's best troops in the New York area to the British West Indies, now at risk due to the French fleet. Never the less, a new plan for the future was devised in 1779.

In 1776, the first year of extensive military operations, the British determined to make New York [City] their central base, thus severing Washington's lines of communication and fragment his army. In that year they met with greater success than at any other, but near the end of the year the military reversals at Trenton and Monmouth in New Jersey offset the effect of their progress. In 1777 the British capture of Philadelphia became insignificant compared to Burgoyne's surrender of his army at Saratoga. In 1778

came the American alliance with France. In 1779 they attempted their last campaign in the north. The initial hope was to force a general and decisive action upon Washington's army, thus forcing him to seek shelter in the New York highlands, well away from populated areas; second, harass the frontiers and coasts, both north and south and third, restore the province [State] of New York, reestablish the former government while allowing the general population to elect a loyal assembly, thus allowing the old ways to reestablish themselves. It was believed that upon seeing this plan implemented, the rest of the rebellious colonies would be eager to jump on the bandwagon. That was the plan, at least.

Their problem was that they did not understand just what sort of man George Washington was, and the year 1779 was perhaps the year when both the Americans and the rest of the World came to appreciate him for what he was. With all the trials and tribulations of the previous three years behind him, he emerged as a man best described as reserved, conservative and practical. He was not known by words and proclamations, but rather by his patience, vigilance, judgment and energies. He began to be universally observed as a man of strength and quiet greatness who inspired profound confidence.

In the spring of 1779, the Continental troops from the middle and southern states were at winter quarters in Middlebrook New Jersey, Connecticut and New Hampshire troops were in Redding Connecticut, and Massachusetts troops were quartered among the highlands east of the Hudson River. West Point and Peekskill were garrisoned. All of these encampments were so placed that they all were within two or three days march of West Point, considered to be the key to the continent; the side that held it controlled the military situation in the north. It was the reason that Burgoyne had marched south from Canada in 1777, only to be met and defeated at Saratoga, some 120 miles short of his goal.

The initial military maneuver was the British seizure of Kings Ferry between Stony Point and Verplanck's Points on the Hudson, 13 miles south of West Point, which they immediately fortified. When this did not cause Washington to attempt to dislodge them, the British next initiated the notorious raids on southwestern Connecticut where, during a ten-day period, they burned 240 dwellings, 7 churches and many barns, mills, stores, shops and vessels, but even this did not cause Washington to make a military move that would have weakened his defense of West Point. After all, the damage was done and the British troops had withdrawn.

As spring turned to summer, the situation seemed stalemated; the British retained possession of the now fortified Stony Point, and Washington remained firmly in control of the highlands and West point. A certain amount of tension existed both on the British as well as the American side as to what, if anything would happen next. Uninformed colonists could misinterpret Washington's forced inactivity as a weakness; what was needed was an inspirational success such as Trenton or Bennington. Washington watched his opportunities and in a brilliant move that had all the effect of a much larger operation, stormed Stony Point by the American Light Infantry at midnight on July 15.

There were many men in Washington's army whose homes were in this corner of Litchfield County. Every town around here was represented in the campaigns in and around the highlands bracketing the Hudson River. William Wallace Lee's *Catalogue of Barkhamsted Men Who Served in the Various Wars, 1775 – 1865*, by listing as many Barkhamsted men as it was possible to trace, is an excellent indicator as to the level of

involvement attained by these rough, developing colonial towns. Lee's research turned up 165 names, which seems a remarkably high number, although his intention was to show how many residents of the town had served during the War of Independence. Many moved into town after being mustered out of service. Lee's list has many entries stating that so and so was credited to New Hartford or Winchester. Far more rare than compilations of names, however, are diaries or other personal accounts written by the soldiers themselves. One such diary exists that is now in the possession of Mike Hurd of Colebrook whose relative, Lewis Hurd, was an active participant in many, if not most of the military campaigns of the Great War of Independence. Mike has graciously allowed the Colebrook Historical Society to reproduce parts of this document. As Lewis' brother Seth came to Colebrook in 1785 and became the first resident of the Beech Hill upland, this narrative has additional local interest. We will begin with his early enlistment and the skirmishes and campaigns he participated in that led up to his involvement with Stony Point. The military action portrayed is no doubt an indication of the type of situation that confronted most soldiers that were recruited from this region.

Lewis Hurd was born in Roxbury, Connecticut in 1759. He was drafted for 6 months in June 1776 to be part of the force assembled to defend Long Island. This turned out to be an unsuccessful campaign, as they were forced to retreat in the face of far superior British soldiers. He then went home until the following May of 1777, when he enlisted in a Stamford Connecticut regiment. His first tour of duty consisted of some 60 officers and men who started out at 2 PM headed toward East and West Chester, New York, then within enemy lines. Upon arriving at 11 PM, they rested one half hour and then began collecting cattle and horses. The British surprised them however, and after a sharp skirmish, recovered all that had been taken and killed several of the Americans. This took place in Rye, New York, near the waterfront, in July 1777. Lewis' shoes were so bad that he couldn't keep up with his unit, and was almost captured, but managed to steal a horse from a man plowing a field. He was thus able to catch up with his outfit, which by this time had succeeded in stealing more cattle, some of which they took through the woods and swamps to White Plains. No sooner did they arrive there than they were beset upon by the British, and just barely managed to escape by hiding out in the swamps all night. By the time they returned to Stamford, they had not succeeded in capturing any horses or cattle, and had lost 41 men and 2 officers [two thirds of their force].

Hurd then marched to Peekskill under Gen. Putnam. His duty there was to guard stores. From there his outfit tried once more to cross the Sound onto Long Island, but were repulsed by the British. They then returned to Peekskill.

The British marched up the Hudson and captured two promontories across the river from each other, the one on the west being Stony Point, the other Verplanck's. At this point, word came that Gen. Burgoyne had surrendered his army to Gen. Gates with 10,000 men.

They then marched to Pennsylvania in the vicinity of Philadelphia, then on to Valley Forge in December 1777. He states that here the army suffered more than at any one time during the entire war.

In January they received some supplies, but no extra clothing or blankets. He acknowledged the fact that he was very lucky to have been chosen to go to Reamstown,

40 miles west of Valley Forge, in order to guard an ammunition dump for two months rather than to have remained throughout the winter at the main encampment.

Hurd sheds some light dispelling a persistent rumor that the Continental Army was reduced to eating their shoes while at Valley Forge. The reality was that the encampment was close to a tannery, and some of the hides, prior to their being tanned, were apparently consumed. Once tanned and thus converted into leather, the nutritional value would have been negligible.

In May, 60 men and 2 officers made an attempt to round up cattle near the British lines. This sojourn was a carbon copy of the raid attempted in Westchester County – no cattle captured, and a loss of 29 men killed, wounded or captured.

After the defeat of the British at Monmouth, N.J., the American army marched back to the Hudson Valley in July, where they had constant skirmishes until November, when they returned to Connecticut, where they made their winter quarters. Due to a lack of adequate clothing, Hurd had to keep himself wrapped in his blanket under his uniform the entire season.

In July 1779 he was with Gen. Wayne's troops when they attacked and captured the British fort at Stony Point. Knowing that they could not retain possession for long, everything was removed. Gen. Washington, with his staff came down the following day to congratulate the captors. The day after this, several British naval ships sailed up the Hudson and commenced a bombardment of the fort, which it could not withstand. Hurd and 29 other volunteers remained to face the bombardment and burn or destroy whatever they could. In this they were successful, not losing a man. For his heroism in leading this endeavor, he was given a promotion. His new job was to take charge of Gen. Anthony Wayne's luggage.

In January 1781, he took a furlough and visited friends in Connecticut and Vermont, traveling 365 miles in 40 days – all on foot!

As part of the Conn. Light Infantry, under the command of the Marquis De Lafayette, he was wounded in the elbow, but was present at Cornwallis' surrender.

Immediately his army departed for the Hudson Valley where he remained until receiving his honorable discharge on September 5, 1782.

Lewis Hurd was a modest man. Nowhere in his journal does he say that he was the leader of those 29 men who faced the British naval vessels, but we know that Gen. Wayne, as an incentive, offered \$500 and immediate promotion for the first man entering the enemy's works, lesser sums to the next four, and all who distinguished themselves should be favorably reviewed by Gen. Washington. The fact that he received a battlefield promotion speaks the words that modesty prevented him to write down.

And so Washington's goals were attained – the colonists received the military victory it needed for a moral booster and the Americans retained West Point, the key to the northern colonies.

Our ancestors were fashioned from really tough fabric.