

## DRAFT: THE IMPORTANT, BUT GENERALLY UNKNOWN, "BRIDGE THAT SAVED AMERICA"

The Hackensack River played a significant role in the success of Washington's Army during the Revolutionary War, one which is barely known even in the local area.

Several weeks after the signing and public proclamation of the Declaration of Independence, George Washington and his Army began the fight to turn the words into a true fact. His largely-inexperienced 'citizen soldiers' fought their first battle against seasoned British and Hessian troops in the Battle Of Long Island (also known as the Battle of Brooklyn Heights) in August. They were looking at a defeat and a quick ending to the revolt, but under the cover of darkness, escaped across the East River to Manhattan. They took up positions on Harlem (Morningside) Heights, where the main campus of Columbia University was built. In late September-early October, the British-Hessian troops again attacked. After a few days, Washington retreated northward to White Plains.

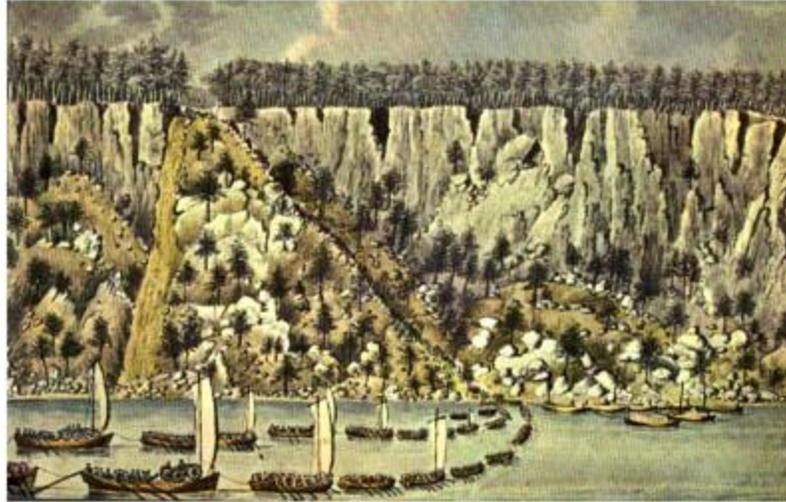
The term "plains" usually brings to mind wide, flat areas, but this area consists of many hills surrounded at that time by low-lying marshes. These were often covered with fog, so some clever 17<sup>th</sup> Century Colonial 'real estate promoter' came up with the name to trick people into coming to settle in the New World. A century later, Washington recognized the strategic value of putting his troops on the hilltops, setting up cannons to guard the few roads through the marshes by which the British could attack, and waited. The British General Howe marched 75,000 soldiers northward from New York with the plan to surround Washington and make him surrender. But over ten days in late October-early November, the marshes and cannons prevented his plan from succeeding. With the approach of winter, Howe returned to New York to wait for better fighting conditions in the spring.

Washington took advantage of this to get his troops across the Hudson River to New Jersey. He set up forts on either side of the river, one (Fort Washington) in northern Manhattan and the other (Fort Lee) on top of the Palisades cliffs. What follows comes from a history of the Steuben House published by the Bergen County Historical Society

(<http://www.bergencountyhistory.org/Pages/steubenhsehistory.html#anchor483832> ).

## **NEW BRIDGE IN THE REVOLUTION**

In the early morning hours of November 20, 1776, Lieutenant General Charles Earl Cornwallis led a British and Hessian army of about 2,500 soldiers across the Hudson River to New Dock (Lower Closter Landing) for an attack against Fort Lee, then garrisoned by about 936 soldiers. The hasty withdrawal of the American garrison across the Hackensack River at New Bridge preserved them from entrapment on the narrow peninsula between the Hudson and Hackensack Rivers.



According to tradition, Thomas Paine composed the first tract of *The American Crisis* - a series of essays intended to rally American resolve during the darkest hours of the war - at Newark, using a drumhead for a desk and a campfire for illumination. Published on December 19, 1776, only six days before Washington's victory at Trenton reversed the declining fortunes of the Continental cause, Paine stirred hopes with his immortal refrain:

These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it now deserves the love, and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet, we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly: it is dearness only that gives everything its value. Heaven knows how to put a proper price upon its goods; and it would be strange indeed if so celestial an article as freedom should not be highly rated. Britain, with an army to enforce her tyranny, has declared that she has a right (not only to tax) but "to bind us in all cases whatsoever," and if being bound in that manner is not slavery, then is there not such a thing as slavery upon earth. Even the expression is impious; for so unlimited a power can belong only to God.

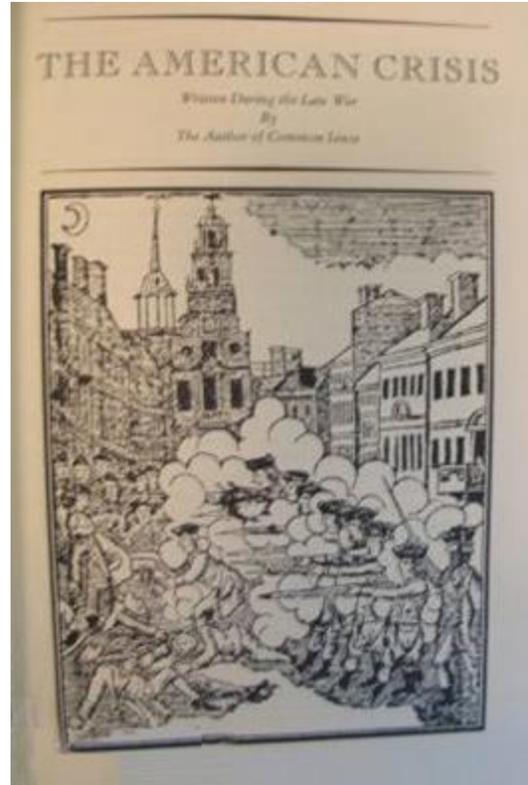
Whether the independence of the continent was declared too soon, or delayed too long, I will not now enter into as an argument; my own simple opinion is that had it been eight months earlier, it would have been much better. We did not make a proper use of last winter, neither could we, while we were in a dependent state. However, the fault, if it were one, was all our own; we have none to blame but ourselves. But no great deal is lost yet. All that Howe has been doing for this month past is rather a ravage than a conquest, which the spirit of the Jerseys, a year ago, would have quickly repulsed, and which time and a little resolution will soon recover.

...As I was with the troops at Fort Lee and marched with them to the edge of Pennsylvania, I am well acquainted with many circumstances which those who live at a distance know but little or nothing of.

Our situation there was exceedingly cramped, the place being a narrow neck of land between the North River and the Hackensack. Our force was inconsiderable, being not one fourth so great as Howe could bring against us. We had no army at hand to have relieved the garrison, had we shut ourselves up and stood on our defense. Our ammunition, light artillery and the best part of our stores had been removed, on the apprehension that Howe would endeavor to penetrate the Jerseys, in which case Fort Lee could be of no use to us; for it must occur to every thinking man, whether in the army or not, that these kind of field forts are only for temporary purposes, and last in use not longer than the enemy directs his force against the particular object which such forts are raised to defend.

Such was our situation and condition at Fort Lee on the morning of the 20th of November, when an officer arrived with information that the enemy with 200 boats had landed about seven miles above. Major General Green, who commanded the garrison, immediately ordered them under arms, and sent express to General Washington at the town of Hackensack, distant by way of the ferry six miles.

**Our first object was to secure the bridge over the Hackensack, which laid up the river between the enemy and us, about six miles from us, and three from them. General Washington arrived in about three quarters of an hour, and marched at the head of the troops towards the bridge, which place I expected we should have a brush for; however, they did not choose to dispute it with us, and the greatest part of our troops went over the bridge, the rest over the ferry, except some which passed at a mill on a small creek, between the bridge and the ferry, and made their way through some marshy grounds up to the town of Hackensack, and there passed the river.** We brought off as much baggage as the wagons could contain, the rest was lost. The simple object was to bring off the garrison and march them on till they could be strengthened by the Jersey and Pennsylvania militia, so as to be enabled to make a stand. We staid four



Painting of Retreat by B.Spencer Newman

days at Newark, collected our outposts with some of the Jersey militia, and marched out twice to meet the enemy, on being informed that they were advancing, though our numbers were greatly inferior to theirs.

The British failure to capture the American garrison at Fort Lee, and perhaps defeat the American rebellion, was a consequence of self-confident British officers not realizing, despite reminders from local Loyalists, that "New Bridge was the key to the peninsula between the Hackensack and the Hudson."

According to Washington's own description, the British intended "to form a line across from the place of their landing to Hackensack [New] Bridge and thereby hem in the whole garrison between the North and Hackensack Rivers. However, we were lucky enough to gain the Bridge before them, by which means we saved all of our men, but were obliged to leave some hundred barrels of flour, most of our cannon and a considerable parcel of tents and baggage." On November 21, 1776, Lord Cornwallis finally ordered "the 2nd Battalion of Light Infantry, the 2nd Battalion of Grenadiers, with one company of Chasseurs, to be in readiness to march at nine this morning under the command of Major General Vaughan...to secure the New Bridge on the Hackensack River from being destroyed by the enemy in their precipitate retreat." Although the American rear guard used the stone houses on opposite sides of the bridge as forts, the British forced these posts and captured the strategic bridge intact. As part of a reinforcement of the British army then sweeping across New Jersey toward the Delaware River, the 4th Brigade camped at New Bridge on November 25, 1776.

Because of its strategic location astride New Bridge, the Steuben House is steeped in Revolutionary War legends and lore. Set in a no-man's land between two opposing armies, the Steuben House served as a fort, military headquarters, intelligence-gathering station, rendezvous, and site of several skirmishes and major cantonments throughout the long war. In March 1780, Hackensack tavernkeeper Archibald Campbell escaped from British capture by hiding in the root cellar after his guards were distracted by attacking militiamen. In fact, the first recorded visit by a tourist to the Steuben House occurred in the summer of 1888, when Archibald Campbell's granddaughter drove up in her carriage and asked to be shown the vaulted root-cellar where her grandfather had hidden to escape his British captors in 1780. According to the old legend of Mr. Campbell's capture and escape, published in 1844: "This gentleman, who had been for several weeks confined to his bed with rheumatism, they [i.e., British soldiers] forced into the street and compelled to follow them. Often in their rear, they threatened to shoot him if he did not hasten his pace. In the subsequent confusion he escaped and hid in the cellar of a house opposite the New Bridge. He lived until 1798, and never experienced a return of the rheumatism."

British troops, hoping to trap Bergen militiamen asleep in the house, mistakenly killed eight of their own men and wounded several more on May 30, 1780. General George Washington stayed here in September 1780 while his army encamped along Kinderkamack Road.

Confiscated from Loyalist Jan Zabriskie in 1781, the State of New Jersey presented use of the dwelling, gristmill and about 40 acres to Major-General Baron von Steuben, Inspector-General of the Continental Army, on December 23, 1783. According to the wishes of the Legislature, he was to "hold, occupy and enjoy the said estate *in person, and not by tenant.*" Accordingly, General Philemon Dickinson, of the New Jersey Militia, informed the Baron of this gift and related his knowledge of the estate based upon recent inquiries: "there are on the premises an exceeding good House, an excellent barn, together with many useful outbuildings, all of which I am told, want some repairs...there is...a Grist-mill; a good Orchard, some meadow Ground, & plenty of Wood. The distance from N York by land 15 miles, but you may keep a boat & go from your own door to N York by water - Oysters, Fish & wild fowl in abundance - Possession will be given to you in the Spring, when you will take a view of the premises."