



Lost Camps of the Hudson Highlands



By WILLIAM S. THOMAS, M. D.

HERE is a branch of antiquarian field research which, instead of concerning itself with the unearthing in distant lands of mummies or Etruscan vases, has to do with the discovery in American Revolutionary camp sites, just beyond our dooryards, of objects that prove military occupation and give old stories new meaning. A group of members of the New York Historical Society are bringing to light relics of the daily life of our Revolutionary soldiers from beneath the dead leaves of the woods which clothe the slopes of the Hudson Highlands.

Fifteen miles of wildness and beauty lie on either side of the river where it flows through a narrow defile in the rugged mountains of this enchanted region, from Dunderberg and Anthony's Nose, some fifty miles to the sea. The stream so closely identified with our country's history affords a highway easy of passage for a great part of the distance between Canada and the main Atlantic seaport of the United States. Had the British gained and kept possession of this river during the Revolution, they would have rent the Colonies asunder and have made it impossible for them to attain independence.

Realizing the importance of this waterway, General Washington devoted the greatest energy to its defense. In the fastnesses of the Highlands a citadel was laboriously erected at West Point. Here, where the river makes a sharp double bend and is at its narrowest point in many miles, was erected a large and important fort, with numerous auxiliary redoubts perched upon the hills on both sides of the river. An enthusiastic traveler who recently passed through these mountains said, "These hills were built by the Creator for the purpose of saving America for the Colonies."

The disastrous ascent of the river by the British in the Fall of 1777, when they destroyed the scantily manned forts here and burned the City of Kingston, demonstrated to the Colonists the necessity of securing the passage of this highway at all hazards. During the Winters and at other times between military campaigns elsewhere this mountainous district may be said to have almost swarmed with troops.

The locality was in fact more populous in Revolutionary times than it is today. Busy camps, military villages with their rows upon rows of log huts lay in sheltered valleys or upon sloping hillsides. Men upon horseback dashed along the roads bearing dispatches; supply wagons, drawn usually by oxen, lumbered back and forth, while soldiers afoot or mounted officers passed upon their various errands. Detachments of troops—fatigue parties, in military parance—marched from camp to work upon some redoubt or back to

their sentry quarters for the night's rest.

The Highlands east of the river are now in Putnam County, named for the Revolutionary General; but so late as the year 1812 Dutchess County extended south as far as the border of Westchester County. It should be remembered that the many fortifications, great and small, were not the dwelling places of the soldiers. As a rule, the forts were guarded by small detachments, and only in case of alarm were they to be manned by regiments or brigades held in readiness for attack. The fatigue parties worked upon them at building and repairing, but left them at close of day to return to their home camps in the neighborhood. In the Fall of 1779 there were not less than 1,000 men working daily upon the forts about West Point itself.

Tumbledown remains of these ancient fortifications are visible today among the lonely hills of the Highlands. The wanderer, standing upon their ruins, may reflect that these forts served their purpose, although never actually called upon to withstand hostile attack. The ruins of unused forts and the lost and almost forgotten camps of the Hudson Highlands are the memorials to the toilers and strugglers for their own

ters in the "hated Highlands," far from home and from the accustomed haunts of man. From a hut in the camp of the Connecticut Continental Line troops Lieut. Col. Ebenezer Huntington wrote to the home folks:

We are entirely sequestered from the world or the pleasures thereof & at present without any news. I have ever had an idea of poverty but never experienced it more. I am in hopes something will turn up so as to oblige us to quit this Cursed Vale soon—otherwise we shall

clear the approach against enemy attacks. As the years of the war passed, wood became more and more scarce, so that camps were shifted at times in quest of sites where fuel would be at hand.

Particular features of the terrain which determined the selection of hutting grounds were, first, nearness to water, second, the presence of wood for fuel and, third, shelter from the cold winds of winter. A

"Gorge of the Mountains," "Hampshire Huts" and "New Boston."

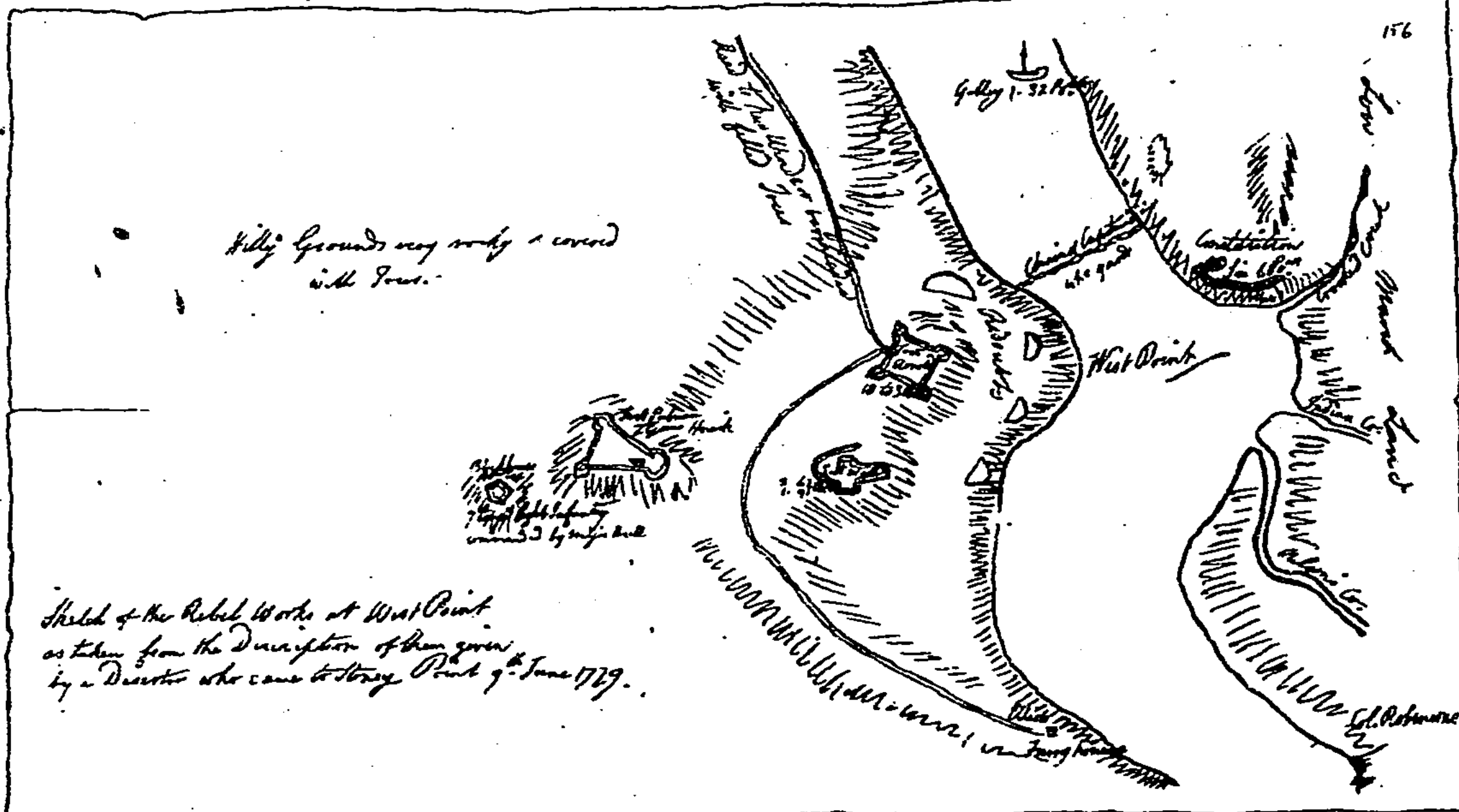
They may be stumbled upon by the antiquarian who recognizes in scattered stone heaps the remains of what were once hut chimneys, but in order to determine locations by their Revolutionary names, field search must be supplemented by evidence in the documents of former times. Ancient maps and almost as ancient inhabitants of Phillipstown point out what has been long called "The Hempstead Huts," a campsite in a valley five miles or so east of West Point. As a matter of fact this term is a corruption of "Hampshire Huts," for it has been proved that the dwellings of the New Hampshire regiments were here. Another recently identified site is at a point where maps of a half century ago show what is called an "old camp oven," now known to be at the former location of "Camp Robinson's Farm," where the Connecticut troops lived before they occupied their more commodious huts, above referred to, a few miles further to the north. The name "New Boston" suggests to the casual eye a place probably named after the capital of the old Bay State. No doubt it was indirectly so, but there is reason to believe that New Hampshire troops built and occupied this camp and that it took its name from a village and county seat in their own State which bore and still bears the name "New Boston."

Clues to the situation of Connecticut Village found in documents inclined members of the Field Exploration Committee to place it tentatively within a comparatively small area, but the obliterating effects of a century and a third have left no sign or trace of it apparent to mere inspection by the seeker among the hills and pasture lots of rocky Putnam County. Perusal of manuscripts yellowed by age; comparison of old maps with new; consultation on ancient surveys—all these have occupied the time of those interested and have suggested promising localities to visit in exploring the field.

It is one thing to locate a campsite upon the map, but quite another matter to go to the spot indicated and find pay dirt which, in the shaken sieve, will yield relics giving proof of former military occupation. Nevertheless, were needles to be found solely in haystacks, there would doubtless be perfected some method of locating them. Revolutionary campsites yield to the experienced seeker relics which prove not only military occupation, but also the identity of the corps formerly occupying them. Gun-flints, leaden musket balls, rusty bayonets and other articles of the ancient soldiers' equipment tell part of the story, but the identification of the regiments depends upon the custom existing in the American and British Armies at the Revolutionary period of equipping the soldiers' uniforms with me-



The North River Running in a Deep Channel Formed by the Mountains Through Which, in Former Times, It Had Forced Its Passage.



West Point and Vicinity From a Manuscript in the Library of Congress.

and for our national existence and liberty.

Ye were the Grecian Cities then,
The Romes of modern birth,
Where the New England husbandmen
Have shown a Roman worth.

So Thoreau has it. In and about these hut camps the men worked and drilled; here they ate and drank and chatted; suffered with cold and hunger and often with homesickness through the hard Win-

be afflicted with greater punishments than an enlightened people ought to suffer. Adieu, adieu!

The sites of the military towns once thronged by Continental soldiers are well-nigh lost. The mountains which today are mostly bare and rocky Revolutionary times. The axe took toll from the forest growth until the hills and valleys were stripped for miles about in order to provide fuel or for the erection of buildings or to

wooded valley, with a brook running through it, was the usual location of a camp.

In the later years of the Revolution the Hudson Highlands contained many of these clusters of soldiers' log huts, varying in importance from a small group of buildings sufficient to house a company or two, to the large "Connecticut Village," with its lodging accommodations for two thousand men, its assembly room, its slaughter house, bake ovens, &c. Yet today the places thereof know them no more. Until recently not a living person could point out the location of this camp, once a populous town with all its activities and as sociations. Here the Connecticut Division of the Continental Army was encamped through successive winters, and here dwelt the men and officers, regulars and militia, of various other New England brigades.

Many Revolutionary shrines are pointed out with exactness in the pages of local histories, and book have been published devoted to the history of Putnam County, yet the precise location of the camps of the American Army in the Highlands is largely shrouded in mystery. Hidden away among the rocky hills in wild valleys of some 300 square miles of territory are the ancient sites of such quaintly named camps as "The Soldiers' Fortune,"



A Road, Now Abandoned, Over Which in Revolutionary Times Many a Soldier Trudged and Wagon Rumbled.

Lost Camps of the Hudson Highlands

(Continued from Page 26)

tallic buttons bearing their respective regimental numbers, names or insignia. Pewter was the metal commonly employed in the case of enlisted men, while the officers' buttons were of silver or of gilded metal.

Such buttons as unearthed today, though they have remained in the earth for a hundred and forty years, are often found to be fairly well preserved. It is somewhat strange that for a long time but little has been known concerning the types and appearance of the military buttons of the American Revolution except for that information acquired in the field during the last few years. More than any other excavated objects can buttons tell a definite story of historic facts.

Evidence acquired after considerable study pointed to the probable location of Connecticut Village in a certain lonely valley through which a pleasant brook runs down sloping sunny fields girt round by wooded hills on its way to the river, follow-

ing nearly the course of a road now abandoned, over which in Revolutionary times many a soldier trudged and wagon rumbled. Down this road with his retinue passed a distinguished French officer, the Marquis de Chastellux, one day late in the Autumn of 1780 on his first visit to headquarters where General Heath was then in command. This observant and appreciative traveler wrote a spirited description of the journey from Fishkill and of what he saw as he approached the river:

I continued my journey in the woods, in a road hemmed in on both sides by very steep hills, which seemed admirably adapted for the dwelling of bears, and where in fact they often make their appearance in Winter. We availed ourselves at length of a less difficult part of these mountains to turn to the westward and approach the river, but which is still invisible. Descending them slowly, at the turning of the road my eyes were struck with the most magnificent picture I had ever beheld. It was a view of the North River, running in a deep channel formed by the mountains, through

which in former ages it had forced its passage. The fort of West Point, and the formidable batteries which defend it, fix the attention on the western bank, but on lifting your eyes you behold on every side lofty summits, thick set with redoubts and batteries.

I leaped off my horse and viewed them a long time with my spy-glass, the only method of acquiring a knowledge of the whole of the fortifications with which this important post is surrounded. Two lofty heights, on each of which a large redoubt is constructed, protect the eastern bank. These two works have no other name than the northern and southern redoubts; but from the fort of West Point, properly so called, which is on the edge of the river, to the very top of the mountain at the foot of which it stands are six different forts, all in the form of an amphitheatre and protecting each other. They compelled me to leave this place, where I should willingly have spent the whole day.

A short distance down this road from the point where the delighted Marquis first viewed the scene above described have been recently found evidences of the former existence of a camp which appears to have been

Connecticut Village. In the woods near by have been traced scattered heaps of stones, the fallen ruins of what were once hut chimneys. Here occasional depressions in the surface of the ground mark what appear to have been the sites of formerly existing buildings and here, buried in the loam of the wooded hillside, have been found oyster shells, clam shells, beef bones, potsherds, pieces of delicately marked table china, broken glass, clay pipes, shreds of metal and other signs of human occupation. Many of these relics are of a type clearly betokening eighteenth century usage.

To validate the theory of the military character of the occupation, the locality has also yielded metallic military buttons of the Revolutionary type, some of them bearing numbers and insignia of the Connecticut Line troops. Gunflints, grapeshot and part of a Revolutionary bayonet have also been unearthed here. More such relics will probably be found at this place and elsewhere in the Highlands as the explorations go on.

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