

## **FORT MONTGOMERY: FORTIFICATION ON THE HUDSON AND THREATENED HISTORIC SITE**

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**ABSTRACT:** *In its short history, both as a Revolutionary War fortification and a state historic site to commemorate that role, Fort Montgomery has been a contested place. Built to protect the American's first efforts to chain the Hudson River during the War for Independence, Fort Montgomery was attacked, captured, and destroyed by the British within two years of its construction. In 2002, after years of effort by historical groups, Fort Montgomery opened to the public as a state historic site to celebrate the history and cultural heritage of the Hudson Valley region. Yet once again, this site has become a contested place as budget shortfalls within New York State threaten its future. While most works and discussions on Fort Montgomery focus on the historical events at this particular place in 1777, this paper examines Fort Montgomery from a geographical perspective, exploring the locational decisions and geographic considerations which led the Americans to initially select this particular place to defend the Hudson as well as the decisions to potentially close this historic site. Furthermore, this perspective illustrates that these historic sites are not only valuable places for learning about events in the past, but also about the historical and current geography of region.*

**Keywords:** *Fort Montgomery, Hudson River, Revolutionary War, Historic sites*

### **INTRODUCTION**

West Point, the site of this year's Middle States' Division annual meeting, has played an important role in American history. Although it is most well-known today as the site of the United States Military Academy, this location was originally selected, because of its geography, as the site from which to defend and retain control of the vital Hudson River during the Revolutionary War and whose fortifications protected the Great Chain strung across the river to block British use of this vital waterway. Aside from Benedict Arnold's attempt to sell the fort's plans to the British, West Point was never contested or threatened during the Revolution and over the past two centuries West Point's role in the struggle for independence has been preserved, and in many places rebuilt, to educate Cadets and the general public about the strategic importance of this point on the west bank of the Hudson River.

Fort Montgomery, five miles south of West Point, provides an interesting contrast in the preservation and commemoration of historic sites. Although the colonists first efforts to fortify the Hudson were in the vicinity of West Point at today's Constitution Island, these efforts initially faltered and Colonial leadership shifted their defensive efforts to Fort Montgomery at Popolop's Point (at the junction of the Hudson and Popolopen Creek) in early 1776. It was here that the first chain was emplaced across the river but unlike West Point, Fort Montgomery and adjacent Fort Clinton, were attacked, captured, and destroyed by the British in 1777. Although the battle is considered a tactical defeat because of its loss during the Revolution, the battle arguably played a tremendous role in the course of the Revolution and after years of petitioning was opened as a State Historic Site in 2002.

Yet once again, Fort Montgomery has emerged as a contested place as budget shortfalls threaten the future of this historic site. This paper examines Fort Montgomery from a geographical perspective, exploring the locational decisions and geographic considerations which led the Americans to initially select this particular place to defend the Hudson as well as the decisions to potentially close this historic site. Furthermore, this perspective illustrates that these historic sites are not only valuable places for learning about events in the past, but also about the historical and current geography of the region.

### **THE HUDSON RIVER AND THE HIGHLANDS**

While Palmer (1975) argued that sparseness of the population was the most significant geographical factor in the course of the war, the Hudson River was considered the most strategically significant terrain feature and played a key role in the strategies of both the British and the Americans. Alternatively referred to at the time as 'the Hudson River,' 'Hudson's River,' or 'the North River,' depending on the source, the geo-strategic significance of

this vital waterway is articulated in many of the letters, diaries, and correspondence of both the British and Americans who served in various roles during the course of the war. John Adams succinctly emphasized this geopolitical importance in a letter to General Washington in January 1776, in which he wrote that the river “is the nexus of the Northern and Southern Colonies...a kind of key to the whole continent; as it is a passage to Canada, to the Great Lakes, and to all the Indian Nations, no effort to secure it ought to be omitted.” (Palmer, 1975: 121) The Hudson was therefore viewed as both a vital transportation route, allowing access to the interior of the continent as well as a boundary between the northern and southern colonies, and control of the river provided significant strategic advantages to both sides (Freeman, 1995; Diamant, 1994).

Although the width and depth of the river varies considerably along its course, in the Highlands the river is at its narrowest between New York and Albany (about 1,500 feet in several places) with three significant bends within the river channel and the steep slopes along the banks provide commanding heights (elevations over 1,000 feet) from which artillery emplacements and fortifications could effectively block the British Navy’s use of this route (Diamant, 1994). The Highlands, a 15 mile wide belt of granite and gneiss mountains formed through millions of years of geomorphic processes (LaMoe and Mills, 1988; Palka, 2004; Galgano, 2004) therefore serves as a natural choke point along this waterway (see Figure 1). In addition to constricting the width of the river, this geography offered additional advantages during the age of sail. As an estuary, the Hudson River is tidal as far north as Albany and Troy and within the Highlands the winds are often strong but unpredictable (Galgano, 2004). In considering these geographic factors, the Highlands were viewed as decisive terrain from which to control the river and in May, 1775 Congress decreed, “that a post be taken in the Highlands on each side of Hudson’s river, and Batteries erected in such a manner as will most effectively prevent any Vessels passing, that may be sent to harass the Inhabitants on the borders of said river.” (Diamant, 1994: 3) But while there was relatively unanimous consensus that the Highlands Region was critical for defense of the Hudson, selecting the location upon which to construct the needed fortifications was not.

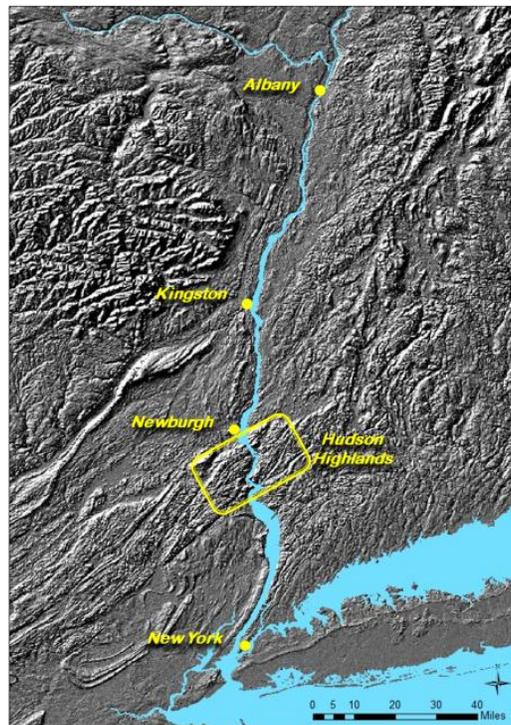


Figure 1. The Hudson Highlands, depicting how the topography of the region forms a natural choke point along the lower course of the Hudson River. Map created from SRTM shaded relief data from ESRI 2008 in ArcGIS 9.3.

Upon receiving this directive, the New York Provincial Congress dispatched Colonel James Clinton and Major Christopher Tappan, both residents of the region, to survey the Highlands and recommend a suitable location. Although both Martelaer’s Rock and Pupolop’s Point opposite Anthony’s Nose were both considered suitable locations upon which to construct fortifications on the river, the inherent geographic advantages of Martelaer’s Rock

(present day Constitution Island) and West Point were evident to Clinton and Tappan after sailing north through the Highlands and experiencing the winds, tides, and currents at this S-shaped bend in the river (Palmer, 1991). At this location, the “river was narrow, ebb tides was at its strongest, wind was unpredictable and treacherous, and where adjacent terrain had a commanding view of the river and could be easily fortified” and became the initial focus of American efforts to fortify the Highlands (Palka, 2004: 96; Miller, Lockey, and Visconti, 1988).

Construction of Fort Constitution subsequently began on Martelaer’s Rock in the summer of 1775. However, these efforts were fraught with controversy as Bernard Romans, the lead engineer, clashed with the Commissioners of Fortifications, dispatched by New York’s Congress to oversee the efforts to fortify the Hudson. Romans developed plans for an elaborate fort on the site of Constitution Island while failing to fortify the ‘West Point,’ which higher in elevation offered commanding views of Fort Constitution, which unoccupied, left Fort Constitution exposed to a British attack from the western side of the river. Coupled with excessive construction costs and the need to quickly fortify the Hudson, these shortcomings led to disagreements between Romans and both the Continental and New York Provincial Congresses, which questioned not only Romans’ capabilities as an engineer but whether the site was the most appropriate (Carr and Koke, 1937; Diamant, 1994; Palmer, 1991). On 5 January 1776, the Continental Congress put forth a resolution that “no further Fortifications be erected on Martelaer’s Rock on Hudson’s River, and that a point of land at Puplopen’s Kill, on the said river, ought without delay to be effectively erected.” (Diamant 1994: 15) Fort Constitution was not abandoned entirely, but the defensive efforts of the Americans shifted five miles south to what would be Fort Montgomery.

## **FORT MONTGOMERY**

Congress made this decision following the recommendations of yet another committee dispatched by New York’s Provincial Congress to assess Romans’ efforts on Martelaer’s Rock. This committee recommended the site upon which Fort Montgomery was constructed, reporting in December 1775, “We are clearly of the opinion that this is by far the most advantageous situation in the Highlands for a fortification...” (Carr and Koke, 1937: 11) This report echoed Romans’ own assessment in October 1775 of the significance of this location, in which he reported, “at Pooploop’s kill, opposite Anthony’s Nose, it is a very important pass; the river narrows, commanded a great ways up and down, full of counter currents, and subject to almost constant winds; nor is there any anchorage at all, except close under the works to be erected.” (Carr and Koke, 1937: 10) Additionally, the Committee’s report found the site was effectively protected by marshes and rugged surrounding mountains and would allow an artillery battery to command the river both up and down stream for a distance of up to three miles (See Figure 2).

This site, referred to as Puplope’s Point at the time, was situated on the northern bank of what is today Popolopen Creek, at its junction with the Hudson River. This rocky point, situated 100 feet above the level of the river, afforded the Americans not only a commanding position on the river, but the surrounding landscape was viewed to provide protection from landward attack. With a pressing need to complete construction quickly, Congress dictated, “That the Battery at Pooplopen’s kill be made of earth and fascines, and to mount a number of Guns not to exceed forty” in order to avoid the excessive costs and construction delays that plagued Romans’ efforts on Fort Constitution (Diamant, 1994: 89). In April 1776, while not completed, the fort was christened Fort Montgomery, in honor of Brigadier General Richard Montgomery, who was killed the previous December leading the American attack to capture Quebec (Palmer, 1991).

Yet the shift from Fort Constitution to Fort Montgomery proceeded slowly and following a subsequent report to Congress on the situation in the Highlands by Charles Carroll in April 1776, General Washington dispatched yet another committee, led by Brigadier General Lord Stirling to assess construction and recommend changes to improve the defensive efforts (Diamant, 1994). Stirling’s opinion reinforced Congress’s decision to fortify the site of Fort Montgomery, reporting, “This appears to me the most proper Place I have seen on the River to be made the Grand Post, capable of resisting every kind of attack.” (Diamant, 1994: 19)

This part of the highlands was largely uninhabited during this period, as the landscape limited agricultural development (Sanders, 1969), and Ward (1952: 515) concluded that, “The approaches on the land side were through narrow, steep, and rugged defiles extremely difficult to penetrate and very easy to defend.” Sanders (1969: 4) likewise found, “the rugged mountainous region, the thickly wooded area and the rocky crags of the countryside, appeared so formidable that the Americans underestimated the ability of the enemy, unfamiliar with the area, to find its way through the forest to attack the forts from the west, or land side.” Yet, as will be seen, these assumptions led to the fall of both Fort Montgomery and the adjacent Fort Clinton.

In July 1776, George Clinton was elected to the New York Provincial Congress and subsequently appointed a brigadier general in the militia of New York, assigned to command the fortifications in the Highlands. Upon establishing his headquarters at Fort Montgomery, he immediately saw the need to fortify the southern bank of

Popolopen Creek, which sat higher than Fort Montgomery and wrote, “We must for the safety of our Works keep a Body of Men there ... while it is fortified. A less Number will then hold the Ground, annoy the enemy’s shipping, and render us safe from that quarter. Indeed it is the spot where our first works should, in my poor judgment, have been.” (Diamant, 1994: 91) Upon approval of General Washington, construction on this adjacent, smaller, fort began and was subsequently named Fort Clinton. Unlike Fort Montgomery, naming this bastion ‘Clinton’ followed a traditional practice of naming forts after the officer charged with their construction (Storozynski, 2009) yet the historical record is unclear whether the fort was named after George Clinton, commanding the overall defenses, his brother James who was dispatched as his second in command and in direct command of the fort, or both brothers (Carr and Koke, 1937; Palmer, 1991; Diamant, 1994).



Figure 2. Forts Montgomery and Clinton, and the British routes of attack, October 1777. The image is a photo of the terrain model at Fort Putnam, West Point, of the Hudson Valley during the Revolution. The routes of the British forces and labels of terrain features were added by the author, drawing from published accounts of the battle. Today, the Bear Mountain Bridge spans the Hudson from the site of Fort Clinton to the east side at the base of Anthony’s Nose.

### **Chaining the Hudson**

Although the subsequent fortifications at West Point have earned a place in American history as the site of the Great Chain which blocked the Hudson and secured the Colonies, the first chain emplaced to achieve this end was stretched from Fort Montgomery to Anthony’s Nose. It appears that the first suggestion to emplace an obstruction across the river was proposed by James Clinton, who recommended at the time of his survey of the Highlands, “By means of four or five Booms chained together on one Side of the River, ready to be drawn across, the Passage can be closed up to prevent any Vessel from passing or repassing.” (Diamant, 1994: 86) Provisioned by Congress to enact this suggestion, ironworkers within the Hudson Valley began to forge the one and a half to two foot links needed for such a chain. In early November, 1776, the chain and the log booms to support it were ready and positioned at Fort Montgomery. Upon anchoring the ends of this boom at Fort Montgomery and Anthony’s Nose on the east bank of the river, the pressure from the receding tidal currents caused a connector to fail and the chain broke, not only once, but twice (Diamant, 1994). During the ensuing winter, the chain was repaired and once

again emplaced in late March or early April 1777. This time, the chain was anchored between these same two points at a “sharper angle” which “not only better fought the tidal currents, but could also deflect enemy vessels directly towards the fort’s cannon.” (Diamant, 1994: 110)

This time the chain held, but was ultimately unsuccessful in blocking the river as the British captured the forts, dismantled the chain, and sailed as far north as Kingston. But the experience arguably taught the Americans a number of valuable lessons in perfecting the chain as well as the methods of emplacing it. The chain positioned between West Point and Constitution Island (Martelaer’s Rock), though, was never tested or threatened.

### **The Battle of Fort Montgomery**

The Battle of Fort Montgomery is interesting in that the three senior most officers leading the forces of both the British and Americans were named Clinton, and related. General Sir Henry Clinton commanded the British forces which attacked the forts commanded by his cousins, General George Clinton and his older brother James (Palmer, 1991). Although the historical record shows the cousins met and worked briefly together when Henry’s father served as Royal Governor of New York before the war (Palmer, 1991), there is little to no mention of the relationship between these relatives after the war. All three, though, continued to serve their respective countries, with Henry serving as a member of Parliament, while James was a delegate from New York and served at the convention which approved the U.S. Constitution, while George served as Governor of New York, and also as Vice President of the United States, under Thomas Jefferson and James Madison.

Sir Henry Clinton, in command of three thousand British troops, proceeded north on the river from New York City and landed at Verplanck’s Point on 5 October 1777. After conducting a feint to draw the Americans into believing the British intended to attack Peekskill, Sir Henry crossed to the east side of the river at Stoney Point and began an overland movement around Dunderberg Mountain to attack Forts Montgomery and Clinton from the landward side (see Figure 2). This offensive was intended to complement General Burgoyne’s drive south along the Hudson from Canada, catching and destroying General Horatio Gates’ forces between them and thereby securing British control over the river.

Perhaps lulled into a sense of security by the ruggedness of the terrain, the Clintons in command of the forts had failed to follow Washington’s suggestions to secure their “flanks and rear,” and the British forces, guided through the defiles and passes around Dunderberg and Bear Mountains by Beverly Robinson, a local area loyalist, attacked on 6 October 1777 (Palmer, 1991). Greatly outnumbered with only 600 soldiers in the two forts, the Battle of Fort Montgomery was a decisive tactical defeat for the American forces—the forts were destroyed, the chain across the Hudson was dismantled and removed, sixty-seven cannons lost, and over 300 soldiers were killed, wounded or missing while approximately 230 others were captured and subsequently imprisoned in ships in New York harbor, many for the duration of the war (Carrington, 1973: 359). Following the capture of the forts, Sir Henry Clinton’s forces proceeded north on the Hudson, pausing to destroy Fort Constitution (abandoned by the Americans garrisoning this post on approach of the British) before continuing on to raze Kingston, then the capital of New York, on 16 October 1777. Yet these acts further delayed Sir Henry’s progress north to join General Burgoyne, and the next day, October 17<sup>th</sup>, the British under Burgoyne surrendered to General Gates at Saratoga, which has been described as the ‘turning point of the American Revolution.’ Upon receiving this news, Sir Henry destroyed Forts Montgomery and Clinton, abandoned the Highlands, and returned to winter quarters in New York thereby leaving the Americans in control of the vital Highlands and the Hudson.

Several American officers suggested rebuilding the forts and occupying the sites on Popolopen Creek again. But the American command decided to abandon the location and refocus their efforts on fortifying the original site five miles north. The subsequent efforts to chain the Hudson and construct an elaborate defensive network of forts and redoubts centered on West Point were engineered by Thaddeus Kosciusko. Undoubtedly, the experiences at Fort Montgomery, in which the forts were attacked by land from the unguarded western and southern approaches, inspired Kosciusko to develop the series of forts and redoubts in depth around the fortifications guarding the chain to protect this vital defensive position from a similar fate. From this second effort to defend the Hudson, West Point has remained the longest continuously garrisoned military post in the United States.

### **Preserving an Historic Site**

While the historic preservation movement finds its roots in the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia in the 1920s and 30s (Alanen and Melnick, 2000), the creation of the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 1949 and the National Historical Preservation Act of 1966 were instrumental in expanding the preservation of historic sites and landscapes in the U.S. (Francaviglia, 2000). In these efforts, the National Park

System has played a crucial and often leading role in the movement to preserve cultural landscapes and designates an historic site as “a landscape significant for its association with a historic event, activity, or person.” (Alanen and Melnick, 2000: 8) Since these developments, and the subsequent focus on cultural landscapes, historical geography, which focuses on “geographies of the past and their relations with the present,” has increasingly engaged with questions and topics of historic preservation (Clayton, 2000: 337; Colten et al., 2003).

Historical preservation, however, is often a contentious issue and raises important questions and debates within local communities as well as at the state and national scales. What should be preserved? How should it be preserved? Whose voices and perspectives should be represented? While geographers have addressed these questions through the concepts of place, scale, and landscapes, historians and landscape architects have made significant contributions to the literature on preserving the past, not only as a product of human activity in shaping the landscape, but as a process through which cultural landscapes are produced, and subsequently preserved (Alanen and Melnick, 2000; Colten et al., 2003; Longstreth, 2008). Elements of each of these questions ultimately play a role, to varying degrees, in determining the manner in which historic places and landscapes are preserved, of which Francaviglia (2000) identified six different forms of heritage landscape preservation: passively preserved, actively preserved, restored, assembled, imagineered, magically preserved. Each type is undertaken for various purposes, limited by financial constraints, but often used conjunctively in order to provide a more complete representation of past landscapes. Efforts to preserve Fort Montgomery parallel the developments of the historical preservation movement in the US and illustrate the salience of the research on historical preservation.

Unlike Forts Montgomery and Clinton, the fortifications at West Point were never attacked by the British and the defenses ensured colonial control over the Hudson River. Following the end of the war, West Point remained a military garrison and in 1802 was founded as the site for the United States Military Academy, charged with training officers for the new nation’s Army. As the Academy expanded, many of the forts and redoubts of this defensive position which were passively (unintentionally through use, ownership and design) and actively (consciously) preserved were restored (reconstructed or replaced), assembled (constructed to achieve look of antiquity), and imagineered (designed to appear historic) starting in the 1970s, both for education purposes for Cadets as well as informing the general public. These preservations were also imagically (images, models, dioramas) preserved to further visitors conceptions of West Point’s landscapes during the time of the Revolution.

The sites of Fort Montgomery and Clinton, however, remained largely unknown and forgotten, except for brief mention in history books and tales told by local residents. In the early part of the twentieth century, much of what remained of the forts was destroyed and subsequently lost forever during construction of Route 9W and the Bear Mountain Bridge, which was completed and opened in 1924 as the first bridge to cross the Hudson south of Albany (Severo, 1998), at a time in which historic preservation in the US was still in its beginning stages. The eastern end of the bridge was constructed on part of the site of what was Fort Clinton, but three years later, in 1927, the Bear Mountain Nature Trails and Trailside Museum was established and an historical trail and museum were built on part of the ramparts and site of Fort Clinton (Carr and Koke, 1937).

These projects had a dual and contradictory impact on the historic preservation of the forts. Although much of Fort Clinton is gone from the landscape, these constructions renewed interest in the history of the site and the role these forts played in the struggle for independence, at the local level. Despite this interest and several archeological digs at the adjacent site of Fort Montgomery, this site remained largely unknown and unnoticed until the late 1960s. Following the passage of the National Historical Preservation Act, an archeological excavation between 1967 and 1971 led by John H. Mead, Director for the Trailside Museum in Bear Mountain State Park, uncovered almost 500,000 artifacts, and reportedly is “one of the largest assortments of undisplayed Revolutionary War objects ever found.” (Severo, 1998: 1) These discoveries, as well as the efforts of local historians and enthusiasts to preserve this heritage contributed to Fort Montgomery’s listing as a National Historical Landmark on 28 November 1972.

Local interest in the history of the region and the role of the forts in particular led local residents and revolutionary war enthusiasts to form the Fort Montgomery Battle Site Association in the 1990s, a period in which the growth of preservation efforts and construction paralleled economic growth in the U.S. (Francaviglia, 2000). This group led a grassroots effort to bring the past alive and appealed to New York State to further preserve this historic place. In response to such appeals, in 2000 the Governor of New York, George Pataki, allocated close to \$1 million to develop the site and two years later, on October 6, was on hand for the official opening of the Fort Montgomery State Historic Site (Schensul, 2002). As Alanen and Melnick (2000: 17) stated, “battlefield sites generally commemorate events that occurred over a few days only. Preserving such scenes, which represent only a snapshot in time, poses different questions and issues for managers and interpreters than do landscapes characterized by multiple layers of history.” While the site commemorates the role of Fort Montgomery in the course of the Revolution, it preserves much more than just an account of the battle.

Encompassing fourteen acres on the location of the original fort, the site includes a visitor's center displaying many of the artifacts recovered at the site, a movie theater detailing the history of the fort, as well as maps, sketches, and dioramas depicting the events of the battle, the physical and cultural geography of the region, and descriptions of what life was like during the time. Additionally, a trail network allows visitors to walk the grounds to gain a first-hand view of the spatial organization of the fort and the excavated foundations of fort's structures. Sketches and descriptions along this trail detail the structures within which the soldiers lived and worked, how they constructed the fort, and how they lived their daily lives (see Figure 3). Whereas other historic sites have actively preserved, restored, or assembled fortifications or buildings to provide visitors with a better perspective of these facilities, the Fort Montgomery Site has not, rather employing all six forms, to varying degrees, to preserve the excavated remnants of the fort, which was destroyed by the British and left abandoned for almost two centuries. In this way, the historical geography of the fort is preserved imaginatively through the sketches and depictions of Revolutionary and colonial landscapes, but also the efforts and process through which archaeological excavations uncover these landscapes.



Figure 3. The foundations of the Enlisted Men's and Officers' Barracks at Fort Montgomery State Historic Site. Posted at each structure within the remains of the fort are artist sketches detailing life in the fort at the time of the Revolution (inset). Photo by author.

### **Threatened Historic Site**

With its opening as a State Historic Site, it would seem that Fort Montgomery's future would be preserved for the foreseeable future. But with current budget shortfalls within the State, Fort Montgomery is once again a contested place. Faced with a budget deficit of nearly \$8.2 billion in New York State, virtually every agency and service within the state government was forced to consider cost reductions in 2009. In response to these efforts to reduce operating costs, the Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) announced on 19 February 2010 its plans to close forty-one parks and fourteen historic sites in the state of New York (NYSOPRHP,

2010). Within the Palisades Region of the Park Service, Fort Montgomery was one of four revolutionary war era historic sites in Orange County included on this list, along with Knox's Headquarters in New Windsor, Stoney Point Battlefield, and the New Windsor Cantonment—the site of the Continental Army's last encampment during the Revolution. It was estimated all the closures would save almost \$6 million for the State (Crowe, 2010a), and the sites selected for closing were based on revenues generated, number of visitors, and operating costs (Foderaro, 2010).

The announcement to close Fort Montgomery, along with the other historic sites, prompted a great response from local historical groups, legislators, and businesses to appeal to the State to keep the parks and historic sites open. Carol Ash, the Commissioner of the New York State OPRHP appealed to the Tourism and Oversight Committees to protect New York's state parks and cited the tremendous financial, recreational, educational benefits these parks and historical sites provide local communities as well as the State (NYSOPRHP, 2009). In response to these efforts, a bill passed in the State Assembly and Senate on 28 May 2010 for the parks to stay open. While initially considered a success, this decision was controversial among many lawmakers, as the State drew \$11 million from the State's Environmental Protection Fund for the money needed to keep the parks and historic sites open. Additionally, this allocation merely extended the life of these threatened parks for a year, until 31 March 2011.

As Crowe (2010b) stated, however, “even bad news about closing parks can be great publicity” as Commissioner Ash reported in early July 2010 that attendance at parks across the state had increased by 11 percent over the same period during 2009. Like many other current advocacy campaigns, the State park system is using web-based initiatives and social networking forums (including Facebook and Twitter) to generate interest and attendance. Through these efforts, the Parks Commissioner is “also encouraging New Yorkers to support parks and historic sites by joining Friends Groups, volunteering at parks or making financial donations to the park through the agency website” (New York History, 2010).

Advocates for preserving Fort Montgomery have likewise enacted calls and undertaken efforts to draw attention to the site and increase visitor attendance. The site hosts monthly evening lecture series detailing historic perspectives of the times and hosts an annual reenactment of the battle. On October 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2010, the Fort Montgomery Historic Site hosted Twin Forts Day to commemorate the 233<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the battle in which Forts Montgomery and Clinton were attacked by the British during the Revolution. Planned by the Fort Montgomery Battle Site Association, Palisades Interstate Park Commission, and the Hudson River National Heritage Area, this two day event showcased over 200 reenactors from local area groups recreating the battle of Fort Montgomery and depicting life during the Colonial period (Pitt, 2010). Foregoing the conveniences of modern life (except for an occasional cell phone call), many of the reenactors pitched their tents, cooked over open fires using utensils of the times, and provided visitors with a glimpse of what it was like to live during his period (See Figure 4).



Figure 4. Reenactors depicting life during the Colonial era on the 233<sup>rd</sup> Anniversary of the Battle of Fort Montgomery Twin Forts Day Celebration, October 3, 2010. Photo by author.

Although this annual event was fairly well attended (over 500 visitors), attendance rates at Fort Montgomery remain low in comparison to the other threatened historic sites in the Palisades Region. The latest available figures indicate only 21,000 people visited Fort Montgomery, with 25,000 visitors to Knox's Headquarters and 29,000 to Stoney Point Battle site (NYSOPRHP, 2010). However, actual attendance rates are potentially much higher as many visitors to the site do not sign the guest register, either entering the visitors' center through the back door or touring the grounds after visiting hours are over.

In February, 2011, Powers (2011) reported that despite cuts in the New York State budget to parks and recreation, the proposed sites would remain open. State parks and historic sites, would however have reduced operating and maintenance budgets and be forced to reduce staff (a loss of approximately sixty-seven staff members through the park system). While encouraging, and certainly attributable to the efforts of local communities, leaders and businesses, the long term future of the proposed park and historical site closures remains uncertain. As New York State continues to reduce expenditures and budget deficits, it is likely that Fort Montgomery (along with other historic sites and parks) may once again be a contested place.

## CONCLUSION

In its short history, both as a Revolutionary War fortification and a state historic site to commemorate that role, Fort Montgomery has been a contested place. Within two years of its construction, it was captured and destroyed by the British, but yet played a critical role in the course of the Revolution. Two centuries later, within a decade of its opening as a state historic site, its future is once again under threat as budgetary issues within the State may potentially force its closure. But as advocates suggest, this historic site provides visitors and local residents a great deal more than a history lesson of the events leading up to and during this particular battle. The park system provides financial, recreational, and educational benefits for visitors and residents, but the preservation of Fort Montgomery (through all types) highlight the significance of the geography of the Hudson River valley as well as the evolution of the cultural landscape in the region. Although students can gain an appreciation of these aspects through books and articles, walking the grounds provides a tremendous educational opportunity for visitors to experience the significance of this particular place first hand as well as an appreciation for preserving the environment in which we live.

The future of this site may well rest with its location. Adjacent to Bear Mountain State Park and five miles from West Point, the site is ideally situated to attract large numbers of visitors. Yet nestled off Route 9W with rather limited parking and only the entrance sign to attract visitors, Fort Montgomery may be easily overlooked. The campaign to attract visitors and raise awareness by the Park's Commission and local advocacy groups has, so far, contributed to a rise in attendance rates and the State budget, while reduced, has allowed the site to remain open, for now. This paper is an attempt to assist in these efforts by calling attention to this, and other threatened historic sites. Although Fort Montgomery was originally established to commemorate the valor of the dedicated defenders who played a critical, though often overlooked, role in the struggle for independence, the site is an excellent laboratory to experience and gain a greater appreciation for the geography of the Hudson Valley as well as the role geography plays in shaping the course of history.

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