



Hub of the Revolution

POMPTON AND THE PREAKNESS VALLEY

by Robert A. Mayers



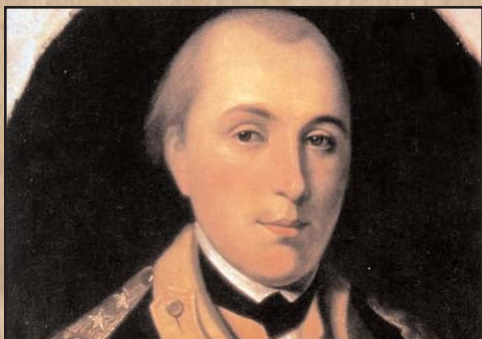
The Dey Mansion, Washington's headquarters in 1780, as it appears today.

In June 1780, Washington led the main body of the Continental Army into an area known as the Preakness Valley, also called Pompton and Totowa. Today it encompasses Wayne Township, Pompton Plains, Totowa and Pequannock, New Jersey. When historians refer to New Jersey as the “crossroads of the Revolution,” this area was truly the hub—all the significant events of the period radiate out from here. Much has changed, of course, in more than 200 years, but many visages of the era remain. Except for a few local residents, it has been overlooked in history, and its past is often unmarked and unrecorded.

Located at an important junction for commerce and communications, roads intersected here that led south to Paterson, Paramus, Acquackanonck (Passaic), Newark and Morristown in New Jersey and north to Ringwood, Suffern, Haverstraw and West Point in New York. From Pompton the American Army could quickly move 20 miles to the Hudson River if the British invaded north from New York City. The rich farmland of the area offered abundant sources of food as well as proximity to iron forges for shot and cannonball.



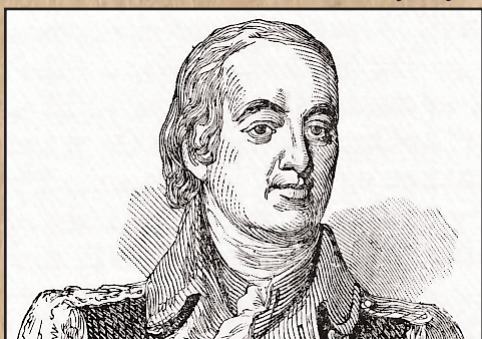
Alexander Hamilton



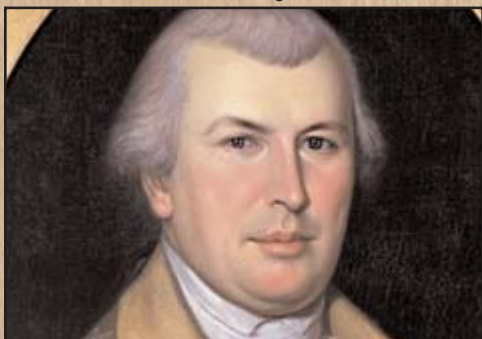
Marquis de Lafayette



Gen. Anthony Wayne



Lord Stirling (William Alexander)



Nathaniel Greene

Located on the long range of mountains that extend north across the New York state border, it is a land of fertile valleys and hills rich in minerals. Dutch farmers were the first European immigrants to settle in Pompton as early as 1694. They purchased large tracts of land from the Indians. Located at the meeting of the three flowing mountain streams, the Pequannock, Wanaque and the Ramapo Rivers, the area was named "Pompton" from the Indian word meaning "Meeting Waters."

General Washington had many problems there. The army was losing many men due to the expiration of enlistments, and supplies were difficult to procure with worthless continental currency. He used the stately Dey Mansion in Wayne as his headquarters during the month of July in 1780 and returned in October and November of that year.

At the Dey Mansion Washington received some of the best and worst news of the war. He learned of the momentous decision of France to join the American cause. But the depressing report of the defection of Benedict Arnold also reached him there, as well as news of the tragic mutiny of the New Jersey line that happened at Bloomingdale in January 1781.

The most illustrious leaders of the war lived here in private homes in the area during the encampments. Alexander Hamilton, the Marquis de Lafayette and Generals Anthony Wayne, Lord Stirling and Nathaniel Greene all camped here with their regiments. In 1781, the entire Continental Army and all of the French forces under Rochambeau joined forces at Pompton to march south to the final critical allied victory at Yorktown. Finally, during the winter of 1781-1782 the New York Brigade at full strength with about 2,000 men camped here on the bank of the Pompton River.

HEADQUARTERS OF THE PATRIOT ARMY

On July 4, 1780, Washington dispersed his brigades over the valley and set up headquarters in the luxurious Georgian mansion of Colonel Theunis Dey in lower Preakness. Dey was a colonel in the Bergen County Militia, and his home would serve as the headquarters of the Continental Army from July 1 until July 29, and again from October 8 to November 27, 1780.

The main body of the army was camped along what is now Totowa Road. The left wing stretched out from the Laurel Grove Cemetery to Goffle Brook Park in the town of Hawthorne. The "Artillery Park" of General Knox was located on Totowa Road, at the crest of the hill that descends to the Dey Mansion. The right wing, occupied by the New Jersey Brigade, extended to Two



Jean-Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur,
comte de Rochambeau

Bridges. The Marquis de Lafayette had his headquarters at the house of Samuel Van Saun at Lower Preakness. Major General Stirling was quartered nearby at the home of George Doremus. Alarm towers were built on Federal Hill and the surrounding ridges. These beacons had barrels of pitch ready to ignite and a canon to sound an alert.

The troops tried to make themselves as comfortable as possible despite few materials and limited time. Tents or huts were set on floors of broad, flat stones and crude chimneys of stone and clay were erected on the exterior. In 1857, when Totowa farmers began plowing up the land at the base of the mountain, they found these stone floors along with cannon balls and other artifacts of military occupancy.

Food and clothing were scarce but rum and wine taken from the British a month before at the Battle of Springfield were plentiful. All soldiers were issued a gill of rum (four ounces) each day. Officers amused themselves by giving receptions and visiting the nearby Paterson Falls, which was regarded as a great natural wonder.

GLORIOUS NEWS AND A MALICIOUS VISITOR

This first visit of the American Army to Pompton was interrupted by news of momentous events. On July 20, a dispatch rider rushed up to the Dey Mansion and gave General Washington this message:

Yesterday afternoon, the long expected fleet of our illustrious ally appeared off Newport.

The French Fleet had arrived in Rhode Island with 6,000 troops.

Fortunately, the Pompton location provided quick access to the French allies and a perfect springboard for a joint attack on New York City. This event never happened, however, because General Rochambeau convinced Washington that trapping the British Army on the Yorktown Peninsula was a more prudent strategy.

In July, General Benedict Arnold arrived in camp with a hidden agenda. This visit enabled the traitorous American officer to gather intelligence on the strength of the American forces, which he reported to British Commander Sir Henry Clinton in New York City. It was here at Pompton that Arnold fatefully persuaded Washington to appoint him commander of West Point. He defected two months later after delivering the plan of the defenses of that fortress to the enemy.

Later that month, the British Army in New York City moved

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north to attack the recently arrived French Army in Rhode Island. Washington promptly moved east toward Paramus and prepared to attack the upper part of the city. This threat forced the British to withdraw and to protect the city that had served as their northern headquarters since 1776.

Washington returned to the Dey Mansion on October 8, 1780, and the troops reoccupied the encampment site of the previous summer for the next two months. In November, as the fifth winter of the war approached, the American Army marched out of the Pompton area to the Hudson Highlands.

THE HEARTBREAKING MUTINY OF THE WAR WEARY NEW JERSEY LINE

A seven-day mutiny of the 200 soldiers of the New Jersey Brigade was brought to a dreadful end in Pompton. Two of the leaders were convicted at a brief court martial. Forced to kneel in the snow, they were immediately shot to death by their distressed companions who were ordered to act as their firing squad.

The trouble started in Jockey Hollow with the Pennsylvania Regiments. Angry over the familiar problems of vague enlistment terms, not enough food or clothing and no pay, they rebelled on New Year's Day, 1781. They killed an officer and wounded two others and started off for Philadelphia to take their case directly to Congress. The Pennsylvanians were persuaded to return and were granted several concessions. The mutiny of the Pennsylvania Brigade was the largest in the history of the United States armed forces.

Encouraged by this example, the New Jersey Brigade rose up in revolt three weeks later. They had not been paid in over a year and lacked warm clothing. Most suffered from frostbite and scurvy and believed they were victimized by vague enlistment terms. The New Jersey mutiny occurred at Federal Hill in what today is the town of Bloomingdale. The site is on a rocky promontory that overlooks the junctions of the Newark-Pompton Turnpike and Paterson-Hamburg Turnpike. Today the location is on Union Avenue, only a half-mile west of Exit 55, Interstate 287.

In January 1781, the New Jersey troops who remained at Federal Hill had little to do except to nurse their grievances. Some of the restless officers were granted back pay after petitioning the New Jersey legislature. After appeasing the officers, Commissioners Reverend James Caldwell and Colonel Frederick Frelinghuysen were appointed to investigate the claims of the soldiers. Unfortunately, the enlisted men were not informed of this effort and rebelled on Saturday evening, January 20.

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The mutineers seized muster rolls and two cannons and then marched 20 miles to Chatham where an additional 300 New Jersey troops were camped. The mutineers found few of these men willing to join them. Colonel Elias Dayton, commander of the New Jersey Line, and Colonel Israel Shreve, both highly respected officers, assured the men that their grievances would be remedied but insisted that they return to their duty before any discussions could begin. The men agreed and were all pardoned.

On Thursday, January 25, on the way back to Pompton, insubordination and disorderly behavior erupted again. An officer with a bayonet held to his chest defended himself by knocking down his assailant. By Friday the last of these men straggled back from Chatham, and all was quiet at Federal Hill during the night.

Washington, headquartered 50 miles away with most of the army in New Windsor, New York, feared that insurrections could become widespread. He sent General Robert Howe with 1,000 reliable New England troops on a six-day march through deep snow to Federal Hill. They surrounded the New Jersey huts and trained three cannon on the camp. Howe then ordered the insurgents to parade in ranks without weapons. Some obeyed but others tried to escape and were blocked.

Three of the guiltiest ring leaders were tried by court martial and sentenced to death. The guiltiest of their fellow mutineers were selected to be the firing squad. The starving, barefoot Jersey soldiers were paraded on the snow to witness this punishment. When two had been executed, a third was pardoned.

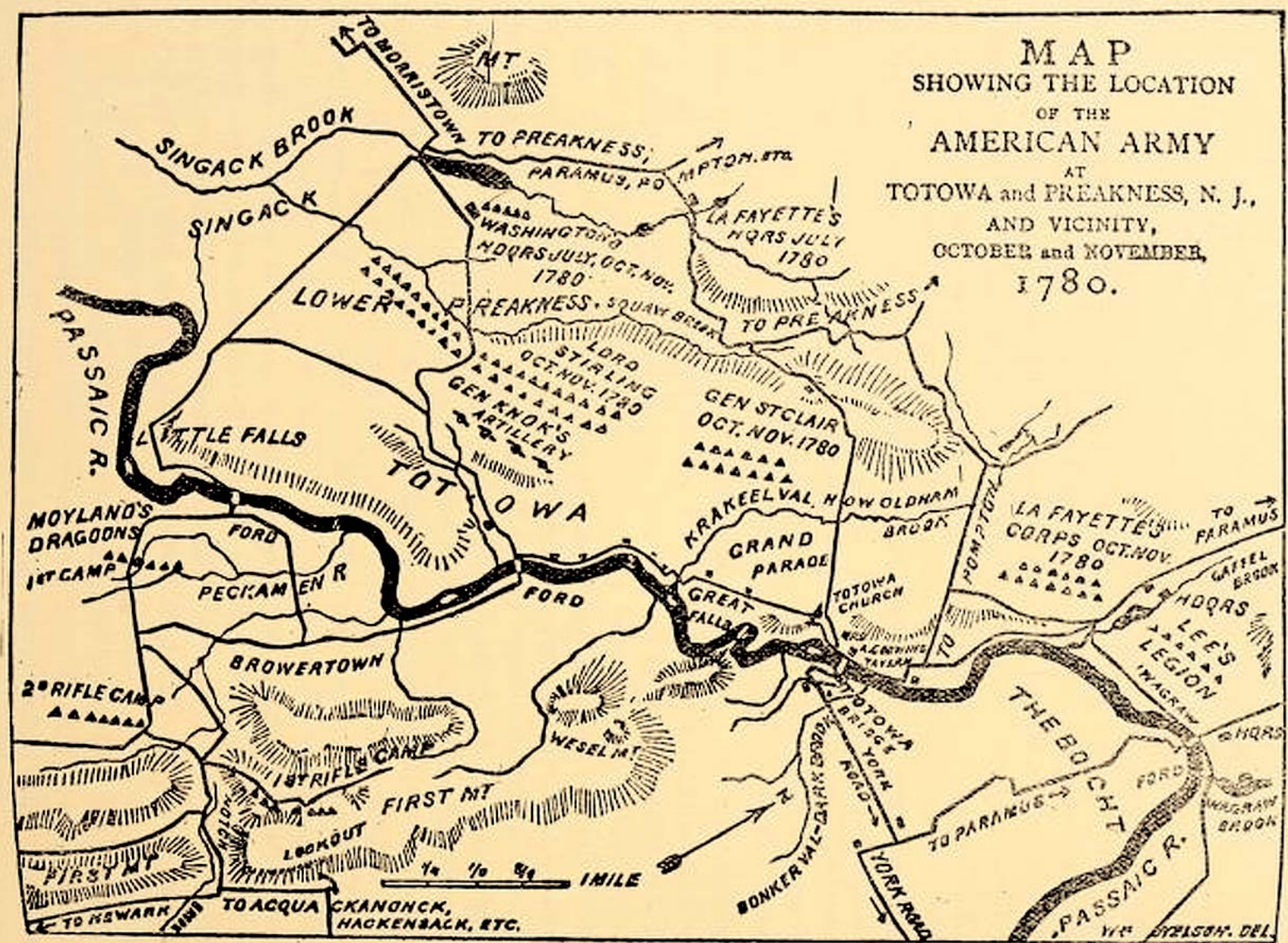
William Nelson, in his classic work on Passaic County, *Paterson and its Environs (Silk City)*, is one of the few sources to provide a detailed account of these events. He reported in 1920:

In a thick wood, on the bleak and desolate summit of a rocky knob of the Ramapo Mountains, overlooking the Pompton Lakes Station on the New York, Susquehanna & Western Railroad, the hearty traveler can find two rude piles of weather-beaten field-stones. These are pointed out as marking the lonely, dishonored graves of the two Jersey mutineers.

Federal Hill, in the Town of Bloomingdale, rises conspicuously above the Pompton Valley. The Pequannock River meanders along its base. A marker near the hill reads:

Federal Hill Historic Site-The site of the Revolutionary war era Pompton Mutiny which occurred in the cold harsh winter of 1781.

MAP
SHOWING THE LOCATION
OF THE
AMERICAN ARMY
AT
TOTOWA and PREAKNESS, N. J.,
AND VICINITY,
OCTOBER and NOVEMBER,
1780.



The disposition of troops on a map from
"History of Paterson and its environs."

It was in the eastern valley overlooking Bloomingdale that an encampment of weary troops mutinied, consequently their two ringleaders were arrested, tried, and executed in the vicinity of what is now known as Union Avenue.

Climbers have frequently visited Federal Hill since it was described by Nelson in 1920. Curiously, since that time nobody has reported seeing the graves of the two mutineers. A small World War I ammunitions storage vault and the remains of a German Bund Camp built before World War II remain. Today, Federal Hill, privately held, has never received designation as a state or federal historic site. The 500-acre wooded tract is environmentally sensitive and is under threat of development.

TO YORKTOWN AND VICTORY

In 1781, the main forces of both the American and British armies in the north had been stalemated for two years around New York



The Schuyler-Colfax House as it appears today, from the Wayne Township, NJ website.

City. Washington's force was massed above New York City along the Hudson River, and British troops confronted them in Manhattan. The Redcoats had held this area for six years and were well entrenched. It helped that the formidable English fleet could protect from incursion from the sea.

The stakes for both sides at this time could not have been higher. A successful American assault against the mightiest British bastion in America could win the war for the new nation. For the cautious Sir Henry Clinton, a final defeat for his northern army would end England's massive effort to control its rebellious colony. Actually both armies lacked the confidence and strength to face off.

The dilemma for the Americans began to end when a French Expeditionary Force arrived in Rhode Island a year earlier, with a powerful French Fleet under the command of Count de Grasse. After conferring with Comte de Rochambeau, the Commander of the French Land forces, Washington settled on a bold approach. They would try to trap the southern British Army at Yorktown, Virginia.

On August 22, 1781, the American Armies began their epic march to Virginia from Haverstraw, New York. They moved south through Paramus, Acquackanock (Passaic) and Springfield. The French Army, accompanied by the 2nd New York Regiment and Lamb's Artillery Regiment, left one day later and took a more westerly route through Pompton. General Washington rode with this column. The New York Regiment guarded 40 bateaux (invasion landing craft) pulled by oxen. They stopped for the first night at Suffern, New York.

An interesting eyewitness account comes from an American who passed through the town:

In that area males are very welcome since we did not meet many of them, where one entered into a house there the first thing they did ask whether one did not want to stay with them they would hide you until the French were gone, one also encountered everywhere Hessian soldiers who had deserted.

Leaving Suffern, New York, the western column marched 20 miles to Pompton following-present day Route 202. Cromot du Bourg, a French officer, reported:

We went from Sufferns to Pompton, the road is superb. This is an open and well cultivated country, inhabited by Dutch people who are almost all quite rich. We arrived in good season and the camps being set and the troops arrived, I thought I could do no better than

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to go to Totowa to see a cataract (the Paterson falls) which is considered to be one of the most curious sights in this part of the country.

Baron Ludwig Von Closen, a French officer, states in his diary:

The Jerseys where we are now abound in all kinds of produce. The inhabitants have kept it neat and have retained their gentle and peaceful customs, and have been very friendly towards the army. It is a land of milk and honey, with game, fish, vegetables poultry etc.

American soldiers left few descriptions of the march through New Jersey. For them the terrain, towns and people were familiar and much like the places they lived.

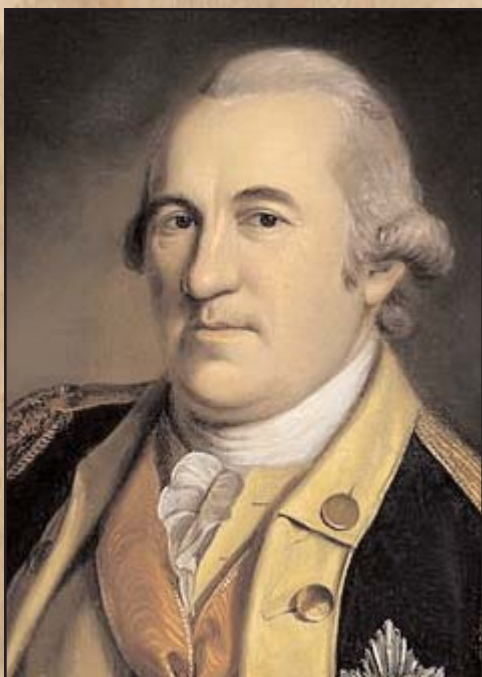
The columns passed through Oakland and crossed the Pompton River. They camped in Wayne Township on the Newark-Pompton Turnpike, north of the Pompton Meeting House and the Reformed Church of Pompton Plains. Washington stayed that night nearby at the Schuyler-Colfax House in Wayne. Most of these historic buildings have survived the years. The next day the French trudged 12 miles south through Pompton Plains, Lincoln Park, Montville, Lake Hiawatha and Hanover Township to Whippany. The location of their campsite in Whippany was on Whippany Road, on what was recently Lucent Technologies Park.

Rochambeau's divisions arose early the following day and tramped 15 miles from Whippany through Morristown and Basking Ridge to Bullion's Tavern (Liberty Corner). The campsite there was just one day away from Bound Brook where they joined the Continental Army.

From Bound Brook and Princeton the Franco-American task force departed for Yorktown and a decisive victory. It was the last major battle for both sides on the continent of North America and is regarded as one of the most brilliant military campaigns in the history of the world.

A COMFORTABLE STAY FOR THE "YORKERS"— WINTER 1781–1782

The triumphant 2nd New York Regiment returned from Yorktown to Pompton on December 11, 1781, after an exhausting 600-mile, 39-day march. It began to snow when they crossed the Delaware River. The "Yorkers" were buffeted by blizzards as they passed through Trenton, Princeton, Bound Brook and Morristown on their way to Pompton. Many of the New York soldiers were



Friedrich Wilhelm August Heinrich Ferdinand
von Steuben

returning to this place. They had camped there on the way to Yorktown only three months before.

The encampment in the Preakness Valley of Van Cortlandt's 2nd New York Regiment with 2,000 men in the winter of 1781–1782 has been forgotten by local historians. The details survive only in military records. Their visit is also overshadowed by the larger encampments during the previous winter.

The snow was eight inches deep when The New York Brigade arrived on December 11, 1781. The first order of business for the weary soldiers was to build huts for the winter along a gently sloping bank of the Pompton River.

Anticipating the worst, the New York huts at Pompton were constructed more substantially than those at Jockey Hollow. Built of heavy logs with roofs of plank or timbers, each had a fireplace and housed eight men. As with previous large encampments, the incessant plundering of civilians for food and the tearing down of their fences for firewood served to diminish the image of the army at Pompton.

Unlike previous winters, the January weather turned mild, and spirits rose when a supply of new uniforms arrived at the camp although food was still in short supply. The New York troops settled into the warm huts and began to enjoy a degree of comfort that they had not known in years.

Orderly books show that at Pompton many available amenities enhanced the quality of life for the soldiers during that winter. Women camp followers washed clothes for two shillings and even provided their own soap. Barbers, tailors and shoemakers sold their services for modest fees.

A VISIT FROM HIS EXCELLENCY AND THE PRUSSIAN MARTINET

On March 30, 1782, George and Martha Washington arrived for a visit to Pompton from their winter quarters at Newburgh, New York, 30 miles north. They spent the weekend with the New York Regiment, staying in a modest inn, known as the "Yellow Tavern," that Colonel Van Cortlandt used as his headquarters. The couple departed two days later with an armed escort and returned to Newburgh, New York.

During the early spring the men of the New York Brigade were inspected by General Baron Von Steuben. The formidable German martinet gave the Brigade high praise for its professionalism and efficiency in parade ground maneuvers.

At Pompton in early August 1782, Washington found time to



Albert Payson Terhune

provide recognition to the soldiers who had made such great sacrifices over the past seven years. He awarded chevrons to those who had served with bravery, fidelity and good conduct. Those chevrons were to be worn on the sleeves of the men's uniforms. One hash mark was given out for each three years of service.

In August 1782 the New York Regiment broke camp and marched 25 miles to Peekskill, New York, where they joined the main army for the planned assault on New York City. This was the last military occupation of Pompton during the Revolutionary War.

Today, the campsite where the New Yorkers bivouacked in 1781 and 1782 is a attractively landscaped, commemorative park, on the west side of Route 202 (Terhune Road) in Wayne, New Jersey. The road winds along the bank of the Ramapo River, in an area of gracious homes in a wooded setting. This bucolic place belies its proximity to the bustling New York metropolitan area that surrounds it.

At the time of the Revolution the Ramapo River was only 25 yards across. In 1836, the river was dammed at this point to form the present-day, mile-long Pompton Lake. The ground of the 1781–1782 encampment slopes down to this remarkably pristine body of water.

Those trying to identify the place as a Revolutionary War landmark will find it difficult to locate. The park was the site of the home of the world-famous author, Albert Payson Terhune, who achieved fame with his many books about dogs, which were written between 1900 and 1940.

On ten acres his father had bought in 1860, Terhune built a large Victorian estate house. He named the home and its surrounding acreage Sunnybank. Much of the land was lost to developers in the 1960s, and the house was demolished in 1969. Terhune found the grave of an American Revolutionary officer, who was buried with a British officer's sword, along with Hessian shackles and rusted cannonballs. Author William Nelson reported that on the wooded hillside on the estate the remains of huts were unearthed, together with bullets, flints, and gunlocks.

THE WAR WINDS DOWN

The location of the Preakness Valley on the southern approach to Smith's Clove, the main north-south corridor from New Jersey to West Point, ensured that it would continue as a conduit for other military events in the final months of the war. In June 1782, Pennsylvania troops mutinied over lack of pay and threatened Congress. Washington sent a detachment of 1,500 men for their protection from the New Windsor Cantonment near Newburg, New

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York. This was the final movement of a large body of troops through the Pompton area.

In the summer of that year, Washington passed through here on his way from New Windsor to Philadelphia to confer with Rochambeau and after the peace treaty with Great Britain was signed. In April 1783, troops released from New Windsor marched through Pompton to their homes in the southern states. George and Martha Washington again passed through Pompton on the way to Rocky Hill, New Jersey, where the 51-year-old General gave his farewell address to the army.

THE VALLEY TODAY

Spread over about five square miles encompassing several contiguous towns, many reminders of the revolutionary era events remain today throughout the Preakness Valley. Regimental campgrounds can be located on a first-rate map drawn by Washington's Cartographer, Robert Erskine, Surveyor-General, in 1780. This remarkable document depicts campsites, waterways, main roads and even topography.

Physical features such as Great Notch, a gap through the hills, and Two Bridges, marking the junction of the Pompton and Ramapo Rivers, were well-known to the Continental Army. Route 202, the road used by the French columns in 1781, follows exactly the same path. Four rivers—Passaic, Pompton, Pequannock and Ramapo—flow through the valley. Historic sites can often be found in relation to these waterways. Existing streets bear original place names. Rifle Camp Road is where 300 men under Major James Barr camped. Cannon Ball Road passes near the Pompton forge.

The ruins of the forge at Pompton still stand above what is today the Hamburg Turnpike in Pompton Lake. Eighteenth-century homes of Dutch colonists that housed Continental Army Generals are house museums and contain interesting artifacts and period furnishings while private owners occupy others.

The most prominent of the early homes is the Dey Mansion. This superb example of Georgian architecture was constructed between 1740 and 1750 and is considered the jewel of the early homes in the Preakness Valley. Purchased by Passaic County from a private owner in 1934, and then restored the brick and stone mansion is now open to the public.

The Pompton-Preakness Valley was the hub of continuous action during the entire duration of the Revolutionary War. Major encampments, the passage of armies and a tragic mutiny all occurred here during the eight years of the conflict.



ALLISON-MAYERS FAMILY HISTORY

Portrait of an American Family



Robert A. Mayers

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Robert A. Mayers comes from a family that arrived in New Jersey in 1826. Over the years, the author has traveled historic sites in the eastern US and Canada. He has a special interest in New Jersey history. His works are based on his onsite experience and primary sources combined with the discovery of original documents and oral accounts passed down in his family through many generations.

His book, "*The War Man*," published by Westholme Publishing, 2009, the biography of Corporal John Allison, is a true account of a soldier in the Continental Army. He served for the entire eight years of the American Revolution. It provides a rare detailed account of the life of a private soldier and serves as a model for researching Revolutionary War soldiers. Currently the book is selling successfully world-wide.

"*The Portrait of an American Family*" - Allison / Mayers Family History, published by Heritage Books, 2011, traces an American family back 600 years and 20 generations. The work spans medieval England, the puritan emigration, colonial America, the Revolutionary War and the industrial revolution.

"*The Forgotten Revolution*," soon to be released, is a study of several battlefields, encampments and sites of many critical events of the Revolutionary War that have been lost or neglected by history.

Other works include "*Revolutionary Citizen-Soldier*" published in the *History Channel Magazine*, "*The Hard Winter-The Story of Jockey Hollow*" recently appeared in *Garden State Legacy* and the September 2011 edition of that publication featured, "*The Battle of the Short Hills*." "*The Voyage of the Marion*" published in the UK by *Cheshire Magazine* is the account of the journey of a silk worker from England to Paterson, New Jersey, in 1839.

Mayers is an active member of ten historical societies and a frequent speaker and contributor to society publications. He typically presents about 20 speaking events each year. A former Human Resources executive, he is a graduate of Rutgers University and was an adjunct professor at Seton Hall University.

Mayers served as a combat officer in the Navy and Marine Corps. His military experiences provide him with a deeper perspective of the campaigns and battles depicted in his works.

