

ARCHIVES | 1978

## In the Field at White Plains

By THOMAS R. PARKER FEB. 19, 1978

About the Archive

This is a digitized version of an article from The Times's print archive, before the start of online publication in 1996. To preserve these articles as they originally appeared, The Times does not alter, edit or update them.

Occasionally the digitization process introduces transcription errors or other problems. Please send reports of such problems to [archive\\_feedback@nytimes.com](mailto:archive_feedback@nytimes.com).

BETWEEN 7,000 and 10,000 people each year visit Washington's White Plains battle headquarters at Virginia Road in North White Plains. In September of 1976—the nation's Bicentennial year— the historic Elijah Miller farmhouse was accepted as the Battle of White Plains patriot headquarters in the United States National Register of Historic Places.

Visitors to the 231-year-old farmhouse and to Miller Hill rising above it should be rewarded by two major points of understanding: They should become better acquainted with Washington's personality and character as well as get a better grasp of the strategic importance of the Battle of White Plains.

The face of Washington we see on dollar bills is cold, impassive, unsmiling, with lips compressed. It's a grandfather face framed in a white wig. Gilbert Stuart, the painter, tells us that he tried every trick he knew to break down his subject's reserve so he could catch with his brush the real Washington.

All; tricks could not dissolve the reserve. In desperation Stuart told a joke and a fleeting smile crossed his subject's lips, but before the painter could pick up a brush the smile disappeared, the mask of the Olympian, impassive President Washington returned, and that is what Stuart painted and what we see. One reason Washington

(then 60 years old) did not like to smile or engage in small talk was that his wooden false teeth were uncomfortable.

In October 1776, on the eve of the Battle of White Plains, the picture of Washington changes dramatically. He was then 44 years old—in the prime of life. He stood over 6 feet tall and weighed 190 pounds. He was a superb horseman and a natural athlete. His store of energy was immense. He could ride in the saddle all day supervising his troops and then return to headquarters and spend hours at his desk writing dispatches to Congress, getting only three or four hours of sleep a night. A visitor to the Miller house headquarters can see the chair and table Washington used.

All of Washington's great qualities, his energy, determination, leadership and military skill, were to be severely tested at the Battle of White' Plains. A visitor 'should be sure to save time to leave the headquarters building and to drive to the top of Miller Hill and visit county park at the summit where the American entrenchments can be seen. Here was Washington's battle command post from where he could see his long line, stretching on the right along the Bronx River to Chatterton's Hill (about a mile south of the County Center).

The British came up from New Rochelle, marching in two columns. On the first day, Oct. 28, the British attack against Chatterton Hill was successful, fording the patriot troops to retreat off the hill. The militia fled in panic, but the Colonial regulars retreated in good order, inflicting about 300 casualties on the enemy. Perhaps it was these casualties that caused Sir William Howe, the British general, to delay following up his success and to wait a day for reinforcements. Then a hard rain intervened; the ground was too wet for Howe to attack but not too wet for Washington to retreat, secretly in the night—with campfires blazing to deceive the British. “ Washington's retreat was a pivot action. He swung his right wing from Purdy's Hill and from the center of his line at Broadway back to Miller Hill, which now became the right anchor of his lines. His easterly lines remained in position. The result was to drastically shorten his line and to put his troops on the ridge of hills in North Castle that lie just to the north of White Plains.

Howe found the new American position impregnable. After a few days' wait, his army. went off to the Hudson

Washington's mettle was severely tested in White Plains River, marched south to Fort Washington in New York City and captured the fort with almost 3,000

patriot troops. That ended the White Plains campaign.

Who won it? Let the visitor judge. Three months before the Battle of White Plains, in July 1776, shortly after the Declaration of Independence was signed, Washington in New York City wrote to the New York State Provincial Congress these words: "The passage of the enemy up the North River [Hudson River] is an event big with many consequences to the public interest, and to prevent which I shall gladly, give every assistance in my power, consistent with the safety of the Army."

The bastion of the patriot effort to control the upper Hudson was West Point, the fortified strong point that dominated the narrow passage of the river as it cut through the ridge of the Hudson Highlands. If Howe's forces could move up along the Hudson to neutralize West Point, or to seize it, British seapower would be able to cut the colonies in two; it could attack the New England colonies from the rear, and it could prevent the Hudson River valley from supporting Washington's army. Before the rail-roads, the Hudson River was the vital communications key.

From Canada the British would launch two attacks along the Lake Champlain-Hudson River corridor. Both failed. The second by General Burgoyne led to the capture of his army at Saratoga, and that victory persuaded the French to form the alliance of 1778 that was to bring . in troops, equipment, money, and a fleet—all indispensable to the final American victory at Yorktown.

The effect of the White Plains battle was to contain the British forces based in New York City. After White Plains, no major British force would be strong enough to threaten West Point or to save Burgoyne.

British amphibious operations in late summer 1776 almost resulted in capture of the Americans at Brooklyn. The march of the shattered American army from Manhattan to White Plains was also fraught with danger, as the British in another amphibious operation landed troops at Throgs Neck behind Washington's troops. Fortunately, the British were slow to advance, and rear-guard American detachments fought hard and well to delay them further.

As Washington stood on Miller Hill on Oct. 28, 1776, he could not help but worry as to how his twice-beaten and untrained army would do against the disciplined veterans of the King's forces.

In this author's application to the National Register we stressed four tactical lessons Washington learned in the Long Island-White Plains campaign and that he would apply with increasing success on his eight-year path to eventual victory. We

said that the Elijah Miller house was the “schoolhouse” for Washington's tactical education.

Washington learned that most American troops were no match for experienced British soldiers in classic 18th-century parade-ground formations. At White Plains the Americans dug in behind stone walls, cornstalk barricades and earth entrenchments. After Chatterton, Washington said he would fight the enemy with spade and entrenching tools. He was prepared to trade ground for increasing British casualties.

Washington's two strategic goals in the crisis days of 1776 were to maintain the safety of his army and to contain the British forces in New York City, preventing them from attacking West Point and opening the upper Hudson River valley to British seapower. In both of these he was successful at the Battle of White Plains. His success there laid the foundations for Saratoga and the entrance of the French, which would make possible the achievement of Washington's great strategic objective, destruction of the main British army.

Thomas R. Parker is a historian who lives in Armonk.

A version of this archives appears in print on February 19, 1978, on Page WC21 of the New York edition with the headline: In the Field at White Plains.