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THE CHAIN AT WEST POINT THAT KEPT THE STATES UNITED



United States Military Academy Cadet Kathleen E. Quinlan, a resident of Dobbs Ferry and member of the Class of 2000, pauses in front of a portion of the West Point Chain. British warships never dared to challenge the Chain during the Revolution.

CHAINING THE HUDSON By Lincoln Diamant
New York: Carol Publishing Group, 234 pp. \$16.95
-- Reviewed by Jean Fritz

From the start, Americans and British both recognized that whoever controlled Hudson's River (as it was then called) had the best chance of winning the war between them. Without the river, Americans would be deprived of flour and other essential goods from the west. On the other hand, without the river, the British would be deprived of easy access to Canada and their Indian allies in the north. But the British had thirty warships in New York Harbor, and how, Americans asked, could they keep them out of the river?

At least they could try to keep the British troops in Manhattan as long as possible. So Americans began digging trenches, throwing up redoubts here, there, everywhere -- so many that a British colonel laughed. They ap-

peared "Calculated more to amuse than for use," he said.

Americans tried everything. An inventor from Connecticut rigged up a kind of submarine which he called the "Turtle", designed to go under water with an explosive device which could be attached to the keel of enemy ships. Twice it was tried. Twice it failed.

What about bottling up the river so the enemy couldn't get through? The Americans picked the site where the present George Washington Bridge stands, built forts on either side (Fort Washington, Fort Lee -- still called Fort Lee), sank vessels and in the gaps put a line of Chevaux-de-Frise, box-like bulwarks filled with stones and topped with iron pikes. A secret channel was left open for friendly vessels.

It didn't work. The British warships, the Phoenix and the Rose, sailed through as easily as if they had been in on the secret. They raided farms along the river, had a brief engagement with Americans, then they sailed back to New York Harbor as if the river belonged to them.

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CHAIN KEPT STATES UNITED -- *continued from page 1*

The barricade was reinforced; still, it was useless. On October 9, 1776, the British sent three ships (including the Phoenix again) through that not-so-secret channel. Although two revolutionary galleys went after them, the British forced them to run ashore just above Dobbs Ferry. But the war didn't just drift along, one ship going after another. On November 16, 1776, the British made an all-out attack on Fort Washington -- 8,000 British against 3,000 Americans who had to surrender while the British went on to take Fort Lee. It was true that the Hudson was indeed now a British river as far north as Dobbs Ferry. One British officer might brag that they were now truly "Masters of Hudson's River", but the Americans were not through.

If they couldn't bottle up the enemy ships, they could try to set them a-fire. The first two fire boats they sent down the river did manage to burn a couple of British tenders but not the Phoenix, their primary target. "The night was too dark," Captain Nathan Hale reported, "the wind too slack."

Signal System and Fortifications

At least Americans should be alert to impending danger. The Committee of the Whole resolved to erect a signal system as well as fortifications on the Hudson "Highlands" -- that ten mile wide band of granite hills, 90 miles south of Albany, 40 miles north of New York City. Bernard Romans, a Dutch-born, self-taught military engineer, offered to fortify the Highlands. Romans unfortunately had grandiose plans, far too complicated for either the tools or the money available and when the Fortification Committee came to see what Romans was doing, they found him working on a small island a quarter of a mile away from the "West Point". But working for what? He had no straight view of the river below him and on the opposite shore high above him loomed West Point, a perfect place for an enemy attack. That was the end of Bernard Romans and his fort.

The hero of this story is Lt. Thomas Machin, son of an English mathematician, and presently with the Continental Artillery. He served America throughout the war from the Boston "tea party" to Yorktown, but

certainly his finest hour was spent laying a chain across the Hudson River at the Highlands where the river was narrowest, the tides less rapid, and the winds less fierce. The idea of a chain had not been his. It had been suggested by James Clinton (father of DeWitt) and in August, 1776, the job had been put in the hands of one Ebenezer Young, who had failed miserably.

And then along came Lt. Machin who must have been not only a capable engineer and a fine officer, but an administrator who could inspire enthusiasm. After all, by this time the British had come up the river as far as Kingston and burned it to the ground. What lay next? By November Machin had secured enough additional links to finish his chain, had attached them to logs and was ready to stretch them across the river. It was so late in the season, everyone recognized that this was only a trial, for the river would freeze over soon and the chain had to be hauled ashore for repairs. Machin was not discouraged. The chain could and would be fixed, he insisted. And so it was. In the spring of 1777 the chain was successfully laid at a slightly different angle -- 1,650 feet of chain, 850 links, which held throughout the war. It was never actually tested by the enemy, but General Washington feared that it might be. Wherever he was, Washington would send word back to the Highlands every fall: don't endanger the chain by letting it stay too long in the river but don't endanger the river by taking it up too soon.

Story with Focus and Power

By making the Hudson River the centerpiece of his study of the American Revolution, Lincoln Diamant is able to present a story with the focus and power of a classic narrative. Like any good historian, he knows that the best way to tell history is to tell it slowly, detail by detail, until the full emotional force is plumbed. As it happened, of course, his story builds up to the incredible treachery of Benedict Arnold. Seen against the background of the struggle for the river, the enormity of Arnold's betrayal strikes a-fresh. And to all who live on the shores of Hudson's River, this book adds the dimension of time, as essential to its life as the tide, itself.



DOBBS FERRY DOCUMENTED IN DETAIL BY BERTHIER IN 1781 — Excer

Editor's Note: Before documenting Dobbs Ferry in detail, Berthier, on the staff of Rochambeau, made himself comfortable, naturally.

I will depart from this devastation of war to tell you about our headquarters -- made famous by a visit from General Washington. I have told you that our quarters are very dispersed and the house assigned to M. le Chevalier de Lameth and me is 3 miles away from the Field Marshall's quarters, left of the French line. Having asked the attendant for 5 tents, we chose a site in the middle of a wood where about thirty superb trees shaded several masses of rock between which ran a brook. The trees are bushy and through a natural portal one enters into a sort of salon. A few openings in the curtain of leafy branches gave us good view-

points. This leafy enclosure was later replaced by a ditch.

One reached the General's through a 500 foot path. To the left on a slope we tethered our horses -- a picturesque spot under an arbor of branches that formed a sort of hangar.

In entering our camp one saw a plain of beautiful grass with a few small trees where we pitched two tents. Between them one could see a splendid field full of cattle. To the left was the mass of rocks which we climbed through a difficult path. Half way up we tied a large English mastiff who warned of the approach of any stranger. Following the rocks one came to a sort of tavern which we formed with branches so thick against the sun that it remained cool and fresh. That's where we made a resting place to read through the heat of the day.



Stories of the Revolution, Including the Ladies, Will be Told at Mead House February 23

Fascinating stories of the American Revolution, including those remembering the ladies, will be told by author/historian Lincoln Diamant at a special program for members at the Mead House, 12 Elm Street, February 23, at 3:00 p.m.

Non-members may join the Society and gain admission by completing an application at the door.

Lincoln Diamant, an authority on the American Revolution, is the author of "Chaining the Hudson" (reviewed on page 1).

In his latest book, "Yankee Doodle Days", he pulls back the curtain on unexpected and little known groups of people who participated in the war.

Women, for instance, were not just the stay-at-homes as they are sometimes pictured. If they wanted to participate in the military, many simply did, legally or illegally, with or without General

Washington's approval.

Although Mr. Diamant in his talk, "Remember the Ladies", will introduce both specific and active groups of women, he may also (as he does in his recent book) disclose the little-known story of a group of Christianized Indians and their involvement in the war.

In "Yankee Doodle Days" Lincoln Diamant introduces us to Private Obadiah Brown, whose detailed diary was discovered in the Westchester Historical Society. A meticulous researcher, he sets us straight on many little-understood facts, such as the origin of the much maligned word "skinnners" as applied to irregulars in Westchester County.

Dobbs Ferry is fortunate, indeed, to have an expert like Mr. Diamant help us explore our common past.

Mr. Diamant's books will be available at the program.

~ IN MEMORIAM ~

Two members of the Dobbs Ferry Historical Society, Raymond Willsea and Demarest Romaine, died in January.

Raymond Willsea served as a Trustee for the past year. Demarest Romaine was a member of the Nominating Committee.

Ray eagerly contributed his engineering abilities to the needs of the Society. Demarest's able council was called upon annually by the Nominating Committee preceding the Annual Meeting.

Both men will be sorely missed.

At the entrance to my tent is a grassy bench. To the left are the tents of Lameth and Dumas in a naturally beautiful setting. In the center of the camp we made an office with a table and seats made of tree trunks. Toward the east was a leafy thicket giving us shade for breakfast. To the left the bush was thick, but we cut a path to an almost secret area where one could enjoy some solitude -- so isolated it seemed made for love. Each tent had a work table and our arms hung above us. The paths were of yellow sand and between the trees we planted grass and flowers.

That, my friend, is where we spent six weeks as happy as can be. Everyone spoke of our charming camp and General Washington, after dining with the field marshal, would come around on his walk. When he entered our camp, our military band played marches until he left.

As he passed in front of our tents he checked our tables to see what we were working on. Dumas was documenting the evacuation of Boston and the surrender of the army of General Burgoyne. Lameth was working on the Trenton affair and that of Princeton as well as the evacuation of Philadelphia. And I was documenting the embarking of the French army for America, its position at Rhode Island and the joining with the American army under General Washington. [Ed. Note: See map below attributed to Berthier.] He seemed pleased to see all these positive events of the war written down.

He would then go into our tavern area for a rest on the grassy bed, beside which was a table with madeira and punch, according to the American custom. After he and his entourage had had a drink, we mounted our horses and escorted them back to their camp.



GREENBURGH HEBREW CENTER -- The First Twenty-five Years

One day late in spring of 1946, Al Spiegel and Arthur Davis met to discuss the possibility of organizing a religious group which would cater to the needs of the Jewish residents of the lower Greenburgh area. Since it was agreed that such a group was vitally needed, both men began scouting villages of Ardsley, Dobbs Ferry, Hastings and Irvington to locate interested families who would support such a venture.

It was determined, in October of that year, that only about two dozen families could be located who expressed a willingness to support a religious organization that would be in part a Jewish social group. Accordingly, a meeting was scheduled in November at Dr. Davis' home, at which the following men were present: Jack Baron, Meyer Camhi, Arthur Davis, Louis Ettus, Morris Lerner, Harry Reider, Morris Reider, Al Spiegel, Harry Spiegel, Sandor Smalheiser.

Although the attendance proved to be somewhat disheartening, promises were nevertheless obtained from a sufficient number of other interested families to indicate that there was a nucleus that could be counted on for support. The name Greenburgh Hebrew Center was suggested, deemed appropriate and descriptive, and adopted. So as to attract the greatest number of people, it was thought best to use the "middle of the road" approach and adopt the conservative philosophy. The Reformed people and those that leaned toward Orthodoxy accepted this decision and agreed that this would be the Center's attitude, hopefully, throughout its existence.

Arrangements were made to meet again, late in January, in the assembly room in the Hastings Municipal Building, to which all interested individuals would be invited. The second meeting of the fledgling Greenburgh Hebrew Center was held on January 28, 1947 in Hastings. Approximately 20 families participated in the meeting.

However, this was the first meeting in which the minutes were recorded. The first business was the election of officers: President Arthur Davis, Vice-President Matthew Davis, Secretary Bess Pobiner, Treasurer Moe Reider. The following committees were also set up: Executive, Membership, Program and Junior League -- to sponsor young people's activities. The members voted to rent Legion Hall in Dobbs Ferry as a permanent meeting place. It was decided that each meeting was to be divided between business and social activities. Card playing was to be barred after business meetings.

At the next meeting, February 25, 1947, a Board of Trustees was elected. Charles Joseph was in the process of getting a charter necessary to make this a legally recognized organization. The Executive Committee reported the following:

1. The Legion Hall was rented for \$125 for one year. This included ten meeting nights, four holidays, three social events.
2. The Jewish Theological Seminary was contacted for a rabbi for the High Holidays, as well as for a Hebrew teacher.
3. A census was to be taken of children who might go to Hebrew School.
4. A journal and fashion show were discussed, as well as the following:
 - a. Mrs. Joseph was to take care of publicity.
 - b. Dues were \$10 per family.
 - c. Treasurer Moe Reider reported \$242.23 on hand after expenses.
 - d. Speakers were to be planned for meetings.
 - e. Ladies were to donate refreshments.

Another busy meeting, with many activities planned, was recorded March 25, 1947.

No minutes were recorded after that until September 30, 1947. This is what the minutes recorded happened in the interim:

- a. The High Holidays had attracted 150 people. Mr. Soffen, a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary, had conducted the services.
- b. Twenty-two children attended an end-of-season party.
- c. A Succoth festival for children and a trip to the Jewish Museum was planned for them.
- d. A card party was planned for November 13th, \$1.00 admission.

From then on, raising money was a prime activity. Women workers were among the most prolific fund raisers, and two leaders were Miriam Marrus and Leona Bender. There were card parties and dances in the High School gym. There were theatre parties, and a rummage sale brought in \$480.60. Several tent bazaars, dinner and journal affairs brought in much-needed cash. The men put on spaghetti dinners, beef steak picnics and, of course, Kol Nidre drives.

The First Sunday School classes were held in the Legion Hall September 1948 with 15 children. Three classes were grouped according to age. Bernice Jacobson, Helen Baron and Joseph Shriro, principal,

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Greenburgh Hebrew Center -- continued from page 5
 each had a group. The object was to teach Bible stories, Jewish history, customs, ceremonies and current events. Classes met for two hours on Sunday mornings. Texts, story telling, crayon and paper work and the use of plays were used to teach. About that time the first permanent rabbi was elected. He took over the religious education of the children. Hebrew was introduced and classes in Hebrew were taught in the afternoon after public school sessions.

A growing congregation required expanded facilities. The result was that under the leadership of Jack Sonkin, Hyman Lipman, Al Spiegel and others, a drive was started to raise money and find a permanent home for the Center. At the present location of the Center on Broadway there was a large brick building,



First home of Greenburgh Hebrew Center

which was purchased. This building was remodeled and then housed the Sunday school, a sanctuary for religious services, offices and a home for the caretaker. This was all accomplished by the fall of 1949.

By this time there were about 50 member families. The Center became the focal point for these Jewish families, and it also acted as an incentive for many Jewish people to make their homes in this area. It became an outlet for their religious and social needs, and a place for their children to get religious training, as well as a place to meet their peers.

The Center continued to grow in many ways. New members brought in new ideas and new energy for the new demands. There were many divergent points of view leading to some dissension, but time proved that what the Center represented was much greater and far beyond any individual's temporary feelings. By and large, there was such a wonderful spirit of cooperation and fellowship in the early days, that it permeated the new members and so carried the spirit along even to this day.

In gleaning through the old minutes of meetings, a few names and activities were picked at random to highlight an activity. A future enlarged history would be more specific. Since no Center can succeed with officers alone, so all old members and workers can take pride in the accomplishments they helped to create.

The foregoing article was written for the 25th Anniversary Journal by Dr. Arthur David and Joseph Shriro. Both members have passed away. Each contributed of himself in many ways to the growth of the Greenburgh Hebrew Center.

A second article, by Rabbi Barry Kenter, covering the last 25 years of the history of the Greenburgh Hebrew Center will appear in the next issue of The Ferryman

Dobbs Ferry Historical Society

IF YOU ARE NOT A MEMBER, PLEASE JOIN US NOW.

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*Persons under 16 years of age must show parent's or legal guardian's consent for membership. Thus, if you have checked Junior membership above, please provide signature below.

 Signature of Parent or Legal Guardian

 Date

Please check one: Parent _____ Guardian _____