

## PART 2

# DEBORAH SAMPSON, CONTINENTAL SOLDIER:

by Jane Keiter

Soon after Deborah returned to the main army a reorganization of officers and troops took place. Deborah and most of her company were transferred to Colonel Henry Jackson's regiment. Her former regimental head, Colonel Shepard, was put in charge at Springfield, Massachusetts, while Captain Webb and Ensign Town were dispatched to the South.

On July 2nd the first of the troops left Peekskill and headed south through Westchester County, with the rest of the army following. The French army, which had marched from Rhode Island, began arriving on the fifth, led by their commander, the Comte de Rochambeau. The French soldiers, in pristine and colorful uniforms, were well trained and equipped. The two armies made an encampment that stretched from Dobbs Ferry on the Hudson east to White Plains, on land that had belonged to Philipsburgh Manor.

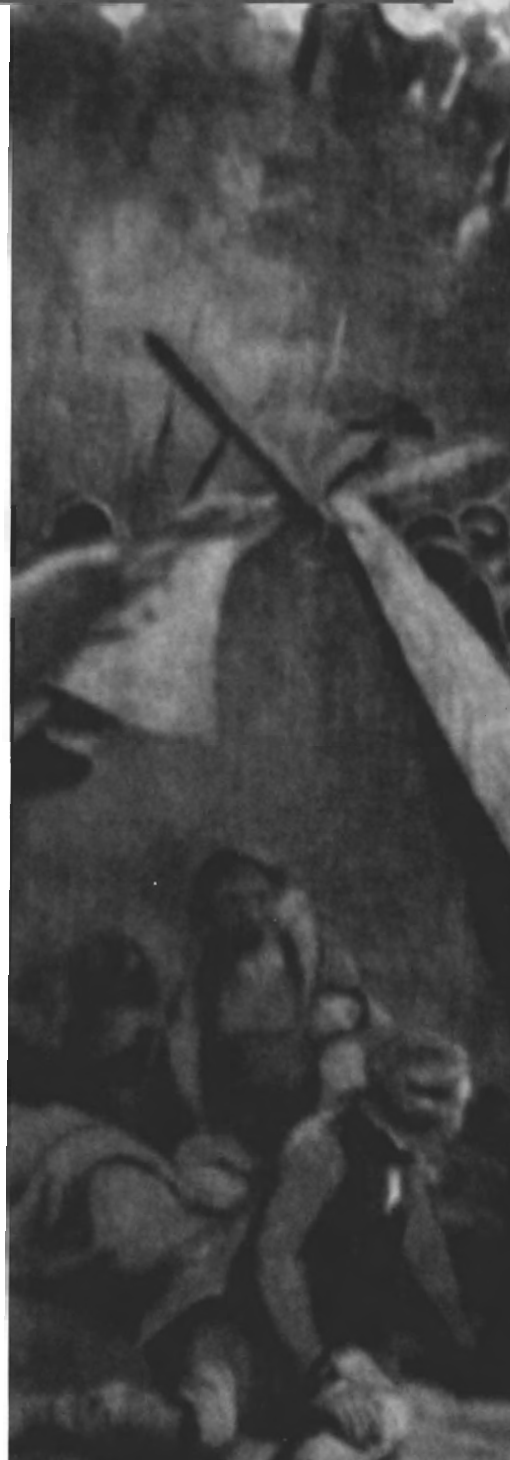
Deborah waited expectantly, but nothing much happened. Then in the middle of August, orders were issued for the troops to be prepared to move at a moment's notice, and on the 19th they were marched to King's Ferry, which they began cross-

ing two days later. The soldiers were lightened of all unnecessary equipment and were allowed only six hours of sleep a night. When they bypassed the camp site and ovens that had been set up in New Jersey and kept marching south, even the rank and file realized that their destination was Virginia.

### THE BATTLE OF YORKTOWN

When they reached the head of the Elk River in Maryland, the troops boarded boats. At Annapolis they received word that a naval battle was in progress just off of the coast between the British and the French, and so they were ordered to stay in port until the outcome was known, which was not until four days later.

On the 15th of September word was received that the French fleet





The Battle of Yorktown. American forces led by Alexander Hamilton overrun the British and raise the Stars and Stripes over the parapet. From *The American Heritage Book of the Revolution*.

had prevailed, and the next day the convoy of transport vessels began streaming out of Annapolis. After landing at a spot between Jamestown and Williamsburg and marching to Yorktown, the Americans, with the French on their left, encamped two miles from the town. Lord Cornwallis and the British army were now hemmed in, the land routes cut off by the allied forces and the water routes blockaded by the French navy.

As the besieging troops set about constructing breastworks, the British began an incessant cannonade. The nights were rainy, making the sandy soil heavy to dig. Deborah came down with a miserable cold, but was relieved that it was not the virulent fever or smallpox, both of which were prevalent in the camp.

The night of October 6th was so shrouded by clouds that no light from the moon penetrated its cover. The soldiers were ordered to march with great stealth for a mile to within 600 yards of the enemy's outer works, where they began digging trenches. By midnight large blisters welted Deborah's palms. Three days later the Americans and French began shelling the town.

In order to complete the second parallel of trenches, it was necessary to capture two British redoubts. The French were assigned one and the Americans the other. Just before sunset on the 14th, the soldiers picked for this assignment were told to unload their muskets and to attach their bayonets. Deborah knew that that could mean only one thing—hand-to-hand combat. At eight o'clock they attacked.

Upon entering the fort Deborah saw two women. One screamed out "Yankee" and an American soldier plunged a bayonet into her chest. He yanked it out and turned toward the other woman. Deborah sprang



Comte de Rochambeau. WCHS Picture Collection.

forward and knocked the blade aside with the barrel of her gun. The frenzied soldier then turned and pointed his bayonet at Deborah. He was about to ram it into her when an officer, who had been watching, rapped him so hard with his sword that the man nearly fell down. The fighting soon ended.

During the next three days the Americans and French let loose with every cannon and mortar they had. The unrelenting din made the earth shudder. Gradually, one by one, the guns of Cornwallis fell silent.

On the morning of October 19th General Washington, mounted on a white horse, led the soldiers to a field between the camp and the

trenches. By noon the Americans were lined up on the right side of the road leading to Yorktown, facing the French on the left side forming an allée of men that stretched for over a mile. At two o'clock the British marched from the remains of the fortified town, their arms shouldered, colors cased and drums beating a doleful march.

Deborah was just one of the tens of thousands of military men and spectators gathered in this Virginia pasture. Not even her right hand man knew who she really was. Deborah Sampson might be anonymous, that then mattered not a whit to her. She knew that she had been at the surrender of Cornwallis.

## THE WINTER OF 1782

Although the victory at Yorktown was a decisive and glorious accomplishment, the war did not end with it. The British still had a troublesome force in the vicinity of Charleston, South Carolina, and the main British army was securely massed in and around New York City. General Washington concluded that "...our only sound policy is to keep a well-appointed, formidable Army in the field, as long as the War shall continue."<sup>1</sup>

While the French were to spend the winter in the South, the Americans were ordered back to West Point. The soldiers began heading north the first week in November, returning by the same route that they had come. They began arriving at West Point on December 7th.

Besides bitterly cold weather and a shortage of clothing, smallpox was a concern. The British had released the slaves that they had captured in the South and had sent them into the American camp at Yorktown. Many had been infected with smallpox. The germ warfare begun in Virginia had been carried

north by the light infantry troops.<sup>2</sup>

By January 8th of the new year, 1782, the situation was deemed critical, and general orders were issued that all of the soldiers who had not had the disease should be inoculated. The inoculation process was risky. The subjects became quite ill for several days afterward and had to be cared for in makeshift hospitals where sometimes complications developed that led to death.

Deborah felt her heart skip a beat when she was ordered to parade for the purpose of culling all those who needed to be inoculated. She had never before felt unwilling to go into the ranks, but she could not allow this to happen. She would have to take the chance of contracting the illness over the surety of being sick and confined to a hospital. She dreaded the discovery of her sex vastly more than the prospect of death. When her turn came, she blatantly lied to the surgeon, saying that she had long ago had smallpox. It was an anxious time for her, as she continued to be exposed to the disease.<sup>3</sup>

As spring approached the ice on the Hudson broke up in echoing cracks and booms that sounded to those who had not experienced it before like the opening cannonade of an attack. Yet all was peaceful militarily. Deborah rejoiced in the strengthening rays of the sun and the lengthening hours of the day.

## SECOND ENCOUNTER

While throughout most of the country farmers were tilling the soil and planting crops and turning their livestock out to pasture, those unfortunate enough to still live in Westchester County had had their lives so disrupted by the constant raids of Tory marauders that any semblance of normal life was impossible. Deborah had witnessed the pitiful condition of these hapless

inhabitants.

In June she and two sergeants asked their captains to give them a detachment so that they could avenge the depredations of the outlaw bands. Deborah's captain had replied, "You three dogs have contrived a plan this night to be killed and I have no men to lose!"

Consent, however, was given, and they immediately looked for volunteers. Although whole companies turned out, only about 30 were allowed to go. The expedition set out near sunset. Traveling south in Westchester, they passed a number of guards at checkpoints where they gave that evening's countersign. They went as far as Eastchester, four miles east of the Hudson. There they quickly learned that two large parties of Tories had just left. While they were discussing the best means of attacking them, they discovered two boys who had been sent to get provisions stored in a cave in the woods.

The boys were asked if they had seen any Tories lately. One replied that a group of them had just been at his mother's, but had left to go visit the Yankees on the lines. The boy inquired who they were. The response was that they were a party on the same business. They said that they were very hungry and requested that the boys take them to the cave.

The boys led the way to a place that they called Vonhoite where they veered off the road and slipped onto a path through the woods. Soon they disappeared into an opening under a ledge. By the wavering light of a lantern, Deborah saw that the cave was well stocked with provisions: bacon, butter, bread, cheese, crouts, early scrohon,<sup>4</sup> and jars of honey. After they had eaten well and had filled their knapsacks, they informed the boys that they were really Yankee soldiers. The two youths made the cave echo with

their cries of dismay.<sup>5</sup>

Guards were stationed near the cave, while the rest of the soldiers hid beside the road to await the return of the Tories. About two in the morning a sentry rushed up and said that a large party was approaching, which outnumbered them two to one. They were mainly on horseback and were well armed.

The Tories stopped on the road. A couple of men dismounted and left to stash some booty in the cave, returning after a short while. Just as the Tories were about to ride off, one of the American sentinels fired his gun. Almost instantly a volley of pistol and carbine shots were aimed where the flash had split the night.

The soldiers emerged and directed a barrage of fire at the center of the Tory troops, scattering them. Several charges were made with bayonets, but the action almost from the start became general. Soon men and horses were lying on the ground, and riderless horses milled about. Deborah grabbed one and mounted. She pulled the reins to the left and tapped the horse's sides with her heels. He responded expertly. Deborah wheeled about and was confronted by a Tory. She sent his upraised sword flying with a whack from her bayonet.

The rest of the night became a blur. Several times she was engaged one-on-one. As there was only starlight, it was difficult to tell friend from foe. It was not until first light that the troops could assess the situation. They found themselves on the edge of a swampy area. Some of the enemy's horses with their riders still on them were stuck in the mire. All of the Tories who had not fled surrendered.

Deborah felt something running down her face that was warmer than sweat. She put her hand to her left forehead and found that blood was flowing freely from a gash. She

looked down and discovered that her clothes on that side were stained red.

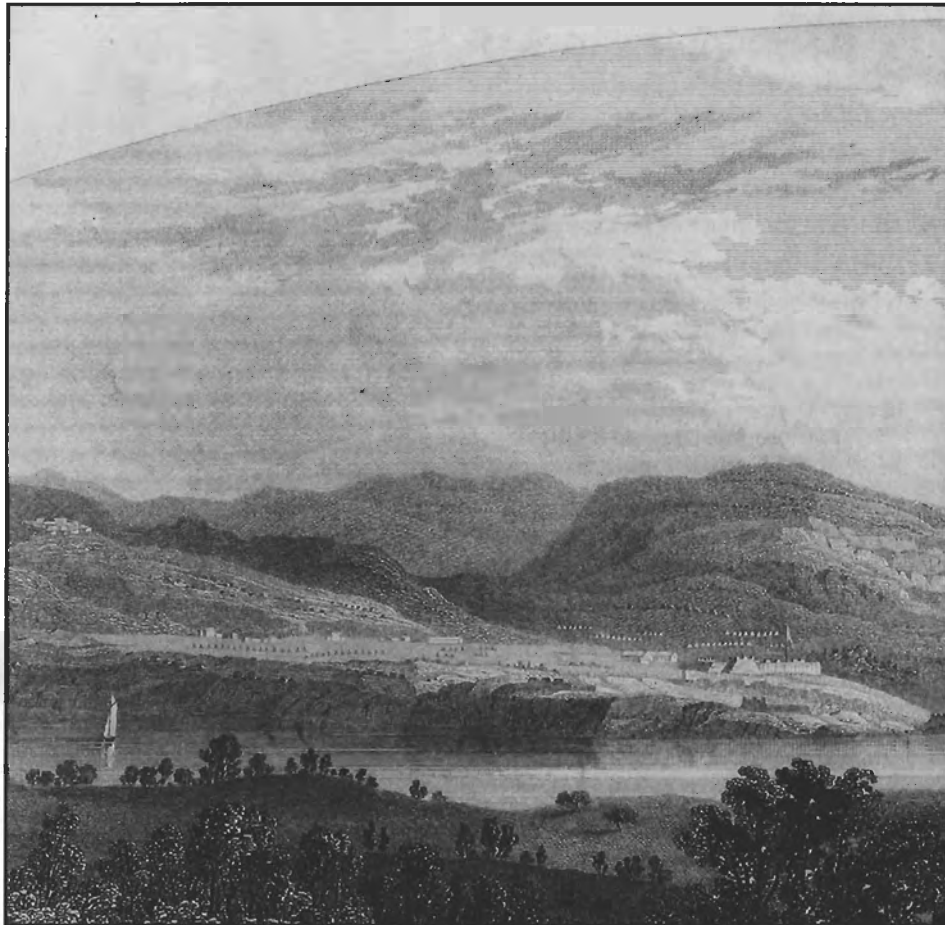
Feeling shaken, Deborah dismounted. Her left leg crumpled underneath her and she slumped to the ground where she fainted. Regaining consciousness, she found herself being carried by two of her companions. She begged them to set her down and get her some water to quench an overwhelming thirst. After gently lowering her, they hastened to the place where they had thrown off their knapsacks.

Examining herself more closely, Deborah discovered that blood also was gushing from a hole made by a pistol ball in her left thigh just below the groin. What was she to do? If this second wound was treated by a doctor, he surely would discover her sex. She would prefer to die from loss of blood that to let that happen.

Her friends returned with a canteen of water and one of spirits. Deborah felt the need of both. As the soldiers bent over to pick her up again, she implored them to leave her. She could not tell them that she wanted to take her chances of either surviving or dying where she was because, above all, she must not go to the hospital. They would not think of abandoning her.

Deborah's despair increased as they headed north. She was so distressed that she hardly noticed when they crossed the Croton River and began the long ascent toward Crompond. Entering the cluster of homes that formed the hamlet, she was told to take heart as they were nearly at the doctor's.

A farmhouse had been taken over by the army to accommodate the officers of troops assigned to this outpost. A doctor was always stationed there to care for the soldiers and for the wounded brought up from the Neutral Ground.<sup>6</sup> Coming in view of the hospital, Deborah



West Point, with its fortifications, in 1780. WCHS Picture Collection.

reached for her holster and took out her pistol—better to end it now and avoid what was to come. But something stayed her hand, and she was borne into the house where a room had been set aside for examinations and, if need be, operations.

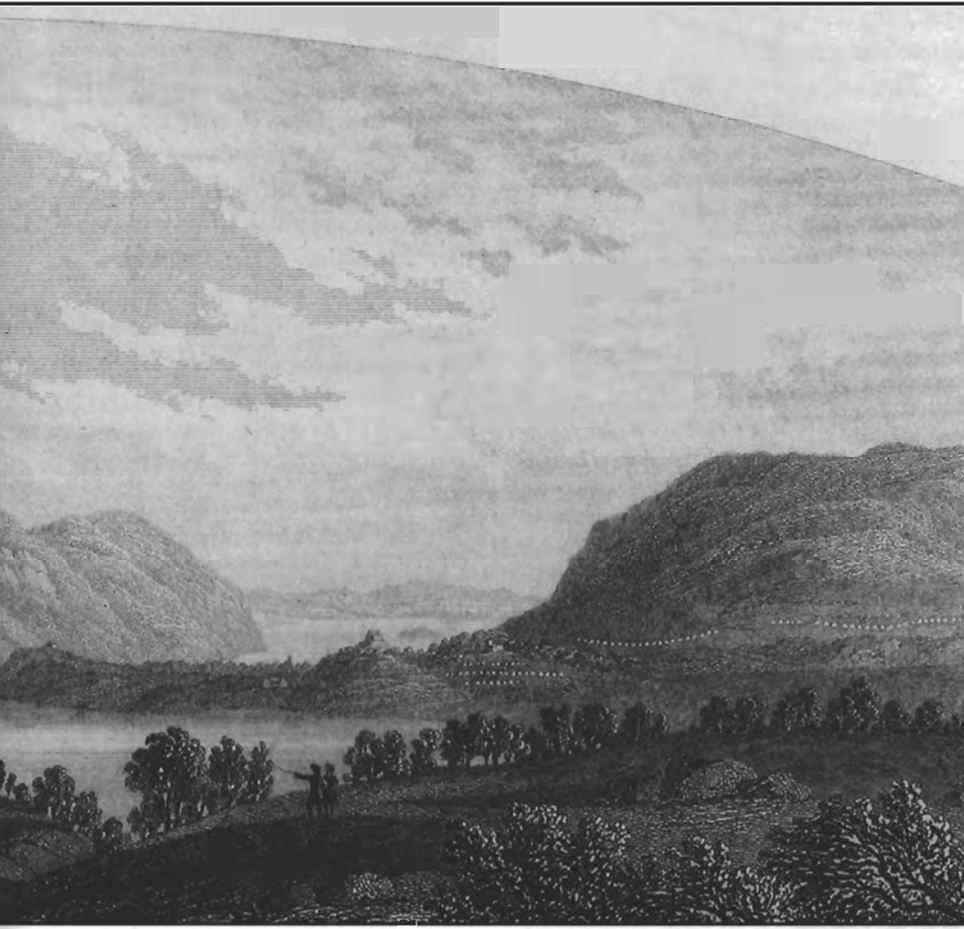
A French surgeon immediately hastened to her side, offering her and some others who had been wounded two bottles of fine wine. “How you lose so much blood at this early hour? Be any bone broken?” he asked kindly, giving her an encouraging smile.

His assistant swabbed the wound to her head with rum. As Deborah did not flinch, he commented that he supposed it had not yet come back to feeling. Deborah's mental pain at this moment was so all-consuming that her brain had not yet

registered that caused by her flesh.

Deborah's head was bound in bandages and she was given a thin, loose gown to change into. As she headed toward the door, the surgeon, eyeing her closely, noticed her pallor and that she limped slightly when she walked. He inquired if perhaps there was another wound that was still undiscovered. Deborah quickly replied no, the one to her head was the only one.

The surgeon was not so easily convinced. He looked her over, his gaze stopping at her boot, which was still oozing from the blood that had filled it. He ordered her to sit and carefully took off her boots and stockings. He washed her left leg to the knee, but on close inspection found nothing. Deborah told him that the blood had come from her



head, and indeed her whole left side was drenched with it. She said that she would retire and change her clothes and would let him know if she found any other injury.

The doctor still seemed uncertain, but just then the wounded privates Rose, Stockbridge and Plummer were brought in and he turned his attention to them. Deborah took this opportunity to snatch a silver probe, a needle, lint, bandages and some of the salve that had been used on her head. Hiding these in the gown she had been given, she walked out of the room. Finding a secluded spot, she gingerly removed her pants. She gasped when she saw the hole, still moderately bleeding, in her inner thigh.

She felt somewhat revived by the wine she had drunk. She insert-

ed the probe, which was slightly curved at the end. It penetrated about two inches before hitting a solid object. On her third try Deborah was successful in extracting the ball.<sup>7</sup> She bandaged her leg and put on the hospital wrap. Then checking to make sure that she had not left any signs of her extraction, she carried her clothes to the shed where mattresses of straw were lined up on the floor.

She was settling herself down on a pallet when the inquisitive surgeon appeared by her side, his shrewd eyes studying her face. Deborah told him that she was feeling better and, above all, she wanted to sleep. An orderly took away her clothes, which were so stiff that they could stand by themselves.

Deborah had been asleep for

about an hour when the surgeon again paid her a visit. She was alarmed to see him holding her pants, still wet from the wash tub. "How came this rent?" he asked, putting his finger into it.

"I believe it happened while on horseback. A nail in the saddle must have snagged it. It's nothing. Please let me sleep. I had none last night."

Deborah never did find out exactly how many of the enemy were killed. Nine were made prisoners and eight horses were taken. Some of the wounded were brought to the Crompond hospital, one of whom soon died.

Deborah's head injury, which received expert care, healed well. She treated her leg as best she could, but it was a deeper wound that, even under the supervision of the surgeon, would have taken much longer to mend. Deborah slowly recovered and as her convalescence progressed, she was pleased to see that the doctor's scrutiny lessened.

By the beginning of August she was pronounced fit enough to rejoin the army for active service on the lines. Had the doctor known, however, of the imperfectly healed wound in her thigh, he would readily have **exempted her** from all military duty. Deborah realized that she could not march far in her condition, but she had no choice but to again enter the ranks and to hope for the best.

### **"VONHOITE"**

No mention of a place called Vonhoite has been found. It was probably a location named for the owner of the land. Such examples were numerous in Colonial times. Most of these early Westchester names were abandoned long ago as neighboring towns grew and absorbed **these small localities**.

**Caves were plentiful** in Westchester and several are fairly

well documented because they either held Indian artifacts or were used as homes by some of the county's more eccentric characters. Many of these caves, however, were lost when the land was either blasted or bulldozed to make way for roads and housing developments

No starting point is given for the American troops' travels eastward, but it would most likely have been north of the Croton River. The manuscript represents this episode as taking place in the course of a single night, which would have meant a vigorous march the length of Westchester and back. Typically, however, scouting parties such as these spent at least several days roving the county. It is possible, there-

fore, that the sequence of events was not so compressed.

The soldiers may have gone to Eastchester in stages, taking a day or two. They may have been wending their way north again when they learned about the Tories and followed, still staying inland, trying to overtake them. More than halfway to the Croton River they encountered the two boys, which would have put them much closer to Crompond.

A possible locale is the area near where the borders of the present towns of Ossining, Mount Pleasant and New Castle intersect two miles due east of Ossining and the Hudson River. There were three caves in this vicinity, two of which were

quite large. A pond, which the Indians had used as a water source, was nearby and may have been the "morass" mentioned in the manuscript.<sup>8</sup>

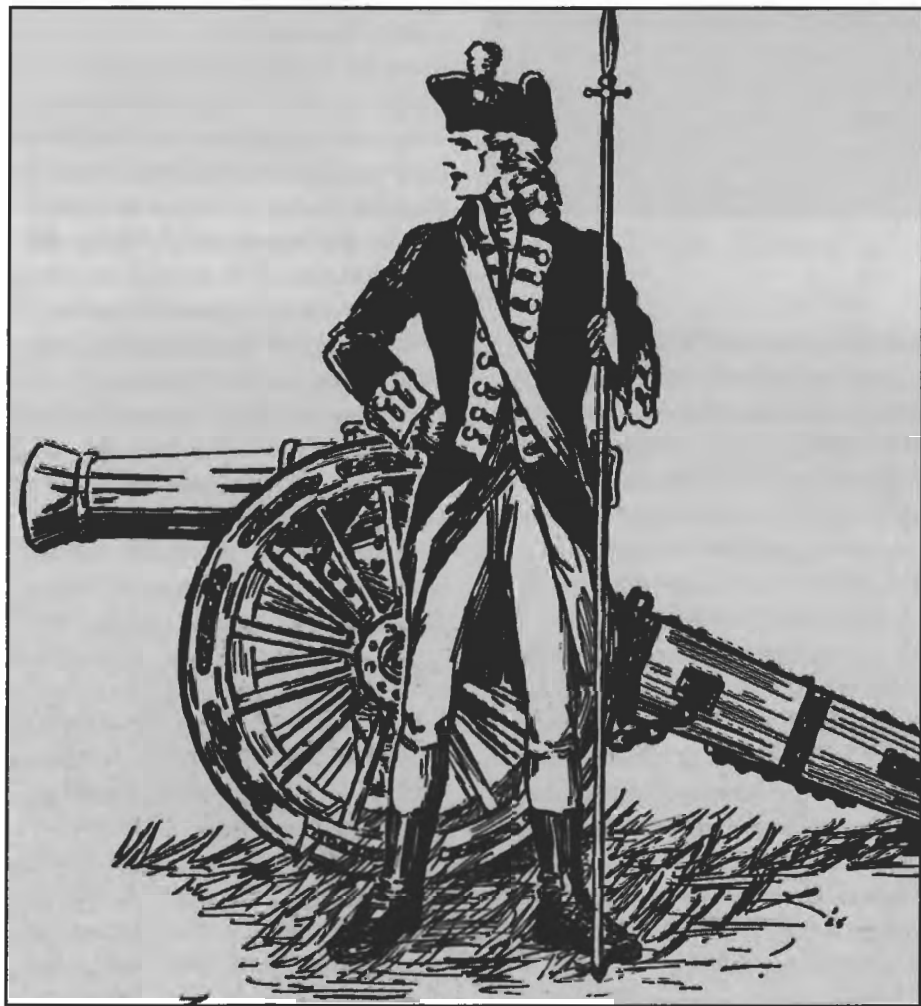
It is in this region that William (also given as Willis) Haight had a tenant farm of 133 acres that was part of the extensive land holdings that made up Philipsburgh Manor. Unfortunately for Frederick Philipse 3d, he chose the wrong side in the Revolution. After the war his confiscated land was put up for sale by the New York State Commissioners of Forfeitures, and Haight purchased the land that he had been farming.<sup>9</sup>

The name Haight has many variations, the most usual being Hoyt and Hoit, with Hoite and Haite also used frequently. It was a relatively common name in Westchester. Deborah only heard it so would have spelled it phonetically in any case. In *The Female Review* it says "a place called, in Dutch, Vonhoite." If the boys were Dutch, they would have used the prefix Van, but it is possible that Deborah misunderstood them. There is no mention of it being Dutch in the manuscript.

The manuscript does not tell by what route Deborah was taken to Crompond. The area of the caves is near the road (present-day Route 100) leading to Pines Bridge. She could also have gone via the New Bridge closer to the Hudson or have forded the river at some point between the two bridges.

The problems with location do not end here, however. In her pension application of 1818, Deborah says that she was wounded at Tarrytown. This has led some writers to conclude that it was in the first skirmish that she received her injury. Some have combined the two into one encounter. Some have placed both in June of 1782.

It is possible that Deborah used



Lieutenant of Light Artillery, West Point. WCHS Picture Collection.

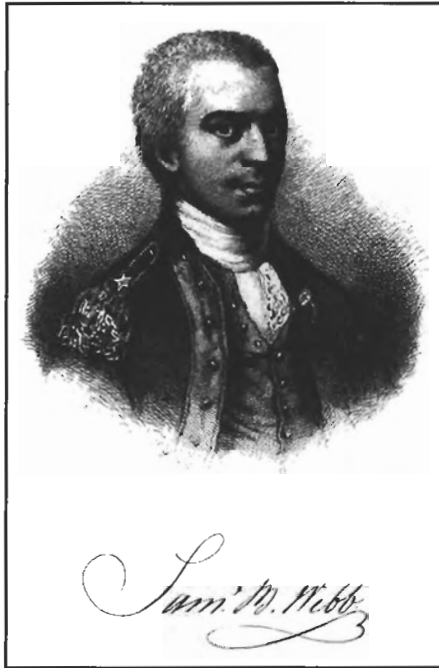
Tarrytown because she thought that it was the town closest to the skirmish. She had covered a lot of ground on a dark night and may not have been aware of her exact location. To those reading her petition many years after the war, Tarrytown would have been familiar as the place where André was captured. Vonhoite was an obscure locality that no one outside of Westchester would have known.

Some writers have claimed that Deborah crawled to a cave where she stayed until her wound healed. Because a cave is involved in this episode, it is easy to see how this rumor may have started. Others have stated that she hid in the woods. Both of these versions are believed to be incorrect.

## THE HOSPITAL

The manuscript says that Deborah was taken to "the French hospital, at a place called CromPond." The French army was still in Virginia and it is unlikely that they had any facilities in Crompond at this time. There is evidence, however, that the Americans gave medical care at this village. In an entry for February 14, 1781, Dr. Thacher states, "The advance-guard of our army, consisting of about two hundred men, is posted at Crompond, about twenty miles below West Point, and is relieved every two or three weeks. A surgeon constantly attends, and I am now ordered to repair to that post to relieve Dr. Thomas."<sup>10</sup>

When the French army returned to this area in September of 1782, they used the buildings set aside the year before by Commissary Claude Blanchard. He states, "On the 16th, I crossed the North river and caused my sick men, amounting to more than a hundred, to be taken across. I placed them in the Peekskill temple, where I had already established



Samuel Blachley Webb. From *Correspondence and Journals of Samuel Blachley Webb*.

hospitals in the previous year."<sup>10</sup> The temple referred to is Saint Peter's Episcopal Church in Van Cortlandtville.

Blanchard continues, "On the 24th, our army proceeded to Crampond, about nine miles from Peekskill; ...I remained at Peekskill, not being attached to the moving hospital near the army, which was then near [enough] to Peekskill, to have the sick forwarded to it."<sup>12</sup> So even when the French army was encamped in Crompond, their hospital remained in Van Cortlandtville, near Peekskill.

It is possible that a French surgeon was attending at the American hospital. If Deborah told Mann that the doctor who treated her was French, he may have assumed that the hospital was also.

## THE WOUNDED

No first names are given for the men mentioned in the manuscript as being wounded in this skirmish, but they can be established from the

Roll of Captain Webb's Company of Light Infantry for November 17, 1782. The original is in the Revolutionary War manuscripts collection of the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts, and appears not to have been known about by the compilers of *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolution* because this information is not listed there.

Private Enoch Rose, from Granville, was 26 years old at the time and had joined the army in 1777. He was a wagoner before being transferred to Captain Webb's company in 1780. His twin brother, Elijah, also served in the army and is described as being 5'8" tall and having a dark complexion.<sup>13</sup>

Having survived the war, Enoch's life came to an early end in 1788 "falling from a frame." His only child and namesake was born that same year, but as no month is given for Enoch's death, it is not known if he ever saw his son.<sup>14</sup> His widow Lydia, who remarried, later applied for a pension.<sup>15</sup>

John Stockbridge of Pembroke first enlisted in January of 1776 at Sutton and served in different companies before joining Captain Webb's.<sup>16</sup> According to records of the Daughters of the American Revolution, he "was in 14 'pitched battles' and seven 'skirmishes.'" He was discharged in June 1783. Three years later he married Mary Dillingham in North Yarmouth, Maine.

As of 1818 Stockbridge was living in Township No. 8, Oxford County, District of Maine. In his pension application submitted that year, he states that he was a surveyor of lands, but was unable to pursue his occupation because of "numb palsy."<sup>17</sup> He died in Byron, Maine, in August of 1820 at the age of 63. Although Mary was said to be "very infirm" in 1818, she applied for and received a pension 20 years later.<sup>18</sup>



There are several entries in *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors* for a Samuel under Plummer and Plumer, but none of these appears to be the right man, and without further information this soldier could not be identified. He must have been a relatively recent addition to Captain Webb's company because he is not listed on the muster roll for the year before.

The manuscript also states that "Diston [sic] was killed upon the field." *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors* has listings for Detson, Didson, Ditson and Dittson, but none seems to fit. It is possible that the man referred to is Samuel Ditson. Mary, his widow, filed a pension application. Formerly of Billerica, more recently of Boston, Ditson had served as an orderly sergeant and private from the spring of 1775 until the close of the war or "nearly that period." Mary "had lost almost all of her faculties" and could not recall much about her husband's record.<sup>19</sup> If Samuel is the correct man, it appears that he did not die in this encounter and it is not known why Deborah mentioned his name.

## AUGUST 1782

When Deborah rejoined the ranks, she was given a strenuous assignment that she could not perform in her injured state. She thought that she had found the perfect solution to her dilemma. As it turned out, however, she had unwittingly gotten herself into a precarious predicament.

*To be continued.*

*Jane Keiter, who lives in Mount Kisco, serves on WCHS's Board of Trustees. She has a BA in Religion and Philosophy from Wheaton College in Massachusetts. She has written several other articles for The Westchester Historian.*

## ENDNOTES:

<sup>1</sup>John C. Fitzpatrick, ed. *The Writings of George Washington From the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*. 39 vols. (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1931-1944), 23:217.

<sup>2</sup>The growing smallpox crisis is recorded in, among others, Thomas Egleston. *The Life of John Paterson, Major-General in the Revolutionary Army*. (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1889), 246, 250-251; James Thacher. *Military Journal of the American Revolution*. (United States of America: Arno Press, Inc., 1969), 307-308.

<sup>3</sup>It seems unlikely that Mann would have known about the inoculations unless he had been told about them by Deborah. Mann clearly used Dr. Thacher's *Military Journal* when he rewrote *The Female Review*, but this episode is mentioned in his earlier work which was published years before Thacher's.

In February 1782 a duel by pistols took place at West Point between Lieutenant Nathaniel Stone and Captain Luke Hitchcock resulting in the captain's death. This is related in Mann's *The Female Review*, but curiously he places it at Goshen, New York, nearly a year later. Thacher mentions this duel but refers to the men only as Captain H— and Lieutenant S—. In his manuscript Mann relates Thacher's version, but also leaves in the Goshen incident, perhaps unaware that they are the same.

Again it would appear that Deborah was the source for the story. Both incidents indicate that she was in the army before May of 1782.

<sup>4</sup>Research has not determined what sort of foodstuffs "crousts" (perhaps sourkraut) and "scrohons" are.

<sup>5</sup>Although it was a moonless night, it seems that the boys would have been able to tell the identity of the soldiers if they had been in their regimentals.

Perhaps they were wearing more casual dress on this occasion.

<sup>6</sup>No description of the "hospital" is given. It was most likely some out-building associated with a farmhouse. In August of 1781 Claude Blanchard, commissary of the French army, visited a hospital near West Point. "The buildings which serve for the hospital were nothing but barns which had not even been repaired." Thomas Balch, ed. *The Journal of Claude Blanchard*. (United States of America: Arno Press, Inc., 1969), 131.

<sup>7</sup>The manuscript says, "which I still possess, as a sacred relic."

<sup>8</sup>Leslie V. Case, "The Ossining Rock Shelter," *The Westchester Historian* (October 1929), 81-85.

<sup>9</sup>*Abstract of Sales, New York State Commissioners of Forfeitures*.

Westchester County Archives. William Haight paid 339 pounds for his land which was bounded on the north by the Sing Sing Kill. *Map of the Upper Part of the Manor of Philipsburgh Showing Occupants in 1785*. Westchester County Archives.

<sup>10</sup>Thacher. *Military Journal*. 255.

<sup>11</sup>Balch, ed. *The Journal of Claude Blanchard*. 174.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>13</sup>Secretary of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolution*. 17 vols. (Boston:Wright and Potter, 196-1908), 13:569.

<sup>14</sup>*Vital Records of Granville, Massachusetts to the Year 1850*. (Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1914) 72, 219.

<sup>15</sup>Pension claim BLWT 1198-100, National Archives.

<sup>16</sup>*Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolution*, 15:40, 41.

<sup>17</sup>Pension claim W250575, National Archives.

<sup>18</sup>Pension claim BLWT 2233-100, National Archives.

<sup>19</sup>Pension claim W15892, National Archives.