

THE BATTLES BEHIND THE MUSTER ROLL

The Hill Beyond the Lines: White Plains and the Road to Valley Forge

By Andrew D. Stevenson

A muster roll can tell us that John Van Dyk served with the Continental artillery at Valley Forge. His later service summary can carry the story backward: Long Island, Harlem Heights, White Plains, Trenton, Brandywine, Germantown, Monmouth. It is an extraordinary itinerary compressed into a few lines. Yet a list of battles cannot show what White Plains meant in October 1776, when the Continental Army was not marching confidently toward independence but retreating through Westchester County with British and Hessian troops pressing after it.

For the experience of that retreat, another soldier helps. Joseph Plumb Martin was fifteen years old during the New York campaign. At White Plains he served in a Connecticut state battalion and fought on Chatterton's Hill, the exposed height west of the Bronx River where the principal action took place on October 28. Martin was not yet the veteran who would endure Fort Mifflin, Valley Forge, Monmouth, and Yorktown. He was a teenager learning how quickly a position could become dangerous and how much an army's survival depended on withdrawing before defeat became destruction.

Van Dyk and Martin did not reach Valley Forge by the same regimental path, and the records do not place them side by side at White Plains. They are useful together for a different reason. Van Dyk anchors the story in the Valley Forge muster rolls; Martin supplies the remembered texture of a rank-and-file campaign. Between them, White Plains becomes more than a minor defeat between Brooklyn and Trenton. It becomes a lesson in terrain, time, weather, and the preservation of an army that still had to learn how to survive.

The Road North from New York

The road to White Plains began with the loss of Long Island. After the Battle of Brooklyn on August 27, Washington escaped across the East River under cover of darkness and fog. The army then lost ground again at Kip's Bay, recovered some confidence at Harlem Heights, and watched as General William Howe used British sea power and maneuver to threaten the American position on upper Manhattan. Washington faced the danger that had haunted him since Brooklyn: not merely losing a battlefield, but having the army cut off and captured.

In October, the Americans began moving north toward White Plains, where roads and supplies converged. The march was neither a clean retreat nor a single movement. Units traveled by separate routes, wagons clogged narrow roads, local geography divided columns, and British landings on Long Island Sound threatened the army's flank. At Pell's Point on October 18,

Colonel John Glover's Massachusetts brigade delayed a much larger British and Hessian force long enough to help protect the movement toward White Plains. Glover's regiments would later enter the Valley Forge encampment, although Glover himself was absent. The connection is important: before those men built huts in Pennsylvania, they had practiced the discipline of buying time in retreat.

By late October, Washington's main line occupied high ground near White Plains. The position looked defensible, but it contained a dangerous omission. Across the Bronx River stood Chatterton's Hill, a commanding height outside the principal American works. Washington had not initially incorporated it into his line. Once British columns appeared, the hill could not be ignored. Troops were sent across the river to hold it, turning an overlooked piece of terrain into the center of the battle.

The Hill Beyond the Lines

Chatterton's Hill was valuable because it overlooked the American right and the approaches to White Plains. Brigadier General Alexander McDougall commanded the mixed force sent to defend it, including Continental and state troops from several colonies. Haslet's Delaware Regiment and Maryland troops helped stiffen a line that also included New Yorkers, Massachusetts soldiers, and Connecticut men. The precise order and strength shifted as reinforcements arrived, and later accounts do not agree on every placement. What matters is clear: the hill lay beyond the main defenses, and the men on it faced the concentrated British and Hessian attack.

British artillery opened across the valley. Infantry then crossed the Bronx River and climbed toward the American position. The defenders resisted, but a Hessian force under Colonel Johann Rall, reinforced by British cavalry, struck the militia on the American right. As that flank gave way, the position became untenable. Some units maintained enough order to cover others; elsewhere the withdrawal became confused. Chatterton's Hill was lost, and the British and Hessians had won the day's principal ground.

It is tempting to turn every orderly retreat into a moral victory. White Plains does not need that rescue. The Americans were defeated on October 28. They gave up the hill and suffered casualties they could ill afford. But the defeat was limited. Howe had neither enveloped nor captured the main army, and Washington still possessed a force capable of withdrawing, reorganizing, and fighting again. In the circumstances of 1776, that distinction was strategic.

A Teenage Soldier on Chatterton's Hill

Joseph Plumb Martin's later narrative fixes the battle at human scale. He remembered enemy artillery, hard fighting, and the moment when his regiment "fell back a little distance and made

a stand.” His account, published more than fifty years later, is not a field report written on the day. It is an old soldier's reconstruction, vivid and indispensable but shaped by memory. Read beside rosters and official accounts, it shows what command language such as “retired” or “fell back” meant to a private who had to cross exposed ground while formations were breaking around him.

Martin's age matters. The Continental Army at White Plains was full of men still learning war while fighting it. They had not yet passed through the winter campaigns in New Jersey, the Philadelphia campaign, or Baron von Steuben's training at Valley Forge. Their discipline was uneven, their enlistments complicated, and their regimental identities were repeatedly reorganized. Yet survival itself became instruction. A soldier who escaped the hill carried knowledge of terrain, panic, rallying, and rear guards into the next campaign.

Van Dyk's surviving service summary places him in the White Plains campaign but does not prove where he stood during the fighting. That limitation should remain visible. Muster rolls and pension summaries can establish service and association; they rarely recover a minute-by-minute battlefield location. Van Dyk nevertheless represents the continuity that Martin's memoir describes from another angle: men passed through defeat, reappeared in reorganized regiments, and accumulated the experience that later made a more durable Continental Army possible.

Rain, Delay, and Another Escape

White Plains did not end when the firing on Chatterton's Hill stopped. Howe reinforced his army and prepared a renewed attack on Washington's main line for October 31. The Americans improved their works and moved stores and baggage toward safer ground. Heavy rain then intervened. A British officer recorded that the army moved at five in the morning but returned to camp two hours later because the morning proved so wet. The delay gave Washington additional time to withdraw northward toward the stronger heights around North Castle.

The resemblance to Brooklyn is striking but should not be romanticized. At Brooklyn, fog concealed an evacuation across the East River. At White Plains, rain hindered British movement while the Americans escaped another threatened position. In both cases weather created time; it did not create the plan, move the wagons, keep the columns together, or persuade Howe to act cautiously. Soldiers and officers converted the weather into an opportunity.

Later Americans often described such moments in the language of Providence. That vocabulary was natural in an eighteenth-century world that did not sharply separate weather, religion, and public events. A timely fog or storm could be understood as mercy, warning, judgment, or divine favor. But the record resists a simple patriotic weather story. Rain that delayed a British

attack at White Plains could ruin American powder elsewhere; fog helped at Brooklyn and confused American columns at Germantown. The same weather could advantage one army in one moment and hinder it in another, while participants supplied the meaning afterward.

Defeat Without Destruction

Preserving the army at White Plains did not end the crisis. Howe turned south. Fort Washington, still held on Manhattan, fell on November 16 with thousands of American troops captured. Fort Lee was abandoned soon afterward, and Washington's remaining force retreated across New Jersey. Enlistments expired, desertion reduced the ranks, supplies disappeared, and the Revolution approached its most dangerous winter.

White Plains therefore belongs in the story of the Ten Crucial Days not as a hidden American victory but as part of the retreat that made Trenton necessary. The army that crossed the Delaware in December had been schooled by Long Island, Harlem Heights, Pell's Point, and White Plains. Washington had learned the danger of defending fixed positions against superior mobility. His officers had learned the value of delaying actions and guarded withdrawals. The rank and file had learned that losing ground was not the same as losing the war, provided the army remained intact.

That lesson helps explain why Trenton could happen. Washington could risk a winter attack because a core of the army still existed. The storm that battered the Delaware crossing became useful only because experienced officers and soldiers forced boats, horses, artillery, and exhausted men through it. White Plains had taught the cost of being caught; Trenton showed what could happen when time, surprise, and weather were made to work together.

From White Plains to Valley Forge

The line from White Plains to Valley Forge was not straight. Martin's 1776 enlistment ended, and he went home before returning to Continental service in 1777. He then endured the Philadelphia campaign, the defense of Fort Mifflin, and the winter at Valley Forge. Van Dyk served through the same broad transformation. At Valley Forge he was a lieutenant and acting adjutant in the Continental artillery under Brigadier General Henry Knox, part of an army trying to impose regularity on the accumulated experience of earlier campaigns.

Valley Forge is often described as the place where the army learned discipline. White Plains shows that the learning had begun much earlier and under harsher conditions than drill alone can capture. Men learned to retreat without dissolving, to read hills and roads, to protect baggage, to use rear guards, and to accept that survival might be the day's most important objective. At Valley Forge, Steuben's regulations gave common form to an army whose veterans already possessed a hard education in movement and loss.

The connection also works in reverse. Looking back from the muster roll prevents White Plains from becoming a battlefield populated only by famous generals. The roll asks what happened to the soldiers after the hill was lost. Some were killed, wounded, captured, discharged, or simply vanish from the surviving record. Others reappear in new companies and regiments. Their later presence at Valley Forge is evidence that the army endured the New York disaster not as an abstraction, but one person at a time.

What White Plains Brought to the Muster Roll

John Van Dyk's name at Valley Forge carries the memory of White Plains even though the monthly roll does not narrate it. Joseph Plumb Martin's memoir supplies sensations and incidents that the roll omits, but memory alone cannot establish every fact. The two kinds of evidence need each other. Administrative records provide dates, units, ranks, and continuity. Recollections restore fear, confusion, fatigue, and the practical intelligence of ordinary soldiers.

Together they reveal the deeper importance of White Plains. The battle was a defeat, but it did not destroy the Continental field army. The hill was lost, the retreat continued, and worse disasters followed. Yet the army survived long enough to cross New Jersey, strike at Trenton and Princeton, fight another year, and enter Valley Forge with veterans who knew what it meant to preserve a force under pressure.

That is why White Plains belongs behind the muster roll. Valley Forge was not the beginning of Continental endurance. It was one of the places where endurance was organized, recorded, and remembered. The soldiers who reached it had already learned, on a hill beyond the lines and on rain-soaked roads to the north, that the Revolution could continue only if its army did.

A Note on the Records

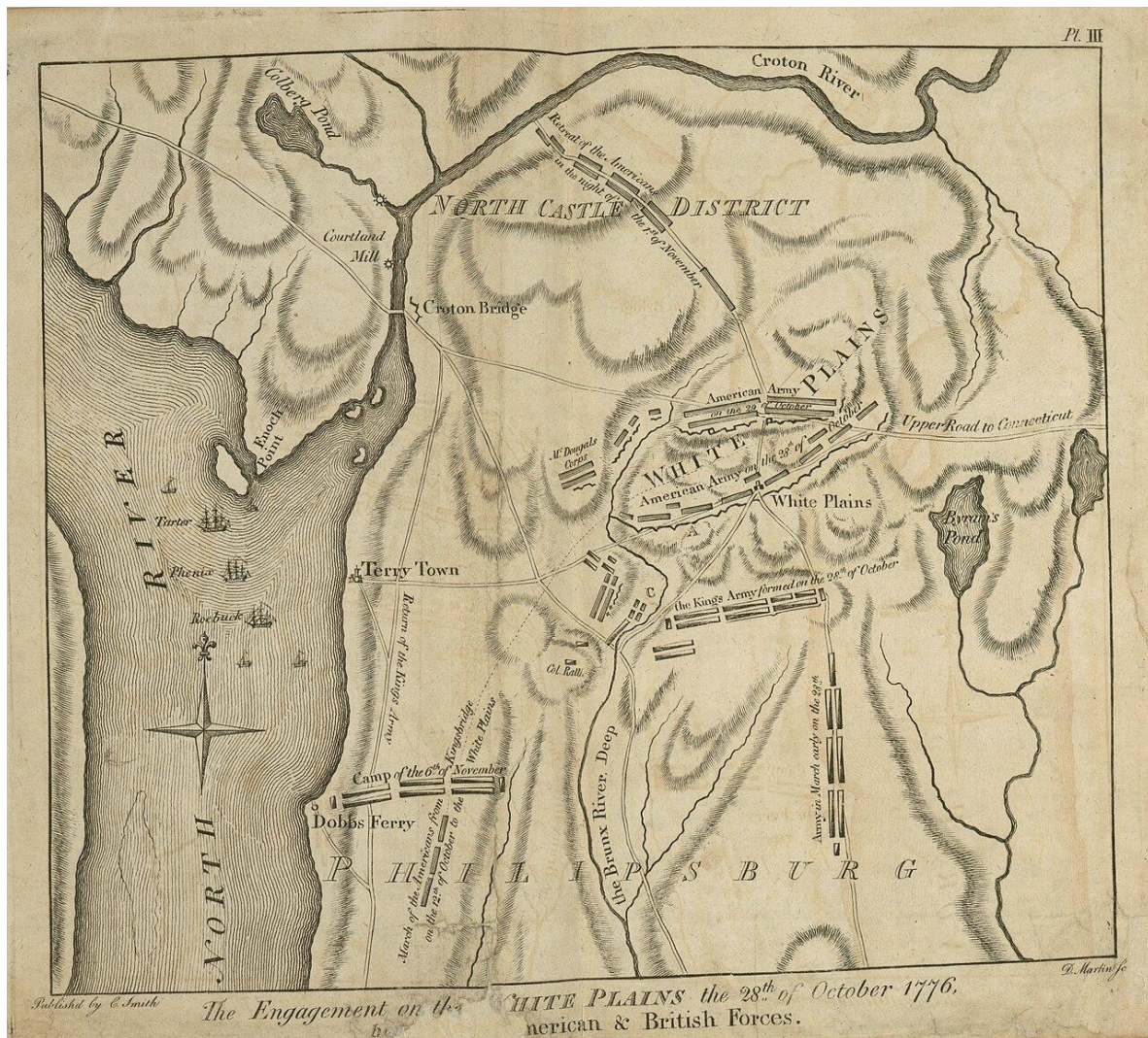
The Battle of White Plains is usually dated October 28, 1776, the day of the principal fighting on Chatterton's Hill. The campaign around White Plains continued for several days as the armies faced one another, the Americans withdrew toward North Castle, and the British eventually turned south. Period accounts vary in unit labels, troop strengths, casualties, and the exact timing of movements.

Muster rolls establish a soldier's status at a reporting point; they do not prove his exact position at every battle. John Van Dyk's Valley Forge record and later service summary support his participation in the 1776 campaign but not a precise post on Chatterton's Hill. Joseph Plumb Martin's 1830 narrative is a retrospective account written decades after the event. It is most reliable when used with contemporary returns, orders, maps, and other soldiers' records rather than treated as a transcript of the day.

Sources & Further Reading

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- [Valley Forge Legacy Muster Roll Project, "Brevet Major John Van Dyk."](#)
- [Valley Forge Legacy Muster Roll Project, "Glover's Brigade."](#)
- [Henry P. Johnston, The Campaign of 1776 around New York and Brooklyn \(1878\).](#)
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- [Claude Joseph Sauthier and William Faden, A Plan of the Operations of the King's Army \(London, 1777\), Library of Congress.](#)

Image and Caption



Caption: This 1797 engraved plan makes the central problem of White Plains visible: the American main line lay east of the Bronx River, while Chatterton's Hill stood beyond it to the west. The hill became the focus of the October 28 fighting and the road of retreat back toward Washington's principal position.

The Engagement on the White Plains, the 28th of October 1776, between the American & British Forces (1797). New York Public Library, Lionel Pincus and Princess Firyal Map Division. Public domain.