THE BATTLES BEHIND THE MUSTER ROLL

THE FORT LEFT BEHIND: FORT WASHINGTON AND THE ROAD TO VALLEY FORGE

By Andrew D. Stevenson

On November 16, 1776, Dr. James McHenry watched the American position at Fort Washington collapse. The young Irish-born physician had entered Continental service that year as a surgeon with the Flying Camp. By the end of the day he was one of nearly three thousand officers and soldiers in British hands.

About eighteen months later, at Valley Forge, McHenry's name appeared in a very different kind of military record. General Orders for May 15, 1778, announced that "James McHenry, Esquire, is appointed as Assistant Secretary to the Commander in Chief." The prisoner taken on the heights of northern Manhattan had returned to the army and entered George Washington's headquarters.

McHenry provides the clearest documented bridge between Fort Washington and Valley Forge. Henry Bedinger, a third lieutenant in the Maryland and Virginia Rifle Regiment, supplies the battle's most vivid personal account. The surviving records do not place the two men side by side, and Bedinger's recollection was written years later. Read together, however, the records show what the muster roll alone cannot: defeat could remove a man from the army for months or years, while exchange could return him to service in an entirely new role.

A Fort Meant to Close a River

Fort Washington stood on the high ground of northern Manhattan, opposite Fort Lee on the New Jersey Palisades. The two works, supported by river batteries and underwater obstructions, were intended to deny British warships the Hudson. The plan was ambitious. If the river could be closed, the Americans might preserve communication between New England and the rest of the states while making the British occupation of New York more difficult.

By November, the strategic premise had weakened. British vessels had already forced passages up the Hudson, and Washington's main army had withdrawn from Manhattan after the fighting at White Plains. What remained was not simply one compact earthwork. Colonel Robert Magaw's garrison defended the central fort and a wide web of outer lines, redoubts, ridges, roads, and river approaches. Those positions stretched across broken ground and required more men than the unfinished fort itself could shelter.

The British also possessed unusually useful information. William Demont, an adjutant in Magaw's Fifth Pennsylvania Regiment, later confessed that he had deserted and delivered a plan of the fortifications to the enemy. His claim does not by itself explain the result, but it underscores how thoroughly the American position had been exposed before the assault began.

The Decision to Hold

Fort Washington's loss is sometimes reduced to a single bad decision attributed either to Washington or to Major General Nathanael Greene. The surviving correspondence shows a more complicated failure of judgment. On November 8, Washington wrote that, if the fort could not prevent enemy ships from passing and might be surrounded, he was inclined to have it evacuated. Greene, who supervised the New Jersey side of the Hudson, believed the position still inconvenienced the British and that its garrison could be withdrawn if danger became immediate. Magaw remained confident that his men could defend it.

Washington did not issue an unequivocal evacuation order. He left substantial discretion with Greene and the officers on the spot, and the garrison remained. The choice was therefore shared and cumulative: strategic hopes attached to the Hudson defenses, confidence in the terrain, reluctance to surrender a prepared post, and an overestimate of the army's ability to remove the men at the last moment.

On November 15, a British officer approached under a flag of truce and demanded surrender. Magaw refused. The battle that followed was not an eight-day siege. It was a coordinated assault fought on November 16, after weeks in which the British had steadily narrowed the Americans' freedom of movement.

Four Attacks on the Heights

At daybreak, British and Hessian forces advanced in four columns from the north, south, and east. Their artillery fired from commanding ground and from vessels in the rivers. The terrain that seemed to protect the Americans also divided them. Steep slopes, ravines, woods, stone walls, and separate defensive lines made it difficult for Magaw to shift men from one threatened sector to another.

The attackers crossing from the east and pressing from the south helped drive the outer defenders toward the central fort. Among the battle's best-known participants was Margaret Corbin. Later military and pension records establish that her husband, artilleryman John Corbin, was killed at Fort Washington and that Margaret subsequently served with the Invalid Regiment. The familiar account that she took her husband's place at a cannon and was badly wounded rests on later testimony and tradition, but it preserves an essential truth about the battle: the garrison's world included women as well as enlisted men and officers, and the cost of defeat extended beyond the formal returns.

The Ridge North of the Fort

The hardest resistance came on the northern ridge, where Lieutenant Colonel Moses Rawlings and Major Otho Holland Williams faced Hessian troops advancing under Wilhelm von Knyphausen. Their command is easily misidentified. Rawlings led a separate Maryland and Virginia Rifle Regiment, not Smallwood's First Maryland Regiment or the main Maryland Line that had fought at Brooklyn and White Plains.

Bedinger remembered roughly 250 men from Rawlings's regiment, another Maryland company, and four companies of the Pennsylvania Flying Camp on the ridge. He wrote that the riflemen held their fire until the Hessians had nearly reached the summit. The first volleys forced the attackers back more than once. The fight then tightened around the crest, where numbers, artillery, and reinforcements gradually decided it.

Rawlings, Williams, Bedinger, and other officers were wounded. Bedinger's right hand became useless. After the ridge could no longer be held, the surviving riflemen withdrew "from redoubt to redoubt," contesting the ground as they moved toward the fort. His description conveys both discipline and desperation. It also needs to be used for what it is: an undated retrospective letter preserved in a later history, not a report written on the night of the battle.

A Garrison Becomes Prisoners

Elsewhere the outer defenses gave way more rapidly. By late afternoon, surviving units crowded inside Fort Washington with little room to maneuver and no realistic route of escape. Magaw surrendered. British and Hessian returns, American recollections, and later histories do not produce one perfectly consistent total, but approximately 2,800 to 3,000 Americans became prisoners. The attackers suffered several hundred casualties, many of them in the struggle for the northern ridge.

This was not a victory disguised by later patriotic language. Courage on one ridge could not repair the strategic trap. The British captured the fort, artillery, supplies, and garrison; renamed the post Fort Knyphausen; and forced the Americans to abandon Fort Lee within days. Washington's army then began its retreat across New Jersey.

For the prisoners, the battle did not end with the stacking of arms. Bedinger recalled that officers were separated from enlisted men and eventually sent on parole to Long Island. The rank and file were crowded into New York jails, churches, and sugar houses with inadequate food, clothing, and shelter. Mortality was severe. Bedinger's later estimate of the number who died in the first months is too uncertain to repeat as an exact total, but the broader distinction in his account is well supported: officers on parole endured hardship, while many enlisted prisoners faced lethal confinement.

McHenry entered that prisoner system as a captured surgeon and officer. His captivity removed him from active service for more than a year. The gap matters. A muster roll can show who answered at a particular place and time, but it can also conceal the military history that explains an absence. At Fort Washington, whole companies passed from active returns into prisoner lists in a single day.

A Surgeon Returns to the Army

By the spring of 1778, McHenry had returned to American service. Washington's May 15 order at Valley Forge did more than record his presence. It assigned him a new function at the center of the army: assistant secretary to the commander in chief. Headquarters correspondence,

orders, intelligence, and the constant movement of information all passed through a small staff whose work connected Washington to generals, civil officials, and detachments in the field.

McHenry therefore should not be described as having endured the whole Valley Forge winter. His documented encampment story begins during its closing phase, only weeks before the army marched away in June. That limited period was still consequential. Within weeks of his appointment, he was participating in correspondence connected to the expected British evacuation of Philadelphia and the army's preparations to move.

Fort Washington also remained present at Valley Forge in a broader administrative sense. General Orders in January 1778 addressed the movement of goods and messages to prisoners behind British lines, and Washington appointed Thomas Bradford deputy commissary general of prisoners. Captivity was not a closed chapter from 1776. It remained a daily problem of exchange, relief, accounting, and manpower.

What Fort Washington Brought to the Muster Roll

A second, more fragile link survives in the later pension history of John Geyer, or Gier. A published summary of his pension claim describes him as a drummer who enlisted near Pittsburgh in 1776, served in the Pennsylvania regiments of Colonels Samuel Miles and Walter Stewart, and was present at Fort Washington. It also reports that he was discharged at Valley Forge on January 1, 1778. If his stated age is accepted, he was only about eleven or twelve when he entered the army.

Geyer's compressed service history is compelling, but it does not identify his exact post on November 16 or explain how he avoided the mass capture. It should not be used to reconstruct movements that the record does not supply. Its value is different: it preserves an enlisted itinerary from the New York campaign through Trenton, Princeton, Brandywine, and Germantown to a discharge at Valley Forge.

McHenry's evidence is stronger and different in form. His Valley Forge connection rests on a dated general order, not a company muster entry. That distinction is precisely why the series must look both at the roll and behind it. Regimental rolls, headquarters orders, prisoner records, pension claims, and later recollections answer different questions. None can safely stand in for all the others.

Fort Washington belongs behind the muster roll because it reveals the cost of a name disappearing from the army—and the meaning of a name returning. Valley Forge did not erase the fort's failure. It gathered some of its survivors, recorded new duties, managed the continuing consequences of captivity, and made the experience of defeat part of an army still capable of continuing the war.

A Note on the Records

Contemporary and later accounts vary in troop strengths, casualty totals, the disposition of individual units, and the number and fate of prisoners. Henry Bedinger's letter is unusually

detailed but was written years after the event; its tactical observations are most reliable when checked against maps, returns, correspondence, and other accounts. James McHenry's capture and his May 15, 1778, appointment at Valley Forge are independently documented. John Geyer's battle list and Valley Forge discharge come through a later published summary of pension claim S.41567 and do not establish his exact position at Fort Washington.

Unit names require particular care. Rawlings's Maryland and Virginia Rifle Regiment was not Smallwood's First Maryland Regiment. Likewise, presence on a Valley Forge-period record does not always mean that a person spent the entire winter in camp. McHenry entered Washington's staff in mid-May 1778, during the final five weeks of the encampment.

Sources & Further Reading

- American Battlefield Trust, "Fort Washington."
- Founders Online, George Washington and Nathanael Greene correspondence concerning Fort Washington, November 1776.
- Danske Dandridge, American Prisoners of the Revolution, including Henry Bedinger's undated letter.
- George Washington Papers, Series 3, Subseries 3G, Varick Transcripts, Letterbook 3, General Orders, May 15, 1778.
- The Society of the Cincinnati, Maryland in the American Revolution.
- Virginia Shannon Fendrick, American Revolutionary Soldiers of Franklin County, Pennsylvania, entries for John and Margaret Corbin and John Geyer.
- Henry P. Johnston, The Campaign of 1776 Around New York and Brooklyn.
- Claude Joseph Sauthier, A Topographical Map of the Northn. Part of New York Island, 1777, Library of Congress.

Image and Caption



Thomas Davies's contemporary view presents British and Hessian forces advancing against Fort Washington across the broken heights of northern Manhattan. Smoke, artillery, and ordered formations make the image a record of terrain and combat, but also a British victory picture; it should be read as a participant's visual interpretation.

Credit: Thomas Davies, A View of the Attack against Fort Washington and Rebel Redouts near New York on 16 November 1776, watercolor, 1776. Wikimedia Commons. Public domain.