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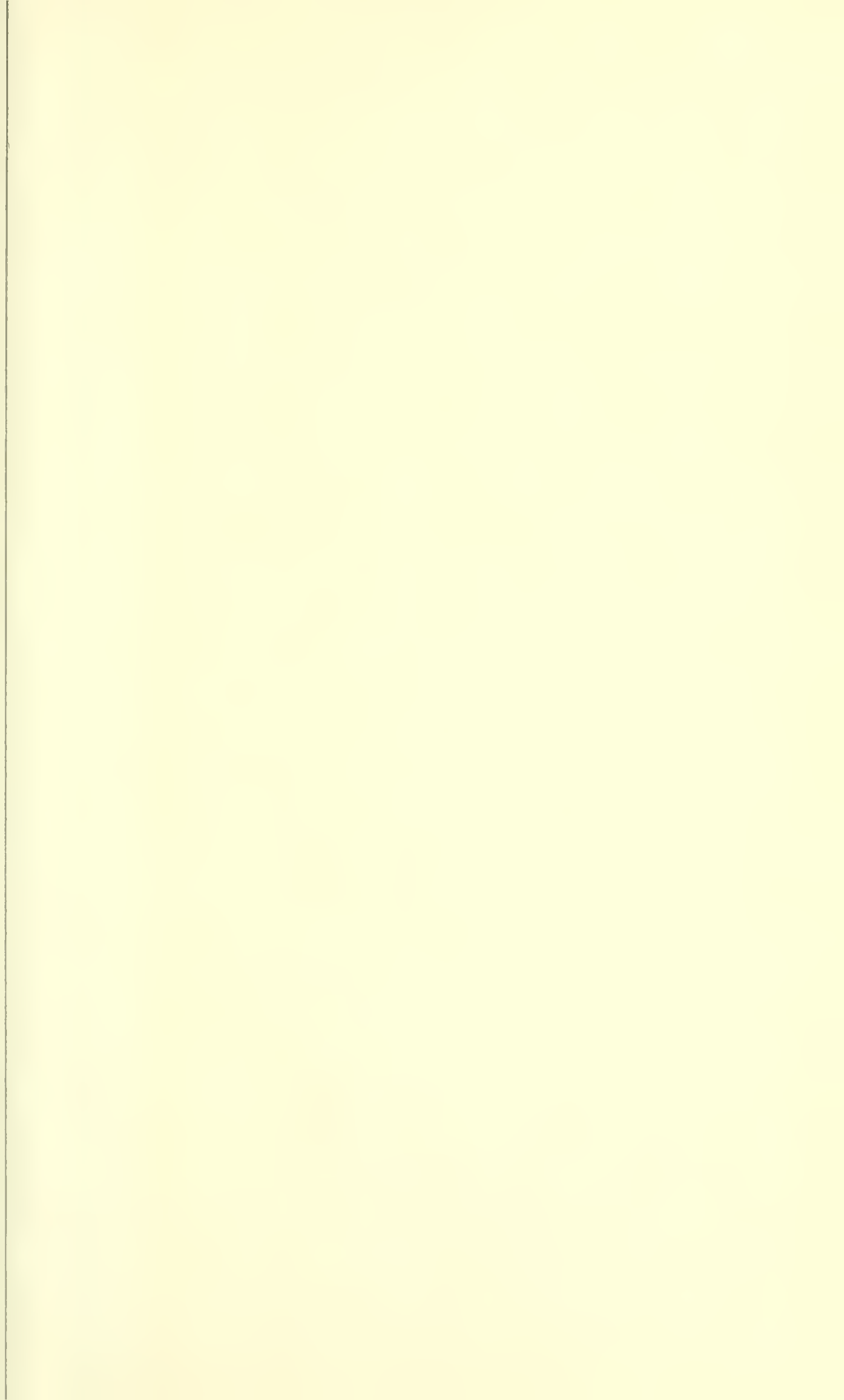
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# CONSTITUTION ISLAND

Written for the Historical Society of Newburgh Bay and the Highlands, at  
Newburgh, in the County of Orange, New York

BY

STUYVESANT FISH

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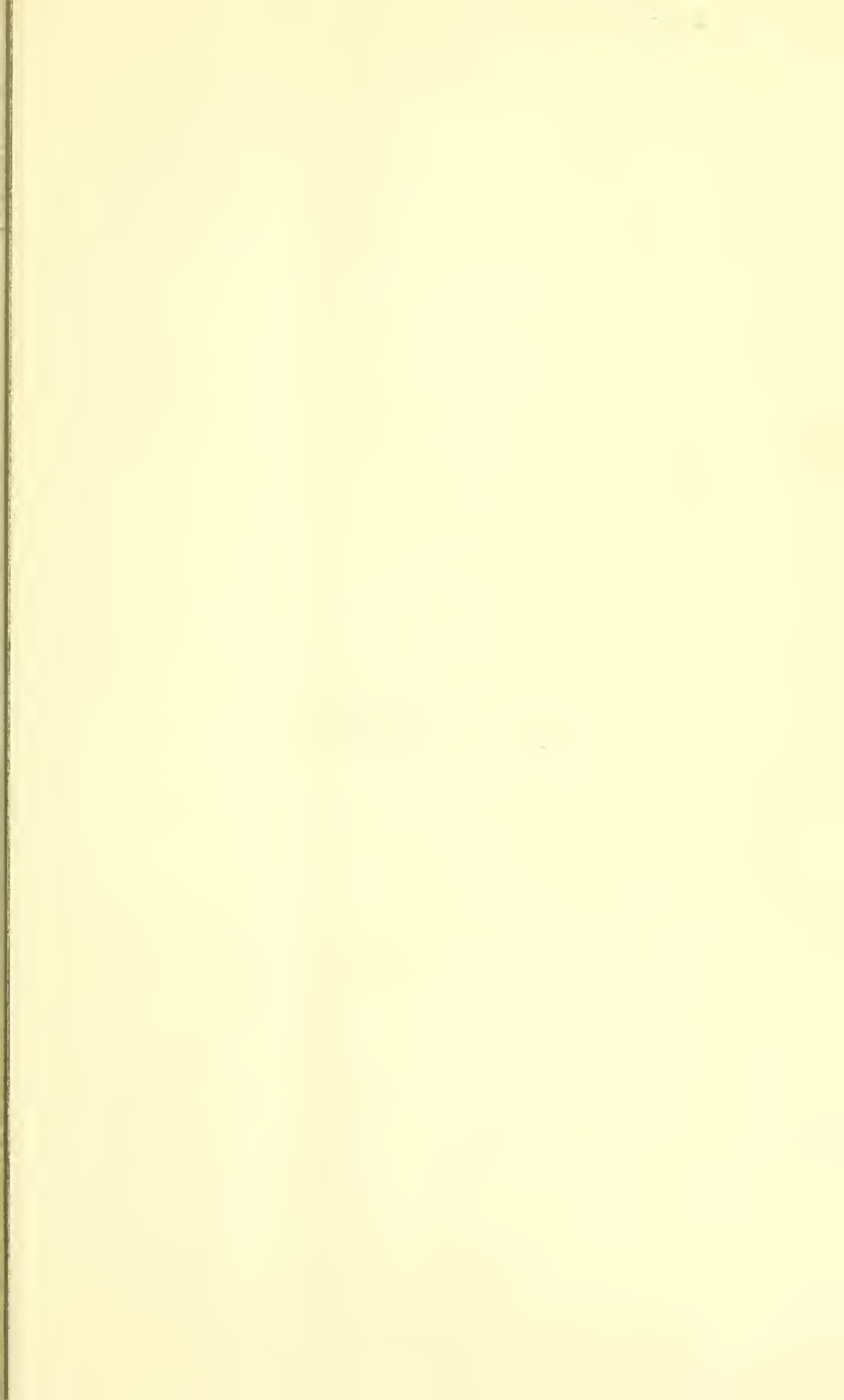
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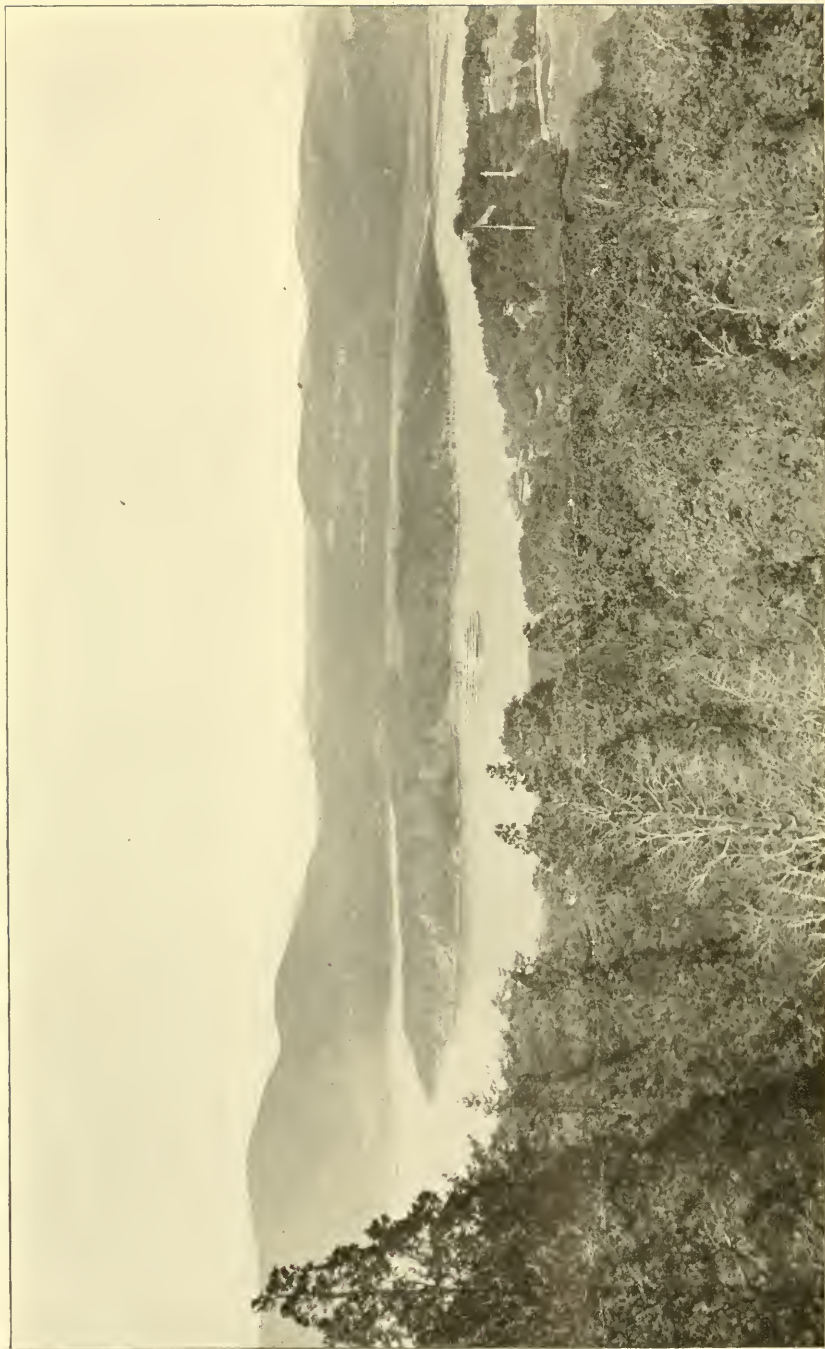


Plate 42.

WEST POINT, N. Y., MILITARY RESERVATION.

Looking northeast from Fort Putnam, showing Constitution Island and northern end of campus. Continuous with plate 43.

See page 573.

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APPENDIX C

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CONSTITUTION ISLAND

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Plate 43.

WEST POINT, N. Y., MILITARY RESERVATION.

Looking east from Fort Putnam, showing campus, chapel, etc. Continuous with plate 42.

See page 573.





## CONSTITUTION ISLAND\*

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Written for the Historical Society of Newburgh Bay and the Highlands, at  
Newburgh, in the County of Orange, New York.

By **STUYVESANT FISH**

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My good friend, Mr. David Barclay, has been kind enough to ask me to write a short article on Constitution Island, that bold, rocky mass which the Indians called Manahan, meaning "Island." (See plates 42 and 43.) It has been best described by Capt. E. C. Boynton, in his History of West Point, published in 1863:

"The Hudson River, in passing the upper Highlands, flows south through the gorge between abrupt and lofty mountains for a distance of nearly eight miles; the channel then changes east about one-fourth of a mile, and, thence changing, again pursues its southerly direction. Projecting half way across the river, and forming the left bank opposite West Point on the north, between the two right angles made by the channel, is an island; its west and northwestern sides are formed of bold and inaccessible precipices, while on the east is a large flag meadow, partially drained by ditches recently cut through it. This island, nowhere more than one hundred and thirty-four feet high, is probably two miles in circumference, and half a mile in width from north to south."

In this County, which received its name five years before the Prince of Orange became King of England, it may not be amiss to say a word about the baptismal name of him whom our fathers for three centuries called Hendrick Hudson. As the Spaniards gave to the Genoese, Christoforo Colombo, the name of Christobal Colon, and the English to the Venetian Zuan Caboto, that of John Cabot, why may not we persist in calling the Englishman who

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\* For the benefit of the reader unacquainted with New York State geography, it may be stated that the Constitution Island herein referred to lies in the bend of the Hudson River at West Point and forms a part of the United States Military Academy Reservation. See 14th Annual Report of the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society, 1909, pp. 88-92.—  
SECRETARY.

commanded the first ship known to have explored our river, as the Hollanders under whose flag he sailed did? When the French become such precisians as to call their great Emperor by his Italian name of Buonaparte, as it may be seen spelled on coins still in circulation among them, it will be time for us to consider calling Hudson "Henry."

On returning down the river, Hudson anchored for the night at the south end of Newburgh Bay, for the stated reason that "The Highlands hath many points and a narrow channel, and hath many eddie winds." His experience and that of other skippers of Dutch vessels gave to the reach near West Point the name of Martelaers Raek. While the literal translation of *martelaer* is *martyr*, the name really meant the struggling or contending reach, having reference to the difficulties which sailing vessels there met with by reason of varying winds and currents. Dr. Timothy Dwight, in a letter written March 16, 1778, and reprinted in his "Travels" speaks of what we still call the North Gate of the Highlands as "The Wey-gat, or Wind-gate, because the wind often blows through it with great violence." That name survives as the Worrugat, Werrygut or Warragat. Our neighbor, Mr. W. E. Verplanck, in his interesting book, "Sloops of the Hudson," derives it from the Dutch words *Weer*, weather and *Gat* a hole or gut, while Mr. E. M. Rittenber, to whose "Indian Geographical Names" I am indebted for so much of the foregoing, quotes Dr. Dwight, and derives it from *Warrelgat*, Wind-gate.

Our Island naturally acquired the name of "Martelaers Raek Eiland," which the English corrupted into "Martler's Rock." The earliest use of that name seems to have been in the deeds passed in February, 1754, between the three younger children of Judge Frederick Philipse, for the partition of Philipse's Upper, or Highland Patent. That Patent, issued in 1697, specifically and by name conveyed Polopel's Island, but was silent as to our Island. The draftsman of those deeds may have coined the term Martler's Rock, in order to include our Island as part of the mainland granted in the Patent, and indeed it may then already have become what it now is, a peninsula rather than an island.

The government of the City of New York, being in the hands of a Committee of One Hundred, that Committee, on May 10, 1775, applied to the Continental Congress, then sitting in Philadelphia, through the delegates from the Province of New York, Philip Livingston, James Duane, John Alsop, John Jay, Simon Boerum, William Floyd, Henry Wisner, Philip Schuyler, George Clinton, Lewis Morris, Francis Lewis and Robert R. Livingston, for advice "how to conduct themselves with regard to the (British) troops expected to arrive in New York City." Five days later Congress referred the matter to a committee consisting of George Washington, Thomas Lynch, Samuel Adams and the delegates from New York. This is the first mention of Washington in any act or resolution of Congress. The Committee having reported, Congress on May 25th resolved among other things:

"That a post be also taken in the highlands on each side of Hudson's River and batteries erected in such manner as will most effectually prevent any vessels passing that may be sent to harrass the inhabitants on the borders of said river, and that experienced persons be immediately sent to examine said river in order to discover where it will be most advisable and proper to obstruct the navigation."

The engineer chosen, Colonel Bernard Romans, arrived at the Island August 9, 1775, and immediately began the erection thereon of the first of the fortifications in the Highlands. Official reports made therefrom in that year are dated "Fort Constitution."

The Province of New York, unlike most of the other Colonies, never received a charter from the British Government. In this Province the Whigs, or as we prefer to call them "Patriots," based their contention upon their rights, as free-born Englishmen, under the British Constitution. The "Association" sent out by the Committee of One Hundred on April 29, 1775, and so generally signed in this Province, was in terms made for "preserving our Constitution and opposing the execution of the several arbitrary Acts of the British Parliament, until reconciliation between Great Britain and America on constitutional principles can be obtained." The Continental Congress, in a Proclamation issued in December, 1775, said: "We oppose the claim and exercise of unconstitutional powers to which neither the Crown nor Parlia-

ment were ever entitled. By the British Constitution, our best inheritance, rights as well as duties descend on us." So late as June 18, 1776, "May the strength of the British Constitution expel the poison of corruption," was one of the toasts drunk at an entertainment in New York, "given by our Provincial Congress to his Excellency General Washington and his suite, the General and Staff Officers, and the Commanding Officers of the different Regiments in and near this City."

In England also, Lord Shelburne desired to have the war in America called a Constitutional War. There was in London a "Constitutional Society" which, on June 7, 1775, sent Dr. Franklin £100 "to the relief of the widows, orphans and aged parents of our beloved American fellow-subjects," who had fallen at the battle of Lexington.

As the fort was built before the Declaration of Independence, before the adoption in 1777 of the Constitution of the State of New York, and ten years before the United States adopted theirs, our Island necessarily takes its name from the British Constitution. Those who built and named the fort knew no other.

Old maps show a Fort Constitution in Westchester County, on Gallows Hill north of Peekskill, and Fort Lee on the Palisades in New Jersey was at first so named.

We have seen above that the first mention of Washington in any act or resolution of Congress was in connection with our Island. At the end of the Revolutionary War, after the British had evacuated New York, and Washington had bidden farewell to his companions in arms at Fraunces' Tavern on December 4, 1783, it was on Constitution Island that the Commander-in-Chief's Body Guard were mustered out of service on December 20, 1783. So that in a certain sense we may say that Washington's services during the Revolutionary War began and ended with Constitution Island.

Following the taking of Fort Montgomery by the British, Fort Constitution was abandoned after firing a single ineffective volley. The British then continued up the river unopposed until they received news of Burgoyne's surrender, which Schuyler's skill had made all but certain and Arnold's impulsive valor altogether so, whereupon they retired to New York. The Continental forces



then reoccupied the Highlands and in the year following West Point was fortified and thenceforth held. The credit for "having chosen this rock of our military salvation" has by the New England writers, as usual, been claimed for one of their popular heroes, General Israel Putnam.

The facts, however, are that — although Romans' original plan submitted to the New York Committee, September 14, 1775, and by them transmitted to the Continental Congress, called for a block-house and a battery at West Point to the north and not far from the site of what afterward became the principal work there, now known as Fort Clinton — his plan was at once condemned by the New York Commissioners, Bedlow, Grenell, Bayard and Lawrence, as not sufficient; that on November 8, 1775, the Continental Congress appointed Robert R. Livingston, Robert Treat Paine and John Langdon, a committee on the "fortifications upon Hudson's River," who reported that it was necessary to occupy and throw up batteries at West Point. Captain Boynton says, "This is the first official recommendation to occupy West Point (Nov. 23, 1775)." On May 21, 1776, Washington wrote to Gen. Putnam, then commanding in New York City, that he feared the fortifications in the Highlands were in a bad situation and directed him to send General, erroneously called Lord, Sterling and others "to see and report such alterations as may be judged necessary." Putnam sent Sterling, Col. Rufus Putnam and Captain Sargeant on this errand and on June 1, Sterling reported to Washington that "Every work on the Island is commanded by the hill on the West Point on the opposite side of the river, within five hundred yards, where there is a level piece of land of near fifty acres in extent. A redoubt on this West Point is absolutely necessary not only for the preservation of Fort Constitution, but for its own importance on many accounts." Gen. Putnam assumed command in the Highlands early in May, 1777. On the 1st of July Washington wrote him: "It appears almost certain to me that Gen. Howe and Gen. Burgoyne design if possible to unite their attacks and form a junction of their two armies \* \* \* and I am persuaded if Gen. Howe is going up the river he will make a rapid and vigorous push to gain the highland passes." Nor was this Washington's only letter on that subject.

Putnam did nothing at West Point. The British fleet, on October 6, 1777, found no difficulty in breaking the chain stretched across the river at Fort Montgomery. With an overwhelming land force they then drove Governor George Clinton and his brother, Gen. James Clinton, out of that position, where Putnam had left them and some raw militia unsupported, because the British had deceived him into believing that their main attack would fall on the east bank of the river where Putnam had stationed and continued to hold the regular troops of the Continental Line.

Shortly after that disaster and on December 2, 1777, Washington ordered Putnam to employ his whole force and all the means in his power for erecting and completing works and obstructions necessary to defend and secure the river, writing at the same time to Gov. Clinton. The latter recommended that a "strong fortress should be erected at West Point opposite Fort Constitution." The minutes of the Convention of New York show that on January 8, 1778, a committee was, on the application of Gen. Putnam, appointed to confer with him, and on the next day Gen. John Morin Scott, Chairman of that Committee, reported that they had conferred with Gen. Putnam, Gen. James Clinton and other military officers; that "there was a disagreement in sentiment between those gentlemen (arising from certain different facts alleged) as to the place where such works ought to be erected," and recommended that Commissioners be appointed to examine the ground "with the Generals and other officers and advise in fixing the places where such fortifications should be erected." The Commissioners thus appointed, John Sloss Hobart, Robert R. Livingston, Zephaniah Platt, Henry Wisner and John Hathorn, reported, January 14, "that the most proper place to obstruct the navigation of the river is at West Point."

While it is true that shortly thereafter, and before Putnam was relieved from command in the Highlands in March, 1778, the work at West Point was begun pursuant to the plan recommended by the above named Commissioners, it nowhere appears that Putnam had favored West Point as the place for the principal fortress, and it does appear that Gov. George Clinton had, a month before his brother, Gen. James Clinton, was consulted by the Commis-

sioners, recommended a strong fortress at the Point. The most that can be claimed for Putnam is that in November, 1777, he had written to Washington that Gen. Schuyler and he were both of opinion that a boom thrown over at Constitution Island with a battery on both sides would answer better than at Fort Montgomery. The real work at West Point was all done under Putnam's successors.

From 1778 on, the Island served principally to hold the farther end of the great chain stretched across the river from West Point. Throughout the Revolutionary War it formed part of the estate of Mrs. Ogilvie and her children by her first husband Philip Philipse (d. 1768). Of those children, one only, Frederick Philipse, left issue, a daughter Mary, who married Samuel Gouverneur.

"Constitution Island continued in possession of the Philipse family until November 3, 1836, when it was sold by Samuel Gouverneur and wife to Henry W. Warner, Esq., a lawyer from Long Island. Upon this island Mr. Warner made his home, commencing improvements on an extensive scale, and erecting a beautiful country seat, which he named 'Wood Crag'. Constitution Island has been famous in modern times as the residence of the well-known authoresses, Susan B. and Anna B. Warner, daughters of its former owner. In 1850 appeared the celebrated novel 'The Wide, Wide World', and its popularity has been exceeded by few works written in America. Over 300,000 copies of this book were sold and 30 editions were issued in England." (W. S. Pelletreau's History of Putnam County, 1886, p. 577.)

Miss Anna Bartlett Warner \* is now living at West Point, and it is to her liberality and that of Mrs. Russell Sage that, subject to Miss Warner's tenancy for life, the Nation is indebted for the gift of the Island, as part of the West Point Military Reservation.

A recent letter from Miss Warner, beside reminding me that on April 5, 1776, Benjamin Franklin, Samuel Chase and Charles Carroll of Carrollton had, as a Committee of Congress, inspected Fort Constitution, goes on to say:

"Two-thirds of the old chain lies in the depths just by my boat-house, and at low water many of the timbers to which it was

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\*Miss Anna Bartlett Warner died at Highland Falls, near West Point, January 22, 1915, in her eighty-seventh year.

made fast can still be seen. The central valley of the island was — is still, perhaps,— called by the country people ‘Washington’s Parade ground’.”

Of the links of the great chain the largest collection is at West Point. There are several at Ringwood, New Jersey, the country seat of the late Abram S. Hewitt, others at the Redwood Library in Newport, R. I., two in the museum at Stony Point in Rockland County, and one was given to the New York Historical Society by my brother, the late Mr. Nicholas Fish. This last had been bequeathed by Thurlow Weed to my father, the late Hamilton Fish, with the statement that his father, Col. Nicholas Fish, had “aided in stretching the chain across the Hudson River.” In support of Mr. Weed’s assertion there is the fact that in the autumn of 1780 Nicholas Fish was Deputy Adjutant General at West Point. As such it may then have fallen to him to take the chain down for the winter or possibly to put it in place once more when spring came again. South of the chain there was placed a boom consisting of massive timbers fastened together with heavy iron bands and of which the only known portion is preserved at the Hasbrouck House, Washington’s headquarters, in Newburgh.

So exact a writer as Captain Edward C. Boynton, in his “History of West Point,” fell into the error of attributing the name Martler’s Rock to a “French family named Martelaire, who resided upon it or in its vicinity about the year 1720,” giving as his authority William J. Blake’s “History of Putnam County.” Blake’s statement is:

“From the most accurate information that we have been able to obtain, this island was called after a Frenchman by the name of Martelair, and who, probably, resided on it with his family. A family bearing that name was early settlers at Murderer’s Creek, in the town of New Windsor in Orange County, and were murdered by the Indians about the year 1720. It may have been the same family who previously resided on this island, or a branch of it.”

Blake gives no authority for this statement. He wrote from Cold Spring and published in 1849, two years after Samuel W. Eager had published at Newburgh his “History of Orange County,” and at page 206 quotes from Eager’s book. Blake and

Eager were close friends and members of their families intermarried. In a paragraph entitled "Murderer's Creek," Eager says (p. 601):

"At the original erection of Orange County in 1683, it was called Murderer's or Martler's Creek. When the County was reorganized in 1688, the name of Martler's was left out, and Murderer's alone retained, in giving the boundaries. In a patent as early as 1694 this creek is called by its present name. Tradition says, at an early period of the settlement of this part of the Country, there was a bloody incident, which accounts for the unpleasant and fearful name of this creek."

Eager then quotes at length the touching tradition of "Naoman," which had been published by Paulding with other tales in 1828, beginning as follows:

"Little more than a century ago the beautiful region watered by this stream was possessed by a small tribe of Indians, which has long since become extinct, or incorporated with some other savage nation of the west. Three or four hundred yards from where the stream discharges itself in the Hudson, a white family of the name of Staey, had established itself."

Paulding's story goes on to describe the fate of the whole Staey family, father, mother, and children, and their Indian friend Naoman, and ends thus:

"They perished — how it is needless to say — and the memory of their fate has been preserved in the name of the pleasant stream, on whose banks they lived and died, which, to this day, is called Murderer's Creek."

Eager then adds:

"If we were disposed to question any part of the story, it would be the part relating to the name of the white man, Staey. This we think is an error, and ought to have been Martelair. In the earliest mention of the name of this creek, as before remarked, it is called Murderer's or Martler's Creek. We know of no reason why it should be called Martler's, unless it was that that was the name of the white family which was murdered on this occasion; in which case, it was very natural to associate his name with the stream. We never heard, and enquiry has been made of many persons, that the white family was named Staey. Mr. Paulding does not give the least intimation where he obtained the materials



of the tradition: if he had, we might have been better able to judge of its truth in all its parts. As it is we question the truth of the tradition in the particular above mentioned.

"The rock opposite West Point, on lands that belonged to Mrs. Ogilvie and children, which was fortified in part by the Americans in 1775, was then called 'Martelair's Rock Island'. May not this name have had some connection with the murder?"

That is to say, Eager being unable in 1846-7 to find local trace of a white family named Stacy who had been butchered by Indians about a century prior to 1828, infers that their name must have been Martelair, because in 1683 Murderer's Creek had also been called Martler's Creek, and suggests that the old name of Constitution Island may have had some connection with all this. He, or his printer, also misstates the name of the Island in 1775, which, in the correspondence he obviously refers to, is given as "Martelaer's Rock Island." (See Force's American Archives, Fourth Series, III, 902 and 1274.)

Blake (p. 172) gives the name in Revolutionary times as last stated. But he adopts and states Eager's hypothesis as fact, fixes the date as 1720, and evolves a Frenchman, named Martelaer, who probably lived on our Island with his family.

Boynton in dealing with a minor adjunct to his main theme, follows Blake blindly, and his well-deserved reputation for accuracy has put this erroneous derivation of the name into the records of the Military Academy and of the War Department, from which it will be difficult to dislodge it.

As Miss Estabrook, the Secretary of the Historical Society of Newburgh Bay and the Highlands, informed me some time ago, the late Mr. E. M. Ruttenber, than whom there can be no higher authority on local names, wrote in his copy of Boynton's West Point, opposite the statement about Martelaire, "Bosh" and underscored the word.

Neither in the lists of "New York Marriages," nor in the "Calendar of Wills" on file at Albany, nor in the twenty odd volumes published by the New York Historical Society, on "Muster Rolls," "Abstracts of Wills," "Tax Lists" and "Apprentices," nor elsewhere, have I been able to find prior to the date of the Partition of Philipse's Upper Patent (1754), a trace of any person named Martelair, with

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My nearest approach was when Dr. E. Haganan Hall informed me that the printed "Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, 1675-1776," showed that one Barent Martlers had confessed to having voted in an aldermanic election, held in 1701, although under age and an apprentice. As Dr. Hall says, "There was ballot box stuffing in the early days of the City."

Our Colonial Muster Rolls, 1664 to 1775, show that one Peter, a labourer, born in Germany in or about 1728, enlisted more than once, in 1758 and later years, in the levies from the counties of Kings, Queens and Richmond. His surname is variously given as Martelaer, Martiler, Martler and Mottleir.

In the French language, *meurtre* means *murder*, while *martyr* has the same meaning as with us, and *marteleur* signifies "one who works with a hammer at an anvil," their word for *hammer* being *marteau*. As *marteleur* is the equivalent of our *smith*, it should have been a common name among the early Walloon and French Huguenot settlers. *Marteleur* has, however, in French no no relation to martyr, nor yet to murder.

S. F.

NEW YORK, April 30, 1914.

















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