The American Revolution in the Hudson River Valley

The Hudson River Valley played a pivotal role in determining the outcome of the Revolutionary War. Here, Americans stymied British attempts in 1776-1783 to control the riverway and sever New England from the rest of the American colonies. Here, Patriots boasted British tear and other goods, accepted the Declaration of Independence, created the State of New York, and kept a sharp eye—or a heavy hand—on their Loyalist neighbors. Here along the Hudson, Americans stood fast and, after the turning point battles at Saratoga, set the stage for their ultimate victory at Yorktown and the British evacuation of North America south of Canada.

The British Invasion

From the beginning of the war, both the British high command and General George Washington realized the strategic importance of controlling the Hudson River Valley. In December 1775 and January 1776 Colonel Henry Knox first highlighted the great resources of New York when he dragged 93 cannons from Crown Point and Fort Ticonderoga to Dorchester Heights overlooking Boston Harbor. That effort helped force the British evacuation of Boston. After driving the Continental Army out of New York City into the Hudson River Valley, the British tangled with the Americans in October 1777 at Pell’s Point and White Plains. Then, in 1778, the British devised a three-pronged invasion of the valley. The main force, under Lt. Gen. John Burgoyne, would head south from Canada via Lakes Champlain and George. Lt. Col. Barry St. Leger would push east along the Mohawk Valley to Albany. Sir William Howe would head north from New York City to assist Burgoyne’s operation. The Americans effectively delayed the three British advances. Engineer Colonel Colasse Kosciuszko brought Burgoyne’s forces to a crawl by dropping trees across his route south of Albany. Reenactments are staged periodically at Rondout Creek and Kingston (above) and other sites along the Hudson.

Turning Point in the War

After winning the battle of Oriskany on August 6, the British under St. Leger lost valuable time bogging Fort Starrett and retreated to Canada. The supporting British contingent from New York City, commanded by Lt. Gen. Sir Henry Clinton, got a late start but succeeded in capturing Fort Montgomery and Clinton in a fifteen-day siege of Fort Ticonderoga on October 6 near West Point. They cut through a massive iron chain the Americans had installed across the Hudson, moved upstream to the capital at Kingston, and set fire to the town. But they were too late to halt Burgoyne. On October 7, American Maj. Gen. Horatio Gates—who had taken over from Maj. Gen. Philip Schuyler’s command—defeated Burgoyne in the second battle of Saratoga near Bemis Heights. The British capitulation convinced the French to join the American cause and proved to be the turning point in the war. In 1778, the British tried to lure General Washington into a decisive battle in New York, but Brig. Gen. Anthony Wayne, in a daring midnight bayonet attack on July 9 and 10, captured their fortification at Stony Point. The British retreated briefly but never again threatened the Hudson Highlands. In August 1781, Washington’s and the French Comte de Rochambeau’s armies linked up at Philipsburgh, New York, before proceeding to Virginia for the decisive battle of Yorktown. After their victory there, Washington returned to the Hudson River Valley, and General Rochambeau marched his army to Boston for service in the Caribbean. Washington brought over 3500 soldiers, some with their families, to New Windsor for their final winter encampment and set up his headquarters in the Hasbrouck farmhouses in Newburgh, from which he issued his order on April 13, 1778, for a “cessation of hostilities.” The troops stayed until June. Washington oversaw the British evacuation of New York City on November 25, 1783. The entire Hudson River was now in U.S. hands, and New York was on its way to becoming the Empire State in the new nation.

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