

The Importance of West Point and the Hudson River

Source:<http://www.mountvernon.org/research-collections/digital-encyclopedia/article/west-point/>

West Point played a crucial role in keeping the new United States from falling to the British during the American Revolution, in the years before the area became known for its famed military academy. West Point is located on a plateau on the west bank of the Hudson River approximately sixty miles north of New York City. In 1781, George Washington called the fortified site “the most important Post in America,” and he worked to keep Patriot control of West Point throughout the Revolutionary War.¹ For the revolutionaries, holding West Point meant preventing the British from controlling the Hudson River and dividing the colonies in two. In November 1775, a committee in Congress reporting on fortifications on the Hudson first recommended occupying the position.² By July 1776, West Point became one of four points along the Hudson River to obstruct British navigation. In December 1777, Washington explained the significance of the Hudson to General Israel Putnam. As the river ran through all of New York, the Hudson was crucial to the transportation of food and supplies as well as communication between the new states.³ In 1778, the Americans began an ambitious effort to build permanent fortifications at West Point. Colonel Louis de la Radiere served as the original chief engineer, until New York Governor George Clinton deemed Radiere as lacking the professional knowledge needed. The accomplished Polish military engineer Tadeusz Kosciuszko replaced Radiere. General Alexander McDougall, whom Washington appointed to command the Hudson Highlands, described Kosciuszko as “esteemed by those who have attended the works at West Point, to have more practice than Col. DeLaradiere, and his manner of treating people more acceptable.”⁴ Washington closely followed the fort’s progress and considered it McDougall’s first priority. In June 1799, Washington worried that British General Sir Henry Clinton would attack West Point and would “interrupt our easiest communication between the Eastern and Southern states, open a new source of supplies to them and a new door to distress and disaffect the country.”⁵