

Military History of the Van Schaick Mansion



The Van Schaick Mansion was built in 1735 by Goosen Geritge Van Schaick. Its island location and geographic position along the Hudson River between New York City and Canada made it an ideal military stronghold, so the house was used as a military headquarters in the French and Indian wars of 1735 and again in the American Revolution from 1777 until the early 1780s. Alongside the river was the main road for north-south travel, used originally by Algonquian Indians and later by both British and Continental troops; a portion of it is the present-day Continental Avenue in Cohoes.

The Mohawk River was the main route for travel going east and west. In the summer of 1777, the British plan was to break the colonies in half by taking control of New York to defuse the American Revolution. New York, near the middle of the 13 colonies and with 40% of its population supporting the English, would be the easiest state to control. English General Howe had taken control of NYC early on in the war. Both English Generals St. Ledger and Burgoyne were sent to Canada. The plan was that Howe would come north up the Hudson River, Burgoyne would come south down the Hudson River, and St. Ledger would travel east along the Mohawk River. The three armies would meet at Van Schaick Island, do battle and thereby take control of New York State.

Gen. Phillip Schuyler, the descendant of the original business partner of Goosen Van Schaick, was in charge of the Northern Territories and was stationed on Van Schaick Island. Schuyler was considered so much of a gentleman that Englishmen held at the military hospital in New City, now Lansingburgh, were given chocolates and tea. Schuyler even sent tea to an American general stationed on Peebles Island, whose quarters were simply a log hut with no windows. Schuyler was respected by his peers but sometimes had a difficult time with his enlisted men. Another general, Horatio Gates, was also assigned to the Northern Territory. Even though the colonists were fighting to be free from English rule, the Dutch name borne by Schuyler held less appeal with the public than Gates' English name. Phillip Schuyler was ordered to hand over his Northern Territory command to Gates, and serve under him. Gates was less well respected than Schuyler by his peers, but the public and the soldiers loved him because he caroused with his troops and was not as aloof as other commanders. At one point during the American Revolution, Gates' popularity was such that a coup was planned to unseat George Washington and install Gates as Commander in Chief. Schuyler, although very upset, accepted the change of command even though he did not agree with Gates' authority or methods of management.

In the meantime, Gen. Burgoyne began heading south along the Hudson River, capturing Ft. Ticonderoga and Ft. William Henry. In August 1777, Gen. Schuyler retreated from Fort Edward to Van Schaick Island with 5000 poorly equipped and hungry men. But in their retreat they destroyed bridges and obstructed roads behind them to delay Burgoyne. Schuyler established the headquarters for officers at the Van Schaick mansion, where plans for the Battle of Saratoga were developed by General George Washington, Horatio Gates, and Benedict Arnold. Schuyler's initial strategy was to engage Burgoyne's men at the first ford of the Mohawk on Van Hoever's (Havers) Island (now Peebles Island), and earthen fortifications were constructed there. But plans were altered and a site further up the Hudson at Bemis Heights was selected for the confrontation.

General St. Ledger was heading east along the Mohawk and attempted to take control of Ft. Stanwix in Rome. American Colonel Peter Gansevoort and Gen. Herkimer defended Ft. Stanwix and won a victory at the Battle of Oriskany. Herkimer was killed but this British contingent was halted and did not advance east to Van Schaick Island. George Washington kept General Howe busy in pursuit of him from New York City, across New Jersey and into Pennsylvania, so Howe did not come north up the Hudson to meet his counterparts at Van Schaick Island. American Gen. Stark, stationed in Bennington, came upon a detachment of Burgoyne's men and defeated them; up to this point the American forces had not won a battle. Now they had two victories under their belt. Gen. Stark was to arrive at the Van Schaick Mansion and file his report with General Washington. Upon seeing that Gates was in command, he refused to accept his control and returned to Bennington to file his report from there. It was reported that two colonels in charge of the Albany Militia were feuding as well, and each wrote a letter to Gen. Washington, going over the heads of Schuyler and Gates. Washington knew well that his men needed to be put in order.

In July, just one month before these happenings, George Clinton was appointed the new governor of New York. He went on to be dubbed "the father of the state" and became Vice President under Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. Washington sent this new governor to Van Schaick Mansion to settle his Generals; Clinton was also a Brigadier General and outranked both Schuyler and Gates. For four days George Clinton stayed at the Van Schaick Mansion, so from August 22 to 27, 1777 the Van Schaick Mansion was the Capitol of New York.

General Johnny Burgoyne continued his path of destruction south along the Hudson River, bound for the Van Schaick Mansion. With summer passing and word spreading that the British and the Americans would have a great battle on Van Schaick Island, more troops arrived, bringing the number to upwards of 8000 American men preparing for Burgoyne. They came from as far away as Maine to camp near the mansion and train. The Americans were excited, with morale boosted by the command of General Gates (who assumed command on August 15, 1777) and the victories at Bennington and Oriskany. Some of the troops would remain there until October 1777, covering the rear forces of the Continental army and securing a fall-back position in case the battle with Burgoyne would compel a retreat.

On September 9, Gates knew that Burgoyne was close. To further throw the British off their plan, Gates moved his men off Van Schaick Island and onto the farmlands in Stillwater where the American troops turned the tide of the war. It was said that Gen. Schuyler's military skill, and strategy formulated at the Van Schaick mansion, were key to this triumph. The victory in the Battle of Saratoga turned the American Revolution with the British Crown into a World War by proving to the French that the American forces had considerable substance and the United States of America could become an independent nation. France was now prepared to fight alongside the Americans and defeat the English. After his defeat at Saratoga and surrender on October 17, 1777, General Burgoyne and his staff, taken as prisoners of war, were housed at the Van Schaick mansion while on their journey down to Albany.

Legend has it that during one of his visits to the mansion, George Washington carved his initials on an upstairs windowpane. More certain is the story of the romance between Catherine Van Schaick, sister of the master of the house during the Revolutionary War years, and Gen. Peter Gansevoort, hero of the Battle of Oriskany. Catherine met Peter at the mansion during the summer and they corresponded through the fall of 1777 while Peter was stationed at Oriskany. In November, he wrote to her and proposed they marry at Christmastime. However, both the war and wintry weather delayed the mail and she did not receive the letter until mid-December. She accepted, but postponed the wedding to permit more time for preparation. They wed in the Federal Room of the mansion on January 12. Peter and Caty had 5 children. One of their grandchildren was Herman Melville, who lived and wrote for a time in Lansingburgh, just across the river from the mansion.

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