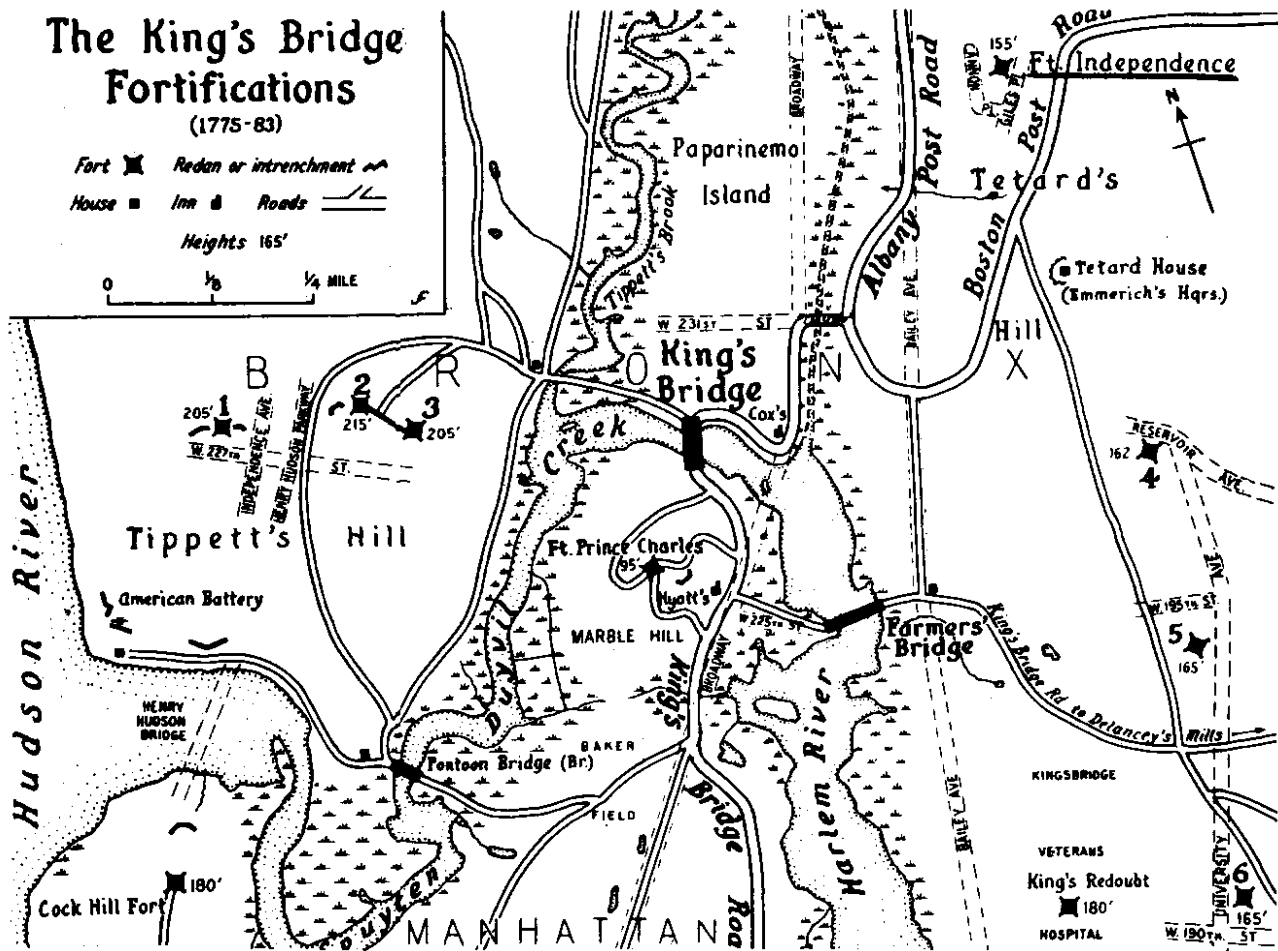




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Fortifications in the Kingsbridge area.
Drawn by John Forsyth-Kingsbridge Historical Society.

No work had ever been done previously on the site as far as we know. However, reminders of the Fort and its buried past reasserted themselves over the years in one form or another. It has been said (Jenkins, 1912, p. 127) that when the cellar was dug for the Giles House, 11 cannon and several cannonballs were found. Two of the cannons were moved to the nearby Van Cortlandt Park and mounted on both sides of the entrance to the Frederick Van Cortlandt mansion built in 1748 (these were eventually given to a scrap metal drive during World War II.)

Cannonballs and other objects have also been unearthed in the gardens of neighboring houses. Insistent that it should not be forgotten, the fort also made its presence known at the foot of Cannon Place. Some lads, playing war games, dug trenches in the street embankment. In doing so, they discovered a cache of cannonballs, a bundle of muskets and other military items; the wooden stocks of the muskets had rotted away but the barrels still remained intact. Bolton, one of our pioneering archeologists rushed to the scene and reported the discovery in his *Relics of the Revolution* (1916).

History

On May 25, 1775, after the news of Concord and Lexington, the Continental Congress in Philadelphia resolved:

"First, that a Post be immediately taken and fortified at or near King's Bridge in the Colony of New York, and that the ground be chosen with a particular view to prevent communication between the City of New York and the country from being interrupted by land; Secondly, that the militia of New York be armed and trained, and in constant readiness to act at a moment's warning; and that a number of men be immediately embodied . . . to prevent any attempts that may be made to gain possession of the City, and to interrupt its intercourse with the country."

Four days later the resolutions reached the Provincial Congress at New York by courier, with instructions to keep them as secret as possible. A committee was then appointed, headed by Captain (later Major General) Richard Montgomery, one of the heroes of the Revolution, the same who captured Montreal and later fell in the unsuccessful attack on Quebec on December 31, 1775. The committee's purpose was "to view the ground at or near King's Bridge, and report this to Congress whether the ground near King's Bridge will admit of making a fortification there that will be tenable." (Jenkins, pp. 118-119, 1912).

In June, 1775, the Continental Congress initiated plans for an army and George Washington was made Commander-in-Chief. Three thousand troops were to be raised from New York to be divided into four regiments, later to be known as the New York Line. To serve both army and country, every man between the ages of 15 and 50 was required to equip himself with a musket and a bayonet, a sword or tomahawk, a cartridge box and belts, 23 rounds of ammunition, 12 flints, a knapsack, a pound of gunpowder and a reserve supply of 3 pounds of bullets. The money for this paraphernalia had to come out of his own purse. Otherwise he was subject to a fine and imprisonment. In many cases, if not in most, this was a hardship for the poorer farmers and artisans who found it difficult enough as it was to provide food and clothing for his family.

On June 3, 1775, the Committee rendered its report suggesting that a post of 300 men be stationed on Marble Hill, near Hyatt's Tavern, Manhattan, and that redoubts be placed on Tippet's Hill, on Tetard's Hill located on a farm of 75 acres which Captain Montgomery had purchased in 1772. Under Major-General Charles Lee, who was next in rank to Washington, work was started on the fortifications, but it progressed very slowly until after the British withdrew from Boston, on March 17, 1776, and Washington assumed command in New York. In June he inspected the area and chose 7 other locations for redoubts, 2 of which were placed on Manhattan and 5 in the Bronx. In orders of July 2nd, Washington placed Gen. Mifflin in command of the Kingsbridge neighborhood with instructions to finish the fortification as quickly as possible. Precious time, however, had been lost. Indeed, there were ample signs that the enemy was assembling a fleet in New York harbour and were pouring troops into Staten Island as a base of operations. This was in late June, 1776. Within 7 weeks the British accumulation of strength had swelled to a task force of 400 vessels and 30,000 troops. The British commanders, after leaving Boston, had

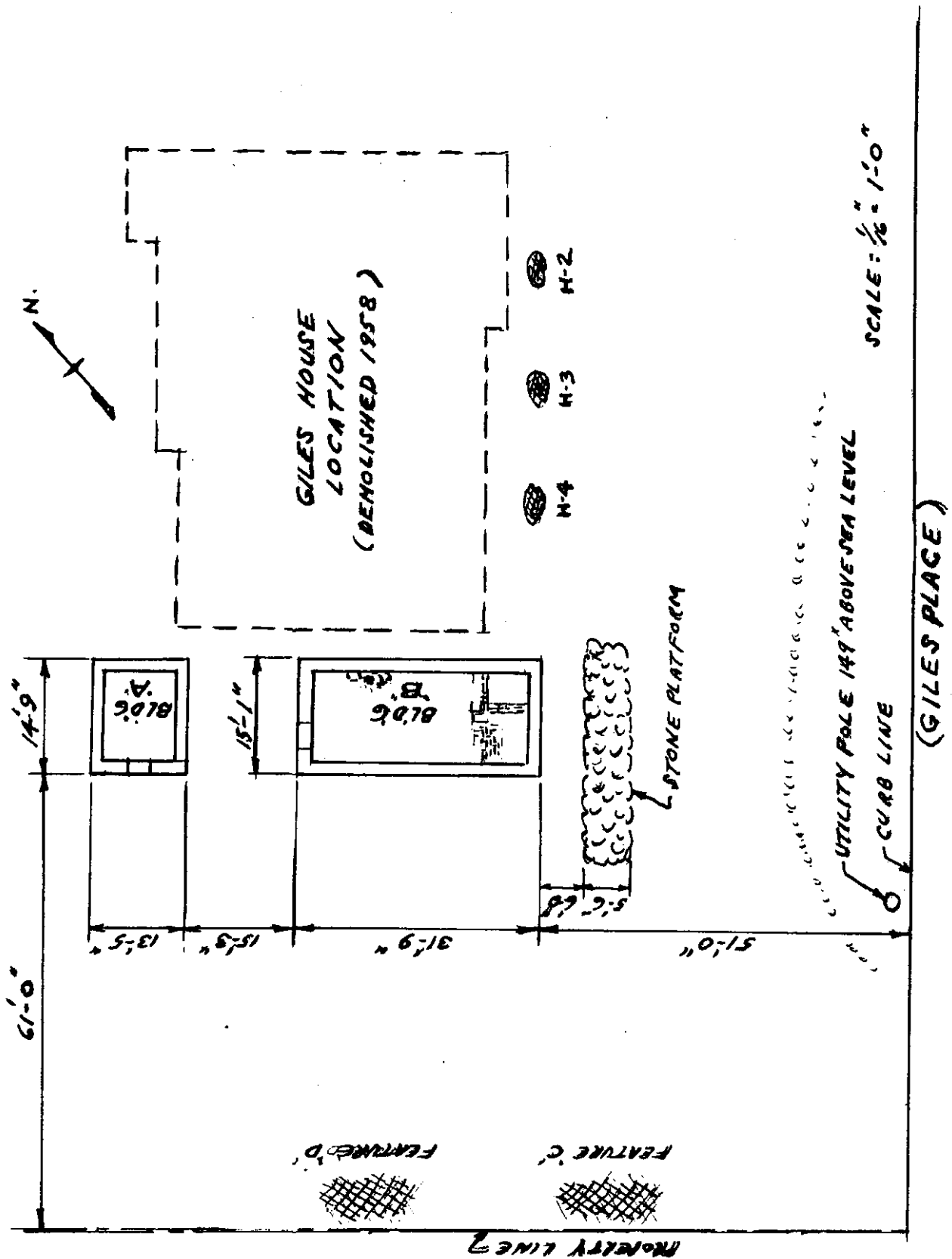


Figure 3. Plot plan of Fort Independence site.

decided to concentrate on New York, as the City, with its belt of navigable waters, had become a key position in colonial commerce and, obviously, its conquest was an essential objective. Besides, its capture would help separate New England from the southern colonies.

In an attempt to hold the city, batteries and defense works were thrown up at various places on both banks of the East River, and barricades were set up in some of the streets. In a wave of enthusiasm a gilded statue of King George (near the junction of Broadway and Bowling Green) was pulled down and sent in pieces to Connecticut where patriotic women melted them down into bullets. To close the Hudson, Fort Lee on the New Jersey bank, and Fort Washington on the New York bank were built and linked by a line of stone-laden ships fastened with chains and sunk to block the enemy. Then, north of the city proper, Washington inspected the key defense points recommended by Montgomery's committee and urged more speed on the construction of the fortifications: the Cock Hill redoubt commanding the mouth of Spuyten Duyvil Creek, the one on Marble Hill (later called Fort Prince Charles by the British) overlooking the Harlem River, and 5 others in the Bronx, including Fort Independence on Tetard's Hill (to protect the approaches to White Plains and Connecticut.)

On July 2nd Washington placed General Mifflin in direct command of the Kingsbridge sector, urging a quick completion of all the defenses because a British attack was expected hourly. In fact, that very same day between 10 and 11 o'clock, 4 British men of war, and several tenders, came through the Narrows. Under the supervision of Colonel Rufus Putnam, an engineering officer (the same who worked on Fort Washington) the Pennsylvania line, helped by the militia, pushed the construction of Fort Independence. But time was running out because events were moving rapidly.

On August 27, 1776, the British invasion began. Bypassing Manhattan, Howe sailed across the Narrows with 15,000 men and occupied the villages on the flatlands of Brooklyn where he was joined by 5,000 Hessians. There the battle of Long Island was fought. Having lost the engagement, Washington escaped during the night, leaving his camp-fires ablaze to divert suspicion. With his army of 9,000 he crossed to lower Manhattan but the retreat was almost a panic. In a letter to Congress, September 2nd, he wrote, "our situation is truly distressing . . . The militia, instead of calling forth their utmost efforts to a brave and manly opposition in order to repair our losses, are dismayed, intractable, and impatient to return. Great numbers of them have gone off; in some instances almost by whole regiments, by half ones, and by companies at a time." Sadly he added, "With deepest concern I am obliged to confess my want of confidence in the generality of the troops." To stop the deserters guards had to be stationed at Kingsbridge and at other points. About noon on September 15, 1776, the British landed almost unopposed (*sic*) at Kip's Bay (now foot of 34th Street). The American General Heath's commentary on the action stated (Abbatt 1901, pg. 52)

"Here the Americans, we are sorry to say, did not behave well; and here it was, as fame hath said, that Gen. Washington threw his hat on the ground, and exclaimed 'Are these the men with which I am to defend America?' " Heath hastened to add (p. 52) "But several things may have weight here;—the wounds received on Long Island were yet bleeding; and the officers, if not the men, knew that the City was not to be defended."

Feeling that he could not defend New York with such troops Washington decided to leave it behind. Several officers suggested that the city be put to the torch but Congress protested as it felt that eventually it would be retaken; but, by design or accident, a fire broke out anyway in lower Manhattan. In mid-September the army pulled back its lines to Harlem Heights where the Americans, for the first time in the New York City area, trounced the Redcoats in a buckwheat field (on the present sites of Barnard College and Columbia University) and chased them for more than a mile. This success seems to have made General Howe think twice about launching a frontal attack. For almost a month the two armies were inactive behind their respective lines, with the Americans entrenched in the northern part of Manhattan and the Kingsbridge locale. A floating, or pontoon bridge was thrown across Spuyten Duyvil Creek to keep communications open. Finally, Howe struck again. He decided to get onto the mainland and outflank the rebels. Sailing up the East River with a huge fleet, he wheeled around the American positions and established a beachhead on Throgs Neck, or "Frog's Neck," or Point, on the foggy morning

of October 12th. Later the task force was swelled by 72 ships with German mercenaries under General William von Knyphausen. At the time, Howe wrote "(I was) determined . . . to get upon their principal communications with Connecticut, with a view of forcing them to quit the strongholds in the neighborhood of King's Bridge, and, if possible to bring them to action." Washington, however, was not to be trapped. Again he withdrew his forces, not permitting Howe to engage him in a pitched battle, the outcome of which could only be disastrous.

A few days later, Washington, alarmed by the British landing on the mainland, summoned his officers for a council of war. After considerable debate it was agreed to march inland lest the Continental army be cut off from the upper country. In view of the mounting pressure from the enemy, the eventual fall of Fort Independence and of the other nearby fortifications seemed certain, but three British warships had succeeded in running the Hudson River gauntlet through the blockade of sunken ships and on past Fort Washington. This no doubt influenced Congress who demanded that Fort Washington be defended as long as possible.

Two days after the council meeting the American columns started to retire, but there was no respite. Still trying to outmaneuver Washington, and cut his communications, Howe launched a series of well-directed flanking movements in rapid-fire sequence to throw the Americans off balance. It was on October 12 that he had landed on Throgs Neck leaving some troops there to drive a spearhead inland. On October 18, just six days later, he ferried additional forces from Throgs Neck to Pell's Point, a peninsula three miles up the coast, and launched another spearhead to penetrate the interior. On October 20, just two days later, some transports put General Knyphausen and 8,000 men ashore on Davenport's Neck, another peninsula further north, near New Rochelle, where a third drive for the interior was organized. Now the entire rear of the American forces was menaced.

In an attempt to keep the pincers from closing and isolating segments of his army in pockets where they could be cut to pieces by the enemy, Washington rushed to White Plains to organize some defenses there. Then he rushed back to the Kingsbridge area where a general retreat was already under way. In the meantime, the entire countryside was in a turmoil.

Since the beginning of the war the area had been a hot bed of Toryism. Loyalists under James de Lancey had formed the Westchester Light Horse. Time and again they had raided the outlying farms for cattle to feed the British army. From this conduct they acquired the name of "cowboys." As one contemporary wrote, De Lancey was the "greatest cow jockey in his Majesty's service." However, not all the plundering was done by De Lancey and his men. Both armies, actually, had spread devastation, stealing horses, oxen, poultry and crops. They also tore down fences, barns and houses and cut down trees to provide firewood for their garrisons. Often, both sides disregarded whether the legal owners were friend or foe. Many individuals also helped to despoil the farms in pursuit of mischievous gains. Thus when the grand retreat started, draft animals were so scarce that if cannon and stores had to be moved the artillery and wagons had to be pulled in relays and often dragged by hand. Adding to the distress of the times was the morale of the American soldiers. Having suffered defeat after defeat, except for the brief but inconclusive victory at Harlem Heights, they were dispirited, not to mention poorly fed, poorly clothed and poorly paid, when they were paid at all and, at that, in Continental money which was growing more worthless day after day. Besides the periods of enlistments for many men were expiring during the months of September and October. Many felt that they had their fill of war. Regrettably, some were indifferent to the challenge and were ready to quit or desert but even as a force the Americans lacked the power to meet the challenge of the disciplined and well equipped British.

Pressing his advantage, Howe attacked White Plains on October 28 forcing Washington to withdraw to another position 5 mi. northwest. By this action Howe finally split the Americans. In the meantime, Knyphausen and his Hessians turned southward from New Rochelle and down the Old Boston Road to attack Fort Independence. Arriving at Kingsbridge, he repaired the bridges which the Americans had destroyed and removed the roadblocks of felled trees which had been placed in his path. When he reached the Fort he found it abandoned because, on October 28, while the Battle of White Plains was raging to the north, Colonel John Lasher, of the New York Militia, and the Fort's commander, destroyed the barracks and led his troops to reinforce the Fort Washington garrison. There was no other choice. American outposts around Kingsbridge were collapsing like a shell around its center; it was a matter of remaining to be encircled and

annihilated by superior numbers, or joining Fort Washington for a last stand. When Lasher evacuated the Fort he left in such haste that he was obliged to leave the cannon and 300 stand of arms. General Knyphausen took Fort Independence on October 29, 1776.

Despite the attempt to hold the twin post of Fort Washington on the Hudson, it fell on November 16th after a deserter gave the enemy the plan of the stronghold. Between 2,000 and 3,000 prisoners were taken, including men from Fort Independence. This was one of the severest blows to the Americans during the war in the north. In effect, it ended the British campaign of 1776 for New York City.

The enemy held Fort Independence for 3 years, but not without some discomfort in the interim. When most of the British army was committed elsewhere, principally in New Jersey, but with many detachments in Rhode Island Washington, on January 5, 1777, wrote a letter to Heath ordering that he harass the Kingsbridge area "as if you had a design upon the city." The objectives were to try to force the British to bring some reinforcements back into the city, to help alleviate the pressure on other fronts, and, at the same time, to inflict as much damage as possible. On the 17th Heath began a concerted drive towards Fort Independence. Three American divisions converged on the neighborhood. General Lincoln advanced along the Albany Post Road to "Upper Cortlandt's" on a bluff to the west of the present Van Cortlandt Park. There he captured a mansion which usually housed both mounted and foot detachments from various German regiments. General Scott descended from Scarsdale while Generals Wooster and Parsons came down the Boston Road. Reaching the farmhouse of the old Valentine family, Heath ordered the cannons to fire on it if the British soldiers quartered there resisted. At the same time 250 men were dispatched into the valley to prevent them from fleeing to the fort. At the Gun Hill Road, near Williamsburg, two British light-horsemen unexpectedly came, in Heath's words, "plump upon the head of Wooster's column" (p. 100, Memoirs). Startled at the sight of the rebels they turned to escape. One was pitched from his horse by a shot but the other galloped off spreading the alarm among his compatriot soldiers at the Negro Fort and other lesser stations. With pandemonium breaking out all over, all the British who could, ran for the protection of Fort Independence "leaving in some places their arms, blankets, tools, provisions behind them," while the Americans kept hot on their trails pouring rounds the fire into them.

With nothing to lose by asking, the Americans "sent a summons to the Commanding Officer of the Fort to surrender." Perhaps it was hoped that the garrison, which at the time consisted of a body of Hessians, and the Queen's Rangers recruited by the renegade Rogers, would overestimate Heath's strength and capitulate. When the summons was refused, the rebels sent two field pieces to the south of Fort Independence, "to a hill above Harlem Creek, not far from the New Bridge," and not far from the Farmers' Bridge, and began to fire at a Hessian battalion near Hyatt's tavern on the other side of the Creek. To get to the water's edge for a better shot at the Germans, the Americans drew one of the cannon lower down the hill. To their surprise, they found themselves under the fire of cannon from an enemy redoubt, near the bridge which they did not know was equipped with cannon. To get out of this dilemma they struggled up the hill pluckily dragging their field piece with them.

Despite this little setback, the Americans raised considerable havoc in the neighborhood. So much so, that rumors flew far and wide that Fort Independence had been retaken. Indeed, Washington wrote Congress accordingly and it was a bitter disappointment when the official report was received to learn that such was not the case.

On February 6, 1777, another raid was made against Fort Independence with a strong detachment under Roger Enos, Lieutenant-Colonel, 2nd Connecticut, but again the campaign was mostly confined to raising hob among the lesser British outposts. This time, however, they were on their guard. Two days later the Americans subjected the Borough to a grand forage.

The next episode involving Fort Independence took place in 1779 when the British started to take forces out of the area for their Southern campaign. They dismantled their posts on the mainland, Numbers One, Two and Three at Spuyten Duyvil, and Numbers Five, Six and Seven on Fordham Heights and destroyed them as best they could, after moving the stores and garrisons to Manhattan Island. On August 16, 1779, the British removed the guns from Fort Independence, or Fort Number Four. The next day they demolished the magazine and on September 12th they abandoned the site.