

Mad Anthony and the Fall of Stony Point

How Wayne's Men Stormed British Stronghold

● A Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington and a print of "Brig. Gen. Anthony Wayne at Stony Point" are reproduced in colors on page one of the Picture Section of this issue.

By JOHN A. MENAUGH

UP THE steep slopes of the fort scramble the intrepid Americans.

The night is pitch dark. Flashes of orange light stab the murk as British muskets blast the night. The air reverberates with the deeper sound of cannon, from the mouths of which grapeshot whistle off into the darkness. Relatively few of the British musket balls or flying grapeshot find targets. The British, in their excitement, are shooting high.

It's like shooting at wraiths—grim, elusive wraiths that tumble up over the ramparts, shouting and stabbing, and sweep in on the panicky Britons.

It's all over in the space of minutes! Driving relentlessly, the two attacking forces of Americans meet in the center of the fort, their bayonets dripping wet.

Thus was Stony Point captured a half hour after midnight on the morning of July 16, 1779, in the most brilliantly executed assault of the Revolutionary war.

Stony Point is a rocky little promontory on the west bank of the Hudson River about forty miles north of New York City. So far does it jut into the stream that three sides of it (a full three-quarters) are washed by the river's current.

In the early part of 1779 it was considered of great strategic value. It, with Verplanck's Point, on the opposite shore, commanded the river, the only route of free communication between American troops in New England and those to the south. Between the two points a ferry was operated.

Sir Henry Clinton, the British commander, was taking life easy down in New York, occasionally sending out marauding parties to harass the countryside. General Washington's troops were strung out at various points in a semicircle around New York at a distance of about forty miles. Clinton was watching Washington, and Washington was watching Clinton, the war had settled down to something like an armed truce, and at Stony Point and Verplanck's Point American soldiers were erecting blockhouses with the idea of making the river impassable to the enemy. The river is only a little more than a half mile wide between these two points.

Word was carried to Clinton of the activities of the Americans at the two points, so on May 30, 1779, he sailed up the river with a strong force. On the following day he landed a division on the east bank of the river and one on the west bank, and on June 1 captured both Stony Point and Verplanck's Point. The first named was taken without a struggle, its garrison of forty men having retreated into the nearby highlands at the approach of the British. Fort Fayette (sometimes called Fort Lafayette), on Verplanck's Point, lowered its flag under fire, its commander, Capt. Thomas Armstrong, surrendering his force of seventy men.

The British immediately set about strengthening the two positions, and General Washington began thinking about recapturing them.

On June 23 Washington established headquarters at New Windsor, about seven miles above West Point, and on July 1 Brig. Gen. Anthony Wayne was given command of the light infantry of the line. Everything was shaping up for the attempt to retake Stony Point and afterward the position across the river.

When Washington asked Wayne if he would undertake to lead the attack the fiery brigadier is reported to have replied: "I'll storm hell, general, if you will lay the plan!"

So Washington laid the plan, and a remarkable one it was. So careful was he to consider

minute details that General Wayne made little if any effort to improve upon it. Still preserved are the words of Washington's directions to Wayne for storming Stony Point, written at New Windsor on July 10. Here they are:

Dear Sir: Immediately upon receipt of Your Letter of this date, I ordered the Quartermaster General to furnish the Esportoons you wrote for, and presume you will get them in a day or two.

[Esportoons were half-pikes, about three feet long, which were carried by infantry officers.]

My ideas of the Enterprise in contemplation are these: that it should be attempted by Light Infantry only, which should march under cover of night and with the utmost secrecy to the Enemy's lines, securing every person they find, to prevent discovery. Between one and two hundred chosen men and officers I conceive fully sufficient for the surprise; and apprehend the approach should be along the Water on the South side, crossing the Beach and entering the abatis. This party is to be pre-

tempt it; and the guns should be immediately turned against the shipping and Verplanck's point, and covered, if possible, from the Enemy's fire.

Secrecy is so much more essential to these kind of enterprises, than numbers, that I should not think it advisable to employ any other than the light troops. If a surprise takes place, they are fully competent to the business; if it does not, numbers will avail little. As it is in the power of a single Deserter to betray the design, defeat the project, and involve the party in difficulties and danger, too much caution cannot be used to conceal the intended enterprise till the latest hour from all but the principal officers of your corps, and from the men till the moment of execution. A knowledge of your intention, ten minutes previously obtained, will blast all your hopes; for which reason a small detachment, composed of

the hazard which would be thereby run of defeating the attempt on Stony Point, which is infinitely more important (the other being dependent) has induced me to suspend the operation.

These are my general ideas of the plan for a surprise; but you are at liberty to depart from them in every instance, where you may think they may be improved, or changed for the better. A Dark night, or even a rainy one (if you can find the way) will contribute to your success. The officers, in these night marches, should be extremely attentive to keep their men together, as well as for the purpose of guarding against desertion to the enemy, as to prevent skulking. As it is part of the plan, if the surprise should succeed, to make use of the enemy's Cannon against their shipping and their post on the other side, it would be well to have a small detachment of artillery with you to serve them. I have sent an order to the park for this purpose, and, to cover the design, have ordered down a couple of light field-pieces. When you march, you can leave the pieces behind. So soon as you have fixed your plan and the time of execution, I shall be obliged to you to give me notice. I shall immediately order you a reinforcement of Light Infantry and Esportoons.

As the commander's letter of directions discloses, he chose Stony Point for the assault

were composed of chosen men commanded by courageous and experienced officers. Washington's army contained no grenadiers, but his light infantry were elaborately organized into a corps, the men while in the field serving independently from the various units from which they were drawn. Wayne's corps was drawn from forty-six battalions which then were under the direct command of General Washington. It was organized into four regiments of 340 men and officers each and was considered the élite of the army. The men wore the uniforms of the troops from which they were originally drawn, which accounts for the variety of uniforms in the illustration on page one of the Picture Section.

The attack on Stony Point was to be an affair of bayonets. In fact, as Washington wrote in his letter of July 10, the men were to advance with unloaded muskets. Only certain troops used in making a feint to draw attention from the real attack actually fired their weapons. All the others relied upon the cold steel, as shall be brought out later.

The bayonet often was the main reliance of British regulars, but among colonial troops it was not popular. Fewer than half of the American soldiers carried muskets equipped with bayonets. The guns themselves were smoothbore flintlocks, most of them .80 caliber (four-fifths of an inch in bore diameter). Despite accounts to the contrary, very few rifled weapons were carried by Americans in military service, and these only by irregular troops or scouts who provided their own weapons. The Continental muskets were made by more than 200 small gunsmith shops scattered throughout the colonies or purchased from the French.

The main defenses at Stony Point, which Wayne's men were to storm with fixed bayonets, consisted of seven or eight batteries planted upon the summit of the promontory. These batteries were connected by a system of trenches that formed a sizable enclosed fort. At the east these defenses included the site of the American blockhouse, which had been razed, and at the west they took in a natural rock formation that had been converted into a bastion. Directly in front of the batteries on the land side ran a line of abatis (obstructions made of felled trees) across the point from water to water. Lower down on the slope and in front of this line of abatis were three outer works, in front of which was a second line of abatis. Before this line was a broad marsh through which ran a causeway from the fort to a bridge over the small stream to the west.

The garrison consisted of about 625 troops. Stationed at the fort was the 17th regiment of foot, the grenadiers of the 71st regiment, and detachments from the Loyal Americans and the Royal artillery, all under command of Lieut. Col. Henry Johnson of the 17th foot.

The night of July 15 was selected by General Wayne as the time for the attack. He carefully made preparations as outlined by his chief. The ground around Stony Point had been carefully reconnoitered by competent observers and all plans had been completed down to the most minute details. It is even said that all dogs within a radius of three miles of the fort were removed or destroyed to prevent them from giving an alarm on

the night of the attack. This seems to have been a curious precaution. The British must have been accustomed to hearing dogs barking in the distance. It is a wonder that they did not note on that fateful night the unusual stillness, the lack of sounds from neighboring farms.

Wayne assembled his force on July 14 at Sandy Beach, just north of Fort Montgomery and about fourteen miles north of Stony Point by the best trails. At that time the center of Washington's army was at West Point, under the command of Maj. Gen. Alexander McDougall. The left wing of the army, under Maj. Gen. W. Heath, was east of the river and a short distance below West Point. The right wing, under Maj. Gen. Israel Putnam, was in the highlands west of the river, about four miles northwest of Fort Montgomery.

Early in the morning of the 15th small parties of picked men were dispatched to secure the passes leading to Stony Point. Then at 11 a. m. Wayne's entire force was paraded with full equipment and rations and with the men freshly shaved and their hair powdered. The general had not overlooked a single factor that would contribute to the morale of his troops. His order for the day expressly had stated that the men should be "freshly shaved and well powdered." He knew that this would increase their pride, and that proud men fought best.

At noon this force began its march. Brom (Abraham) Springster acted as guide for the Americans. He had previously guided Clinton's British troops in their descent upon Stony Point. The soldiers, because of the nature of the trails, were compelled to march in single files the greater part of the way. They took a roundabout course, swinging far to the west of the river as they moved southward and turning back toward the east as they approached their goal.

At 8 o'clock in the evening the leading troops reached the farm of David Springsteel a mile and a half west of the Stony Point fort. As the troops came in after the long march, weary and footsore, they were formed into solid columns of half platoons. Col. Christian Febiger's regiment (in front), Webb's regiment under the command of Lieut. Col. R. J. Meigs, and a detachment under Maj. William Hull together formed the right wing. Col. Richard Butler's regiment and two companies of light troops from North Carolina under Maj. Hardy Murfey (sometimes written Murfree) constituted the left wing. Maj. Henry Lee's light horse, which had been brought down with the infantry to serve as a support, and Brig. Gen. John Peter Muhlenberg's brigade covered the entire party. Wayne had available for the actual business of storming the enemy works on Stony Point between 1,150 and 1,200 men. Muhlenberg's reserve brigade numbered about 300. Lee's scouts did not exceed 150 in number.

The first of the columns, that headed by Febiger's regiment, was preceded by about twenty paces by 150 picked men under Lieut. Col. D. De Fleury, a gallant Frenchman. The second column in a like manner was preceded by 100 men under Maj. Jack Steward. Farther in advance of the two columns were twenty

men on the right, led by Lieut. John Gibbon, and twenty men on the left, led by a Lieutenant Knox. These two groups of twenty each represented a so-called forlorn hope. Their job was to be a highly dangerous one. They were to be the first through the enemy lines.

General Washington had suggested that the attackers wear white feathers or cockades to distinguish them from the enemy in the dark. Lacking feathers or cockades, they attached pieces of paper to their headwear. This was in obedience to Wayne's order of battle, which on this particular point said:

"Every Officer and Soldier is then to fix a piece of white paper in the most conspicuous part of his Hat or Cap as an Insignia to be distinguished from the Enemy."

All authorities agree that the Americans wore pieces of white paper during the attack on the enemy position, although the artist who made the illustration that appears in the Picture Section failed to recognize this point.

Wayne and his staff rode up when the troops were formed into columns, inspected the formations, and ordered the advance on the fort. This was at 11:30 o'clock. Guiding the troops on their last mile and a half of the march was a slave named Pompey, the property of one Captain Lamb, who dwelt in the neighborhood. On each side of the guide walked a soldier disguised as a farmer.

The columns slowly felt their way toward the fort. The guide and the two soldiers with him surprised and seized a sentry at or near the bridge over the small stream that flowed west of the fort, and the whole of the advance force swung together to cross the bridge. Then the force separated again into two columns. The column headed by Butler's regiment swung off to the left, while the other column, with General Wayne commanding, moved to the right. From the rear of Butler's column Major Murfey's North Carolinians were detached to advance straight ahead toward the fort, to feint an attack and to mask the approach of the two attacking columns.

But the marsh that lay before the point and between the Americans and the fort was under two feet of water. The forward movement of the attacking wings was delayed until nearly twenty minutes after midnight as the water slowly went down. In the meantime, however, Murfey's men, who had moved along the causeway toward the fort, had opened fire on the British defenses. The enemy replied with muskets and cannon, but most of their shots went wild in the darkness. According to a Connecticut officer who served in the battle: "The enemy wasted their fire mostly over our heads."

Standing at Stony Point today is an old pivot cannon, a relic of the battle. It is about three feet long and four inches in diameter, and it is easy to understand how fast this piece could have been served with bags of grapeshot. It was the "machine gun" of its day.

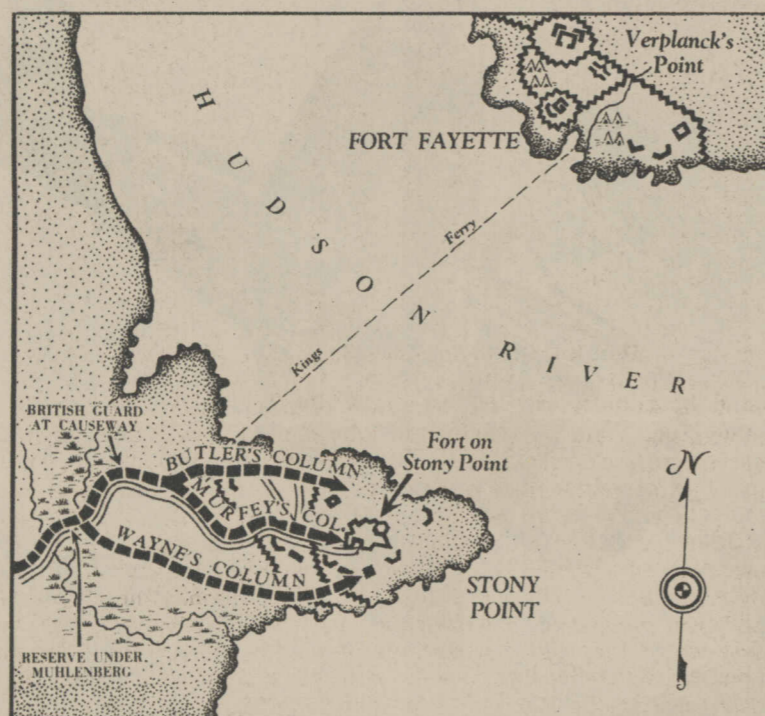
The attacking forces finally got down to business. The abatis were cleared with difficulty by the two groups in advance of the main forces. Relying entirely on their bayonets, the soldiers of the main bodies followed through the openings in the abatis, scaled the parapets, and crept through the embrasures, driving the garrison before them. It will be recalled that they went into action with muskets unloaded.

"The fort's our own!" was the cry set up by the Americans. These words had been agreed on earlier in the night as the watchword of the attackers.

While a desperate hand-to-hand fight was being waged within the fort, General Wayne lay bleeding beside the inner abatis. His head had been grazed by a musket ball. He thought (Continued on page eight.)



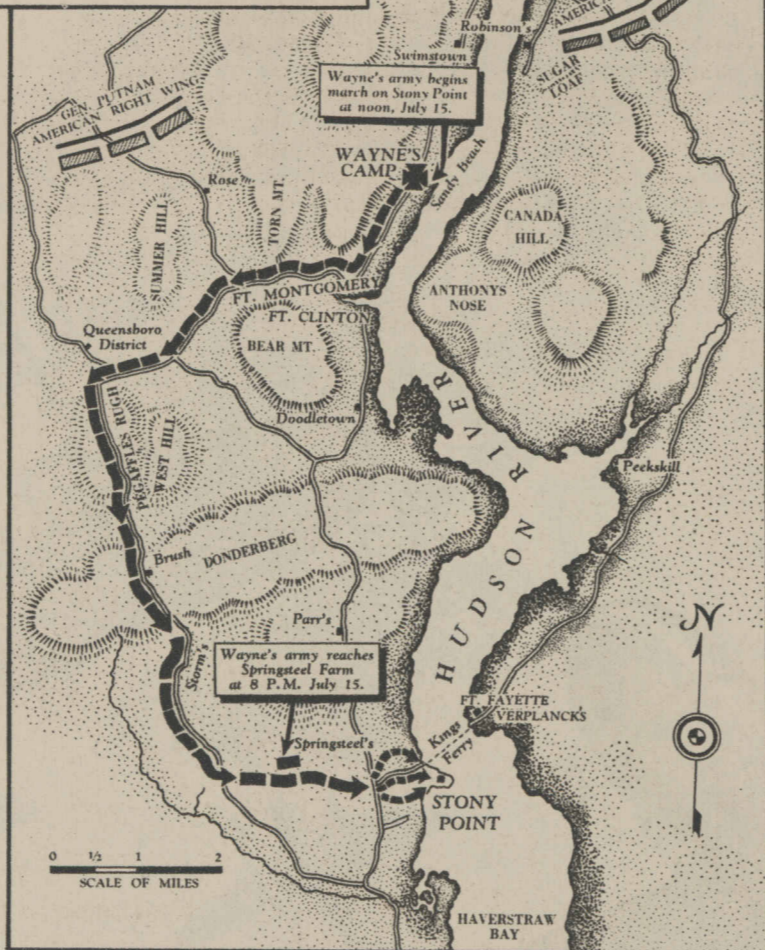
Stony Point. Wayne's men moved in from the left at the foot of the ridge in the background.



Map showing the line of march followed by Wayne to Stony Point. Above, larger-scale map of Stony Point and Verplanck's Point.

ceded by a Vanguard of prudent and determined men, well commanded, who are to remove obstructions, secure the sentries, and drive in the guards. They are to advance the whole of them with fixed Bayonets and muskets unloaded. The officers commanding them are to know precisely what Batteries, or particular parts of the line, they are respectively to possess, that confusion and consequences of indecision may be avoided. These parties should be followed by the main body at a small distance, for the purpose of support and making good the advantages which may be gained, or to bring them off in case of repulse and disappointment. Other parties may advance to the works (but not so as to be discovered until the conflict is begun) by the way of the causeway and the River on the north, if practicable, as well as for the purpose of distracting the Enemy in their defence, as to cut off their retreat. These parties may be small, unless the access and approaches should be considered very easy and safe.

The Three approaches here mentioned should be well reconnoitred beforehand, and by persons of observation. Single men in the night will be more likely to ascertain facts, than the best glasses in the day. A white feather, or cockade, or some other visible badge of distinction for the night, should be worn by our Troops, and a Watchword agreed on to distinguish friends from Foes. If success should attend the Enterprise, measures should be instantly taken to prevent, if practicable, the retreat of the garrison by water, or to annoy them as much as possible if they at-



men whose fidelity you can rely on, under the care of a Judicious Officer, should guard every avenue through the marsh to the Enemy's works, by which our Deserters or the spies can pass, and prevent all intercourse. The usual time for exploits of this kind is a little before day, for which reason a vigilant officer is then more on the watch. I therefore recommend a midnight hour. I had in view to attempt Verplanck's point at the same instant, that your operations should commence at Stony Point; but the uncertainty of co-operating in point of time, and

rather than Verplanck's in the belief that the first named was the more important. He obviously chose to crack the harder nut first. The defenses on Verplanck's, on lower ground, could be reduced later by cannon fire.

Washington selected the light infantry for the assault on Stony Point because it was the picked corps of the Continental army. The American light infantry corps was modeled after a similar corps in the British army. In the British service one end company of a regiment was called the light infantry and the other the grenadiers, and they

"Looking at Hollywood with Ed Sullivan"—on page eight of this section.