

Washington and the King's Bridge

George Washington, the Evacuation of Manhattan, and Kingsbridge



As of this writing, Ken Burns' remarkable documentary on the American Revolution has dropped in time for the 250th Anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the military events of 1776 in Brooklyn, Manhattan and points north. Admittedly, the Revolution and the developments which sparked it constitute a very complex series of events that are a challenge to capture in six documentary episodes. Be that as it may, the episodes which captured the actions of George Washington and the Continental Army in 1776 were not able to relate the full history of Washington's evacuation of Manhattan Island. Rather, the narrative moves from the skirmish in Harlem Heights directly to the Battle of White Plains, reducing the actual evacuation to a footnote, regardless of the near demise of the Continental Army as they departed from Manhattan.

Beginning in 1775, Kingsbridge was recognized for its strategic significance to the patriot cause. On May 25, 1775, the Second Continental Congress adopted the following resolution:

First, that a Post be immediately taken or fortified at or near [the] 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.*¹

In May 1775, the military conflict had been initiated in Massachusetts. Why then the attention of the Continental Congress to the northern tip of Manhattan Island? The Congress correctly assumed that the British would soon turn their attention to New York City, its valuable harbor, and the lure of the Hudson-Lake Champlain corridor to the north. With the only physical connections – the King's Bridge and the Free Bridge -- between Manhattan and the mainland, Kingsbridge was regarded as crucial to the supplies needed for the defense of the City.² Indeed, without any practical patriot Navy in the waters around Manhattan, maintaining these physical links were an absolute imperative for the Continental Army.



Figure 1 - Excerpt from the Battle of Fort Washington Map by Sauthier showing the King's Bridge and Free Bridge (identified as Dykemans Bridge). Note Tippet's Hill at upper left (i.e., Spuyten Duyvil Hill) misidentified as Tetard's Hill.

¹ Stephen Jenkins, *The Story of The Bronx; From the Purchase Made by the Dutch in 1639 to the Present Day*. (New York & London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, The Knickerbocker Press, 1912), page 118

² Nick Dembowski, *Fort Number 2 in the Bronx; An Endangered Relic of the Revolution on Spuyten Duyvil Hill*. The Kingsbridge Historical Society, April 2019, accessed December 2025; www.kingsbridgehistoricalsociety.org

The King's Bridge had been constructed in the late 17th Century after a provincial council called for its construction in 1680 and a bill to erect it was introduced in 1691. The provincial Governor recommended its construction by the municipal authorities in Manhattan, who were deterred by the cost.³ This municipal inertia led to an offer by Frederick Philipse, a Dutch immigrant, trader and land holder who came to the then colony of New Netherland in 1647, to construct the bridge in 1693 at his own expense on the condition that it would be tolled. A franchise to do so was granted in June of 1693, with the caveat that the bridge would be free for the King's forces.⁴ In 1713, the provincial Assembly authorized that the bridge be moved to its second location to the west of the original, proximate to the modern intersection of West 230th Street and Kingsbridge Avenue.⁵

By the 1750s, a movement arose to build a free bridge, spearheaded by Benjamin Palmer, a notable and entrepreneurial figure in the mid-1700s. Palmer started a popular subscription to raise funds for the construction of a free bridge between Manhattan and the mainland to counter the King's Bridge.⁶ That bridge was constructed in the location of the modern West 225th Street to the east of Broadway and opened in 1759.

These two unimposing structures over the Spuyten Duyvil Creek, which separated Manhattan Island from the mainland until the late 19th Century, when the first phase of a ship canal between the Hudson and Harlem rivers was dug just to the south of the creek, had become a strategic focus. Given that, the heights on either side of Kingsbridge were fortified by the Continental Army, primarily to guard the King's Bridge and the Free Bridge. American intelligence anticipated a British attack in the area of Kingsbridge, possibly via the Hudson River (known then as the North River).⁷ Patriot fortifications rose on Spuyten Duyvil Hill on the west and at Fort Independence on the east.

By mid-October 1776, the Continental Army – perhaps 10,000 men – was evacuating Manhattan, mainly via the King's Bridge,⁸ just as the British moved to cut off their supply lines from Connecticut and encircle Washington's forces.⁹ Had these British objectives been met, it could have spelled the ultimate defeat for Washington's ragged army, which had barely

³ Thomas H. Edsall, *History of the Town of Kingsbridge, Now Part of the 24th Ward, New York City* (New York City: privately printed, 1887), page 15

⁴ Edsall, *History of the Town of Kingsbridge*, page 15

⁵ Jenkins, *The Story of the Bronx*, pages 187-188

⁶ Blake A. Bell, *More About Benjamin Palmer's Involvement with Raising Funds for a Free Bridge from Manhattan*. Historic Pelham, May 17, 2006; www.historicpelham.blogspot.com

⁷ William A. Tieck, *Riverdale, Kingsbridge, Spuyten Duyvil; New York City; A Historical Epitome of the Northwest Bronx*. (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1968), pages 29 & 30

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham; A History of New York City to 1898*. (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), page 243

escaped destruction in the Battle of Brooklyn (a.k.a. the Battle of Long Island) almost two months earlier. The annihilation of this main patriot force could very well have been the death knell for the American Revolution.

Setting the Stage

In June 1775, the Second Continental Congress had taken two steps to bring a putative Continental Army into being. One was supporting the New England militias then in action in and around Boston by encouraging troops from other colonies (they were not yet states prior to the Declaration of Independence) to join those militias. The other was naming George Washington as commander-in-chief of this army-in-formation.¹⁰

It is important to note that the Continental Army did not exist at the very start of the military conflict in 1775. It was essentially designed, managed and trained on the fly from scratch. Therefore, there was constant effort to deal with supply chain issues, behavior and military strategy.¹¹



Figure 2 - Map of Boston and environs, 1775

After the Congress' action, Washington journeyed from Philadelphia, passing through New York City, through the rest of Manhattan Island and then over the King's Bridge to the Boston Post Road on his way to assume command at Cambridge outside of Boston.¹²

New York City had become both a military and political touchstone for both the British and the Americans early in the military conflict. The City had long been the headquarters for British forces in North America. General Thomas Gage took command there in November 1763 after his appointment as the

British commander-in-chief for North America.¹³ Following the Boston Tea Party in December 1773, Gage was appointed military governor of Massachusetts and arrived in Boston in May 1774.¹⁴ In September 1774, he withdrew garrisons from New York City, as well as New Jersey,

¹⁰ Richard Borkow, *George Washington's Westchester Gamble; The Encampment on the Hudson and the Trapping of Cornwallis*. (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2011), page 30

¹¹ *Continental Army 1775-1783*. American History Central, accessed December 2025;
www.americanhistorycentral.com

¹² Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, page 225

¹³ John Richard Alden, *General Gage in America: Being Principally a History of His Role in the American Revolution*. (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1948), page 61

¹⁴ *Ibid*, page 204

Philadelphia, Halifax and Newfoundland and brought them together in Boston along with a large British naval presence.¹⁵

General Gage's time in the fray in Massachusetts was to be limited. After the military actions at Lexington and Concord in April 1775, General William Howe arrived in Boston in May along with 4,200 additional troops to reinforce the 5,000 which Gage had assembled.¹⁶ As Adam Zielinski relates in his article on General Howe:

*Having learned of Lexington and Concord, Howe set about trying to isolate the rebels by taking the high ground in and around Boston. This would prevent any Americans from gaining a tactical advantage around the city. American spies learned of [the] plan and quickly set to building breastworks atop Breed's Hill.*¹⁷

Gage commanded Howe to take the American breastworks on Breed's Hill, which he eventually did in June 1775 -- at a steep cost of over 1,000 British soldiers -- in what became known as the Battle of Bunker Hill. Afterwards, Washington arrived at Cambridge on July 2nd to take command of the new Continental forces made up largely of New England militia. As Washington arrived, Howe assumed command of all British forces from Gage, who was recalled to London in September.¹⁸

With the Continental forces outside of Boston lacking artillery, heavy munitions were laboriously moved from Fort Ticonderoga in New York and on March 4, 1776, Washington had them installed in fortifications on Dorchester Heights, the highest point in Boston Harbor and one which had not been occupied by British forces. After the losses in the Battle of Bunker Hill, Howe was wary of another costly hill assault and decided to abandon the city.¹⁹

The Focus Shifts

Howe left Boston and moved to Halifax, Nova Scotia to regroup, after which Washington turned his attention to New York City.²⁰ He marched the Continental Army from the outskirts of Boston to the City, arriving himself in April 1776. Military preparations in the City and surroundings -- begun earlier under patriot General Charles Lee -- continued apace, including establishing artillery batteries and fortifications.²¹

¹⁵ Andrew Wheatcroft, *The World Atlas of Revolutions*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), page 17

¹⁶ Adam E. Zielinski, *Sir William Howe: The Man Who Could Not Quell a Rebellion*, American Battlefield Trust, December 2024, www.battlefields.org

¹⁷ Zielinski, *Sir William Howe*, www.battlefields.org

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, pages 228 & 229

²¹ Ibid

Flushed with the relative success of the actions in and around Boston, Washington was resolute in his determination to defend the City. As David McCullough described in his book 1776:

*Washington . . . would later tell Congress he had not a doubt he could defend the city, and he was eager to do so . . . New York had “vast importance,” he wrote, because control of its harbor could mean control of the Hudson River and thus the whole Hudson-Lake Champlain corridor north to Canada, which if seized by the enemy could isolate New England from the other colonies – which, in fact, was exactly the British intention.*²²

New York City in 1776 was a bustling port and commercial hub with a population of roughly 20,000 to 25,000 at the southern tip of Manhattan. The City encompassed less than 10% of the total area of the island, then known as York Island. The rest of the island - to its northern tip at the Spuyten Duyvil Creek - was known as the “outward”.²³ North of the Creek lay the mainland of the current northwest Bronx.



Figure 3 - Bien and Johnson map of Manhattan Island during the Revolutionary War (north is to the right)

Kingsbridge and the Future Bronx

In 1776, the area known as Kingsbridge was not part of New York City. Rather, it was within Westchester County along with the rest of the future Borough of The Bronx. Specifically, Kingsbridge was part of the Town of Yonkers known as *Little* or *Lower* Yonkers. This arrangement was maintained until 1872 when Yonkers was incorporated as a city, and the area

²² David McCullough, 1776. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), page 118

²³ McCullough, 1776, page 122

of Lower Yonkers became the Town of Kingsbridge for a short time until being annexed into the City of New York in 1874.²⁴

Most of the current Bronx in 1776 was a farming community. With a preponderance of loyalists and a good deal of political apathy due in part to the limited franchise -- the voting rights of the inhabitants were limited to holders of higher value land -- the population of the future borough was disconnected from the events occurring in and around Boston during the decade prior to 1776.²⁵ As Stephen Jenkins observed in *The Story of the Bronx*:

*We do not find, therefore, that any Committee of Correspondence or society of the Sons of Liberty existed within [Westchester] County. This feeling of apathy was more pronounced in the southern part of the county, that is, within the [future] Borough.*²⁶

Despite this, beginning in 1774 Westchester County participated in the selection of delegates to the Continental Congresses -- the second of which, convened in Philadelphia in 1775, would serve as the provisional national American government during the Revolution. These delegate selections were made over the protestations of the loyalists. However, news of the skirmishes at Lexington and Concord strengthened the patriot cause. A Provincial Congress of delegates from all counties in the colony, including Westchester, was also organized in New York City.²⁷

Military Preparations in Kingsbridge

The aforementioned Provincial Congress in New York responded to the Continental Congress' May 25, 1775 resolution by appointing a committee of five to view the ground near the bridges and report on prospects for fortification. Their report on June 3rd favored a post for 300 men in present day Marble Hill.²⁸ Further, the Committee suggested "commanding points on Tippet's Hill (i.e., Spuyten Duyvil Hill) and Tetard's Hill" (i.e., future site of Fort Independence) for additional works."²⁹

²⁴ Jenkins, *The Story of The Bronx*, pages 2, 7

²⁵ Ibid, pages 113, 114

²⁶ Ibid, page 114

²⁷ Ibid, page 118

²⁸ Edsall, *History of the Town of Kingsbridge*, page 20

²⁹ Edsall, *History of the Town of Kingsbridge*, page 21

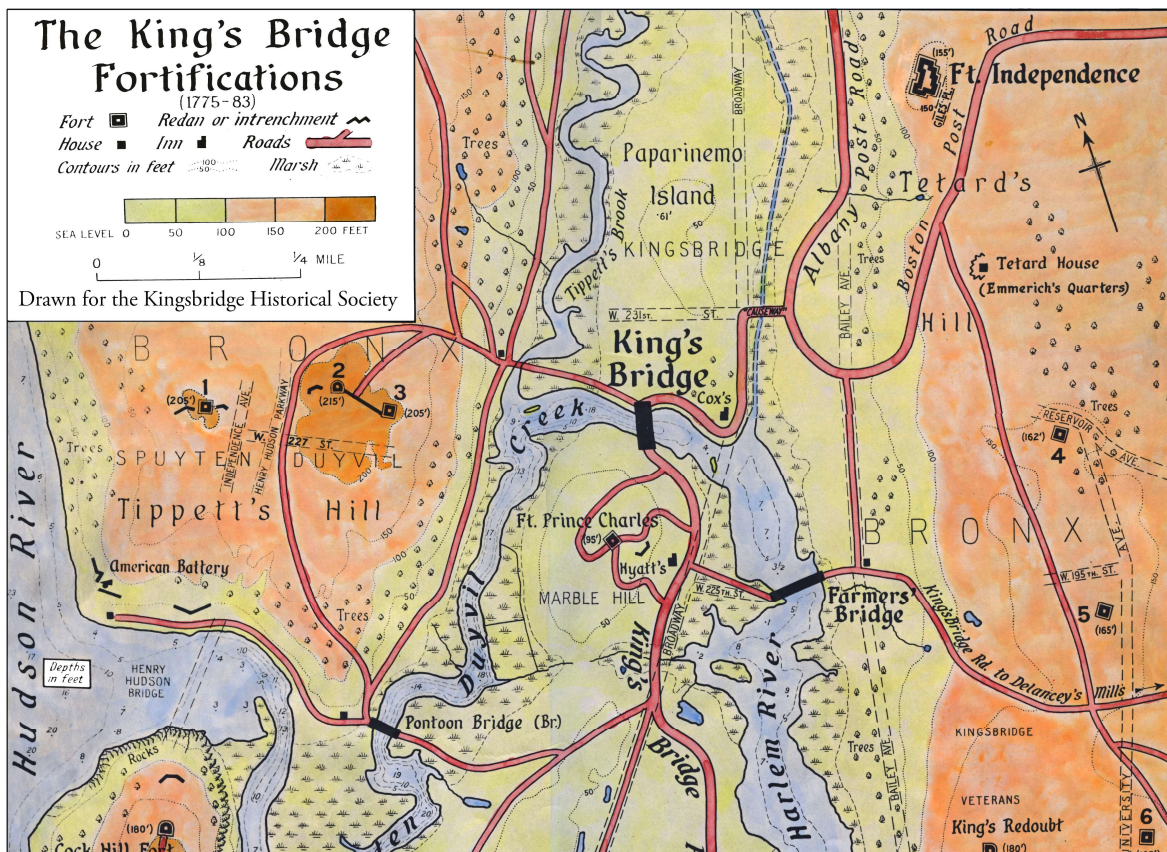


Figure 4 - The King's Bridge fortifications by John Forsyth

In a letter responding to the Continental Congress, the Provincial Congress indicated that “no fortification [near the bridges] can be so constructed as to be tenable for any length of time” due to the “great irregularity of the ground,” since the two bridges were in a valley surrounded by hills and prone to bombardment from any British troops that might occupy those hills.³⁰ Therefore, a focus on the surrounding hills was paramount.

As the Kingsbridge militia became organized during the second half of 1775 at the behest of the Provincial Congress, some large guns were moved from the Battery in lower Manhattan to Kingsbridge. Early in June 1776, General Washington visited and inspected the grounds above the King’s Bridge and located several places “well calculated for defense.”³¹

³⁰ Nick Dembowski, *Fort Number 2 in the Bronx*, accessed December 2025. www.kingsbridgehistoricalsociety.org

³¹ Edsall, *History of the Town of Kingsbridge*, page 24

On June 29, 1776, Washington wrote the following to the Continental Congress:

*Yesterday I took a view of the works at Kingsbridge and find them in much better forwardness than I expected, considering the small number of men that have been employed in that quarter. The pass is of utmost importance, and I have therefore ordered more of the militia to be stationed there.*³²

Washington's general orders of July 2nd charged General Mifflin to "repair to the post near Kingsbridge" and to immediately "forward the works" [i.e., fortifications].³³ Then on July 12th, as a probe of the Continental defenses, the British gunship *Phoenix* the frigate *Rose* and three tenders sailed virtually unscathed up the Hudson River to the vicinity of modern day Tarrytown. Their northward sail past patriot artillery on Manhattan Island and on Spuyten Duyvil Hill was followed by additional Continental troops being hurried to the King's Bridge on July 15th. As David McCullough relates:

*But there was a far larger, more ominous lesson in what had happened. Clearly if two enemy warships with their tenders could pass so swiftly and readily up the Hudson suffering no serious damage from the onshore batteries, then so could ten or twenty warships and transports, or for that matter, an entire British fleet, and by landing an army of 10,000 or more upriver, they could cut off any chance Washington and his forces would have to escape from New York.*³⁴



Figure 5 - HMS Phoenix and HMS Rose under fire

On July 19th, three hundred additional Continental troops were sent up the Harlem River and put to work on the fortifications around the King's Bridge, where work took place around the clock.³⁵ Local militia were also engaged in the fortification efforts. Major General William Heath was put in command of the troops at Kingsbridge on August 18th and provisions and ammunition were received.³⁶

³² *George Washington Papers, Series 4: General Correspondence* (Library of Congress)

³³ Edsall, *History of the Town of Kingsbridge*, page 24 and *George Washington General Orders, 2 July 1776*, National Archives: Founders Online, accessed January 2026. www.founders.archives.gov

³⁴ McCullough, 1776, pages 139 & 140

³⁵ Edsall, *History of the Town of Kingsbridge*, page 25

³⁶ Ibid

The British Arrive in Force

While this was transpiring at the northern tip of Manhattan and on the mainland just beyond, New York Harbor was filling with British ships. On June 29th, the long-awaited fleet from Halifax arrived – more than a hundred vessels bearing thousands of troops. Shortly thereafter, some nine thousand British troops came ashore on Staten Island and began fortifications.³⁷ As Edwin Burrows and Mike Wallace describe in their book *Gotham; A History of New York City to 1898*:

*His Majesty's army was ready to fight too, convinced it would make short work of the rebels defending New York. Despite the recent unpleasantness in Boston, its officers believed that Washington's so-called army was a mere republican rabble, without the training or leadership necessary to hold off seasoned veterans. This unshakable class contempt was reinforced by the knowledge that large numbers of recent immigrants had thrown in with the patriots.*³⁸

This display of military capability filling the harbor must have astonished the City's defenders. Even today, it would be awesome amidst the modern structures and infrastructure of the City. In 1776, there was nothing in or around the harbor which would have come close to matching its size and scale.

Despite the availability of such force, General Howe's overall view was more nuanced. Again, as Burrows and Wallace relate:

*General Howe, though, didn't want an all-out fight for New York. It wasn't a question of winning, but of how much it would cost to win. He couldn't forget the carnage at Bunker Hill, where a frontal assault against entrenched American positions had cost him 40 percent of the men under his command in a single afternoon, and it was clear that Washington expected him to try the same thing again. Howe knew, too, that if Washington fought well the City could be left unfit as a base for further military operations.*³⁹

But not all British forces had yet arrived. On August 1st, Generals Clinton and Cornwallis appeared after an abortive attempt to capture Charleston, accompanied by eight regiments and several ships. Soon thereafter, a convoy of twenty-two ships and regiments arrived from England and Scotland. Finally, on August 12th, a fleet of vessels arrived bringing 9,000 Hessian mercenaries.⁴⁰

³⁷ Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, page 231

³⁸ Ibid, pages 232 and 233

³⁹ Ibid, page 233

⁴⁰ Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, page 234

The result was the largest British expeditionary force to that point, bringing together more than 40 percent of all the men and ships in the Royal Navy, as well as 32,000 well equipped troops. By contrast, Washington had little naval capability at his disposal, and roughly 23,000 troops comprised mostly of raw militia, only roughly half of which were available for duty due to an outbreak of dysentery.⁴¹

A waiting game ensued as the British forces prepared their plans for attack. British General Henry Clinton advocated for attack at Manhattan's northern tip via the Hudson River as a means of encircling the Continental forces. His suggestions were rejected by General Howe.⁴²

Washington's concerns for his forces are described by McCullough:

Washington's quandary over where the British would strike, and how to apportion the strength he had, was no less extreme now than it had been at the start. [Generals] Greene and Reed, whose judgement he valued most, were certain the enemy would attack Long Island, both because of the number of Loyalists there and the broad accessible beaches where troops could readily land under the protection of British ships.

But Washington worried that a landing on Long Island might be a diversion in advance of a full assault on New York. And with no way of knowing, he felt compelled now to violate one of the oldest, most fundamental rules of battle, never to divide your strength when faced by a superior force. He split his army in roughly equal parts on the theory that he could move men one way or the other over the East River according to how events unfolded.⁴³

On August 18th, the *Phoenix* and the *Rose*, along with their tenders, completed their return trip down the Hudson from Tarrytown, basically unscathed. However, during that return voyage, the Americans had sent fireships – ships set ablaze – against the returning British ships in the vicinity of Kingsbridge.⁴⁴ The attempt at midnight on August 17th was witnessed by Continental officers and men from Spuyten Duyvil Hill and resulted in the loss of one of the tenders. General Heath may have been among the witnesses on the hill.⁴⁵

On August 19th, Washington ordered a number of old ships sunk at the mouth of the East River between the Battery and Governor's Island to thwart any attempt by the British fleet to use the river to isolate Brooklyn from Manhattan.⁴⁶ On the 21st, he assigned a new engineer to the post

⁴¹ Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, page 235

⁴² McCullough, 1776, page 152

⁴³ McCullough, 1776, page 152

⁴⁴ Ibid, page 153

⁴⁵ Edsall, *History of the Town of Kingsbridge*, page 25

⁴⁶ McCullough, 1776, page 153

at the King's Bridge to press forward on the fortifications on the Spuyten Duyvil Hill and at Fort Independence. Over the next several days, additional troops and armaments were ordered to these fortifications on the north side of the bridge.⁴⁷

The Waiting Ends

On August 22nd, the British invasion of Long Island got underway when 4,000 British troops went ashore at Gravesend Bay with no opposition. Additional deployments brought that total to 15,000.⁴⁸ As McCullough describes:

*Word reached New York early in the day, but Washington was badly misinformed about the size of the enemy force that had come ashore. Told that there were 8,000 or 9,000, he quickly concluded the landing was the feint he had expected, and consequently he dispatched only 1,500 more troops across the East River to Brooklyn, bringing the total American strength on Long Island to something less than 6,000 men. The expectation of another, larger strike by the British at New York or up the Hudson persisted.*⁴⁹



Figure 6 - Troop movements in the Battle of Brooklyn (battle of Long Island). Image by Oneam.

On August 25th, an additional 5,000 Hessian soldiers were dispatched to Long Island from Staten Island, bringing total British forces to approximately 20,000.⁵⁰

It is beyond the scope of this article to describe in detail the actions taken during the ensuing Battle of Brooklyn, which began on August 26th with the British attacking through the Jamaica pass.⁵¹ Suffice it to say that the Continental forces were beaten by superior numbers and tactics, to the point that the American army was almost destroyed in the process. The beaten remnants of the American forces – 1,200 had been killed and 1,500 wounded, captured or missing -- were only able to escape to Brooklyn Heights due to a desperate counterattack by roughly 400 Marylanders (although that number

⁴⁷ Edsall, *History of the Town of Kingsbridge*, page 26

⁴⁸ McCullough, 1776, page 156

⁴⁹ Ibid, pages 158 & 159

⁵⁰ McCullough, 1776, page 161

⁵¹ Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, page 236

has been disputed by some historians). Rather than pursue the Americans forcefully, Howe prepared for a formal siege of the heights.⁵²

Washington took advantage of this choice by his counterpart. Starting the night of August 29th, the Continental forces – employing stealth and taking advantage of weather conditions -- made a bold escape across the East River to Manhattan by the morning of the next day.⁵³ Part of that escape was assisted in part by General Heath at the King's Bridge. As Thomas Edsall describes in the *History of the Town of Kingsbridge*:

On the 29th, Heath impressed every boat and craft at the post and hurried them down to Washington for use in the retreat from Long Island.⁵⁴

Colonel John Glover and his regiment hailing from Marblehead, Massachusetts - who we will meet again later in this narrative – were tasked with evacuating the remaining soldiers from Brooklyn. As contemporaneous historian William Gordon wrote:

Colonel Glover, who belonged to Marblehead, was called upon with the whole of his regiment fit for duty, to take command of the vessels and flat-bottomed boats. Most of the men were formerly employed in the fishery, and so peculiarly well qualified for the service.⁵⁵

Howe's choice and Washington's initiative prevented the very real possibility of the destruction of the Continental forces at the Battle of Brooklyn, which – had it occurred – would most likely have ended the Revolution itself.

Pursuit of Washington's Forces in Manhattan

From this point forward, Washington's forces faced a very precarious situation. As Burrows and Wallace describe:

Now even Washington could see his days in New York were numbered. His dispirited army was falling apart – in one week, six thousand of eight thousand Connecticut militia simply picked up and went home – and the longer he stayed in the City, the greater the danger he would be encircled and destroyed. At a war council on September 12th, Washington accepted the advice of his officers to abandon all of Manhattan to the enemy except for Fort Washington at the northern end of the island. . . Two days later, leaving

⁵² Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, page 237 & 239

⁵³ Ibid, page 239

⁵⁴ Edsall, *History of the Town of Kingsbridge*, page 26

⁵⁵ William Gordon, *The History of the Rise, Progress and Establishment of the Independence of the United States of America: Including an Account of the Late War, and the Thirteen Colonies, from Their Origin to That Period*. (New York: Samuel Campbell, 1788), Page 102.

[General Israel] Putnam and five thousand men to cover his rear, Washington shifted his headquarters ten miles out of town [i.e., out of New York City] to the home of Roger Morris on Harlem Heights.⁵⁶

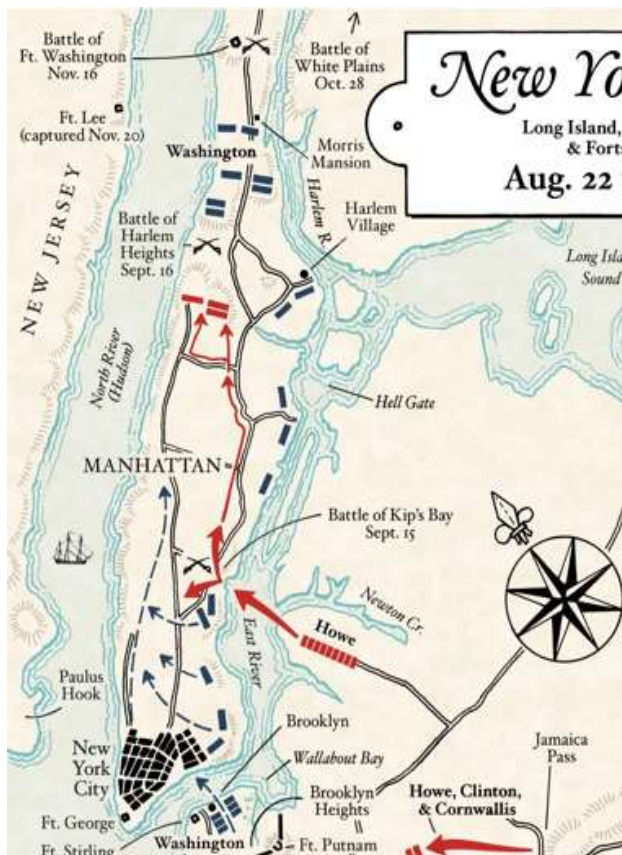


Figure 7 - British and American troop movements in Manhattan, 1776. MountVernon.org/revolutionarywar

General Howe finally crossed the East River on September 15th and -- accompanied by an artillery barrage from British warships -- landed in the vicinity of Kip's Bay (modern 34th Street). The Continental forces scattered in disarray, and General Putnam and the routed patriots retreated to Harlem Heights. Reformed there with the main contingent, the Americans were able to repulse British forces in a skirmish on September 16th in the vicinity of modern Broadway and 120th Street.⁵⁷

McCullough describes the impact of this positive result:

Reporting to Congress on the Battle of Harlem Heights, Washington referred to it only as a "pretty sharp skirmish" and made no claims to a great victory. But to the troops it was a genuine victory at long last, and an urgently needed lift to their self-respect. They had seen the backs of the red coats on the fly.⁵⁸

Washington's position in the heights was relatively secure and the two armies, although close, did not engage while the Americans labored to increase their fortifications.⁵⁹ Then a huge fire raged out of control in New York City during the night of September 20th into the 21st. As McCullough again describes:

Houses were torn down in advance of the flames, but then nothing seemed to check the inferno. Had the wind not shifted to the southeast at about two in the morning, the entire city might have been consumed. As it was, the fire raged up the west side, destroying nearly everything between Broadway and

⁵⁶ Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, page 240

⁵⁷ Ibid, pages 240 & 241

⁵⁸ McCullough, 1776, page 219

⁵⁹ Ibid, page 220

the Hudson. Nearly five hundred houses were destroyed, or approximately a quarter of the city, and in the shock and horror of the moment it seemed certain that the disaster was the villainous work of the enemy.⁶⁰



Figure 8 - Map of the Great Fire of 1776

Although Trinity Church on Broadway was consumed in the blaze, Saint Paul's Chapel, several blocks to the north on Broadway, survived the inferno, as it would 225 years later when the massive World Trade Center complex just across the street to its west was destroyed in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The origin of the fire was a point of contention and suspicion. The British rounded up more than 100 suspects in the aftermath, notably including Nathan Hale. All were released, except for Hale who was famously hung as a patriot spy. The cause of the fire was never determined.⁶¹

The conflagration most likely contributed to the intermission in the fighting. During this time, the East River filled with British ships, and the Americans tried to block the Hudson at their position with sunken ships and a submerged chain of spike-studded logs (known as a Chevaux de Frise).⁶² However, on October 9th, three British warships again proceeded up the Hudson to Tarrytown, despite the American obstructions at Fort Washington, as well as artillery fire.



Figure 9 - Chevaux de Frise between Fort Lee and Fort Washington by Sauthier

On October 16th, Washington again held a council of war. As McCullough describes:

⁶⁰ McCullough, 1776, page 222

⁶¹ Ibid, page 223

⁶² Ibid, pages 223 & 228

It was decided that Fort Washington and its garrison should be, in the words of the brief minutes, “retained as long as possible.” The passage of the ships on the Hudson was no longer the issue – the obstructions in the North [Hudson] River had proved insufficient – still, “communication” across the river to New Jersey had to be maintained.

All of York Island [Manhattan] was to be evacuated. The entire American army would march off, except for 1,000 men left to hold Fort Washington.⁶³

The exodus from Manhattan was soon thereafter underway. And it would happen via the King’s Bridge, which was the only viable military crossing strong enough to support artillery and supply wagons. The Free Bridge could not be used for this purpose, except by civilians and smaller units of troops.

As for General Howe’s thinking, Ian Frazier notes the following in his book *Paradise Bronx*:

If any single principle motivated him [Howe] in the fighting in and around New York, it was to avoid another Bunker Hill. He did not want to lose too many of his men; nor, it seemed, did he want to kill too many Americans. He and his brother [Admiral Howe] resembled patient adults trying to quell tantrum-throwing children, first giving hard slaps to get their attention, then wrapping them in a smothering embrace to subdue them. Seeing the Americans ensconced on the [Harlem] heights, Howe switched to the smothering approach. He decided to reach all the way around the American army and take King’s Bridge, the only land exit from Manhattan.⁶⁴

⁶³ McCullough, 1776, page 231

⁶⁴ Ian Frazier, *Paradise Bronx: The Life and Times of New York’s Greatest Borough*. (New York: Picador; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024), page 60

The British Advance and Evacuation

Four days before the October 16th war council, Washington observed a British flotilla moving up the East River from his perch on Harlem Heights. General Howe was putting his plan into play.



Figure 10 - The Bronx in the Revolution. New York Almanack. American position circled; arrow indicates British troop movement.

On October 12th, 4,000 British troops landed at the Throg's Neck peninsula in the current East Bronx. A narrow causeway connected the peninsula to the mainland.⁶⁵ As Frazier relates:

To defeat Washington's army, the British would have to prevail not only on the islands – Long Island (Brooklyn), Staten Island, and Manhattan – where they had already established themselves. They would also have to win on

*the continent, i.e., Westchester County [then including the current Bronx]. Their main headquarters were on Manhattan. No force there could be safe if it did not control the King's Bridge. John Adams said that New York was key to the whole continent. If that was so, then the King's Bridge . . . could be seen as the key to the whole war.*⁶⁶

According to Ian Frazier, Howe's intention was to leave the peninsula via that causeway over Westchester Creek and proceed overland five miles to the west to the King's Bridge, which could be reached in a matter of hours.⁶⁷ Frazier cites as his source for this assertion Bronx historian Lloyd Ultan's work, *The Northern Borough*. However, there is nothing in General Howe's surviving documentation that indicates the *specific* objective of the King's Bridge. And there are indications that Howe and the British were seeking to disrupt American supply lines from Connecticut.

So, what can be said about Howe's intentions in his landing in the current east Bronx? Howe's November 30th dispatch to Lord George Germain states the following:

The very strong positions the enemy had taken on this island and fortified with incredible labor determined me to get upon their principal communication

⁶⁵ *The Battle of Pell's Point*; American Battlefield Trust, accessed December 2025. www.battlefields.org

⁶⁶ Frazier, *Paradise Bronx*, page 62

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, page 63

*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.*⁶⁸

Washington reported in his October 13th letter to John Hancock, the president of the Continental Congress from 1775 to 1777, his take on Howe's intentions:

*Yesterday the Enemy landed at Frogs point about Nine miles from hence further up the Sound. their number we can not ascertain, as they have not advanced from the point, which is a kind of Island, but the Water that surrounds it is fordable at low tide. I have ordered Works to be thrown up at the passes from the point to the Main. From the great number of Sloops, Schooners and Nine Ships that went up the Sound in the Evening full of Men, and from the information of two Deserters who came over last night, I have reason to believe that the greatest part of their Army has moved upwards or is about to do it, pursuing their original plan of getting in our rear & cutting off our communication with the Country.*⁶⁹

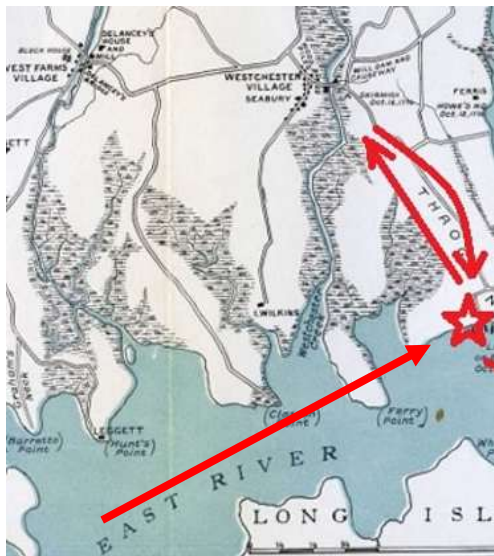


Figure 11 - British troops movements at Throg's Neck. Pelham Town Historian.

From his post among the fortifications surrounding the King's Bridge, General Heath had scouted Throg's Neck nine days before General Howe's landing there. Based on that reconnaissance, Heath had assigned a troop of Pennsylvania riflemen under Colonel Edward Hand to guard the causeway. Those riflemen had removed planks from the causeway and then, on October 12th, they resisted Howe's movement across that crucial bottleneck.⁷⁰

This then was a crucial encounter for the future of the Continental Army. Washington's main force was still in Harlem Heights. The patriot evacuation of Manhattan was not yet fully underway. As in the Battle of Brooklyn

⁶⁸ K. G. Davies, ed. *Documents of the American Revolution, 1770–1783; (Colonial Office Series)*. 21 vols. Shannon and Dublin, 1972–81, pg. 258.

⁶⁹ George Washington to John Hancock, 11–13 October 1776," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-06-02-0405>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 6, 13 August 1776–20 October 1776, ed. Philander D. Chase and Frank E. Grizzard, Jr. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994, pp. 534–536.]

⁷⁰ Frazier, *Paradise Bronx*, page 64

two months earlier, the British were directly threatening the patriot force.

Howe's forces fell back from the Americans' fire at the causeway. He then turned to artillery fire, which did nothing to dislodge the Americans. As Frazier relates:

Howe probed further upstream on Westchester Creek, and found another crossing, with more Americans guarding it. His superior force – four thousand trained veterans against maybe not even hundreds of recent recruits – could have forced its way, but here the general showed the diffidence that he was often criticized for. At the end of the day the British marched back down Throg's Neck and went into encampment near their landing spot.

The next morning, Washington, no doubt relieved to find that he still had an army, ordered troops to reinforce Heath in and near Westchester Village. Had Howe's encirclement attempt of October 12 succeeded, the war might have ended right then.⁷¹

Facing bad weather, the British forces stayed in their Throg's Neck encampment, while Washington worked to anticipate a future attack in what would become the southeast Bronx. He placed defenders in and around Morrisania as an easy landing spot with a shorter distance to the King's Bridge. The other possibility was that Howe would move across Eastchester Bay to the Pell's Point peninsula, and Washington placed a small force to block that maneuver.⁷²

As Frazier describes:

It consisted of four Massachusetts regiments – about 800 men under the command of Colonel John Glover. When Howe finally moved, on October 18, he chose the Pell's Point option. At one in the morning, he loaded his four thousand men into two hundred flatboats, crossed Eastchester Bay, and landed on the point.⁷³

Once again, the British forces needed to move off of a peninsula to achieve their objectives. They were met by Glover's brigade, comprised of the 3rd, 13th, 14th, and 26th Continental regiments from Massachusetts.⁷⁴ The 14th Continental Regiment notably was an integrated unit. Dubbed the "Marblehead Mariners", the force consisted of an interracial group: white, Native American, Spanish, and free Blacks, all treated as equals.⁷⁵ Previously involved in the

⁷¹ Frazier, *Paradise Bronx*, pages 64 and 65

⁷² Ibid, pages 65 and 66

⁷³ Frazier, *Paradise Bronx*, page 66

⁷⁴ Patrick K. O'Donnell, *The Indispensables; The Diverse Soldier-Mariners Who Shaped the Country, Formed the Navy, and Rowed Washington Across the Delaware*. (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2021), page 264

⁷⁵ Arthur L. Scinta, *The Battle of Pelham; October 18, 1776*, accessed February 2026.

www.pelhamtownhistorian.com

evacuation of patriot forces from Brooklyn, the Mariners also had a hand in the aforementioned launching of fireships against the *Phoenix* and *Rose* and their tenders.⁷⁶

Improvising to take advantage of topography and the stone walls lining the single road exiting the peninsula, Glover engaged the superior British forces with a tactical choreography that employed successive layers of ambush to block them from exiting.⁷⁷

While this was transpiring, Washington's evacuation of Manhattan was underway, mostly via the King's Bridge. Had Howe been able to get his forces off of Pell's Point, they could have met the evacuating forces in and around Kingsbridge. However, two units of American defenders – at Throg's Neck on October 12th and Pell's Point on October 18th – had impeded the British objectives that would've likely endangered Washington's forces.

The conclusion of the Battle of Pell's Point set the stage for the next phase of the conflict. As described by Frazier:

Glover's men, having checked Howe's advance, retreated down the hill to the Hutchinson River, forded it, and went into camp three miles away. Howe, once again diffident, did not pursue.

So ended the biggest military engagement ever fought in the Bronx. Had Howe got past the greatly outnumbered Glover, he would have had a straight shot to the Hudson River and the encirclement he sought. In this case . . . a determined follow-up could have crushed the colonials, maybe for good. People wondered if Howe really wanted to win. It was almost as if he was testing the Continentals to see if they really, truly desired independence.

Howe moved up the valley of the Hutchinson River, joined by nine thousand troops under General George Cornwallis, and they fought a major but indecisive engagement with Washington on the heights above the village of White Plains.⁷⁸

The day before Howe broke camp at Throg's Neck and moved to Pell's Point, Washington's general orders of October 17th read in part as follows:

As the movements of the enemy make an alteration of our position necessary . . . tents are to be struck and carefully rolled, the men to take the tent poles in their hands, two men out of a company, with a careful subaltern, to go with the baggage and not leave it on any pretense. No packs (unless of sick men), chairs, tables, benches, or heavy lumber [are] to be put on the wagons. No

⁷⁶ O'Donnell, *The Indispensables*, page 350

⁷⁷ Frazier, *Paradise Bronx*, pages 66 and 67

⁷⁸ Ibid, pages 70, 71, and 72

person, unless unable to walk, is to presume to get upon them. The wagons [are] to move forward before the regiments.⁷⁹

The Continental Army then crossed the King's Bridge and headed north along the west bank of the Bronx River. Travel was slow and difficult, given that teams and wagons were in short supply.⁸⁰ But the Army had survived a perilous two months since the British had first come ashore at Gravesend. Almost to the day, five years remained until the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown that would end major combat.

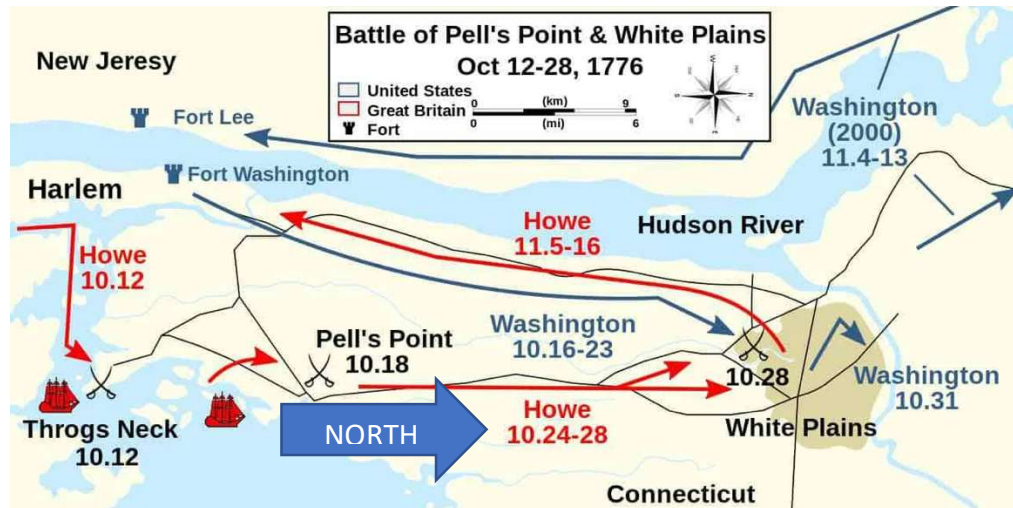


Figure 13 - British and American troop movements; October 1776. Note Howe's movement to Throgs Neck and then on to Pell's Point. Note also Washington's movement north from Fort Washington and over the King's Bridge.

In his book *George Washington's Westchester Gamble*, Richard Borkow observes that the Revolution had nearly ended more than once in and around Manhattan in 1776:

While the Americans suffered a major loss at the Battle of Long Island [i.e., the Battle of Brooklyn], General Howe failed to exploit his advantage fully and missed several opportunities to envelope the American army and destroy it. Had he acted expeditiously on the day of the Battle of Long Island, he could have surrounded the American forts on Brooklyn Heights and captured Washington's entire army.

Several days later, General Howe missed a second chance to capture the Continental army when he failed to cut off the American withdrawal from lower to upper Manhattan. A third chance was missed a few weeks after that, during Washington's retreat from Harlem Heights into Westchester County.⁸¹

⁷⁹ *The Papers of George Washington, Revolutionary War Series, Volume VI.* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1985-1998), page 582

⁸⁰ McCullough, 1776, page 231

⁸¹ Borkow, *George Washington's Westchester Gamble*, page 35

The struggles of the Continental Army at the Battle of Brooklyn are generally well known as part of the history of the American Revolution. But the further travails of Washington's forces in the aftermath less so, as well as the precipice they were treading as they abandoned Manhattan. As in the Burns documentary, they are relegated to the minor details of American history.

Regardless, Washington's army *could've* been attacked as they evacuated Manhattan Island, using the King's Bridge at the modern intersection of Kingsbridge Avenue and West 230th Street, and continued north in what was then Westchester County. Had that occurred, the very future of the revolutionary enterprise might have hung in the balance. Instead the patriot forces moved successfully, dependent on a relatively insignificant wood and stone crossing over a rather small tidal creek.

Instead of the sounds of cannonades and musket fire, the valley through which that long-ago landfilled creek meandered, along with the surrounding hills, were filled with the sounds of an army on the move. Its destruction was not to be thanks to a variety of conditions, decisions, and tactics which contributed to its successful evacuation and ultimate survival. And to less than a thousand militiamen – Black, Native American, Hispanic and white – who bottled up a fearsome British force on two peninsulas in what would become the east Bronx.