

From Robert A. Mayers's new book, "Revolutionary New Jersey: Forgotten Towns and Crossroads of the American Revolution"

# Finding the Eagle's Perch

New Jersey's  
Washington  
Rocks

*by Robert A. Mayers*

*One of the  
most  
important  
places had  
been forgotten  
for over 150  
years...*

**I**t is difficult today to imagine the significance that the Watchung Mountains held during the Revolutionary War. Washington Rock, located in present-day Green Brook Township, is the location of the best known of several Revolutionary War observation posts that may be found on the crest of the first ridge of the Watchung Mountains. Historians and local residents claim that General George Washington used all of these sites to scan the countryside and observe the movements of British troops on the plains of central New Jersey, Staten Island and New York City.

I first selected Washington Rock as a critical site of the Revolutionary War that has been neglected in the history of the Garden State. However, while today it is typically acknowledged as being the *only* lookout, my research has recently revealed that it was one of *several* places along the first ridge of the Watchung Mountains used by General Washington during the war as an observation post.

The first ridge provides a 60-mile panoramic view of central New Jersey, stretching from Newark to Trenton. Troop movements in the British-occupied areas around New Brunswick, Perth Amboy, Elizabeth, Staten Island and New York Harbor could be closely watched from its several vantage points. These lookouts, at an elevation of between 400 and 500 feet above the central plains of New Jersey, provided the American Army with a unique sight advantage. An early warning to American troops would allow time to prepare and plan tactics and strategy to counter the invaders. In the 18th century the land below the Watchung Hills was mostly plowed fields and open pastures, thus allowing an almost unobstructed view from the lookouts.

My expanded study encompassed all the known Washington Rock locations in New Jersey. Most of these sites became obscure over time and were seldom identified in historical accounts. One of the most important places had been forgotten and unacknowledged for over 150 years, which led to my exciting rediscovery of a rocky ledge that has not been visited, to my knowledge, by any historian since 1851. It was found above the Middle Brook Encampment near Chimney Rock in Martinsville.

### **Strategic Situation**

During the winter of 1776–1777, Washington kept the Continental Army encamped at Morristown, New Jersey. In April 1777, when the outpost garrison at Bound Brook was attacked and the American troops were routed, he moved his army to the Middlebrook Encampment on the heights above the town of Bound Brook. This location was twenty miles closer to the British lines around New Brunswick. He arrived at Middlebrook



Charles Willson Peale's sketch of Washington at today's Washington Rock State Park, drawn while he was viewing the Battle of Short Hills, 26 June 1777.

with the troops on May 28 and remained there until July 2, 1777.

A total of 8,298 Continental troops were encamped in the Watchung hills between Bridgewater and Green Brook, which included 2,660 sick and disabled men who were unable to fight. This extended stay by the Patriots is known as "The First Middlebrook Encampment." Massing the American troops in these mountains at this turbulent time would prove to be a superb strategy.

British forces in and about New Brunswick had been reinforced to an overwhelming 17,000 men. The Redcoats were seasoned troops, well trained and equipped with state of the art weapons, including a small number of repeating rifles. Much of Washington's poorly clad army were raw militia with worn muskets often brought from home.

Washington could observe the enemy troop movements from anywhere along the crest of the first Watchung ridge, from Middlebrook to Scotch Plains. The Continental Army was in a naturally fortified position. From there they could counteract any hostile repositioning and have a significant effect on British campaign planning in America.

In early 1777 constant military action occurred on the plains below the lookout rocks, and skirmishes took place almost daily. These incidents included a clash at Spantown (now

*He observed  
the main  
body of the  
British army  
moving out  
during the  
night of  
June 13 and  
marching  
toward  
Somerset  
Court  
House...*

Rahway) on January 5 and another on February 1 near the Millstone River at what is today Franklin Township. In April and May there was fighting near Perth Amboy and Piscataway. During this time there were also encounters on the roads from Elizabeth to Morristown and near Springfield and Scotch Plains.

British commander William Howe had two options at this time that could end the war with a British victory. He could advance directly across New Jersey by land to take the nation's capital of Philadelphia. He then could move up the Hudson River to join General Burgoyne, who was moving southward from Canada by way of Lake Champlain. This action would split New England from the other states, severely limiting the ability of America to wage war.

Or he could move to Amboy to embark at Staten Island and proceed by sea. This voyage would require sailing up the Chesapeake Bay and marching north to reach Philadelphia. The threat of an attack by the Continental Army from the hills at Middlebrook could force him to take the safer, but much slower, sea route from New York to Chesapeake Bay. This trip could cause a long delay which would completely upset Howe's strategy and affect the course of the entire war for Great Britain.

Two weeks after General Washington had moved from Morristown to occupy the heights of Middlebrook, he began to notice activity in the British lines. He observed the main body of the British army moving out during the night of June 13 and marching toward Somerset Court House, now present-day Somerville. In Middlebush (now Franklin Township), they threw up earthworks and tried to tempt the Americans to move down from their impenetrable position to engage in a European-style action on open ground, where the Redcoats would have all the advantages.<sup>1</sup>

The British continued to hold their position at Middlebush after June 15. British General Howe marched and countermarched his army, making feints. These false movements failed to draw Washington from the security of the Watchung heights to fight on the plains of Quibbletown (today's South Plainfield and Piscataway). Washington tenaciously refused to leave the security of his mountain stronghold to confront an enemy that had him outmanned and outgunned.

During this time, the British forces and their Hessian mercenaries indiscriminately plundered the farms of both Patriots and Loyalist inhabitants. The whole region of the Raritan and Millstone was stripped. The farmers threshed their wheat and then hid it under the straw in the barn in order to preserve it from the greedy enemy. In many instances not enough seed was saved to serve for replanting in the autumn. Cellars, houses, pig pens and hen roosts were all raided, and everything desirable was carried off.

*The  
intelligence  
that  
Washington  
had left his  
fortified  
camp in the  
hills was  
immediately  
reported by  
Tory spies...*

At the Somerset Courthouse, British soldiers set fire to the Presbyterian and Dutch Churches, burned farmhouses and attempted to destroy every building between there and New Brunswick. Despite these provocations, the American general could not be lured from his stronghold on the first ridge above Bound Brook. He simply advanced his forces to the south side of the mountain, which he could more readily defend

On June 19, Howe finally appeared to abandon this strategy to engage the American in battle and began a general withdrawal from New Brunswick to Perth Amboy and Staten Island. Washington spotted the move from his rock ledge lookout on the first ridge at Middlebrook and detached three brigades under General Nathanael Greene to hassle the rear guard of the retreating Redcoats. He rejoiced when he observed the evacuation of the British forces and assuming the enemy would not return, and soon released militia units to return home.

General Washington perceived that he was witnessing an orderly withdrawal of the enemy from Amboy across the Arthur Kill to Staten Island, so he sent his army down from the heights of Middlebrook to liberate the oppressed farmers of central New Jersey. The Patriot forces gathered at a weak and exposed place, Quibbletown, now the New Market section of Piscataway Township. He did take one vital precaution by sending a force of 1,500 men, led by New Jersey Generals Stirling and Maxwell, to protect the flank at Edison, Plainfield and Scotch Plains.

The retreat of General Howe's forces from New Brunswick to Amboy has been viewed by many historians as only a deception to induce Washington to draw the American army down from its strong position in the hills at Middlebrook. There they could theoretically engage in a final decisive battle of the war, a fight in which the Americans where would be outnumbered and outgunned. But his original report shows his initial objective was simply to move his army to Staten Island for embarkation, not as a move to deceive Washington: "On finding their [the Americans] intention to keep a position—which it would not have been prudent to attack, I determined, without loss of time, to pursue the principal objects of the campaign by withdrawing the army from Jersey, and in consequence of this determination returned to the camp at Brunswick on the 19th, and marched from thence to Amboy intending to cross to Staten Island, from whence the embarkation was to take place."<sup>2</sup>

The intelligence that Washington had left his fortified camp in the hills was immediately reported by Tory spies to General Howe at Amboy. When he heard this news he ordered the British Army to about-face and rapidly deploy to Quibbletown, where he hoped to surprise Washington in his unprotected position

Howe continued in his letter to Germaine:

*Washington's  
last glimpse  
of the enemy  
was from  
Washington  
Rock in  
Green Brook.*

*The necessary preparations being finished for crossing the troops to Staten Island, intelligence was received that the enemy had moved down from the mountain [heights at Middlebrook] and taken post at Quibbletown, intending, as it was given out, to attack the rear of the army removing from Amboy; that two corps had also advanced to their left—one of three thousand men and eight pieces of cannon, under the command of Lord Stirling, Gens. Maxwell and Conway, the last said to be a captain in the French service; the other corps consisted of about seven hundred men, with only one piece of cannon. In this situation, it was judged advisable to make a movement that might lead to an attack, which was done on the 26th, in the morning, in two columns.*

Washington was warned by Stirling of the impending surprise attack, so he hastily withdrew back into the hills without any losses. But Stirling and his vastly outnumbered detachment took heavy losses while holding off the entire British Army. This valiant stand at Edison, Plainfield and Scotch Plains saved the American forces from a disastrous defeat that would have certainly ended the war. This critical but largely forgotten engagement has come down in history as The Battle of the Short Hills, as already discussed.

The battered survivors of Stirling's detachment retreated to Middlebrook through the Borough of Watchung and Warren Township, where they were secure behind the first ridge. The English generals then assessed their position and decided that the Watchung ridges were impregnable. This kept the American Army secure and difficult to attack, and when added to the strength of the formidable New Jersey militia units, this prevented Howe from marching across New Jersey to take Philadelphia. Instead, he was forced to take the longer and more difficult sea route to Chesapeake Bay.

Washington's last glimpse of the enemy was from Washington Rock in Green Brook. He watched the English forces moving out of New Jersey through Westfield, Rahway and Amboy to Staten Island for the voyage to Chesapeake Bay to begin the Philadelphia campaign. They departed Amboy on the last day of June 1777, and this final exodus left the Garden State in possession of the Americans for the remainder of the war. The American army evacuated its position at Middlebrook two days later and moved northward to Pompton, a locale which provided even greater security, and a better position to protect the Hudson River Valley.<sup>3</sup>

**Washington Rock at Green Brook**

Today the first ridge of the Watchung Mountains in Union and Somerset Counties looks down on US Route 22. During the

*...the  
Watchung  
Mountains  
were major  
obstacles to  
troop  
movements  
and all other  
types of  
transportation.*

Revolutionary War this stretch of high ground was known as the "Blue Hills". The first settlers on the plains below gave it that name because of the blue haze that can still be observed cloaking these mountains today. Nestled in these hills were the sites of training schools, supply depots and hospitals. The three ridges of the Watchungs provided the security for Washington's Continental Army to encamp two winters at Middlebrook. Lookout stations and a string of signal beacons on the crest of the first ridge served the American Army as the main line of defense in New Jersey during the entire war.

Washington Rock, in Green Brook Township, the best known of the lookout posts, is in a scenic 52-acre state park. After more than two centuries of housing and roadway development in the region the landscape surrounding the park has been altered. Today it takes little time or effort to drive through these hills. We do not appreciate the fact that in the 18th century, when only men or horses provided the strength to haul wagons and cannons, the Watchung Mountains were major obstacles to troop movements and all other types of transportation. The ridges of the Watchungs provided layers of protection that stretched for over forty miles, from Mahwah to Somerset County, and formed a natural barrier that protected New Jersey from a British invasion westward.

The passes through these mountains were guarded by the New Jersey Militia from several counties. These citizen-soldiers assembled and drilled on the farm of Cornelius and Frederich Vermuele at the base of the first ridge along the Green Brook, in today's town of Plainfield. Washington Rock at Green Brook lies on the ridge directly above the Vermuele Farm. General Washington ordered that a camp be established here when he reached New Brunswick early in December 1777. It would serve as an assembly place for the New Jersey militia who could fan out over the central part of the state to protect inhabitants from the plundering bands of British and Hessian soldiers.<sup>4</sup>

The militia of Hunterdon, Morris and Sussex Counties, the First Essex Regiment, the First Somerset Regiment under Colonel Frederick Frelinghuysen, and the First Middlesex Regiment, under Colonel John Webster, were stationed at the Vermuele Camp. "General Wind's brigade," the nucleus of the garrison, totaled more than 1,200 men. The entire garrison of this post swelled to 2,000 men at various times, which made it half as large as Washington's entire Continental Army during the winter of 1776 and 1777.

This large militia post was built along the east bank of the Green Brook between what is now Clinton and West End Avenues. Its present address is 614 Green Brook Road in North Plainfield, New Jersey. It consisted of ninety-five acres and a

*...the  
Watchung  
Mountains  
were major  
obstacles to  
troop  
movements  
and all other  
types of  
transportation.*

large fort that guarded the main road from Scotch Plains to Quibbletown, present-day Front Street in Plainfield. Although the Plainfield area was mostly open farm land at that time, with a population of only about fifty residents, the location of the post had significant military importance. It served as the approach to the two vital passes through the first ridge—the Quibbletown Gap, now an abandoned roadbed, parallels Warrrenville Road, and the pass at Stony Brook, now Somerset Street in Watchung.

General Washington ordered troops to guard the main gaps through the southern section of the first Watchung Ridge as early as the fall of 1776. These gaps were at Middlebrook, where today Chimney Rock Road cuts through the ridge, the Quibbletown Gap, the pass at Stoney Brook, and at Scotch Plains where Bonnie Burn Road now ascends the first ridge. The battles at Bound Brook and the Short Hills, in the spring of 1777, were attempts by the British to penetrate American defenses by punching through these passes to get behind the ridge. These attacks were not successful, but their small raiding parties often caused havoc.

The British incursion that captured Major General Charles Lee at Widow White's Tavern in Basking Ridge, New Jersey was the most notable of the smaller forays. During the retreat across New Jersey in December 1776, General Charles Lee, second in command of the Continental Army, placed his troops near Morristown rather than join General Washington on the west side of the Delaware River. While sleeping in the tavern of the Widow White, Lee was taken prisoner by the troops of General Charles Cornwallis. The removal of Lee, a frequent critic of Washington, may have actually led to Washington's success at Trenton and Princeton. There had been conflicting rumors as to why General Lee was even at the Widow Whites Tavern; some historians allege that he went there in search of female sociability, or perhaps to visit Widow White herself. The tavern's original location was on what is now the corner of South Finley Avenue and Colonial Drive in Basking Ridge.

When the British Army began moving from New Brunswick to Amboy after June 19, 1777, Washington followed their move by shifting his observation post north of Middlebrook to Green Brook, an easy move along the crest of the ridge. Parts of the trail that he took are still visible, although most of the route has been covered by residential development. Local tradition is that the general spent five days away from the Middlebrook Camp visiting the rock. This visit likely occurred during the end of June when the fighting took place at the Short Hills

At Green Brook he was nearer to any hostile action that might develop and was closer to the Vermuele Camp. He remained in this immediate area and is known to have visited

*He could see  
the troops of  
Stirling,  
outnumbered  
six to one,  
being being  
beaten back...*

both the camp and the house of Nathaniel Drake. It was at the Drake House that General Washington consulted with his officers during and after the Battle of Short Hills, which was fought over the entire Plainfield area between June 25 and 27, 1777.<sup>5</sup> Washington observed the clash from the Rock and may have sent orders to the beleaguered General Stirling using semaphore flags.

One can imagine the stress Washington must have endured while looking down on the action with his "glass." He could see the troops of Stirling, outnumbered six to one, being beaten back toward Westfield and the wagons loaded with American wounded escaping up Bonnie Burn Road. Would the victorious British Army then attempt to break through one of the passes and attack him from the rear? He must have been elated to see the Redcoats withdraw and not continue to press the assault.

After the war, in the early 1800s, Washington Rock at Green Brook became a popular tourist attraction. About 2,500 area residents visited the rock on July 4, 1831, to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the nation's independence. To accommodate the influx of travelers, a road called Cardinal Lane was constructed for stage coaches to shuttle tourists between the Plainfield Railway Station and Washington Rock. Families would spend the day picnicking on the grounds near the rock, and in the years that followed inns and hotels were opened nearby. Cardinal Lane remains today as an unpaved hiking trail. In the decades following the American Revolution, community leaders made many attempts to identify Washington Rock with a monument. This proved difficult as ownership of the property frequently shifted.

The earliest public reference to the Washington Rock at Green Brook was in 1844, sixty years after the War. This description is given in Barber and Howe's *Historical Collections of the State of New Jersey*:

*At an elevation of about 400 feet on the brow of the mountain in the rear of Plainfield stands Washington's Rock. It is one of very large size, being about 25 feet in height and from 30 to 40 in circumference. The bold projection, which nature has given it from the surface of the eminence, renders it a fine position for taking an extensive view of the country below.*

In June, 1777 the American Army was stationed at various places on the plain below. After the retreat of Sir William Howe from New Brunswick, Washington retreated to the heights in rather than confront the enemy. The advance guard of the British army led by Cornwallis fell in with Lord Stirling's Division on June 27, 1777.

*“I know of  
the best point  
on the  
mountains for  
that purpose.”*

Barber and Howe further reported:

*At various times he [General Washington] resorted to this place to ascertain the movements of the enemy. This circumstance has given the Rock a sacred character to the people of the present day, which, in connection with the beautiful prospect it affords, has made it a place of resort for parties of pleasure.*

*The scene is one of uncommon beauty. The whole country, apparently, lies as level as a map at the feet of the spectator, for a circuit of 60 miles. On the left appear the spires of New York City, part of the bay, Newark, Elizabeth, Rahway and New Brighton [Edison]. Directly in front are Amboy and Raritan Bays. To the right New Brunswick and the heights of Princeton and Trenton; and far to the southeast the eye stretches over the plains of Monmouth to the heights of Navesink. Beautiful villages bedeck the plain; and cultivated fields, farm houses and numerous groves of verdant trees are spread around in pleasant profusion.<sup>6</sup>*

Proof that General Washington used the Rock as an observation post was verified in 1897 when evidence of an eyewitness account was found. This account was related to George W. Fitz-Randolph by two local farmers, Ephraim and Josiah Vail, before 1830. Fitz-Randolph, a descendant of the Vail family who owned several farms below the Rock in Greenbrook:

*In the year 1777 or '78 Washington, with 6,000 men was encamped on the Ridge at Middlebrook near and west of Bound Brook. The British army were encamped at New Brunswick, Rahway and Perth Amboy, making incursions into the surrounding country. Doubtless, with an intent of guarding against a serious incursion or surprise, Washington was on his way to the top of the mountain back of Green Brook.*

*Be that as it may, he, with an aide-de-camp, mounted, rode in the gateway and up to a group of men standing between the house and the barn on the farm, now known as the Jonah Vail farm. Washington said: "Can any of you gentlemen guide me to some spot on the mountains from whence a good view of the plain below can be obtained?" Edward Fitz-Randolph, one of the group, said: "I know of the best point on the mountains for that purpose" and added that, if he had his horse, he would take him to it. Thereupon the General requested his aide to dismount and await his return. Fitz-Randolph, mounted upon the aide's horse, piloted the General to the Rock, which today bears the historic name of 'Washington's Rock.*

*While Lossing mentions the Green Brook Rock, residents apparently regarded it as less historically important than the other lookout in the years after the war.*

*I have given the above nearly word for word, as given to me by Ephraim Vail, who died a few years since aged 90 and over, on the farm where he was born and raised. Josiah Vail gave me the same version of the incident; Indeed any of the old residents of Green Brook would corroborate the same, were they alive. All these Vails were Quakers, owning adjoining farms, and their word is reliable.<sup>7</sup>*

George Fitz-Randolph again confirmed Washington's presence at the Rock shortly before he died in 1830. Fitz-Randolph reported that Washington observed the British Fleet preparing to sail to Chesapeake Bay: "Looking through his glass, Washington rejoiced at finally watching the British fleet of 270 transports leave Amboy bay heading to sea and leaving Jersey forever.

The development of the rail line below the Rock in 1838 accelerated the development of the towns below. Westley H. Ott, the unofficial historian of Dunellen, reported that the Rock was a popular spot for political rallies as early as 1840. Rail service was provided between Elizabethtown and Plainfield at that time and was later extended to Bound Brook in 1843.<sup>8</sup>

The Rock has long been a landmark and site for day trips for Central Jersey residents. As early as 1840, residents from nearby towns began climbing up to the Rock to admire the view and have picnics. Rebecca Vail, a Quaker farm wife of Green Brook, kept a diary for a brief period in her life. That fragment of journal records that in 1847 she made a picnic trip to the Rock.

Historian Ott also reported that on the 75th anniversary of Independence in 1851, more than 2,500 spectators visited Washington Rock. He also described the Washington Rock Mountain House, erected in 1852, as a "large three-story building" with a full-length porch. This hotel burned to the ground in a raging fire in 1883.

Curiously, in 1851, the famous historian Benson Lossing visited New Jersey and inquired about the location of "Washington Rock." At the time local residents assumed that the Rock was the rocky ledge above the Middlebrook Encampment near Chimney Rock, not Green Brook. While Lossing mentions the Green Book Rock, residents apparently regarded it as less historically important than the other lookout in the years after the war.

Lossing provided this brief mention of the Green Book Rock after a lengthy detailed description of the large stone at Middlebrook: "In the rear of Plainfield, at an equal elevation, and upon the same range of hills, is another rock bearing a similar appellation, and from the same cause. It is near the brow of the mountain, but, unlike the one under consideration, it stands quite alone, and rises from a slope of the hill, about twenty-five

*After the Civil War, John W. Laing, a Plainfield stableman, dutifully climbed the mountain each year to give the Rock a coat of whitewash.*

showing. From this latter lofty position, it is said, Washington watched the movements of the enemy in the summer of 1777."<sup>9</sup>

An 1860 real estate map titled "Washington Rock to Newark Bay," part of a collection found at the Cannon Ball House in Scotch Plains, shows two hotels at the site. In the 1870s, a stage coach regularly ran two miles between the Dunellen Station and the Rock. After the Civil War, John W. Laing, a Plainfield stableman, dutifully climbed the mountain each year to give the Rock a coat of whitewash.<sup>10</sup>

*The Constitutionalist*, Plainfield's leading newspaper from 1868 to 1911, reported that repainting the Rock each year had become a notable annual event.<sup>11</sup> In 1898 *The Constitutionalist* proclaimed that Washington Rock was to be defended, not against the assaults of a Spanish Army, but by the ravages of time: "It is really but right that that historical spot should be looked after especially at such a time as this. For years, it has been the custom of some patriotic citizens to whitewash the Rock so that it can be seen for miles around. Constable William N. Pangborn and Edward Conshee are leading a group to ensure that the Rock receives a coat of whitewash and the brush cleared around it."<sup>12</sup>

With the approach of the Centennial, a group of citizens formed the Washington Monument and Historical State Association in 1867. The group included many members of the local Masonic lodge in Plainfield, since George Washington was an active Mason all his life and served as the Grand Master of his fraternity. The association began raising funds to build a 100-foot observation tower on the mountain behind the Rock. The tower, was to be "a monumental shaft dedicated to immortal Washington which greets the rising sun from yonder mountain brow." The Masons provided the motto "New Jersey gratefully remembers her defenders in the dark and bloody days of the Revolution."<sup>13</sup> Although the foundation and cornerstone were laid, mortgages held on the land prevented the association from getting a clear title, and the project was eventually abandoned.

While the tower monument was never built, the ceremonies, parades, speeches, fireworks and displays held on July 4, 1876, were extensive. A band played on all day at the huge dancing platform constructed at the Rock. In the evening, the grove and the hotel were brilliantly illuminated, music was provided for more dancing, and a grand Centennial supper for 6,000 guests was served.

There was still interest in erecting some sort of memorial at the Rock, and finally the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) Continental Chapter started raising funds in 1879. A.L.C. Marsh, a New York City architect who designed "country homes," and lived in Plainfield, donated a design plan to the DAR

*Finally, in 1912, a small cube-shaped one room stone building was erected by the DAR at the cost of \$3,000.*

for the memorial. It called for building a stone cairn on the foundation of the tower that had been built forty years before by the Masons, and adding a native stone retaining wall to join the two rocks on the site. This plan was never put into action, however, due to lack of funding. In 1909 the property was purchased by Mr. Charles McCutchen of North Plainfield, who understood its historical significance, and held it in trust for the people of Plainfield and North Plainfield.

Finally, in 1912, a small cube-shaped one room stone building was erected by the DAR at the cost of \$3,000. The monument now stands approximately twenty feet above the rock and is surmounted by a high flagpole. On March 27, 1913, the New Jersey Senate and State Assembly passed an act to acquire Washington Rock and adjoining lands as a gift from McCutchen. The act also called for the appointment of a commission to improve and maintain the site as a public park.

Washington Rock in Green Brook is currently being managed by the Somerset County Park Commission. Today Washington Rock Park encompasses two large rock outcrops that stand about eighty feet apart. One is called "Lafayette Rock" in honor of the young French general who frequently accompanied Washington and who is reported to have perched on it in 1777. The park is currently operated and maintained by the New Jersey Division of Parks and Forestry.<sup>14</sup>

#### **The Washington Rock at Middlebrook and Other Lookouts**

General Washington apparently utilized many locations along the first Watchung Ridge to observe the British and to plan troop movements. My tracing of the history of Washington Rock in Green Brook, led to a fascinating discovery when I came across a reference to another rock observation post along the ridge in a British account written in 1785. This document mentions Washington's observation post as being on a rock on the south side of Middlebrook Heights, which would place it on the first ridge about five miles southwest of Green Brook in the Middlebrook Encampment, in what is now Martinsville.

General Washington relocated the American army from Morristown to Middlebrook after learning that British forces under Howe might be preparing to move across New Jersey to capture the nation's capital at Philadelphia. American troops began arriving in May 1777 and remained until early July. This became known as the First Middlebrook Encampment. From Middlebrook Washington could quickly maneuver his forces to strike the flank of the enemy columns if they attempted to move anywhere in New Jersey. These tumultuous seven weeks in the spring of 1777 were a time of uncertainty and indecision for the Americans. What would be the next move if the mighty 16,000-man British force billeted around New Brunswick? Would they

move south to take Philadelphia? Would they move west to occupy the entire state? Or would they cross over the Arthur Kill to Staten Island and return to New York?

A lookout post at Middlebrook would provide a sweeping view of the area from New Brunswick, seven miles away, to Amboy. Enemy activity could be observed on the Raritan River and on the road to Pluckemin to the west. It would be logical for General Washington to have an observation post close to the British lines. The lookout, at Greenbrook Rock, two miles north, would only have value if the Redcoat army moved in that direction.

More recent references reported that the Middlebrook Rock was actually Chimney Rock, an iconic landmark that has been notable throughout the state's history. This natural rock outcrop resembles a chimney stack, hence its name. It is identified on current maps as Hawk's Watch and is now a place frequented by bird watchers. I ruled it out as being the Middlebrook Washington Rock after noticing that the view from there is through a valley and is restricted by hills on each side.

Another early reference to the Middlebrook Rock was from local historian, Rev. Dr. Abraham Messier, pastor of the nearby First Church of Raritan. He described the rock outcrop in the

1830s but did not disclose its exact location. He reported, "On the apex of the Round Top, on the left of the gorge in which Chimney Rock stands, there are yet to be seen the rude remains of a hut which Washington sometimes frequented during those anxious months of 1777. On the east side of the gorge, also, fronting the plain north of Middlebrook, there is a rock which has been named 'Washington Rock,' because there he often stood to gaze anxiously upon the scene it overlooks."<sup>15</sup>

I found very few references in documents written in the next 150 years that mention a lookout site somewhere along the ridge, so its exact location had been lost in history. One account



Washington Rock at Middlebrook Campground, Martinsville, N.J. 1851 drawing by Benson J. Lossing. (*The Pictorial Field-Book of the Revolution*, 1859)

*Not only did he describe the location in lucid detail, but he also drew a sketch of the rocky ledge which was identified by local residents as “Washington Rock.”*

reported that it was covered by a swimming pool, but it provided no further details. In 1975, local historian and archeologist A. A. Boom reported that the location of the Middlebrook Washington Rock was mentioned in a book by historian Benson Lossing.<sup>16</sup>

Lossing had actually visited the site in 1851, so I conducted a search of his journal. This proved to be an abundant source of information, because it stated that the rock was at the end of the old steep road over the mountain. Not only did he describe the location in lucid detail, but he also drew a sketch of the rocky ledge which was identified by local residents as “Washington Rock.” Lossing’s account of his visit to the Middlebrook Rock provided enough detail for me to find the approximate location using existing landmarks:

*Returning to the village, we proceeded to visit the campground, which is upon the left of the main road over the mountains to Pluckemin; also ‘Washington’s Rock.’ The former [at Green Brook] exhibits nothing worthy of particular attention; but the latter, situated upon the highest point of the mountain in the rear of Middlebrook, is a locality, independent of the associations which hallow it, that must ever impress the visitor with pleasant recollections of the view obtained from that lofty observatory.*

*We left our wagon at a point half way up the mountain, and made our way up the steep declivities along the remains of the old road [Vossellor Avenue]. How loaded wagons were managed in ascending or descending this mountain road is quite inconceivable, for it is a difficult journey for a foot-passenger to make. In many places not even the advantage of a zigzag course along the hillsides was employed, but a line as straight as possible was made up the mountain. Along this difficult way the artillery troops that were stationed at Pluckemin crossed the mountain, and over that steep and rugged road heavy cannons were dragged.*

*Having reached the summit, we made our way through a narrow and tangled path [Miller Lane] to the bold rock seen in the picture on the next page. It is at an elevation of nearly four hundred feet above the plain below, and commands a magnificent view of the surrounding country included in the segment of a circle of sixty miles, having its rundle southward.*

*At our feet spread out the beautiful rolling plains like a map, through which course the winding Raritan and the Delaware and Hudson Canal. Little villages and neat farmhouses dotted the picture in every direction. Southward, the spires of New Brunswick shot up above the intervening forests, and on the left, as seen in the picture, was spread the expanse of Raritan and Amboy Bays, with many white sails upon their bosoms. Beyond were seen the swelling hills of Staten the Island, and*

*He examined  
Lossing's  
sketch of a  
rock outcrop  
and noted that  
it looked very  
familiar...*

*the more abrupt heights of Neversink or Navesink Mountains, at Sandy Hook. Upon this lofty rock Washington often stood, with his telescope, and reconnoitered the vicinity. He overlooked his camp at his feet, and could have descried the marchings of the enemy at a great distance upon the plain, or the evolutions of a fleet in the waters beyond."<sup>17</sup>*

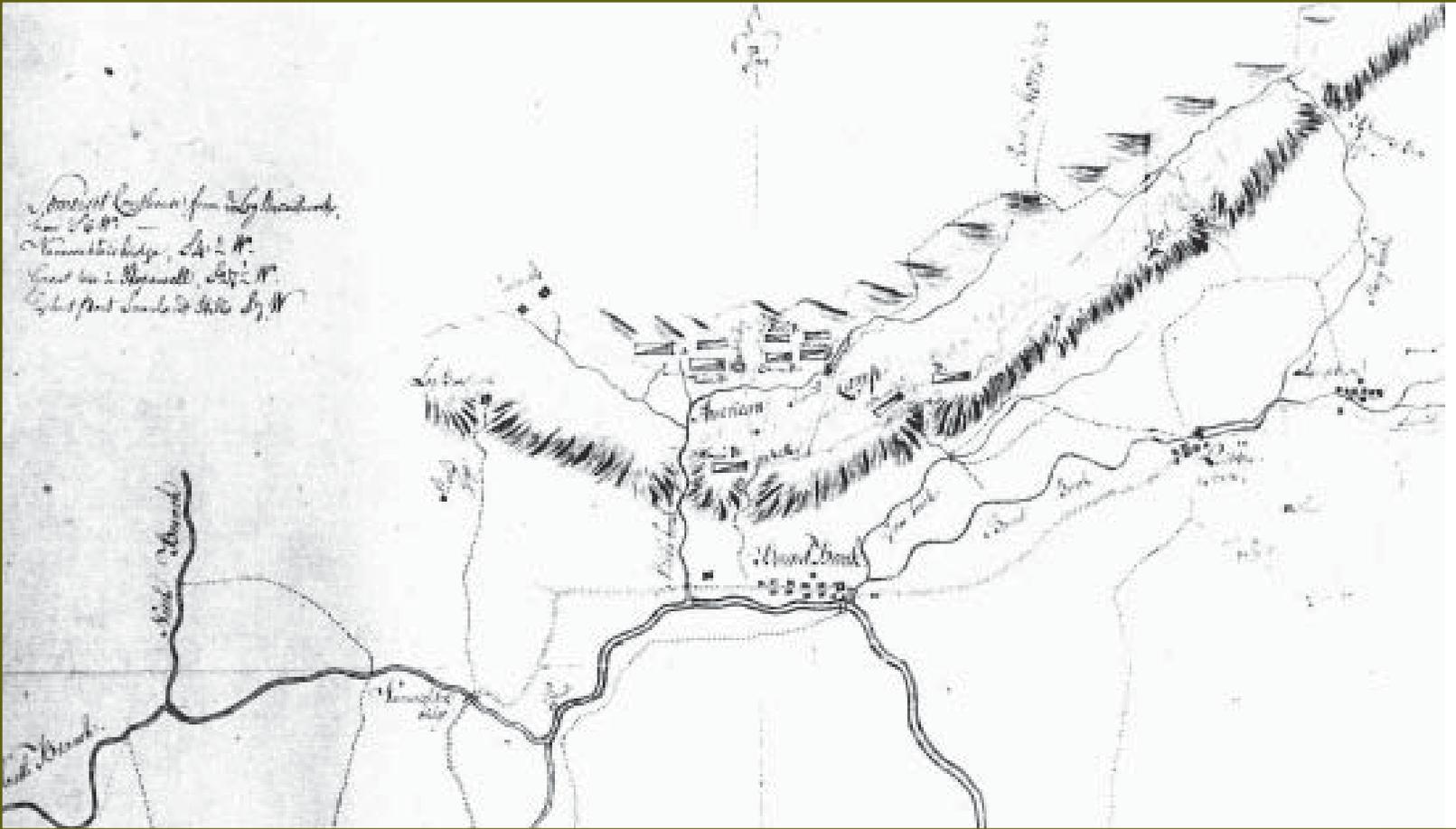
I was able to match Lossing's description with a 1777 map drawn for General Washington by Captain William Scull.<sup>18</sup> The map shows the locations of the Continental Army units during the First Encampment in 1777, as well as both Vosseller Avenue and Chimney Rock Roads. An icon marks the exact location of Wayne's Regiment, which occupied the hilltop. With this additional information, I could now closely identify where the rock should be.

I returned to Middlebrook with these clues, along with a copy of Lossing's sketch. I left Route 22 West and drove up the hill on Vossellor Avenue to the crest of the first ridge, then turned left onto Miller Lane. Here I began looking out for the rocky ledge depicted in Lossing's sketch. I soon noticed a sign— "Eagle's Nest Museum- Herbert M. Patullo."

Nearby was a large barn and a private home. The barn appeared to contain antiques. Adjacent to these structures was a grassy plot with a flagpole that overlooked a vast panoramic view. I knew at once that this was the vista described by Lossing. I was soon greeted by Herb Patullo, owner of the premises. He examined Lossing's sketch of a rock outcrop and noted that it looked very familiar and might be close by. We tramped through the woods for about fifty yards to a rock outcropping which resembled Washington Rock at Middlebrook as described by Benson Lossing in 1851.

Mr. Patullo, owner and operator of the Eagles Nest Museum, told me he has lived his entire life in Bound Brook and for many years was a restaurateur in the town. He has served the community as a leader in many cultural and historical activities, including serving as past President of the Washington Campground Association. As a child his father instilled in him an awareness that their town and the heights above it provided the setting for many critical events during the American Revolution. As a result, he is an astute local historian, and has a comprehensive knowledge of the history of the Bound Brook area and the Middlebrook Encampment. This historical awareness led to his lifelong interest and efforts to preserve the historic encampment site from desecration by commercial and residential development.

This land on the heights around Bound Brook, now part of Martinsville, was the nucleus of the two Middlebrook Encampments; in many ways is more significant than other



Map by Captain Scull of the 11th Pennsylvania Regiment, 1778. Route 22 now runs along the base of the thick dark line. Note label for Bound Brook.

renowned Continental Army camp sites such as Valley Forge and Jockey Hollow. It was a natural fortress for placement of artillery positions to guard the pass that is now Chimney Rock Road. The site provided a view of the countryside that General Washington needed to observe the activities of the British in New York and New Brunswick; it was a position from which he could attack if they attempted to cross New Jersey to Philadelphia.

Washington placed his best armed and trained brigade in this position of honor in advance of the main Army. The Pennsylvania Brigade, commanded by General Anthony Wayne, was recognized as an elite fighting unit. It camped here in an area that extended from the intersection of Vosseller Avenue and Hillcrest Road towards Chimney Rock. The position secured the strategic road passes through the mountain and guarded the rest of the army that was spread out in the Washington Valley behind the ridge. Wayne's Brigade was made up of four Pennsylvania Regiments, most of whom were armed with .69 caliber Charleville muskets from France. Many of the Pennsylvanians were veterans of the Trenton-Princeton campaign and the earlier operations in New York State.<sup>19</sup>

The historical significance of this land had been completely forgotten until relatively recently. The land had been owned by an adjacent quarry operation since the late 19th century. In the early 1970s the property was occupied by a single dilapidated building that housed a county home for the indigent. Herb Patullo became worried that encroaching commercial and

*The Vosseller  
Avenue rock  
formation  
looks much  
more like  
Lossing's  
drawing.*

residential development would soon envelop this historic place. When the county home was closed in 1974, he purchased the building and the 3-acre lot on which it stood. Later, in 1988, he acquired the forty acres that span along the ridge between Chimney Rock Road and Vossellor Avenue. This large swath covered the entire hilltop of the Revolutionary War campsite. He built his home on the site twelve years later and eventually sold the remainder of the property back to Somerset County. The county added the historic land to the adjoining Washington Valley Park in 1994.

The Eagles Nest Museum is open to the public and houses a modest eclectic collection of historic memorabilia, as well as items from Patullo's time as a Machinists Mate in the US Navy during the Korean War. Two original paintings by local artist Victor Temporra are also on display, both of which portray scenes of the camp during the time when it was occupied by Washington's Army. Many of the details depicted in the paintings were provided by Patullo. The museum is open to the public, and visitors remain enthralled by the view from the premises.

#### **Another Middlebrook Rock**

I was asked to be the speaker at the annual meeting of the Washington Campground Association in February 2017. I took this opportunity to venture the possibility that the Rock at Middlebrook on the Patullo property was the observation post along the ridge mentioned in the British account of 1785, and the same one visited by Lossing in 1851. Soon afterward I was contacted by local historian Don Mc Bride. He claimed to have found another observation rock that more closely matched Lossing's sketch, one that was only 1,000 yards north of the Patullo Rock and nearer to Vosseller Avenue.

McBride lives on the ridge adjacent to the former campground, and for many years has explored the area on foot. He has identified remnants of trenches and stone walls and has cleared paths to the crest of the ridge. I stopped by to join McBride to visit the Vosseller Avenue Rock a few weeks after my talk. We tramped through the foliage to the edge of the cliff and stood on the Rock to observe its field of view. We found the same sweeping panoramic 60-mile vista. We then descended about fifty feet down the hill to the base of the cliff to observe the lookout from below. We then compared the two Rock observation posts to the Lossing sketch and narrative.

The Vosseller Avenue rock formation looks much more like Lossing's drawing. Its location atop a distinct cliff closely resembles his sketch, and the site is closer to the road (Vosseller Avenue), as described by Lossing. In addition, the site is where Wayne Brigade was camped, and its elevation is 375 feet, 65 feet higher than the Patullo Rock. However, if trees were



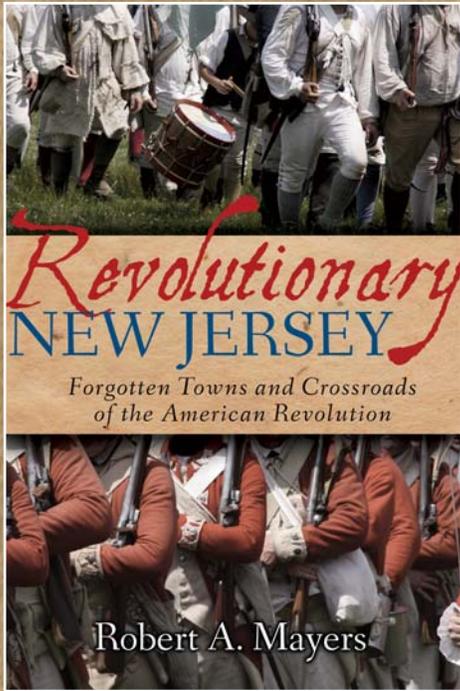
McBride's Rock.  
*(author's collection)*

removed, the view from Petullo's Eagles Nest would be better to the South-South East toward New Brunswick. Moving down the ridge toward Petullo's home also allows a better view of the Sandy Hook area.

You can move about 100 yards down the ridge to get a view of Sandy Hook in the winter when there are no leaves on the trees. It is impossible to see the Vosseller Avenue Rock in profile looking south towards New Brunswick, so it is likely that Lossing used some artistic license in his illustration. It is also probable that General Washington moved to several places along the ridge between Vosseller Avenue and Petiullo's Eagles Nest in 1777 to detect the movement of his Redcoat adversaries.

The Middlebrook Encampment has never been regarded as a significant New Jersey tourist attraction. Most people that are acquainted with it are residents of nearby towns who attend a July 4th ceremony each year held at a commemorative park which is maintained by the Washington Camp Ground Association located on Middlebrook Road east of Vosseller Avenue.

In 1888 the LaMonte family donated twenty acres near the camp to the Washington Camp Ground Association. The LaMontes donated the land on the condition that the Declaration of Independence be read every 4th of July, and that the 13-star version of the American flag be flown twenty-four hours a day. They also stipulated that the land would revert



This article was adapted from Robert A. Mayers's new book, "Revolutionary New Jersey: Forgotten Towns and Crossroads of the American Revolution"

Available from American History Press by clicking on the cover above.

back to the heirs of the family if these requirements were not fulfilled. Since the Association had clear title and it could be easily reached via Vossellor Avenue, the area was suitable for a commemorative park. The Association has faithfully respected the wishes of the LaMonte family each year since that time. Unfortunately, few visitors are aware that the park is not on land occupied by the Middlebrook Encampment; it was actually positioned about a quarter of a mile away.

In the 1990s, the Somerset County Cultural and Heritage Commission explored the feasibility of establishing some historical landmarks in the area south of Miller Lane. They considered retaining Hunter Research, an archaeological investigative firm, to perform a study in the area near Middlebrook Washington Rock to determine if there was any evidence of remains from Revolutionary War encampments. This effort did not play out, but in a way this may be fortunate since this forgotten place remains undisturbed to this day, and the Middlebrook Washington Rock appears very close to the way it did in 1777.

#### **More Washington Rocks Along the First Watchung Ridge**

Another Revolutionary War lookout post was located above Montclair State University at the intersection of the Great Notch area of Little Falls and the Montclair Heights section of Clifton. Eagle Rock in West Orange served as a lookout site as well. Two other places on the South Mountain Reservation, in central Maplewood, Millburn and West Orange have been reported, one of which is marked with two stone pillars.

In June 1780, sentries at these northern lookout stations reported the dreaded news that the British had finally launched a westward attack. The assault moved toward the Hobart Gap, the pass through Chatham and Madison which is now Route 24. This corridor led west to Jockey Hollow, Morristown, the winter encampment of the Continental Army. A breakthrough would have been devastating to the debilitated Continental Army, which was recovering from one of the most brutal winters ever recorded.

Five thousand enemy troops advanced through Union Township. A British column rushed along Galloping Hill Road while Hessian troops were under the command of Hessian Lieutenant General Wilhelm von Knyphausen pressed up Vaux Hall Road. This joint attack was vigorously repelled at Connecticut Farms by the Continental Army and New Jersey Militia forces under the command of General William Maxwell and at Springfield on June 23, sixteen days later. The warnings provided by the observation posts along the First Ridge of the Watchung Mountains in New Jersey were critical to stopping an American defeat and an early end to the War.



1. Boom, A. A., *A report of the Middlebrook Encampment by the Continental A in the Middle of 1777 and in the Winter of 1778-1779*. Sponsored by the Somerset Historical Society, typewritten Ms. Collections of the Warren Township Library. In 1973-74, A. A. Boom, a local historian who conducted tours of the area around Miller Lane, did an extensive investigation of the rock walls in the area.
2. Hon. Gen. Sir William Howe to Lord George Germaine. December 20, 1777, *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, from the *London Gazette*, Whitehall, August 22, 1777.
3. *History of Hunterdon and Somerset Counties*, New Jersey, compiled by James P. Snell and Franklin Ellis (Philadelphia: PA Everts & Peck, 1881), 50.
4. Vermeule, Cornelius C. *The Revolutionary Camp Ground at Plainfield*. An Address delivered before the Continental Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution, January 9, 1923.
5. The house on 602 West Front St. Plainfield, built by Isaac Drake in 1746, is now a museum of the Historical Society of Plainfield. Its collections and exhibits contain various Revolutionary War items.
6. Barber, John Warner., *Historical collections of the state of New Jersey: past and present* (New Haven, CT: J.W. Barber, 1868), 201.
7. Randolph, Edward F., *Journal of Edward Fitz Randolph* (Rutgers University Special Collections, University Archives), 6.
8. Ott, Westley H., *1 mile X 1 Mile X 100 Years Dunellen, N.J.* (Collections of the Green Brook New Jersey Public Library).
9. Lossing, Benson John, *The Pictorial Field-Book of the Revolution or, Illustrations, by Pen and Pencil, of the History, Biography, Scenery, Relics, and Traditions of the War for Independence* (New York, Harper & Brothers, 1859), Vol. 1, Ch. XVI, 331.
10. John Laing named in 1880 Federal Census, City of Plainfield, NJ, First District, 52.
11. *The Constitutionist* July 16, 1896.
12. *Ibid.*, July 14, 1898.
13. *Ibid.*, February 27, 1868.
14. Bebbington, George and Siegel, Alan A., *Washington Rock Is Focus Of Renewed Interest* (Warren History, Volume Two, No. 3, Spring 1995 Warren Township Historical Society), <https://sites.google.com/a/gbhsnj.org/gbhsnj/misc/washington-rock?tmpl> (accessed October 13, 2017)
15. Messier, Abraham, *Centennial History of Somerset County* (Somerville, NJ: C.M. Jameson, 1878), 83.
16. In 1973-74, A. A. Boom, a local historian who conducted tours of the area around Miller Lane, did an extensive investigation of the rock walls in the area, which is documented in Chapter 11 of *North of the Rariton Lotts: A History of Martinsville, NJ Area*, edited by Edward J. Maas, Martinsville Historical Committee, 1975. In 1974, William Liesenbein performed an archaeological investigation of the same area. He refutes some of Boom's claims that most of the walls were set up for fortifications but did admit that some may have been. He also found features which he speculates could have been huts and kitchens in 1777.
17. Lossing Vol. 1, Ch. XVI, 33.
18. Map number 55 in the Erskin/DeWitt series, was drawn for Capt. William Scull. It shows detailed locations of the Continental Army units during the 1776-77 Middlebrook encampment. US National Archives.
19. Wright, Robert K., *The Continental Army* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1986), Ch. 5, 91.