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FISHKILL: A PROBLEM, A SOLUTION AND A CALL FOR ASSISTANCE

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The sound of the bulldozer is heavy upon the land. The heritage and history of beautiful southern Dutchess is being paved over to allow for new businesses at an alarming rate. This is a fact that I became aware of while engaged in archaeological excavations in Fishkill over the past two years.

Here at Fishkill was the major supply depot for Washington's Army during the Revolutionary War. Large forces of men rendezvoused, camped and suffered through northern winters at this then desolate outpost. There was little glamour in spending the war here, often far away from the main army, and further still from home. Men and boys as young as fifteen stood huddled and shivering around small flickering fires, picking apart the bones of horses to eat the marrow inside so they might keep from starving. The huts in which these men lived offered little protection against the wind and cold since the mud had washed from between the stones which formed the walls. The roof leaked when it rained or when the snow began to melt, and the hut had the distinct odor of unwashed bodies mixed with gunpowder which was occasionally burned to "purify" the air.

As if this wasn't enough suffering, smallpox became so prevalent in Fishkill that the hospital, full beyond its intended capacity, overflowed with sick and dying soldiers. The Episcopal and Presbyterian churches were pressed into service as make-shift hospitals. These also were inadequate, and so some of the barracks helped to house the infected.

If we were to enter one of these hospitals, we would be witness to a truly grim panorama. Soldiers lie all about us, many almost entirely without clothing, coughing and cursing, some moaning, some sleeping fitfully. They rest on barren floors or occasionally upon a pallet of straw which has not been changed even though occupied by three soldiers prior to the one who now occupies it. If a limb must be removed, and amputation is fairly common, it is merely sawed off by a surgeon while four strong assistants keep the patient from struggling. The stump is not stitched or bandaged, but is covered with tar. There is no anesthesia to ease the pain, nor are there antiseptics to prevent infection. Cries of pain and a call for water momentarily distract us and, for the first time since entering, we don't notice the overpowering stench of sweat and vomit, but it soon returns and is inescapable.

This is how the war was fought in Fishkill. No quick merciful death greeted those brave men, no drums and fifes urged them into battle. Yet they suffered and persevered, enduring more than most could endure today. We hear much about the rigors of winters spent at Valley Forge or Morristown, yet the winters and the suffering at Fishkill were just as severe if not more so. Fishkill was not occupied merely for a winter or two, but for nearly the entire period of the Revolution, from late 1776 through 1783. It was the site of an extensive military center composed of barracks, hospitals, a prison, an ordinance store, powder magazine, armory, huts, work-

shops, a park for wagons and artillery, storehouses, a cavalry stable and a blacksmith shop.

Despite the importance of the area, however, little attempt has been made to make known the full story of the sufferings and sacrifices of these patriots, or to locate and preserve the structural remains of the depot and encampment. Archaeological work has been done only when it was learned that certain areas were about to be destroyed. The blacksmith's shop was excavated while a bulldozer literally hovered hungrily over the shoulders of the excavators. The shop's location is now marked by a new gas station. The supposed site of the barracks was "excavated" under similar circumstances, and will soon be noticeable as the site of a large shopping complex. Will the cemetery containing the bodies of the soldiers who suffered and died in Fishkill be paved over next?

Historical research has had to take a back seat due to the urgency of getting information and artifacts from the ground before they were destroyed. But ideally, historic site archaeology draws upon two sources: the information buried in the ground, and the information buried in the documents of the times. Taken individually, each can be interesting, rewarding and helpful in understanding the particular area to which they are applied. But it is only when the two are employed jointly that their maximum potential is realized.

What is needed then, and what I have already begun, is a comprehensive research program, designed to bring together into one source as many of the references to Revolutionary Fishkill as can be found. An application for a *Youthgrant*, a federally funded program under the National Council on the Arts, is presently being prepared and will shortly be submitted to the National Endowment for the Humanities. The Fishkill Supply Depot Historical Research Project is designed as an eight month program in three phases. The first phase would involve research of locally available sources (e.g., *Public Papers of George Clinton*), and through interviews with local historians who have conducted previous research on the subject. The second phase will consist of research of sources outside the immediate area, such as those in the collections of the New York Public Library, New York and Massachusetts Historical Societies, Boston Public Library, and the Morristown, New Jersey National Park Library. Phase three of the project would involve organization and dissemination of the material. I intend to make known the results of the research through every practical channel, such as talks given to school groups and historical societies, and articles written for publications dealing with state or local history. The research will also be used to aid in the location, preservation and protection of structural and occupational remains of the depot and encampment.

The National Endowment for the Humanities gives preference to projects which are co-funded by local organizations and individuals interested in the results of the research. The Endowment urges applicants to secure one half of the funds for the proposed project. The budget for the Fishkill Supply Depot Historical Research project totals \$4,778, and so, in this case, \$2,389 must be raised from donations and pledges of donations.

