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Peekskill officials dot historic mountain with plaques

By **BRIAN J. HOWARD**
THE JOURNAL NEWS
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If the best-kept secret about Fort Hill Park was simply its nine rolling acres of woodland overlooking Peekskill's urban bustle, then its 200-year survival still would be notable.

But this granite landmark once was fortified by 1,200 Continental soldiers who withstood a three-day assault from its sister peak Drum Hill, an assault that saw Peekskill burn before the British were turned aside. Yesterday, 228 years after the Battle of Fort Hill, Mayor John Testa stood about halfway up the winding dirt path that climbs this rocky landmark and surveyed most of the city's downtown.

"All the troop movements that went through this area went through Peekskill," said the city's mayor, clad in the woolen garb of a private in the 1st New York Regiment under Gen. Alexander Macdougall. "This was the hub of everything that took place."

Peekskill makes much of its history, including its links to George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. This hilltop abutting the neighborhood behind Oakside Elementary School bears its own strategic historical significance. Joined by several nearby residents, city officials yesterday hiked to the summit and along the way unveiled a series of plaques that serve as trail markers to the top of Fort Hill and a guided tour of its history.

Fort Hill has been the focus of development battles, too. Developer Louis Cappelli purchased the property in 1997. The city's efforts to block rental housing there were upheld in court three years later after the group Friends of Historic Peekskill discovered documentation that proved the site was protected parkland. Ensnuing legal action by Cappelli was settled in 2001.

Visitors may enter the park off Decatur Avenue. A stone stairway gives way to a leaf-strewn path that winds to the top and branches out in several directions. Nelson Avenue resident John Kennedy said the park offers a respite from the everyday. A member of the Fort Hill Homeowners Alliance, he takes part in an annual spring cleanup at the park. "We take pride in our neighborhood, and we consider this a part of our neighborhood," Kennedy said.

Added fellow Fort Hill homeowner Gene Panczenko, "It's really encouraging that every year we come up here to do the cleanup, there's less and less to clean up."

About all that littered the park yesterday were fallen trees and a thick bed of leaves.

Jim Johnson, a retired Army colonel and former chief historian at West Point, arrived yesterday in the uniform of the 5th New York Regiment. It was Johnson's decision to share archival materials about Fort Hill with city Historian John Curran six years ago. Those documents led the city to rediscover this bit of history.

"I think this really says a lot about the city fathers that they have been able to keep this aspect of their history alive," Johnson said.

Fort Hill Park's historic plaques

City Historian John Curran wrote the text on the historic plaques. Each features a map or a key figure in the Battle of Fort Hill. The text of each follows

Peekskill's Revolutionary War Fort Hill Park

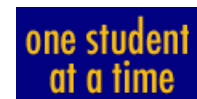
"This authentic Revolutionary War site of 9.42 acres contains an Eastern redoubt as one part of the overall military complex. A Continental Army Fortification, lookout post, and five barracks buildings were located on the entire hilltop overlooking the Hudson River and the Albany Post Road in 1776. This part of the Peekskill Camp was directly attacked and occupied by a British military expedition from New York City in March 1777. The Village of Peekskill purchased Fort Hill Park in 1929."

Peekskill Suffered a British Attack in 1777

"The Continental Army base camp at Peekskill was assaulted by 500 British infantry, supported by sailors and naval vessels on March 23rd 1777. The defending New York 2nd and 4th regiments were led by Gen. Macdougall. The British bombarded the Fort Hill area with four cannons they positioned on Drum Hill, directly to the south. Five large barracks buildings on this hilltop were burned by the retreating American forces. Vital military supplies including food, shoes, clothing, wagons, sloops, tools, mills and warehouses were destroyed by the invaders."

Revolutionary War Redoubt

"Remnants of this original Continental Army Redoubt are evident in the hilltop circular perimeter made of rubble stone. Logs would have been layered for further protection from attacking forces. Soldier work crews under the direction of Gen. William Heath in November and December 1776



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constructed the simple fortification overlooking the former Albany Post Road. British forces briefly occupied this American outpost twice in 1777, and once in 1779."



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