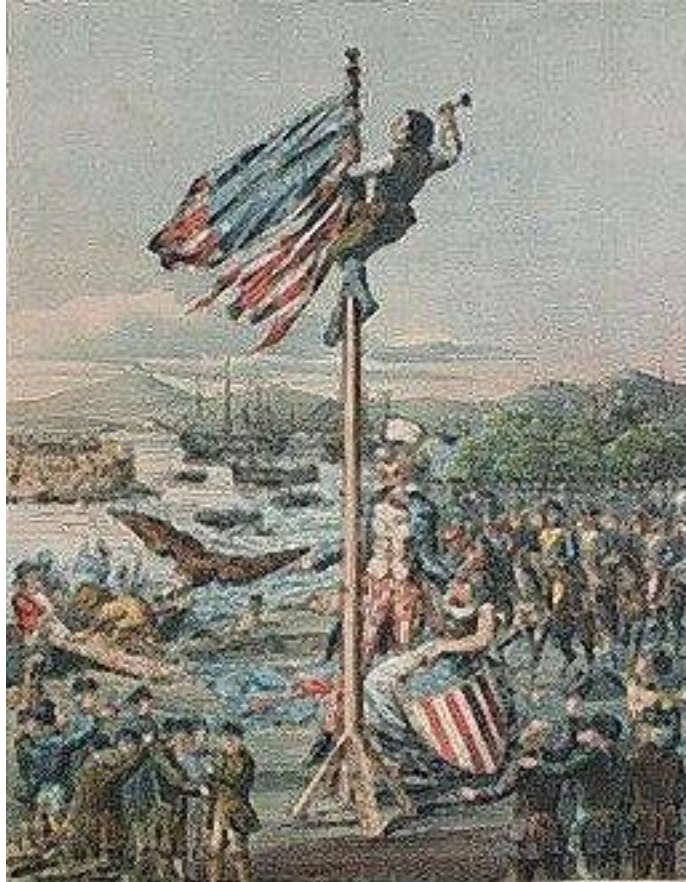


Evacuation Day 1783

The Story of John Van Arsdale



This is the story of a Town of Montgomery lad
Who fought in America's War of Independence and
brought it to a thrilling conclusion

The War of Independence

America's war of independence was truly difficult for the many soldiers and their families who had to endure seven long years of struggle, often with little hope of success. After General Washington was defeated in the battle for Manhattan, patriot Thomas Paine said: "These are the times that try men's souls". The goal of independence and freedom was so strong that the

colonial people endured hardships, including the absence and death of loved ones, to create a new society based on inalienable principles.



Painting depicting the "shot heard around the world" in Concord, Mass

While the colonial armies fought, America's Founding Fathers were busy creating the Declaration of Independence and working out details that would join the thirteen colonies into one nation. Everyone had their part to play and the result was a resounding success. The founding of this new nation was such a heartwarming experience that the former colonists bristled with pride as Americans, and they showed this enthusiasm loudly as the British departed American shores in

defeat.

Evacuation Day 1783

America's war of independence began with the "shot heard round the world, at Concord which is outside of Boston. The war ended with Evacuation Day on November 25, 1783. This was a



General Washington enters New York City on Evacuation Day, November 25, 1783.

holiday celebrated in New York City from the late-eighteenth century into the early decades of the twentieth century. It marked the departure of British troops from the city following the end of the American War for Independence. After the Treaty of Paris was signed on September 3, 1783, the British commander in New York City, General Guy Carleton, made sure that many thousands of British loyalists had safely left the city before removing his troops.

As the 7500 British servicemen boarded ships on November 25, 1783 General George Washington and Governor George Clinton of New York led 800 Continental Army soldiers into New York City. This was a triumphant parade from the Bowery to Pearl Street to Wall Street to Broadway. A civilized handover of New York City was planned to protect all parties, Loyalists and Patriots alike.

Parades, fireworks, and patriotic speeches marked Evacuation Day for many years. Over the ensuing decades, it was increasingly overshadowed by Independence Day festivities, but was revived with a major celebration on its hundredth anniversary in November of 1883.

This is the amazing story of the last day of the American War of Independence and the Town of Montgomery man who brought the events of that day to conclusion in a true American fashion to the cheers of thousands as the British departed.

Introducing John Van Arsdale

John Van Arsdale was born in 1756 and he settled in the Neelytown section of the Precinct of Hanover, later named Montgomery in honor of the general who was killed in the attack on Canada in 1775. John lived with his brother, Teunis and Teunis' wife Jennie Wear Van Arsdale, on their farm, which about 80 acres in size. Both brothers would leave their mark on the American war of independence as many Colonial Americans had done. It was the essential of John Van Arsdale's character that he chafed at the thought that his country, the home of his ancestors for a more than a century, would suffer under the iron hand of tyranny such that at a very young age, he would come forth and strike a blow for freedom. At nineteen years of age, John joined the Continental Army and served faithfully throughout the war.

The Battle for Canada

John Van Arsdale enlisted with the Fourth New York Regiment under Captain Jacobus

Wynkoop on August 25, 1775 and he was with this expeditionary force, led by Benedict Arnold when they departed up the Hudson Valley into Maine and then into Canada to join General Richard Montgomery's forces in the winter of 1775. General Montgomery had already taken Montreal forcing the Governor of Canada, General Guy Carlton; to flee to join British forces camped to the west. General Montgomery was then preparing to attack the City of Quebec and the additional troops provided by Arnold's force would be sorely needed. Arnold's expedition was



stricken by a series of setbacks from the beginning of his journey including a wave of smallpox that took the lives of 500 of his troops, leaving only 600 to face the cold winter march into the Quebec region. John Van Arsdale would complain of the march into Canada for the remainder of his life because they accomplished this in summer clothes and they literally froze while crossing the ice of Lake Champlain. The forces of Montgomery and Arnold met outside Quebec City in December with both forces underfed and suffering from various sicknesses. The combined force attacked Quebec on New Years Eve of 1775 during a blinding snowstorm. The outcome was defeat for the American forces with General Richard Montgomery mortally wounded and Benedict Arnold severely wounded. The American forces suffered heavy casualties and they withdrew to camp near Quebec until Spring and then they departed Canada in retreat. John Van Arsdale was among the survivors who returned to New York with the remaining colonial force to fight another day.

Return to New York

John worked on his father's schooner sinking obstructions around New York, to oppose the new troops expected from Britain, but he returned to Orange County when the British took the city. While trying to get to his schooner from their current home in New York, the elder Captain Van Arsdale rented a wagon to take his family and some possessions to the schooner but they were shelled by British cannons on the way. His schooner was required to take military stores and some people trying to escape but they were heavily laden and they had to turn some folks away. They traveled up the Hudson to Murrain's Bay, John left the vessel at his father's request to notify brother Teunis at Neelytown of their pending arrival. Teunis harnessed horses to bring the family to the farm where warm greetings were exchanged. That winter saw much military activity by the militia of Hanover (Montgomery) and New Windsor to protect from the attacks of Lord Howe in the area of the Hudson Highlands. The Van Arsdale brothers served under their neighbor, Captain Henricus VanKeuren, who also served in the French and Indian War.

The Battle of Fort Montgomery

In the fall of 1777, British forces led by General John Burgoyne planned a three-prong attack on the colonial armies. Burgoyne's forces would travel down from Canada to meet with the



Joseph Brandt

British and Indian forces who were conducting raids along the Mohawk Valley, led by Indian Chief Joseph Brandt who commanded both the Indian and British elements.

Once they were able to meet, the combined force would travel south to connect with a large force led by Sir Henry Clinton who would be traveling north from New York City. Sir Clinton had to encounter some defenses in the Hudson Valley before he could meet with Burgoyne and Brandt in Albany.

The colonial army led by General George Clinton was defending two forts, Ft Montgomery and nearby Ft Clinton, along the Hudson River while the small colonial navy had ships stationed on the river nearby. These forts were strategically positioned to prevent the British easy access to the Hudson Valley. General Clinton commanded Fort Montgomery while the general's brother, James, commanded Fort Clinton. During the summer and early fall of 1777, both forts were being strengthened against attack but neither was completely finished when the British force arrived.



Among the soldiers defending Fort Montgomery was John Van Arsdale. His brother Teunis had been among those alerted on October 5th that British vessels were ascending the Hudson to attack Fort Montgomery. Teunis answered the call to duty and rushed to the fort and his brother who was a sergeant in the 5th Regiment. The NY 5th Regiment was joined in the forts by the Ulster and Orange militia, which comprised about 1500 troops overall. The British forces were nearly twice the size of the colonials and the British were equipped with heavy artillery, capable of knocking large, gaping holes in the forts, which were made primarily of wood logs.

Once in position, the British opened fire and the forces fully engaged. Once dark fell, the British began to get the upper hand and they entered the fort under heavy fire from the colonials. The ranks of the colonial forces began to dwindle as many soldiers saw the effort as lost and they retreated to defensive positions outside the fort so the remaining troops could also evacuate. Teunis Van Arsdale was in an awkward position. The British who were using bayonets to slaughter the colonial soldiers in hand-to-hand combat blocked his path. While one British soldier was using his bayonet against a militiaman, Teunis managed to crawl between the feet of one British soldier and flee the fort. He joined the other soldiers who were able to defend their orderly retreat away from the British

John Van Arsdale was not so lucky. He was wounded by gunshot to the leg and taken prisoner by a British soldier only a short distance from the fort. The soldier asked for John Van Arsdale's musket and when John handed it to him, the barrel was so red hot

Soldiers manning a redoubt at Fort Montgomery (Painting by Dahl Taylor; courtesy of NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation)



Page 5 of 16

that the British soldier burned his hand. This caused the British soldier to vent abuse on John Van Arsdale such that John feared for his life all the way back to the fort where he was held with about 275 other prisoners for two days before they were loaded on ships destined for New York.

The sounds of artillery, twenty miles distant, caused the town folk of Montgomery to shudder with fear about the battle. Jennie Wear Van Arsdale watched the road for over a day for her husband, Teunis, and brother-in-law, John. Some neighbors stopped by to see if there was any news about the two. News came about two apprentices at the Van Arsdale farm. One had been shot at the fort and died instantly while the other was seriously wounded. Jennie dispatched her brother, William Wear, to find Teunis and he had success. William returned to the farm with Teunis, holding him on the horse because he was completely exhausted.

Teunis told of his ordeal after leaving the fort at the order of Governor Clinton. Teunis was a short distance from the fort when he heard the scream of a young lad who was stuck in a deep crevice and he was unable to free himself. Teunis, at no small risk to himself, crept down and freed the boy but he suffered deep cuts by scraping his own legs on sharp rocks. He then found a river skiff and crossed to the east side and traveled to Fishkill and then crossed again to New Windsor where Governor Clinton had assembled some of the fort's escapees. The governor tried to cheer the group by saying. "Well we were badly beaten this time but the next time may be ours".

John Van Arsdale's Captivity and Release

John Van Arsdale was initially taken to the temporary hospital at the Presbyterian Church on Beekman Street for surgery but only a short time passed before they were taken from the hospital to prison. During the British occupation of New York, the Rhinelander Sugar House was turned into a notorious prison. It was here that the wounded John Van Arsdale was taken. This was a brick warehouse into which American prisoners of war and private citizens, suspected of helping the patriots, were thrown. Sanitary conditions were frightful and starvation was a constant threat, so that its evil reputation was well earned, and its death toll unbelievably high. Healthy prisoners had little chance of survival and wounded prisoners fared even worse. John was able to feign wounds more serious than he actually had which helped him survive the ordeal. The



Rhinelander Sugar House Prison

man responsible for the prisons on land and in the water was Provost Marshal William Cunningham.

The unsanitary conditions inside the stuffy and crowded structures used for prisons resulted in the spread of diseases. No matter how large a building might have been, there eventually were more prisoners to fit into it than sense and logic would dictate. The resulting crowded conditions made the perfect environment for diseases. It has been estimated that a dozen prisoners died each day, to be carried out in carts and cast into ditches dug just outside the city limits.



Vermin and lice, though not diseases in themselves were constant companions even to the healthiest of the prisoners, their persistent borings into the flesh would have been a steady irritation to remind the prisoner of the situation he was in. The only remnant of this building is a window salvaged from the factory and set into a memorial behind the Municipal Building located at Centre and Chambers Streets.

Thomas Stone, a Patriot from Connecticut, was captured in a raid on British post near New York City. In his recollections he noted:

"About the 25th of Jan., 1778 we were taken to the Sugar House... Cold and famine were now our destiny. Not a pane of glass, nor even a board to a single window in the house, and no fire but once in three days to cook our small allowance of provision. Old shoes were bought and eaten with as much relish as a pig or a turkey; a beef bone of four or five ounces, after it was picked clean, was sold by the British guard for as many coppers. In the spring our misery increased; frozen feet began to mortify...Death stared the living in the face; we were now attacked by a fever which threatened to clear our walls of its miserable inhabitants.

The lack of prison space in New York City was compounded by the filling of the jails with rebels and by two great fires during the autumn of 1776 thus forcing the occupation forces to use converted ships. John Van Arsdale was eventually transferred to one of the British prison ships. It was estimated that 11,000 prisoners perished on the ships. The brutality on



The notorious prison ship, the New Jersey

these ships had inflicted untold suffering in an unprecedented scale. Flogging and other acts of violence had run rampant on the ships. Overcrowding, starvation, and disease (smallpox, dysentery, typhus and yellow fever) were of epidemic proportions. Many of the prisoners dared their guards to kill them.



Martyr's Monument in NYC

The current Martyr's Monument in New York City, dedicated for the victims of the prisoner ships, is the most austere and moving of the war memorials in New York. It was dedicated on November 18, 1908 with President William Howard Taft in attendance

At the latter part of Van Arsdale's imprisonment, his father's cousin, Vincent Day and now a Loyalist, was permitted to visit John and bring him rations. On July 20, 1778, John Van Arsdale was taken to a river barge as part of a prisoner exchange that had been negotiated. He was able to return to his family in Montgomery where he was greeted warmly. He still suffered from his wounds and scurvy so he remained under a doctor's care for some time

John Van Arsdale's Militia Duty

The frontiers of Orange and Ulster Counties were subjected to roving attacks of settlers by Indians and Tories, disguised as Indians. This caused constant fear among the local population. Many were inclined to leave their homes to seek relief, which would cause members of their families to return from fighting in the American cause. The state plan was implemented by forming two divisions called State Levies, which would act to protect local settlers and possibly to travel into Indian territory and lay waste to Indian villages if that need arose. One company commanded by William Faulkner was where John Van Arsdale enlisted in May of 1779. The challenge to defend West Point and the Minisink attacks by Chief Joseph Brandt, in which fell many brave yeomen of Orange, made the movements of the Levies more restricted to defending the Orange/Ulster frontiers. After several marches, the unit moved to Fishkill in the Fall and was partially paid and disbanded for the winter. This was the famous winter of 1779/1780 (Little Ice Age) and John Van Arsdale and his brother, Teunis, would spend many hours each day chopping wood at Neelytown to fend off the winter cold. Snow collected on the

ground at an average of six feet and travel was very difficult using horses so they hauled their wood using a hand drawn sled.

The Spring of 1780 was difficult. There was no money to pay the army or even supply it with basic clothing and food. Officers and men were deserting in great numbers. This was when John Van Arsdale rejoined the army to share whatever fate might lie ahead. His first duty was the defense of the redoubts at West Point and then Fort Montgomery, thus reviving the memory of his 1777 ordeal. He was then transferred to a regiment of Light Infantry under the command of General Lafayette who took great expense to equip the unit with fine uniforms and good rations. His main focus was the defense of New York State should Sir Henry Clinton decide to move north. The companies were discharged for the winter without a military engagement. He rejoined the levies in the Spring of 1781 under the command of Captain John Burnet of Little Britain who was at the battle of Fort Montgomery. Their duty was again the defense of the settlers in the Orange/Ulster frontier having been stationed in Wawarsing and Pinebush. He remained in service until well after the Cornwallis surrender at Yorktown.

Cessation of Hostilities

The last major battle of the American Revolution was at Yorktown, Virginia, on October 25, 1781. The end result of the Battle of Yorktown and the surrender of General Cornwallis had broken the resolve of the British troops and the Loyalists who had held New York since 1776.



Upon hearing the news of this defeat, John Van Arsdale was said to have danced a lively jig to rejoice the news. With the battle over, Washington withdrew his forces to Newburgh, New York, to protect the Hudson Highlands and to regroup his soldiers during the winter of 1781-82. It was also a defensive posture for the American army, since they were

so close to British-held New York City.

The uneasy truce caused the exchange of prisoners, and John Van Arsdale was able to return home to see his family. The privations he endured took a heavy toll on him, and his wounds never fully healed, but he was home with his wife, Mary, to begin family life

On April 11, 1783, the announcement of the cessation of hostilities between Great Britain and her former colonies in America had been established. A week later, general orders were issued by General Washington, which announced, “The cessation of hostilities between the United States of America and the King of Great Britain.” Although the treaty had not been officially signed, the armistice “opens the prospect of a more splendid scene.”

Evacuation Day, The End of Tyranny

The British commander of New York, General Guy Carlton, had several tasks to complete before New York could be turned over to the Americans. First he had to help evacuate British Loyalists. They were given the choice of receiving free transportation to safety in Nova Scotia, the Bahamas or somewhere else out of the colonies, or to return to their old homes. Thousands chose the unknown trials of exile to the known problems of staying in a hostile environment. The second consideration was the orderly transfer of control of the city to Washington’s forces. The fear was that civil unrest in the city would occur if a lapse of time happened during the transfer of power. British loyalists might react bitterly and then vengeance might be wrought against them. The third consideration was to avoid hostility between the departing British forces and the arriving Americans. An agreement was reached between Carlton and Washington that the British would fire a cannon at 1pm on September 25th, 1783, to indicate that the last of their soldiers, British and Hessian, had left land and were boarding the British ships for departure.



American Patriots knock down the statue of King George of Great Britain

In honor of Washington’s pending entrance to New York, many American patriots proudly displayed the American flag. American patriots began to celebrate by knocking down a statue of King George to the cheers of many NYC residents.

British Provost Marshal William Cunningham, notorious for being the infamous commander of the prisons and prison ships in New York City, went throughout the city tearing down the rebel American flags while there was still a British presence in the city. When Cunningham arrived at Day’s Tavern, which is located on what is now 128th Street and Saint Nicholas Avenue, Mrs. Day attacked the Provost Cunningham with a broom when Cunningham tried to remove the flag from the premises, saying “Take down

that flag. The city is ours until Noon”. It was said that “Mrs. Day hit the Provost with such lusty blows that she made the powder from his wig fly about such that the Provost had to make a hasty retreat” Cunningham reportedly had a bloody nose also.

When General Knox reached the Provost Office called the New Jail, Provost William Cunningham and his jailer Sergeant Keefe had to depart quickly, whereupon one of the prisoners who was there for a purely criminal offense called out: “Sergeant Keefe, what is to become of us”? “You may all go to the devil together” was the sergeant’s surly reply as he threw the jail keys on the floor behind him. “Thank you sergeant” was the cutting retort. “We have had too much of your company in this world to follow you to the next”.

Van Arsdale Travels to New York City for the British Departure

John Van Arsdale had recovered from his wounds and was now the captain of the Black Prince schooner, which was equipped to carry passengers and freight on the Hudson. He was a man of average height, ruddy honest face, tarpaulin cap and pea jacket all told of his vocation as a sailor. Born neither to fortune or fame, he had earned some measure of respect through his merits while serving under Mc Claghry, Willet and Weissenfels and also the Clintons to whom he had lived as a neighbor in that patriotic circle in old Orange. He had made a good record during the war and no officer, however superior in rank, has sustained a better character or a more pure patriotism. This was John Van Arsdale, lately a sergeant in Captain Hardenburgh’s Levies. John had wanted to see the last British soldier leave American soil. He was bitter over his treatment in the POW prisons, and several friends had lost their lives in the American cause. John, like thousands of other New Yorkers, arrived in New York City to join the festivities.

Washington Enters New York City

General Washington along with General George Clinton (who served as Governor of the State of New York) then marched into Manhattan through what is now Washington Heights and Inwood. While in the area, Washington and Clinton stopped at the Blue Bell Tavern, which was located at what is now 181st Street and Broadway. Both men were on their horses with the

army passing in review as they marched southward to McGown’s Pass and lower Manhattan.

. There was an atmosphere of unreality in New York City. Washington and his troops passed half-ruined mansions and earthworks and trenches that dotted the streets, making them impassable. The largest



**Washington Enters
Manhattan Nov 25,
1783**

John Van Arsdale knew that this moment was one for history and it required ingenuity and courage to do what he was about to do.

Van Arsdale rushed to nearby Peter Goelet's hardware store in Hanover Square where he purchased a halyard (for raising and lowering the flag), cleats, nails, gimlets, a hammer and nails. He quickly returned to the cheers of the crowd. John then rolled on the ground so that the dirt on his body would absorb some of the grease. He climbed the pole, nailing cleats into it as he ascended ever so slowly. Once atop the pole, John ripped the Union Jack off and threw it to the ground. He then mounted the Stars and Stripes to the halyard. John attached a rope to the flag, ran the line through the halyard and, to the enthusiastic cheering of tens of thousands including Generals Washington and Knox, he nailed the halyard to the pole and attached the rope. Upon descending, he handed the rope to Lieutenant Anthony Glean who raised the Stars and Stripes to the hearty vent of cheers of the multitude and the artillery boomed forth a national salute of thirteen guns. For the first time in seven years, the American flag flew over New York City.

Many British soldiers had been moving toward their ships and enjoyed the embarrassment of watching the Colonials trying to take their Union Jack down. They were looking forward to saluting their flag as they departed but were quite disappointed to see the Stars and Stripes flying in the breeze. The British ships passed lower Manhattan as they departed for England but there was no salute. American ingenuity prevailed in a very young United States of America.

John Van Arsdale was warmly greeted by the crowds and some passed hats around for a collection to recognize John's incredible feat. Virtually all donated even the Commander in Chief, George Washington himself. The collected sum amounted to a heavy purse of silver. Though taken quite aback, Van Arsdale modestly accepted the gift saying that it was for such a trivial act. But his contributors were of a different opinion for they saw his act as courageous and the emergency made his success gratifying to all present.

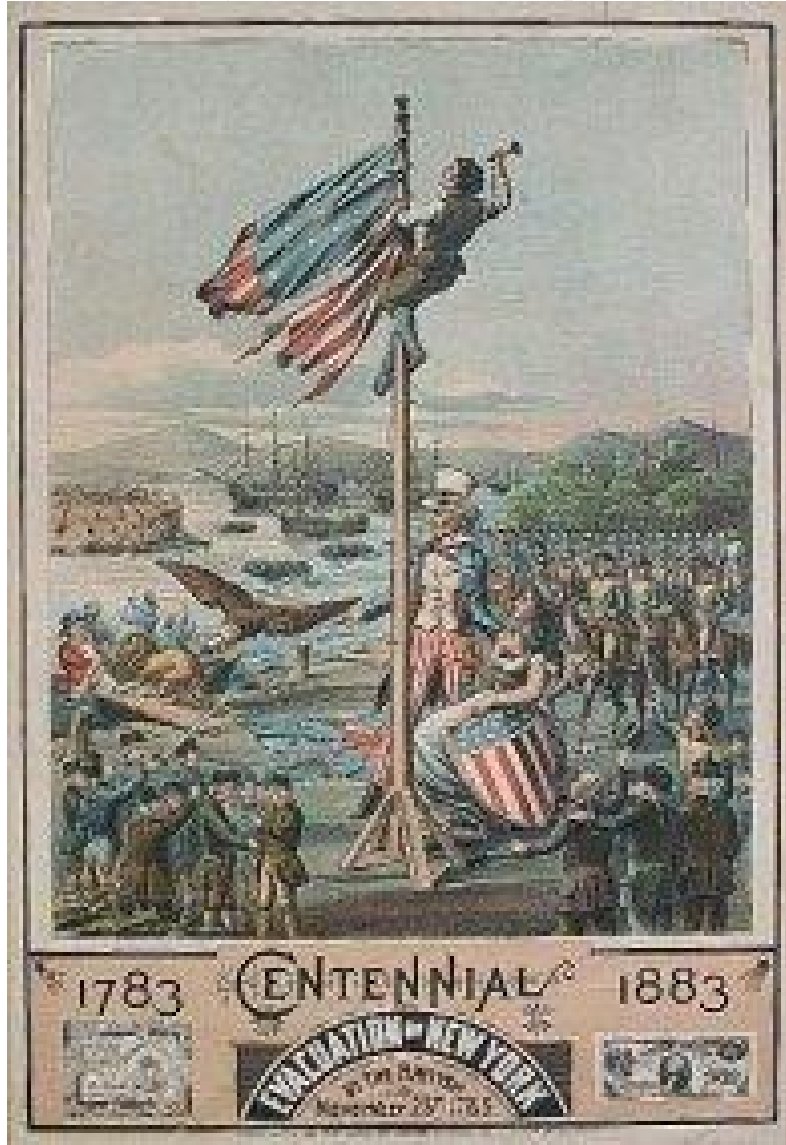
When all of this was over, General Washington and Knox joined Governor Clinton at Fraunces' Tavern (corner of Pearl and Broad St) for a sumptuous dinner followed by a toast to the new United States of America. The celebrations lasted for days and, when it was all over, Americans began the process of building a new country based on individual respect and freedom. Exiled New Yorkers were now able to enter the city and claim their property.

John Van Arsdale returned to his wife Polly and showed her the small fortune in silver that he was given by the grateful crowd in New York. This event was fixed indelibly in her memory forever because the fortune enabled them to begin a new life with John acting as the captain of his own transport boat, operating out of Newburgh. He no longer had to depend on his brother

for employment. The new Precinct of Montgomery was renamed from the Precinct of Hanover one year earlier. In 1789, the new name would become the Town of Montgomery.

Evacuation Day Celebrations

For many years, Americans celebrated Evacuation Day on November 25th. Each year veterans would gather to remember the sacrifices of the Revolutionary War soldiers. In later years, Evacuation Day was celebrated at all public places most conspicuously at Peale's American



Museum where, as advertised, "The flag that was raised by order of George Washington at the Battery as the British departed is hanging in the upper hall as a sacred memorial of that day". The flag had been presented to the museum by the NYC Common Council in 1819. It was last raised over the Battery in 1846 and when the museum burned, the flag perished too.

The largest of the celebrations was the centennial celebration in 1883. On hand for this event was John Van Arsdale's son. John Jr. was then eighty-seven years old and in frail health. Regardless he was proud to take a major part in the event and to speak of his father in defying the British as they left American shores. On the night before the celebration, John Jr. died, but his patriotic spirit, and that of his father, remained alive and well. Large posters of John Van Arsdale, raising the American flag one hundred years earlier, were circulated to the large crowd, and were the delight of all. The painting illustrated the British lion being

pulled into the boat, possibly by John Bull, Britain's Uncle Sam, and the American eagle is biting at his tail.

Harper's Weekly reported that the chilly rain on November 25, 1883 did not dampen "the universal glow of patriotism" manifested by the cheerful crowd at the Evacuation Day

centenary. The event was attended by President Chester Arthur, seven governors from the original thirteen states, and hundreds of thousands of spectators who braved the weather to watch the four-hour procession. The ceremonies culminated with the unveiling of the Washington statue, at which editor Curtis spoke. The observance of Evacuation Day largely disappeared after World War I because of the waning of anti-British sentiment and the holiday's close proximity to Thanksgiving. However, a bicentennial was celebrated in 1983 in New York City.

Epilogue

“A nation's tribute is the least that it can render to its soldiers who have fought its battles, but of any class of patriots should be tenderly embalmed in the nation's memory, it is those who, through devotion to country, have languished in prison walls, whether the Sugar House or prison ship. What firmness and consecration to country was required by the Revolutionary prisoners, under the pressure of their sufferings, to spurn the frequent offers made to entice them into British service; but so rarely successful. Do not their names deserve to be written in letters of gold on the proudest obelisk that national gratitude and munificence united could erect.” James Riker, 1883

Goodwill Church Cemetery, Montgomery, NY

John Van Arsdale is buried in Cypress Hills Cemetery in New York City. Teunis and Jennie Wear Van Arsdale are buried in the Goodwill Church Cemetery on Route 208 in the Town of Montgomery just a short distance from the church rear wall. May their contributions to American independence be always remembered and may they rest in peace.

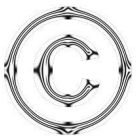


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