Chapter 8

A MILITARY GEOGRAPHY OF THE HUDSON HIGHLANDS
Focal Point in the American War of Independence

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Abstract: During the American War of Independence (1775-83), the Hudson Highlands were a focus of military activity as both the Continental and British forces struggled to gain control of the Hudson River. Continental and British commanders alike recognized the strategic importance of the waterway as a major thoroughfare into the interior of the Colonies, as a vital link between New England and the Middle-Atlantic, and as the major connector between New York harbor and Canada. West Point was regarded as the most decisive locale throughout the entire Hudson Valley because of its commanding position along the banks of the river. This paper is an example of historical military geography that focuses on understanding how the physical geography of the region influenced military decisions and activities.

Key words: Hudson Highlands, American War of Independence, historical military geography

1. INTRODUCTION

The Hudson River served as a vital artery during the growth and expansion of Colonial America. The military significance of the river was apparent throughout the era, as it provided the only non-oceanic avenue of approach for the French into the Colonies, or the British into Canada during the Colonial Wars (Rutledge, 1956; Kagan, 1966; Miller et al, 1988; Crackel, 2002). Consequently, the Hudson Valley had been at the center of hostilities throughout a century of Colonial conflicts, known by their American names as King William's War (1689-97); Queen Anne’s War (1702-13); King George’s War (1744-48); and the French and Indian War (1754-63) (Crackel, 2002). The river and the valley through which it flows
were also decisive terrain features during the American War of Independence. At the outset of the war, control of the river was almost a foregone conclusion, if not an integral part of both the Colonial and British military strategies.

This paper examines the Highlands section of the Hudson Valley from a military geographic perspective within the context of the American War of Independence. I begin with a brief historical geography of the Colonies prior to the outbreak of hostilities. Then, I describe the strategic setting from both American and British viewpoints. I subsequently explain aspects of the military geographic analysis that underscored the nature and location of the Continental Army’s defensive positions throughout the Hudson Highlands.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Treaty of Paris, ending the Seven Years’ War, was signed on 10 February 1763. Ironically, even while British peoples on both sides of the Atlantic celebrated the triumph over France, their relationship began to deteriorate rapidly as interests diverged (Meinig, 1986). In the aftermath of the war, the Colonists became agitated by the presence of British troops and a succession of acts (such as the Revenue Act of 1764, the Stamp Act of 1765, the Tea Act of 1773, and the Quartering Act of 1774) passed by Parliament. Rebellious activities ensued throughout the Colonies, but the hotbed of dissention appeared to be concentrated in New England.

Prior to the American War of Independence, the Thirteen Colonies stretched nearly 1200 mi along the Atlantic coast, with approximately 2.5 million people (Lemon, 2001) settled in a long sweeping arc from Boston in the north to Savannah in the south (Palka and Galgano, 2001; Fig. 1). One source estimated the population (excluding Native Americans) to be somewhere between 2,325,000 and 2,600,000 in 1775, with the Mason-Dixon Line (the Pennsylvania-Maryland border) dividing the population almost equally between North and South (Meinig, 1986). Residents were clustered in New England towns, or lived on dispersed farmsteads, plantations, or in small villages throughout the Middle and Southern Colonies. All of the prominent cities were on the coast or along navigable waterways (Brown, 1948); but only four cities (Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston) had populations of over 10,000 people (Palmer and Tripp, 1977). The Hudson River and Chesapeake Bay, with its main tributary, the Susquehanna River, formed natural territorial divisions, separating the inhabited portions of the Colonies into three regions. The regions differed in terms of climate, soil, and natural resources.