

Hamilton! A Jersey Musical

HOW DOES A hip-hop historical Broadway sensation teach us about the founding of our nation? Through *Hamilton*, our era has reimagined the Founders in its own image. The musical is very Manhattan-centric, so you might never guess that much of the action actually takes place in New Jersey. Alexander Hamilton's first port of call in North America was Elizabeth. He met and courted Elizabeth Schuyler at the Campfield House in Morristown, while Aaron Burr wooed Theodosia Prevost at the Hermitage in Ho-Ho-Kus. Hamilton and George Washington spent nearly half the war here.

More battles and skirmishes were fought on Jersey soil than in any other colony. A war of attrition laid waste to the eastern part of the colony, and residents were bitterly divided among Revolutionaries, Loyalists, and opportunists who played both sides. The concerns that Hamilton expresses in the play about "an endless cycle of vengeance and death" were not at all hypothetical. Historian Jim Gigantino has argued that the wartime deprivations and fear of further instability were a big reason that New Jersey was a latecomer to the abolitionist cause, compared to other northern states.

The area around present-day Glen Ridge was significant in two ways. First, it was the crossroads of a major north-south route (River Road along the Passaic) and a secondary but nonetheless important east-west route (roughly paralleling what is now Bloomfield Avenue). Second, it was a rich agricultural region from which both armies purchased—and pillaged—their sustenance. Here are some local Hamilton-related sites that even history buffs might not know about.

"Right Hand Man"

NEW YORK CITY fell to the British in the late summer of 1776. Washington retreated across New Jersey in November and appointed Hamilton as aide-de-camp the following March. What remained of the Continental Army crossed the Passaic River on November

21 using what is now the Main Avenue bridge from Wallington to the City of Passaic (then known as Acquackanonk) (1). It marched south to Newark along what is now Route 21, which was, by all accounts, a beautiful bucolic lane. The only reminder of the retreat route today is a historic marker in front of the Belleville Dutch Reformed Church (2). Some of the pursuing British troops under General Charles Cornwallis detoured through Bloomfield (then known as Watsessing) and ransacked a dozen or so homes, including that of Joseph Davis, now the Bloomfield Steak and Seafood House (3). Refugees fled over the hill to Verona and Caldwell (then called Horseneck).

"Stay Alive"

AS THIS SONG recounts, Washington engaged in guerrilla tactics to avoid an open battle against superior forces. The British responded in kind, and their foraging raids ravaged our area of New Jersey. In the most elaborate assault, several regiments led by British General Henry Clinton converged on Belleville (then called Second River) on September 12, 1777, and forced local militia to retreat west to Bloomfield. Clinton supervised the battle from a mansion that mining magnate Arent Schuyler, Elizabeth's great-granduncle, had built on the east bank of the Passaic (4). (The spectacular house was torn down in 1924.) The next day the Redcoats marched up the Second River valley and were repulsed at what is now the south tip of Watsessing Park, near the corner of Glenwood Avenue and Dodd Street (5). Markers near the Second River bridge in Branch Brook Park (6) and near the Watsessing Avenue train station (7) memorialize the skirmishes. Clinton's units also penetrated into Bergen County and were fought

Hamilton-related sites in and around Glen Ridge. The map shows present-day roads, parks (light shading), and bodies of water (dark shading). Dotted lines are routes surveyed by the Continental Army for troop movements.

Base map ©Mapbox ©OpenStreetMap

north of Hackensack by Burr, who was an army colonel.

On July 9, 1778, after the Battle of Monmouth, the Continental Army marched back north through Bloomfield, as Virginian officer Joseph Clark recorded in his diary and as Washington mentioned in general orders issued July 12. During his overnight visit, the general held a court-martial and wrote letters addressed from "Newark," which then spanned most of Essex County. He may have stayed with militia commander Thomas Cadmus at the corner of Washington Street (then known as Samuel Ward's lane) and Ashland Avenue, as commemorated by a historic marker (8). Cadmus's de-



scendants recounted the details to historians John Oakes and Joseph Folsom, but we have no independent corroboration. Folsom speculates that Washington may also have visited Joseph Davis and Moses Farrand, who lived at the corner of Franklin Street and Berkeley Avenue (9). Hamilton and Lafayette presumably accompanied Washington, since another of Washington's aides-de-camp, James McHenry, placed the men together the following day at the Great Falls in present-day Paterson. That night they stayed over in Ho-Ho-Kus (then Paramus) at the house of Theodosia Prevost, Burr's lover and future wife. Later in the month, Hamilton himself wrote a letter from "Newark."

"Guns and Ships"

IN FALL 1780, as he prepared to join forces with the French general Jean-Baptiste

de Rochambeau, Washington camped at the Dey Mansion in Wayne (then Totowa). From here Hamilton wrote at least one love letter to Elizabeth Schuyler, who was his fiancée by this time. On October 23, Washington ordered six battalions to guard the southern approaches to his base, including the Cranetown Gap, through which Claremont Avenue crosses into Verona (10). The next day Hamilton warned those troops about a possible British attack. A French military map places the units' headquarters on the east side of what is now Glen Ridge Avenue, just south of Bay Street (then known as Wood Road) (11), and their campsite on the opposing bank of Toney's Brook (12). To judge from a report in the *New York Gazette* newspaper, they remained there until the end of November, when the Continental Army left for winter quarters in Jockey Hollow and elsewhere.

A plaque at the corner of Valley and Claremont claims that Washington himself stayed in Montclair (13). It is based on an 1894 article by Montclair resident Oliver Crane, who gave an elaborate account—perhaps too elaborate—of how Washington slept in his great-grandfather William's house for up to three weeks. There is no contemporaneous record of any such visit, and numerous documents place Washington in Wayne throughout this period.

Lafayette, though, did sleep a night in Montclair on October 28, 1780, while traveling back from an abortive raid on British-held Staten Island, as indicated in his correspondence. A plaque next to 551 Valley Road in Upper Montclair (then known as Speertown) claims to mark the doorstep of his headquarters (14). At some point during the army's stay in Wayne, Lafayette may also have set up a guard post on the hill behind what is now Montclair State University, according to a plaque on Woods Road—a section of which is a rutted gravel track that seems to have changed little since colonial times (15). Although there is no other documentation of such a post, it would be consistent with Washington's general orders to secure Great Notch, where Route 46 now crosses the mountain.

"Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down)"

WASHINGTON AND ROCHAMBEAU rendezvoused in July 1781 and marched across New Jersey on their way to the decisive Battle of Yorktown. Their full 680-mile route is a National Historic Trail with multiple historic markers. The bulk of the American forces passed through Caldwell; the French, through Parsippany. To cover the main columns, a regiment commanded by Brigadier General Moses Hazen marched down the Passaic along the route of the 1776 retreat and camped in Belleville on August 20 (16). A brigade under General Benjamin Lincoln followed a week later (17). Their campsites are unmarked, but the locations were estimated by historian Robert Selig in a 2006 report for the N.J. Historic Trust.

Epilogue

AFTER THE WAR, Hamilton saw New Jersey as crucial to his program for national economic development. In 1792 he helped to found the City of Paterson to exploit the hydropower of the Passaic, and he oversaw the purchase of copper from the Schuyler mine in North Arlington (18) for the U.S. Mint. Less happily for him, many people in our area—including Montclair's prominent Crane family—came to oppose his Federalist Party. The song "Washington on Your Side" notwithstanding, Thomas Jefferson's Democratic-Republican party was not just southern.

The above is based on *RevolutionaryWarNewJersey.com*; my own site visits; letters by Washington and Hamilton at *founders.archives.gov*; William Baker's *Itinerary of General Washington*; a battle report by British General Henry Clinton; the state's Revolutionary War Damage Claims database; local histories by Joseph Folsom, Charles Knox, John Oakes, and William Shaw; maps by Continental Army surveyors Robert Erskine and Simeon De Witt (37, 67A, 67B, 81, and 98A in the Erskine-De Witt collection at the N.Y. Historical Society); and a French military map by Lafayette's aide-de-camp Michel Capitaine du Chesnoy (map 141 in the Louis Charles Karpinski Collection). **George Musser**