

White Plains Historical Society

FOUNDED IN 1983 • SUCCESSOR TO THE BATTLE OF WHITE PLAINS MONUMENT COMMITTEE

Jacob Purdy House • 60 Park Avenue • White Plains, NY 10603 • www.whiteplainshistory.org • Summer 2012

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2012 Membership Dues for all except "Lifetime Members" are due. Please help us continue our mission by sending in your payment with the newsletter form on the back page, or pay on-line at:

www.whiteplainshistory.org

Pruning the Parks: White Plains National Battlefield Site (1933-1956) Was a Stillborn National Park

By Bob Janiske

(Reprinted with permission from National Parks Traveler—www.nationalparkstraveler.com)

The Revolutionary War Battle of White Plains receives scant attention, not least because the Continental Army did not win the battle and the battlefield is not a National Park System property. Although the National Park Service administered the White Plains National Battlefield Site for 23 years, no national park materialized there and the property was eventually delisted.

Few Americans know much about the Revolutionary War, and what they do know (or think they know) is linked to certain iconic events and hallowed places like the Boston Tea Party, Old North Bridge, Valley Forge, and American victories at places like Trenton, Saratoga, Kings Mountain, Cowpens, and of course, Yorktown. These are true cultural icons. All trigger thoughts and feelings of patriotic fervor, determination, bravery, and triumph over injustice. All make us proud. **Continued on page 2**



A New Roof for a Grand Old House - The Jacob Purdy House National Historic Site received a new cedar roof this Spring. Installed by Rob and Jim Clark of *White Plains Roofing and Siding*, the roof was financed by a Community Development Rehabilitation Grant from the City of White Plains, and generous contributions from our members.

White Plains National Battlefield Site (cont.)

Our cultural memory is very selective, however. While we have proudly commemorated victories, we have shown little enthusiasm for stoking memories of draws, defeats, and retreats. Truth be told, the Continental Army was pretty incompetent in the early stages of the war, being not just small, poorly trained, inexperienced, and resource poor, but also lacking in skilled leadership. The latter deficiency included George Washington, whose field command worksheet leading up to the 1776-1777 winter encampment pretty much consisted of beginner's blunders, stinging defeats, and a long, humiliating retreat.

The Continental Army's failures in New York during 1776 very nearly brought the Revolutionary War to an early and unhappy end. Washington's army, about 9,000 strong at the time, was so thoroughly whipped in the Battle of Long Island (August 27, 1776) that only an improbable fog-masked evacuation to Manhattan saved it from annihilation. Unable to maintain control of Manhattan (then called York Island), Washington had to retreat northward into Westchester County.

Sir William Howe's British force was in hot pursuit. Howe had every reason to believe that he could destroy the Continental Army if he could quickly catch it, pin it down, and force a climactic battle. Washington, for his part, had to avoid being forced into a back-against-the wall, all-or-nothing fight that his troops could not hope to win.

Howe dispatched a waterborne force to Westchester County with orders to block Washington's escape route and bring the Continentals to bay. When Washington caught wind of this, he moved his army to White Plains, a village less than ten miles northeast of Yonkers. White Plains had a Continental army supply depot, but no strong fortifications. Washington readied for the British attack by having his Continentals and supporting militia establish a defensive line that stretched three miles and used swampy and hilly land to advantage.

On the morning of October 28, Howe's troops advanced from Scarsdale for the main assault and the Battle of White Plains was underway. The patriots put up a spirited fight - both sides suffered serious casualties - but could not prevent the British from seizing Chatterton Hill, vital high ground on the patriot right flank. This exposed flank put Washington's army in mortal danger.

Once again at imminent risk of having his army overwhelmed, Washington once again got lucky. Howe spent the next two days getting ready for the final assault, but on October 31, the day that Howe had chosen for his attack, there was an all-day heavy rain that drowned out any chance of a fight. That very night, Washington moved his troops northward into the hills behind his original lines and encamped them at North Castle.

The Battle of White Plains yielded no clear victor, and is generally considered to have been a draw. Howe, who was frustrated to distraction, soon headed back to New York where he captured Fort Mifflin, the last remaining Continental stronghold on Manhattan. Washington, who saw no reasonable prospect of retaking Manhattan (nor of even safely remaining in the vicinity much longer), retreated out of New York and into New Jersey, where he established a winter camp at Morristown. It was from there that Washington famously led his troops in a foray across the Delaware River to his first notable victory of the war, the stunning defeat of the Hessians at Trenton on December 26, 1776. And the rest, as they say, is history.

What place the Battle of White Plains may deserve in that history remains a subject of debate among historians, but there's no question that the White Plains battlefield is a nationally significant historic site. In fact, it was once a national park - at least in the broad sense of the term. It's an interesting story, if an obscure one.

White Plains National Battlefield Site was proclaimed in 1926 and placed under War Department administration. The site was then transferred to the National Park Service for administration under terms of the Federal Reorganization of 1933. Being listed as a National Park System property, it was authorized for development as a national park.

This never happened. During the next two decades, the National Park Service didn't buy or acquire any battlefield land and didn't build any facilities. No development at all occurred, unless you count the placement of three descriptive markers. In 1956, the National Park Service quietly dropped the White Plains National

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Notable Achievements of One Colonial White Plains Family

By Clayton Purdy (St. George, UT)

The People mentioned here have lived or have ties to Westchester County. Space does not permit giving lineage, only the generation number from Franchise 1 Purdy. The 5th generation was of military age during the Revolution, and the 10th in 1939. Movement from Westchester County began when land became scarce. Descendants are in 50 states, 10 provinces of Canada, Northern Ireland, England, Wales and Australia. Louis E. Bierenger was the greatest single researcher, and typed 3,000 pages. He gave me a copy and I added data from hundreds of letters. Computers and on-line ended those two phases. I depend on obituaries. Today's grandchildren are tomorrow's grandparents.

First middle name Jonathan Hunt Purdy b. 1776, two middle names Susan Jane Millege Purdy b. 1814 and three middle names, Thomas Herbert Henry Reese 7 Purdy b. 1860. The oldest in my record is Loraine Purdy Bieringer; 103y 8m. I have a "90 and Over Club" with nearly 400 members, and here are a few selected from the "Careers" category:

Joseph 2 laid out some of the original farm lots in White Plains.

Daniel 3 collected taxes and put them in a jar on his window sill. He took them to New Haven when Rye was in Connecticut, and to Albany when Rye became New York.

Samuel 3 taught 41 pupils, "21 from the church, 19 heathen, one Jew and one Negro."

Obadiah 4 recorded documents which were later used as the base for the family genealogy.

Gilbert 5 listed the birth of his children, hour, day, month and year.

Bethia (Fisher) 6, a midwife with horse and buggy for use at all hours, had 10 children of her own.

Mary (Rafter) 6 was the wife of Hachaliah Bailey who started the famous circus with one elephant.

Henry B. 7 built in his shipyard 20 ocean going ships. James Gilbert 7 built hundreds of yachts and boats.

Isaac H. 7 donated land for tracks and buildings for the Harlem Railroad, was engaged in mercantile business, and was postmaster at Purdy Station for 50 years.

Corydon Tyler 8 designed high-rise buildings including the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, the New York Times Building, and the RH Macy Store. He had offices in New York City, Boston and Montreal.

Howard Oscar 8, school teacher, athlete, scholarships, a major in French, taught in Montreal, degree in math, Assistant Professor at McGill, sang in the choir, played piano, organ, trombone, tuba, composed anthems and played golf.

Simeon Desmond 9 paint salesman, founder of the Purdy Paint Brush Company Inc.

James Layton 9 Ralston, Lieutenant Col in the trenches in World War I, lawyer, Minister of Defence for Canada 1939-1944.

Iva Lucena 9, mother of John Vincent Atanassof whose pioneering work and invention of the first computer to separate data processing from memory was ultimately acknowledged after lengthy patent litigation.

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The White Plains Historical Society
 60 Park Avenue
 White Plains, NY 10603
 Phone: (914) 328-1776
 e-mail: info@whiteplainshistory.org

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Jack Harrington with daughters Debbie and Pam, and grandson Derek, pose in front of a cherry tree on June 23rd, planted in memory of Margaret "Peg" Harrington, our long-time Trustee and Treasurer. *Photo by Lou DeGenaro*

White Plains National Battlefield Site, continued from page 2

Battlefield Site from its list of National Park System properties.

Local residents then took over. In 1958, the Battle of White Plains Monument Committee was organized to identify, preserve, and protect sites associated with the battle. With the cooperation of Westchester Department of Parks, Recreation and Conservation, the City of White Plains, and the Towns of Harrison and North Castle, the Committee created a 9-mile long Heritage Trail that starts in White Plains, continues through Harrison and North Castle, and connects the principal points of interest. Each year the White Plains Historical Society hosts an anniversary commemoration of the battle at the Jacob Purdy House, a National Historic Site-designated building that served as Washington's headquarters at the time of the battle. As in previous years, the recently staged 235th anniversary commemoration featured a battle reenactment.

Postscript: Two U.S. Navy vessels were named for the Battle of White Plains - the WW II escort carrier CVE-66 and the combat stores ship AFS-4 (decommissioned in 1995).

Save the Date: Sunday, October 28, 2012—
The **White Plains Historical Society** presents
the **236th Anniversary Commemoration of
the Battle of White Plains**—Jacob Purdy
House National Historic Site (Washington's
Headquarters) - 60 Park Avenue, White Plains.
Revolutionary Camp opens at 10:00 AM.

The White Plains Historical Society is proud to host the
program series:

The Civil War

Presented by

The Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War
Meetings on the First Wednesday of each month.
For more details call (914) 949-4679 or
e-mail Program@CivilWarNY150.org



Stonehurst— Home of the Ebenezer Pray Family of White Plains as photographed by John Rosch. It is mis-identified in Renoda Hoffman's *It Happened in Old White Plains* as the William Reynolds Brown home (now the site of Broad Park Lodge), but was actually located a bit south near Franklin Street and Westchester Avenue.
Photo Courtesy of Al Tarleton.

THE WESTCHESTER COUNTY CENTER: THE NY KNICKS' HOME COURT AWAY FROM HOME

By John Vorperian

"Battling to hold top place in the National Basketball Association's Eastern Division, the New York Knickerbockers move into the County Center Wednesday night for an important date with the troublesome Philadelphia Warriors." -*The Reporter Dispatch*, March 1, 1954.

March 3, 1954 County Center spectators witnessed an 88-79 thrilling Knickerbockers victory which helped the franchise secure their Division's top spot. But why and how were the New York ballplayers running up and down the basketball court in White Plains?

Over a half century ago, the Westchester County Center located in our metropolis, served as a satellite homestead for action-packed major league professional basketball. Conceived by the Westchester Recreation Commission in 1924 as a multi-purpose indoor recreational facility for community and commercial programs, the Art Deco styled building was completed at a cost of \$785,000. Opened May 22, 1930, the Center held a multi-artist concert which featured White Plains denizen, pianist Percy Grainger, Metropolitan Opera Company tenor Edward Johnson, organist Palmer Christian and over 1,500 local choral group performers. So began the venue's entertainment parade which delighted its audiences with key events in music, arts, acting and the world of sports.

Today's NBA teams have one primary home arena. The New York Knicks' "Eden" can be found on

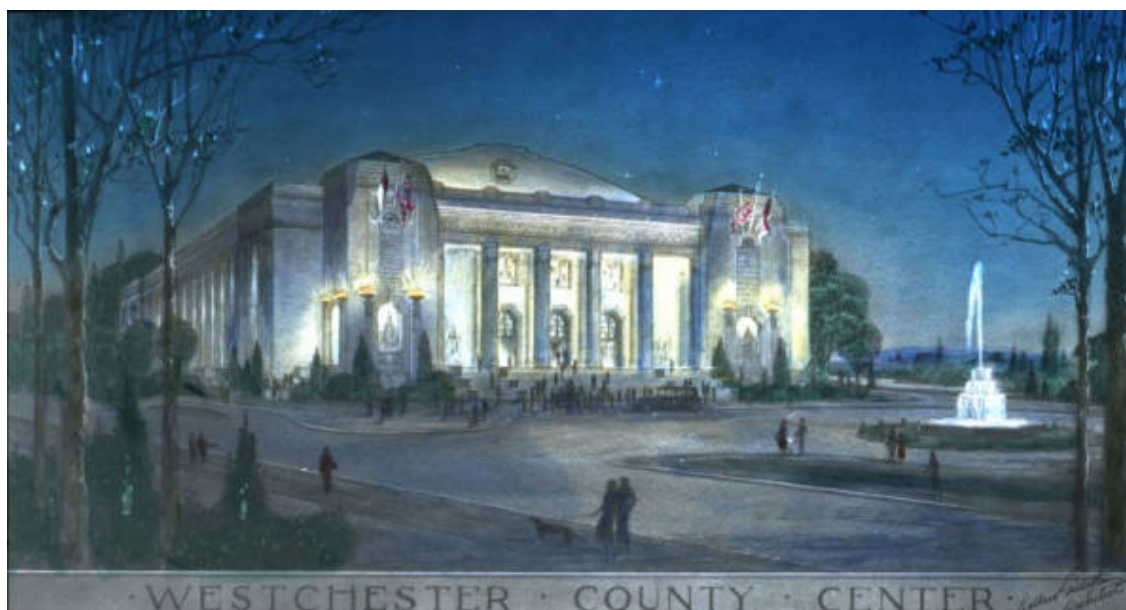
Manhattan's 34th Street-the venerable Madison Square Garden. But in the 1950s, the typical American sports fan narrowly focused on just Baseball, Boxing, and Horse Racing. The fledgling nascent pro hoops circuit attempted to capture Sports fandom's attention. To increase their tiny number of basketball boosters, the pro Hardwood loop employed two strategic marketing ploys.

Led by one of the NBA's founders, Eddie Gottlieb, a Basketball Hall of Famer promoted that the league hold double-headers whereby attendees could see four teams and twice the stars for a single price. Gottlieb also keenly pushed that teams play some "home-games" in small city venues to spread the association's exposure and thereby enlarge the NBA fan foundation.

The 1953-54 Season saw the five club NBA Eastern Division of the Syracuse Nationals; Baltimore Bullets; Philadelphia Warriors; Boston Celtics; and New York Knickerbockers adopt the following as their respective sister city: Binghamton, New York; Collingswood, New Jersey; Hershey, Pennsylvania; Providence, Rhode Island; and White Plains, New York. Overall the Season was simply a tight race for first between the Nats, Celts and Knicks.

Needless to say the NBA's business plan worked. The fan base did indeed grow. And with that success the Sport's business model evolved so sister city games were replaced with exclusive dates in central city arenas.

John Vorperian is WPHS 1st Vice-President, and Host of BEYOND THE GAME White Plains Cable Television Channel 76 & Verizon Fios 45, www.wpcommunitymedia.org.



The County Center was built on land opposite the trolley car barns that served White Plains commuters. The land had been acquired in the effort to create the Bronx River Preserve; a monumental effort to save the Bronx River from pollutants cause by the growth of industry and slums along the river. Named for Jonas Bronck, the Indians called it "Aquehung."