

Introduction

At 315 miles in length the Hudson River is not among America's largest rivers. From its headwaters in the Adirondacks it flows in a southerly direction until, just below Lake George, it turns sharply to the east for several miles, and then proceeds almost due south until it passes into the Atlantic. Just after turning to the south in the final stage of its passage to the Atlantic, the Hudson passes alongside Fort Edward. Fort Edward is some 30 miles below Whitehall, which lies on a watershed that separates bodies of water that flow in opposite directions; it is from this watershed that water passes into Lake Champlain, which empties into the Richelieu River. That river flows into the Saint Lawrence, which, in turn, passes into the Atlantic. These two waterways, the Hudson and Champlain, were discovered in the same year, 1609; it was in that year that Henry Hudson sailed up the river that was named after him, and Samuel de Champlain sailed along a lake that was named after him. Were it not for the 30 miles of forest that separate the two waterways the Hudson-Champlain corridor would be continuous; the stretch of wilderness that separates the Hudson River from the headwaters of Lake Champlain is of no small historical significance. A battle was fought a few miles below Fort Edward that changed the course of world history. The Battle of Saratoga was the turning point of the American Revolution, and it set in motion a chain of events that led to the French Revolution. The geography of New York contributed to the outcome of that historic battle.

England and France waged four wars between 1689 and 1783, a period of just under one hundred years. These wars were fought most importantly in Europe, but they were also fought overseas, nowhere more importantly than in North America. Within the North American theater of war throughout this period no geographical area was of greater military significance than New York. This was owing to New York's location between England's and France's colonial holdings in North America. Beginning with raids and skirmishes back and forth between New York and Canada in 1690, carried out by parties of several hundred or so, the struggle increased in scale and intensity until Britain achieved an overwhelming victory over France in 1763. Britain's victory over France in



Figure 7. Whitehall in the summer of 2006. Originally Skenesboro, it is here that waters flow in different directions, north into Lake Champlain and south into the Hudson. Knowing that the wooded area between Skenesboro and Fort Frederick presented serious problems for Burgoyne's army on the march to Albany, I wanted to see it for myself. Seen here are Sam Huntington, a former student of mine who lives just above Whitehall, another student, Tony Anadio, and my wife Anne. Tony, Anne, and I spent a weekend with Sam and his parents; Sam drove with us from Whitehall to Fort Edward, observing what was once a stretch of wilderness that contributed to the outcome of a battle that changed the course of world history.



Figure 8. South Bay, between Lake Champlain and Whitehall. I took this photograph from Mount Defiance (originally Sugar Loaf Hill).



Figure 9. Fort Edward, next to the Hudson River. Visiting the physical ground on which history unfolded in 1777 was an exercise in historical recovery. This is what I have done throughout my *Early Albany Stories* on similar trips.

the French and Indian War was complete; she forged the most far-flung global empire up to that time, vaster even than the Roman Empire at its height. The cost of these wars was staggering for both Britain and France; both were fiscally exhausted and forced to search for additional sources of revenue. For Britain, the problem was exacerbated by a large-scale Indian uprising, Pontiac's Rebellion, which broke out in the aftermath of the French and Indian War. Britain had to build forts and maintain garrisons along the western frontier, at no small cost, adding to the heavy burden of the war debt. Under these circumstances, Britain imposed taxes on the American colonies, direct beneficiaries of the victory over France and of her continuing military presence along a troublesome western frontier. The problem was that the colonies did not want to pay taxes; within a mere 12 years colonial opposition to taxes and other imperial measures culminated in armed conflict at Lexington and Concord, the beginning of the American Revolution. Fiscally exhausted as France was, she threw her support behind the American war for independence after the American victory at Saratoga. Without France's intervention the American cause looked bleak; with it, victory was possible. Revenge against Britain was sweet for France, but the cost was more than the French treasury could bear; within three years of the 1783 Treaty of Paris, France was faced with a fiscal crisis that led to the French Revolution. And within another four years France and Britain were at war again, the beginning of a struggle between two imperial powers that ended with Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo in 1815.

Two rivers that come together just above Albany, the Hudson and Mohawk, had major strategic and military importance in wars fought between 1690 and 1815. The same was true of two lakes north of Albany, Lake George and Lake Champlain. It became evident during the French and Indian War that control of the Mohawk River valley was one of the keys to victory; another was control of Lake George and Lake Champlain. Forts were built along these waterways; rival armies passed back and forth, fighting for control of the forts and the waterways along which they lay. As the military historian John Keegan has said, these river corridors were among the most bitterly contested places on earth in the second half of the eighteenth century. This was true of the French and Indian War, and it was true again during the American Revolution. In 1777, the third year of the revolution, one British strategy was to gain control of the Hudson-Champlain corridor by sending armies down Lake Champlain, up the Hudson, and across the Mohawk. All armies were to meet at Albany. Had the strategy succeeded Britain would have sealed off New England from the rest of the Revolution, thereby assuring victory. Of course, this is not how it turned out; the American victory at Saratoga, fought 25 miles above Albany, was a major defeat for Britain. An entire British army surrendered, along with arms and gunpowder; this was the turning point of the American Revolution.

The story of New York's waterways in time of war did not end with the American Revolution. Once again, during the War of 1812, British armies would pass across New York's waterways, along the Saint Lawrence to Lake Ontario and down Lake Champlain toward Albany; battles of great significance were fought along these historic waterways, most importantly in the Battle of Plattsburgh in 1814. Again, an American force prevailed, as an earlier one had at Saratoga during the Revolution. As wars were fought along New York's river corridors during the Revolution, and again in the War of 1812, Americans became aware of the potential of these waterways as avenues of commerce. For this potential to be realized, canals could be built that would facilitate trade between New York and the vast area beyond its western frontier, and with Canada to the north. Commercial traffic passing along canals from the west and the north would arrive at their natural terminus, Albany; it would then proceed down the Hudson to New York Harbor, making it the leading port in America, and one of the most important in the world. This is precisely what happened with completion of the Erie and Champlain canals.



The historian Norman Cantor has said that throughout most of history

only the aristocracy had any real consciousness of its identity, its rights, or its destiny. The aristocrats held a monopoly of power, learning, and culture, and they alone had a sense of their special

and privileged place in the world . . . As late as 1700, the prevailing European social system was still one in which vast power, the greater part of landed wealth, and the prime control of political life belonged to the hereditary landed aristocracy.¹

It was during the eighteenth century that domination of the aristocracy was first challenged. This happened on both sides of the Atlantic, in Europe and America, and particularly after 1760, when democratic stirrings were felt throughout Western society. How this happened is anything but straightforward. The aristocracy had always held power and been socially and culturally dominant in Europe, but in America it was only in the course of the eighteenth century that an aristocracy coalesced. America became more aristocratic during the eighteenth century; paradoxically, it also became more democratic. The democratic impulse did not come exclusively from above or below; it came from both the elite and from the people. How this complex dynamic played out during the half century between 1775 and 1825 is one of the central themes of this book.² Two Albany aristocrats and their Hudson River mansions will be focal points and provide physical settings for the narratives in which this theme will be traced.

After 1720, the members of leading families in America began consciously to emulate the way of life of the English elite, whose refinement they admired.³ In acquiring refinement, prominent Americans formed themselves into a civilized elite, thereby separating themselves from the coarse people, who lacked social polish. A courtesy book whose precepts George Washington copied at age 17, *Youth's Behaviour, or Decency in Conversation among Men*, sheds light on the historical process by which Americans from prominent families acquired refinement. The book from which Washington hand-copied 110 precepts of proper behavior was a seventeenth-century English manual that was derived from a 1595 book written by French Jesuits that, in turn, borrowed from one of the most important of all etiquette books, Giovanni della Casa's *Il Galateo*, first published in 1558. Renaissance Italy was a seedbed of good manners, where forms of proper conduct were first set down in courtier's books, and then in etiquette books and manuals of civility.⁴ By the time the system of manners contained in this literature was assimilated—over a period of several centuries—Western society was transformed; a divide ran through society, with a well-mannered and refined elite on one side of the division, and the uncultivated people on the other side.⁵ The book from which Washington copied precepts of behavior was part of a sizeable body of etiquette books that told readers how to dress, converse, maintain proper comportment, and conduct themselves at the dinner table; these manuals told readers how to acquire the social skills that constituted good manners. Members of the well-mannered American elite acquired the trappings of gentility: articles of clothing, furniture, interior décor, material objects that marked one as refined. Many of the fine things that marked a person as

refined came from Europe; imported from abroad, these items were costly, beyond the means of ordinary people, accessible only to the well-to-do. But refinement was not only about observing the outer forms of proper behavior and surrounding oneself with tasteful objects; refinement involved a state of mind—it contributed to the formation of personal and social identities. To be refined was not only to be polished and genteel, it was to occupy a different mental sphere, separate from the less elevated world of the people.

George Washington's contemporary, Philip Schuyler, is an object lesson in the process by which an elite American acquired refinement. From a Dutch family originally of middling background, Schuyler's ancestors married well and climbed the ladder of success over several generations. He inherited family properties, was economically astute, and amassed a considerable fortune, offering him the means to achieve the social ambitions of a man of refinement. As with other elite Americans, construction of a mansion marked him as a person of distinction; if ever there was a bastion of American refinement and elitism it was Philip Schuyler's Albany mansion. When Schuyler purchased a 24-acre plot of land for his mansion, it was a mile south of a stockade that still encircled Albany. Only after American victories in the French and Indian War in 1759 and 1760 was it deemed safe to build on a site such as the one chosen by Schuyler for his mansion. Schuyler had served under Major General John Bradstreet in the French and Indian War, and with keen mathematical skills he brought order to Bradstreet's account books. He went to England in 1761 to present Bradstreet's account books to the authorities, just as construction began on his mansion, with Bradstreet overseeing it during his absence. While in London, Schuyler acquired fine objects for himself and for his mansion, all in the latest fashion, all marking him as a person of taste, discernment, and refinement. Before returning to America he compiled a list of objects he had purchased in England, valued at £645 13s, that included "window glass, fabrics, silver and brass items, glassware, hardware, a theodolite, Hadley's quadrant, a reflecting telescope, a magic lantern, and a crane-necked chariot."⁶ Also among the articles Schuyler acquired in England was wallpaper for his mansion, a fashionable commodity that had only recently appeared on the market. The wallpaper that Schuyler selected depicted scenes of the "Ruins of Rome," a subject that evoked the Grand Tour and reflected elite taste of the time.

Lord Adam Gordon, son of the second Duke of Gordon, traveled along the Atlantic seaboard in 1765, the year in which construction of Schuyler Mansion was completed. Having gone from Charleston to New York and then made his way up the Hudson, Lord Gordon had seen houses of the great as he proceeded. Upon arriving in Albany, he made note of the "dull and ill-built" town, but he added, "One Mr. P. Schuyler has a good house near it, lately built in a better Stile, than I have generally seen in America."⁷ It is difficult for us today to imagine the impact Schuyler's mansion would have had on contemporaries. It is in a style that, broadly speaking, may be called Georgian,



Figure 10. Schuyler Mansion.

with rows of windows running along the front and sides of the brick building, a grand total of 26, each with 24 panes of glass that Schuyler had purchased in England, having paid £68 15s for “1500 feet [of] the best London crown glass.”⁸ Brick mansions stood apart from wooden houses that were the norm in mid-eighteenth-century America; to build in brick was to be fashionable, and to build a house in a Georgian style just outside Albany between 1761 and 1765 was to place oneself in the stylistic vanguard. The first house in the town of Albany done in this style was the Stevenson House on State Street, built between 1770 and 1780. Earlier Albany houses were typically in a Dutch vernacular style, with gables facing the street. It was Schuyler who introduced the new style, and he did so in grand manner in a building whose size and fineness could only have had dramatic effect on contemporaries.

To carry off a statement such as this it was necessary to bring in a master carpenter from Boston, along with other skilled craftsmen. The staircase, one of the stylistic centerpieces has hand-turned balusters of varied and complicated design, in imitation of the finest houses in America, such as the Hancock House in Boston. One entered Schuyler’s refined residence in a main hall, a rectangular room that was an appropriate space to receive guests. On both sides of the great hall there were parlors, intended for the use of the family and for guests. The very word parlor is indicative of the thinking that attended the design of eighteenth-century mansions. Derived from the French word *parler*

(“to speak”), the parlor was a room intended for the use of refined people who came together in proper sociable interaction, people who had learned to converse easily and correctly, who dressed well, and in the fullest sense of the word were refined. The parlor was a civilized space, and as such it was part of what one might call a “parlorization” of elite society. Behind one of the parlors was Philip Schuyler’s study, a place to which a man of parts, and learning, could retire. The staircase was in the room behind the main hall, and on the other side was the dining room. Upstairs, running the entire length of the building, was the saloon, the largest room in the house, and in many respects the most important. This is where formal entertainments took place; this is where the important guests who came to meet with and receive the hospitality of Philip Schuyler assembled.

Driving all of this was the reality of power, of utmost importance to someone of Philip Schuyler’s station and ambitions. A list of the guests who received Schuyler’s hospitality in *The Pastures* and assembled in its most important room, the saloon, is impressive. We will be meeting some of these dignitaries in the early Albany stories that follow. When we come to them it will be useful to keep the saloon in mind; this is where they will gather. Like the parlor, the saloon says much about the refining process. Derived from the French word *salon*, it denotes a coming together of civilized people in convivial and informed gatherings. The other four upstairs rooms are bedrooms, intended for members of the Schuyler family and for guests. What is missing from both floors is a kitchen, or any workspace whatever. The kitchen was in a separate building attached to the rear of the house, as were quarters for servants. All of this is congruent with a pattern of architectural thinking that relegated workspaces and those who occupied them to the rear of houses, or to buildings outside houses. The thinking that resulted in arrangements of this type is integral to the civilizing process that ran its course from the time of the Renaissance to the eighteenth century, and resulted in the separation of a refined elite from an unrefined people.

Construction began on another mansion overlooking the Hudson in 1765. This mansion was in Watervliet, north of Albany, on the manorial grounds of the largest estate in New York, Rensselaerwijck, comprised of some 700,000 acres. The origins of the Van Rensselaer land holding went back to Kilian Van Rensselaer, a Dutch diamond merchant who called for investment groups to establish large estates, patroonships, along the Hudson River valley. The Van Rensselaer patroonship, initially 24 miles wide and 24 miles in length, was enlarged later and ran along both sides of the Hudson. Kilian Van Rensselaer never set foot on the patroonship that he founded; but his son, Jan Baptiste, came to America in 1651, and from this time on the Van Rensselaers lived on and continued to develop their extensive land holding, making them one of the wealthiest of all American families. Jeremias Van Rensselaer, the third patroon, built a new house on the manorial grounds north of Albany after

floods destroyed the previous farm house in 1666. This house was near the grist mill and a new brewery, close to Patroon's Creek that passed through the Van Rensselaer manorial grounds before emptying into the Hudson. That house served as the manor house until Stephen Van Rensselaer II began construction of a grander mansion in 1765, Van Rensselaer Hall. Stephen Van Rensselaer II died in 1769, before construction of his riverside mansion was completed. It was his brother-in-law, Abraham Ten Broeck, who oversaw the completion of Van Rensselaer Hall in the years after Stephen Van Rensselaer II's death. Ten Broeck was also the ward of his nephew, the next patroon, Stephen Van Rensselaer III, a child of five at the time of his father's death. Befitting someone of his station, Stephen Van Rensselaer III attended Harvard, from which he graduated in 1782. He married a daughter of Philip Schuyler, Margarita, in 1783, and two years later they moved into Van Rensselaer Hall. Margarita climbed out of her second-floor room in her father's mansion to elope with her 19-year-old husband. She was 25 and six years older than her husband. From this time on there was close contact between Albany's two most important families, the Schuyler and Van Rensselaer families, whose mansions, one south of Albany and one north of the city, were among the finest in the Hudson River Valley.

The front entrance of Van Rensselaer Hall opened into a central great hall that was 47 feet in length, had a 12-foot ceiling, and was 24 feet in depth. By the standards of the landowning elite of the mid-Hudson River Valley this was a most impressive house, as one would have expected given the status and



Figure 11. Van Rensselaer Hall, demolished in 1893.

wealth of the patroon who built it. If there was a nodding acknowledgment of the Dutch heritage in the gambrel roof of Van Rensselaer Hall, the design was basically Georgian, placing it in the same stylistic category as Philip Schuyler's mansion. The great hall was decorated with hand-painted wallpaper purchased by Philip Livingston, Stephen Van Rensselaer II's father-in-law, when he was in London in 1768. Made by the firm of Neate and Pigou, the wallpaper designs included scenes of the "Ruins of Rome" and pastoral landscape scenes loosely paraphrased from the rococo paintings of Nicolas Lancret, a student of Antoine Watteau. The hand-painted wallpaper scenes, smart and fashionable, were placed within borders of flowing arabesques, decorative motifs such as one might have seen in the estates of French and English aristocrats. Visitors to Van Rensselaer Hall would have seen the same "Ruins of Rome" wallpaper design in Philip Schuyler's mansion if they had visited the riverside mansion of Albany's other leading aristocrat. The important personages who visited these two mansions and enjoyed the hospitality of Philip Schuyler and Stephen Van Rensselaer III will play a central role in the four stories brought together in this book.