

PUTNAM MEMORIAL PARK: CONNECTICUT'S VALLEY FORGE

Truman Warner

The Bicentennial logo posted on signs along the main highways in the Danbury region encourages the traveler to visit Putnam Memorial Park at Redding, which the Bicentennial map of Connecticut describes as a "379 acre park and museum [which] stand as memorials to soldiers in General Putnam's army who camped there during the severe winter of 1778-79".

The park has been called "Connecticut's Valley Forge" because of the difficulties encountered by the American troops while wintering there. However, the significance of this encampment in terms of the overall strategy of the war merits greater clarification in order to orient the modern visitor.

After Washington retreated from Manhattan in the fall of 1776, the British retained control of New York City and vicinity until the peace treaty in 1783. Consequently, Washington was forced to concentrate a considerable portion of his army in the area for a span of seven years. During that period Danbury was the eastern anchor of a great arc swinging across Dutchess and Westchester Counties to the Hudson at West Point, and south to New Jersey. The Danbury region was particularly important as a supply and hospital center and as a major gateway on the inland roads from New England to the troop concentrations in the field. Men and supplies could move from the area south to Long Island Sound, west to the Hudson or east to Boston and Providence if the need developed.

Late in 1778 Washington distributed most of his troops in winter quarters at Danbury -- actually Redding, just over the Danbury line, at West Point, and at Middlebrook, New Jersey with a few misgivings, for he felt that inasmuch as the British commander had been very inactive during the summer, except for a few foraging expeditions, he was unlikely to send out his troops during the cold of winter. The choice of encampment locations was based upon the availability of supplies nearby as well as upon strategic considerations.

Israel Putnam originally was to have been in command at West Point, in charge of completing the fortifications there. However, Washington changed his mind, probably because he did not feel Putnam was suited to direct this vital operation, and Putnam was sent instead with his men to the Redding site. Only a portion were located within the present park. Two other areas outside the park boundaries also were utilized. The troops arrived by the middle of November and had left by the end of May in 1779, but many of the men who had families within a couple of days journey from the camp spent at least part of their time at their own homes.

Today, reproductions of block houses, replicas of two log huts, a forty foot obelisk memorializing the troops stationed there, a

double row of stones claimed to be the remains of old firebacks of the revolutionary barracks, an equestrian statue of Putnam escaping from the British at Greenwich, and a small museum call attention to the park's historical associations. Unfortunately, the significance of the events which these monuments symbolize remains hazy to the casual visitor; for he received little guidance.

In recent years a one sheet map with a key to historical sites is the visitor's only aid. The older, more detailed guide books of years past no longer are available.

The state of Connecticut has made no serious attempt to utilize modern archaeological techniques to fully investigate the encampment. During the summers of 1974 and 1975, however, a group of students, some from Wesconn, led by David Poirier from the University of Connecticut excavated the fire back area in the hope of reconstructing camp life. They made minor finds but so far have not located the foundations of any of the huts. The dig will continue during the summer of 1976.

The museum collection at the park has been decimated in recent years by a series of robberies. The entire gun collection was stolen in 1974 and never recovered. During this past winter season thirteen bayonettes, swords and long knives were taken. The irony of such losses is that requests for an inexpensive security system which would have revealed the robbery attempts have been denied repeatedly over the years because of the state's financial "crises". By saving approximately two thousand dollars for the state treasury the people of the state have lost an irreplaceable heritage.

Lack of funds has also restricted plans for special programs during the Bicentennial. Indeed, all major efforts in recent years to upgrade the facilities at the park have failed. The legislature did appropriate funds, but the State Bond Commission denied the bonding requests. Selection of priorities is always essential in allocating limited monies, and the evidence is plain that to our state governmental leaders the historical heritage about which they so often talk in their public proclamations in actuality have an extremely low priority when it comes to making the hard decisions.