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DEATH IN THE BRONX

The Stockbridge Indian Massacre
August, 1778
by Richard S. Walling

A Rediscovery of the Lost Battlefield and Burial Place of the Stockbridge Indians

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Secreted away in the forested expanse of a vast urban park in the Bronx, lie the mortal remains of a band of noble Mohican Indians who died for the defense of American liberty during the Revolution. Hidden in an area of Van Cortlandt Park, known aptly as Indian Field, is a page of history forgotten by time and obscured by two centuries of nature's inexorable reclamation.

The story of these Mohican warriors who fought and died in the service of a young United States cannot remain unknown by the present generation. Their sacrifice in the war, known as the Stockbridge Massacre, is worth retelling because it embodies a number of significant qualities: The history of the Mohican Nation and its relationship to the colonial, and later, the national governments; the role of Native Americans in the War for Independence; and

lastly, the unique quality of individual bravery under desperate circumstances.

The Mohicans

The world of the native inhabitants of present day New York and environs forever changed in 1609 as a strange object appeared on the great river that flows from the Adirondack Mountains, past the Palisades and Manhattan Island into the Atlantic. In that year, Hendrick Hudson captained the Half Moon up the great waterway in search of the elusive Northwest Passage that was thought to link the Atlantic with the Pacific oceans. As Hudson moved northerly up the river, he met several individuals of the Mohican nation whose home territory encompassed not only both sides of the river, but also extended westerly towards the Catskill Mountains, northerly to the two great inland lakes of Lake George and Lake Champlain, easterly to the Green Mountains of Vermont and extending southeasterly to the Connecticut River. Their homeland encompassed present-day eastern New York and the western sections of Vermont, Massachusetts and Connecticut. Their population prior to the introduction of Old World diseases and European alcohol is estimated from between 8,000 and 25,000 individuals.

The nation occupied a critical place on the North American continent; situated along the interconnecting waterways of the two lakes and the Hudson River, this natural waterway through the mountains is called the Warpath of Nations. Anthropologists have also called it the Mohican Channel, because of its location within that tribe's homeland. Historically, their location was equally important as a shield between the Algonquin peoples of the eastern seaboard, and the Iroquois peoples of the interior. Both groups were well organized and had a significant degree of tribal and ethnic identity. By the late 1500s the Iroquois tribes of upstate New York had formed the great Iroquois Confederacy of Five Nations

(later increased by the arrival of the Tuscaroras to Six Nations in the mid-18th century). Not as well known as the Iroquois league was a similar intertribal confederacy of Algonquin tribes that stretched from the Potomac River to Albany, New York. Major tribes within this confederacy included the Lenape (renamed by Europeans as the Delaware), the Esopus, Wappinger and Mohican, but also included the many tribes ranging from New York City to New England. This vast confederacy did not survive long after the arrival of the Dutch and the English; these natives were the front line of colonial settlement, and were either forced to relocate to the west or attempt to survive in a white man's world. The vast majority of the population of the native inhabitants died of the unknown diseases brought by the inhabitants of a distant continent.

During the 1600s, the Mohicans played a critical role in the fur trade between other native peoples and the Dutch, then after the 1664 takeover, the English. Always protective of the newcomers, the Mohicans sold small plots of land for the establishment of trading posts and forts (Albany and Kingston for example). Two destructive wars during the 17th century with the Mohawks over the lucrative fur trade diminished the former status of the Mohicans. Territory west of the Hudson was lost, and it was now to be the Mohawks to serve as middlemen between the colonials and the tribes of the Great Lakes and Ohio Valley. As colonial settlement spread westward from Massachusetts and northward along the Hudson River, the Mohicans began to consolidate their settlements and take on a new role in the colonial period of American development. The best known new settlement of Mohicans was the mission village of Stockbridge, Massachusetts. By the late 1730s, Mohicans began to settle there as converts to both Christianity and English-style town government. In the 1740s, the Mohican nation transferred its Council Fire (capital) from the Hudson to Stockbridge; other families and groups relocated to Stockbridge during the

turbulent years of the mid 18th century, notably the Wappingers of the Dutchess County area led by Daniel and Aaron Nimham.

Mohicans as Warriors

Beginning with King William's war of the 1690s, England and France engaged in an on-going struggle for supremacy in North America. During the 1740s, and again in the French and Indian War of 1755-63, Mohicans played a vital role as scouts and rangers on the frontier between Canada and up-state New York. Their service is immortalized in the books (and films), Last of the Mohicans, by James Fenimore Cooper and in Northwest Passage by Kenneth Roberts. While Cooper imbued his Mohicans as the archetypal Noble Savage, doomed by the destiny of Europeans to sweep across America, Roberts portrays the Indian members of Rogers Rangers as drunken lackeys of the great white frontiersman. Both of these images are caricatures of the real role played by these Americans. Stockbridge warriors served in most of the campaigns between Lake George and Canada, fought alongside their Iroquois neighbors under Sir William Johnson against the French, and even participated with the English in putting down Pontiac's Rebellion in the 1760s.

For the young men of the Mohican and allied tribes, serving as soldiers was an expression of their traditional role as warriors for their people. While military service was appealing, its consequences had the accumulative effect of weakening the tribe. Death by bullet was compounded by death by disease, particularly in the cramped, sickly military camps of the 18th century. Smallpox, dysentery, measles, etc., all diminished the strength of the people. With each passing year, the number of the Stockbridges gradually declined.

While fighting for the King, and living with his colonial subjects, the Stockbridges (which

became their new identification) continued to struggle to maintain their cultural and tribal identity. Other area Mohicans moved to Moravian communities in Pennsylvania and Ohio, and still others resided with regional tribes in the northeast and midwest. Wherever the Mohicans traveled however, all paid homage to Stockbridge and considered that community as their capital.

Service to the United States

The tensions between the colonials in North American and the Mother Country caught Native Americans in an awkward position. While those tribes who lived on the frontier of the Ohio Valley and the Southeast mostly sided with the English, many eastern tribes fought along side their American neighbors against the King. Even the Iroquois Confederacy was split apart by the war; the Mohawk, Seneca and Cayuga eventually allied themselves with the British, while the Oneida and Tuscarora chose to support the movement for independence.

The Stockbridges sided early with the Patriots. The young men of the community, Indian, white and black served in local companies formed into militia, state and Continental regiments. In addition to playing an active role in the military history of the Revolution, the Stockbridge Mohicans played a vital role in diplomacy with their Algonquin brethren, notably the Delaware and Shawnees, on toe frontier. The American government utilized the Mohicans as liaisons with their western relations in an attempt to keep the frontier free from the raids and bloodshed that all too frequently accompanied warfare on the

A Stockbridge Warrior, Circa August, 1778

fringes of colonial settlement.

John Sergeant, Jr., son of one of the first missionaries at Stockbridge, wrote to Congress in November, 1776:

> Far from desiring to remain neuter in the dispute between Great-Britain and America, they have made themselves acquainted with the merits of the controversy, and have taken an active part in our favor, inlisting [sic] their young men in our Army, while their counsellors and sachems have carefully sent belts of wampum by their messengers to the Six Nations, to the Canada Indians, and to the Shauwanes, on the Ohio, addressing them in such teems as they judged would have the greatest tendency to attach them to the interests of the United States (quoted in The American Revolution in Indian Country by Colin G. Calloway; Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 95.)

Action in the Bronx

By the summer of 1778, the Stockbridges had served in every major campaign in the eastern theater of the American Revolution, from Bunker Hill to Monmouth. At the latter battle, fought just ten days after the British evacuated Philadelphia in a move to consolidate their forces in North America, approximately twenty Stockbridges fought in several New

England regiments, shoulder to shoulder with their neighbors in what was the largest, longest land battle of the entire war.

By early July, the British were ensconced in and around Manhattan while the American forces were camped at White Plains, just several miles north. The area between the two armies, present-day Bronx and Yonkers, was indeed a dark and bloody ground, as patrols skirmished and ambushes laid. On the British side, the best unit for such maneuvers was the Queen's Rangers led by young Colonel John Simcoe. This unit was the direct descendent of Rogers Rangers from the French and Indian War some twenty years earlier, and in fact, Rogers was the first commander of the Queen's Rangers during the Revolution. Consisting of loyalists, the regiment was formed into both cavalry and infantry units, all clothed in short green jackets. While serving in the Bronx area, the regiment often worked in cooperation with Hessian troops. On the American side of the lines, the forward troops consisted of light infantry. These men were the shock troops of the Continental Army; lightly equipped and always ready to move quickly. They patrolled the no-mans land between the two armies during the summer of 1778.

During July, a group of Stockbridges under Daniel Nimham (the Wappinger sachem who moved his people to Stockbridge during the French and Indian War) joined the American army at White Plains. Abraham Nimham, seeking to fight alongside his father, requested of the army that all the Stockbridges from the several regiments be allowed to serve together. In addition to the Stockbridges, it is possible that other Indians in the New England regiments were allowed to form up with the Mohicans for their patrolling activities. This combined Indian force served in conjunction with the light infantry. Thus the stage was set for a showdown between the loyalist Queen's Rangers, formerly Rogers Rangers, and the Stockbridges, formerly a vital element of that very same unit some two decades earlier.

On one occasion during July, a group of British troops led by Lt. Colonels Simcoe, Tarleton and Emmerick were patrolling near the Valentine house (near present-day Woodlawn Cemetery). Proceeding northerly on Mile Square Road (now Van Cortlandt Park East), they stopped at the entrance of a lane (DeVoe's Lane, now an unpaved continuation of Oneida Ave. in Van Cortlandt Park) next to Daniel DeVoe's farmhouse. From Col. Simcoe's own narrative we ream:

> The Stockbridge Indians, about sixty in number, excellent marksmen, had just joined Mr. Washington's army. Lt Col Simcoe was describing a private road [DeVoe's Lane] to Lt Col Tarleton; Wright, his Orderly dragoon, alighted and took down a fence of DeVou's farm yard for them to pass through; around this farce the Indians were ambuscaded; Wright had scarce mounted his horse, when these officers, for some trivial reason, altered their intentions, and spurring their horses, soon rode out of sight, and out of reach of the Indians. (Simcoe's Military Journal, pp. 80-81.)

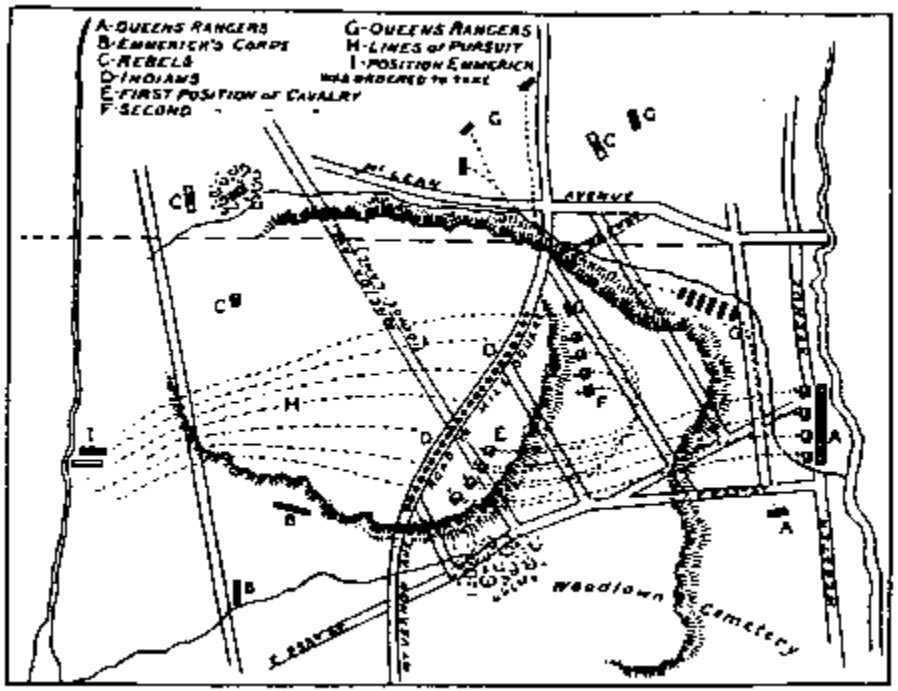
Simcoe was not one to let this incident go unrequited. Towards the latter part of August, he devised his own ambush that would punish the Stockbridges.

The Battle

The scene of the action between the Queen's Rangers and the Stockbridges was Van Cortlandt Manor, a large estate situated between Broadway and the Bronx River. Midway between the manor house and the river was Mile Square Road, connecting the Albany Post

Road (Broadway) with the small hamlet of Mile Square in Westchester County. Almost all of the ground on which the battle between the Stockbridges and Queen's Rangers was fought is now preserved within Van Cortlandt Park. The lane described in Simcoe's account is still there, linking the old Mile Square road with a residential neighborhood just north of the park. The fields and forests of the battle are now covered by some playing fields, but mostly with luxuriant forest.

On August 31st, Simcoe implemented his planned revenge. Moving forward from the Kingsbridge section of the Bronx in the early morning with five hundred men from several units, Simcoe hoped to entice the Americans forward down Mile Square Road from their positions. At the same time, he would divide his own forces in an effort to envelop and trap the Americans. Emmerick's Corps was to take up a position westerly of Tibbet's Brook and Mile Square Road near the residence of a Frederick De Voe, while the Queen's Rangers moved up along the Bronx River; both units were hidden from the Americans by the natural fall of the land.



The Attack upon the Stockbridge Indians.

From Simcoe's Military Journal.

With his troops into position by 10 a.m., Simcoe continues his narrative:

> Emmerick most unfortunately mistook the nearer house - Daniel DeVoe's - for one at a greater distance, the names being the same, and there posted himself, and sent from thence a patrole forward upon the road, before Lieut.-Col. Simcoe could have time to stop it. This patrole had no bad effect, not meeting with an enemy; had a single man of it deserted, or been taken, the whole attempt probably had been abortive. Lieut.-Col. Simcoe, who was halfway up a tree, on the top of which was a drummer boy, saw a flanking party of the enemy approach. The troops had scarcely fallen into their ranks when a smart firing was heard from the Indians, who had

lined the fences of the [Mile Square] road, and were exchanging shot with Lieut.-Col. Emmerick, whom they had discovered. The Queen's Rangers moved rapidly to gain the heights, and Lieut.-Col. Tarleton immediately advanced with the Hussars and the Legion cavalry; not being able to pass the [stone] fences in his front, he made a circuit to return upon their right, which being reported to Lieut.-Col. Simcoe, he broke from the column of the Rangers, with the Grenadier Company, and directed Major Ross to conduct the Corps to the heights, advanced to the road, and arrived without being perceived within ten yards of the Indians, who had been intent upon the attack of Emmerick's Corps and the Legion. The Indians now gave a yell, and fired upon the Grenadier Company, wounding four of them and Lieut.-Col Simcoe. They were driven from the fences, and Lieut.Col. Tarleton with the Cavalry got among them and pursued them rapidly down Cortlandt's ridge; that active officer had a narrow escape; in striking at one of the fugitives he lost his balance and fell from his horse. Luckily the Indian had no bayonet and his musket had been discharged.

The Indians fought most gallantly; they pulled more than one of the Cavalry from their horses. French, an active youth, bugle-hoary to the Huzzars, struck at an Indian, but missed his blow; the man dragged him from his horse, and was searching for his knife to stab him, when loosening French's hand he luckily drew out a pocket pistol and shot the Indian through the head, in which situation he was found. (Simcoe's Military Journal, pp. 83-86.)

While the Stockbridges were engaged with the main force of enemy troops, the American

light infantry were positioned to the north and west of Mile Square Road. As the fighting started and the British cavalry caught the Indians off guard from their rear flank, the American infantry took off. One account of the battle states that there were sixty light infantry and forty-eight Stockbridge Indians; the American forces were outnumbered nearly five to one. Simcoe's map of the battle clearly shows that the light infantry units were cut off from the main fighting along Mile Square Road and were obliged to retreat.

During the action, just as Simcoe's men hit the left flank of the Indians, Daniel Nimham was the one to wound the British officer. With enemy troops at their front and rear, the old chief called out to his men to retreat, but shouted 'I am old, and can die here'" He was then shot by Simcoe's orderly. Nimham, sachem of the Wappingers and a leader of the Stockbridges, had once visited the King of England in 1766 to try to stop the land frauds being committed upon his people, crawled off of the battlefield towards a stream where his body was later found.

The Indians ran through the open fields bordering the road, where they were chased down by the cavalry and hit in the flank by infantry. Overwhelmed, the Indians refused to surrender, and few received quarter from the green-jacketed enemy. The Mohican warriors fought with a determination perhaps unmatched during the war; they leaped onto horses and dragged off the riders; tomahawks and knives had to suffice because there was no time to reload their muskets. Banastre Tarleton, who would later become the scourge of the southern theater of the war, would have been killed but for the lack of a bayonet on the musket of his Indian assailant.

By seven in the evening, it was all over. Some of the Indians did escape over Tibbetts Brook and hid among the rocks and boulders. Unable to scale the rocks, the British horse

soldiers called out for the fugitives to surrender, promising them their lives. According to one account, three Indians ventured out and gave themselves up, whereupon the British killed them. The site of this alleged atrocity is known as Indian Bridge, although its actual location is not certain.

As the dead and wounded lay on the battlefield, a Hessian officer visited the scene. Walking amongst the carnage, he took special note of the Indian warriors who had fought so bravely.

> Their costume was a shirt of coarse linen down to the knees, long trousers also of linen down to the feet, on which they wore shoes of deerskin, and the head was covered with a hat made of bast. Their weapons were a rifle or a musket, a quiver with some twenty arrows, and a short battle-axe which they know how to throw very skillfully. Through the nose and in the ears they wore rings, and on their heads only the hair of the crown remained standing in a circle the size of a dollar-piece, the remainder being shaved off bare. They pull out with pincers all the hairs of the beard, as well as those on all other parts of the body. (Tustin, editor of Diary of the American War. A Hessian Journal: Captain Johann Ewald, Field Jager Corps, p. 145.)

As to the casualties of the battle, the British reported some thirty seven to forty Indians and a small number of other rebel soldiers killed or desperately wounded, and ten prisoners taken. Four British soldiers were reported killed, and three wounded, including Simcoe, although a Hessian officer reported as many as forty English dead. If the number of Indians killed is correct, then many of them were non-Stockbridge natives, as only seventeen

Stockbridges were killed during the entire war. The two Nimhams were dead, along with as many as twelve more young men from the mission village.

Aftermath

Once the British pulled back to their lines at Kingsbridge, local residents went through the battlefield looking for survivors. Several of the wounded soldiers were taken to the houses of Frederick and Daniel DeVoe, where they were tended to. One Stockbridge was severely wounded in the face, having one side of his face cleaved down by a sword cut almost to his chin. He was nursed for several weeks and was finally able to return home, but with a "frightfully" disfigured face (Thomas F. DeVoe, 1880, p. 194.).

Several days after the battle, local residents noticed their dogs acting very strangely. Suspicious as to the cause of the dogs' behavior, the owners followed them one day. Down the hill from the battlefield, they found a grisly scene; old Chief Nimham's remains had been nearly devoured by the dogs, along with the bodies of several other Indians. These remains were brought up the hill and interred with the other Stockbridge dead of the battle; all were buried in a plot known as Indian Field, and stones were placed over their graves; not as a monument to their memories, but to prevent further desecration by animals. One local historian wrote that eighteen Stockbridges (and other Native American warriors) are buried at Indian Field (Stephen Jenkins, The Story of the Bronx, 1912, p. 303.)

In 1880, just one hundred and two years after the battle, a local resident wrote an account of the Stockbridge Indian Massacre. At that time, the Van Cortlandt family still owned the grounds of the ancient manor estate. The author of the article was Thomas F. DeVoe, a

descendant of the DeVoe families on whose farm the battle was fought. Mr. DeVoe's personal account of the battlefield as it appeared during his lifetime is worth retelling.

> Some fifty-five years ago [1825], an incident occurred, which made such an impression on my mind that it will never be forgotten. I will relate it in my own style.
>
> Late one pleasant afternoon, two persons were leisurely walking up the road, which was then known as the New Road, although it was publicly opened soon after the year 1800. Before that period it was a lane, used by several farmers on its line, and at its entrance from the old Mile Square Road - about one- quarter of a mile south of the scene of the incidents of my story - were set up "posts and bars," which closed it from the public.
>
> The elder of these two persons was a lady, some 65 years of age; the other, the writer of these lines, a stout lad of about 14 years - her grandson - of an inquiring turn of mind, whose numerous questions somewhat annoyed the ancient dame; in fact, his tongue was more active than all other members of his body, and while passing on towards the spot I refer to - then an opening in the woods - she told him the reason why it became known as the "Indian Field," and related many interesting incidents connected with the terrible massacre of the friendly Indians, which the lad had often heard talked about from his early youth.
>
> At the period spoken of [1825], the cleared opening, Iying on the left-hand side of the road, was almost square, containing two or three acres of land,

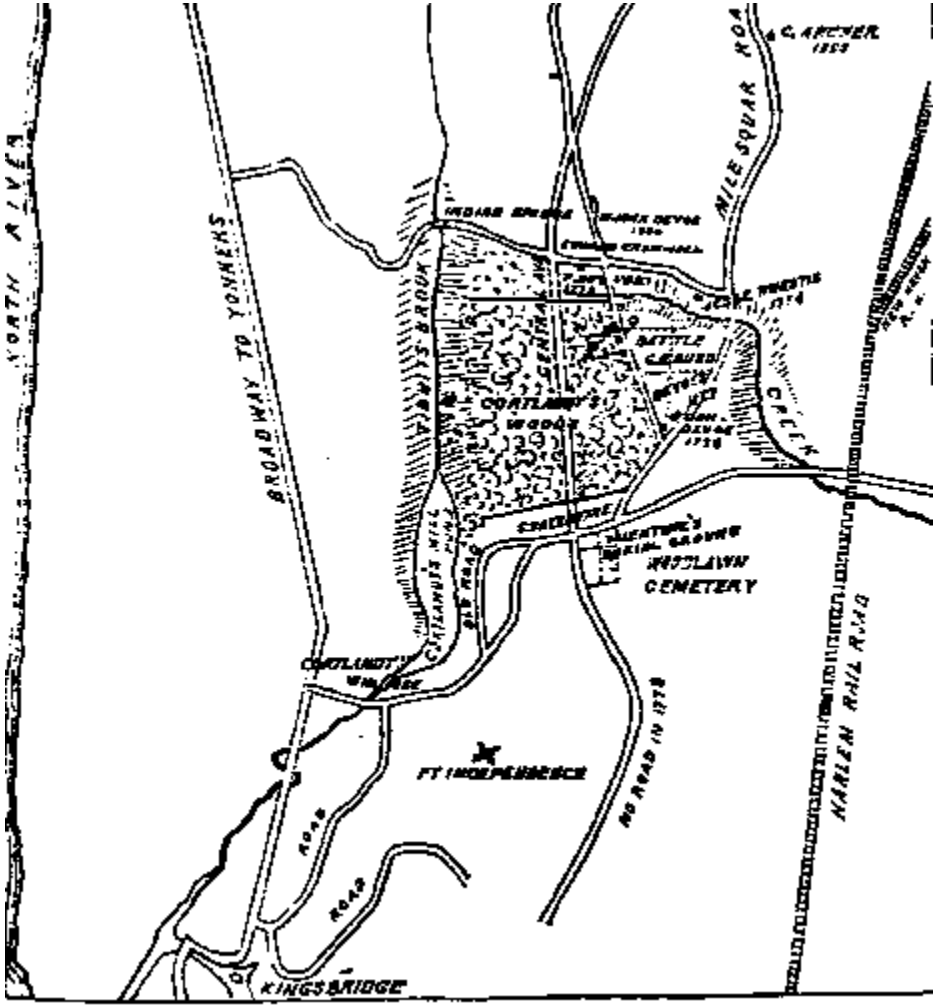
> and was surrounded on three sides by large trees, and a dense wood, covering several hundred acres, known as "Cortlandt's Woods"...The soil, of this open space, was of a light and loamy nature, though l well remember to have seen grain growing upon it during several seasons, and it was also a famous place for wild strawberries, as were also the fields on the high grounds on the easterly side of the road, which were formerly known as the Battle Field on "DeVeaux's Heights."
>
> The old lady, spoken of before, was at the time of the conflict a young woman of eighteen. She, with several others of the family, the next day visited a portion of the grounds where this butchery took place...here she saw a great many dead Indians...

Fortunately for history, Mr. DeVoe drew a map of the grounds which he described. With that map, present-day visitors to the very same spot can easily detect the burial place of these Stockbridge Indians. Between Mr. DeVoe's article of 1880, and the next published account of the affair in 1912, many changes occurred to "Cortlandt's Woods." Urban expansion had arrived to the Bronx/Yonkers border. The Valentine property became Woodlawn Cemetery, Mile Square Road changed names several times (to present-day Van Cortlandt Park East), the sloping hills east and north of the road were subdivided and prepared for housing development. In 1888 the old manor was preserved as a vast park in an expanding New York City. The New Road described by DeVoe in 1880 was Oneida Ave. in the Bronx and Old Jerome Ave. at its intersection with the Yankers border. It still exists in Van Cortlandt Park; although now just a pathway through Cortlandt's Woods, the modem visitor can easily trace the stone walls that border the lane. Was it stone walls like these that Simcoe referred to in describing Tarleton's inability to cross the fences along

Mile Square Road?

Indian Field Today

As you approach the battlefield today in 1996, there is a curious blend of the various historic periods of this portion of the Bronx. Coming off of the Major Deegan Expressway at Exit 13 (East 233 Street), you go onto that street and proceed to Van Cortlandt Park East (Mile Square Road). On your right is Woodlawn Cemetery, on your left are abandoned tennis courts and active ball fields of this portion of Van Cortlandt Park. This portion of the park, separated from the main park by the Major Deegan Expressway, is called Indian Field. This name is somewhat of a misnomer, as the actual placement of Indian Field is hidden within the forest, and comprises, as DeVoe wrote in 1880, two or three acres surrounded by stately trees.



SCENE OF THE MASSACRE, AUGUST 31, 1778.

Turning left onto Van Cortlandt Park East at the light, (with a gas station on the comer), the park is to your left and houses and apartment buildings are on the right. Near the intersection of the old lane, opposite Oneida Ave., is a memorial to the Stockbridges erected in 1906. The man responsible for this monument was Stephen Jenkins, member of the Westchester Historical Society and author of The Story of the Bronx, published in 1912. At the suggestion of Jenkins, a calm of rough boulders was erected in 1906 by the

Bronx Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, and dedicated on June 14, "Flag Day." Even today, local residents take the time to do pruning of the bushes and trees that border the small plot of land surrounding the memorial.

But what of the actual location of Indian Field, where the mortal remains of perhaps eighteen Stockbridges and other New England Native American patriots are interred? Again, thanks to DeVoe's map of 1880, which was incorporated into a 1926 map drawn by a later local historian named Otto Hufeland, we can locate the precise spot of Indian Field. It is not near the 1906 monument, although DeVoe's Lane is within several feet of that monument. A visitor to the battlefield must enter the old lane, now just a foot path bordered by a stone fence overgrown with vegetation, and proceed northerly along this colonial roadway. Just ahead you must cross over a paved roadway that goes east to west and leads back to Van Cortlandt Park East. This roadway connects with the park's nursery, situated on a portion of the battlefield, which Thomas DeVoe described as "DeVeaux's Heights." Skirting the metal fence of the nursery, you continue along the old lane, and then quite suddenly, the forest opens up to the left of the lane. Climb up on a large fallen tree which straddles the old lane, and you can get a better glimpse of Indian Field. It is just as DeVoe described it more than a century ago, "...the cleared opening, Iying on the left-hand side of the road,...almost square, containing two or three acres of land...surrounded on three sides by large trees..."

Now, 116 years since those lines were written, and more than two centuries after the Massacre of the Stockbridge Indians, we rediscover their burial place. We can touch the very soil of their sepulcher, we can commune with the men who laid down their lives in the cause of American independence. Now that we have recovered their burial ground from decades of neglect

and uncovered their history from obscurity, we must take whatever steps are necessary to venerate the true location of Indian Field. The story of the contribution of the Stockbridges, their role in both military and diplomacy during the American Revolution, and the extreme bravery exhibited that fateful August day in 1778, are all worth remembering and commemorating.

Graphics

Scene of the Massacre, August 31, 1778. Appearing in "The Massacre of the Stockbridge Indians" by Thomas F. DeVoe, *Magazine of American History,* 5, no. 3, 1880; PP. 187-94.

The Attack upon the Stockbridge Indians, interpreted from Simcoe's Military Journal by Stephen Jenkins, The Story of the Bronx, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1912.

Pen sketch of a Stockbridge warrior, drawn by John Pepe, July, 1996. Based on Hessian Capt. Johann Ewald's sketch of same, 1778.

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Walling, Richard S. Field visits to Van Cortlandt Park, Summer of 1996.

For further reading on the role of Stockbridge Mohicans during the American War for Independence, see:

Patrick Frazier's Mohicans of Stockbridge;

Colin Calloway's American Revolution in Indian Country; and,

Richard Walling's Men of Color at the Battle of Monmouth

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