

CHAPTER VIII

HAMILTON VISITS LITTLE BRITAIN

THE LEGISLATURE LEAVES KINGSTON

THE CLINTONS LEAVE NEW WINDSOR

CLINTON COMMANDS THE NEW YORK TROOPS

WASHINGTON WANTS HIM IN THE FIELD

HE LEAVES THE HUDSON TO PARSONS

HE DISLIKES HORATIO GATES

ON October 7, 1777, the day after the fall of the Highland forts, the little legislature at Kingston hastily adjourned. To provide for the government of the state in the emergency the chameleon legislature converted itself into a convention which in turn appointed a council of safety over which the governor, with a casting vote, was to preside.¹ This council, which met frequently in the smaller towns of Ulster County and in Poughkeepsie, gave way again, on January 7, 1778, to the convention which lasted only eight days before the legislature met at Poughkeepsie pursuant to Governor Clinton's proclamation of December 15.² Meanwhile the Falls house on the Goshen road at Little Britain had been for some weeks the executive capitol of the state.

After his conference with Putnam on October 7 Clinton had hurried to New Windsor where he arranged for Mrs. Clinton and the children to leave the New Windsor farm to which they were never to return. The Clinton household and personal effects were sent by sloop up the river to Esopus; while Mrs. Clinton with her brother, Dr.

¹ Lincoln, *Messages from the Governors*, II, 16. The legislature was not prorogued by the governor when Henry Clinton attacked the Highlands, as is often stated.

² *Ibid.*, 17. The date set by the proclamation was January 5. The Council probably determined upon Poughkeepsie; *Public Papers*, II, 500.

Peter Tappen; his wife, Elizabeth Crannell Tappen, who was then in a most interesting condition; Elizabeth's sister, Catherine, who was Mrs. Gilbert Livingston; and Captain Machin, who was Clinton's factotum at the time, sought refuge with a Mr. and Mrs. Barnes of Pleasant Valley some eight miles from Poughkeepsie.³ Here they were comfortable enough, but Colonel Hughes thought that they were too near the army's supplies and might better be moved to Sharon in Connecticut. At any rate the governor did not propose to bring Cornelia back to New Windsor; he planned to rent the New Windsor farm, and he soon had Peter Tappen, Major Billings, and Captain Machin house-hunting for him in and near Poughkeepsie which was to remain his home for several years. The only hitch in the moving was that Captain Machin forgot to send the governor his razors.⁴

The house that the Clintons occupied at Poughkeepsie for all or at least part of their stay there was the Crannell house on Main Street not far from Dr. Peter Tappen's home. Crannell was a Tory who was forced to take refuge behind the British lines as early as 1776, leaving behind him his substantial mansion which had been built over thirty years before on the outskirts of the town. His two sons-in-law, Peter Tappen and Gilbert Livingston, may very naturally have been reluctant to see the property pass out of the family and so have suggested to the governor that he occupy the mansion, which since May 1777 had been in the hands of the Commissioners of Sequestration. It is entirely possible that the governor also used the Everitt house which had also been owned by a Tory and which in the twentieth century was to become the Clinton Museum; but certainly he was in 1780 paying for repairs on the Crannell house and a map of the town of 1790 labels that house as one occupied by George Clinton during the Revolution. It was purchased by Gilbert Livingston and Peter Tappen in 1788, five years after the Clintons had left Poughkeepsie.⁵

Almost a year after the governor's arrival in Dutchess county the

³ Helen Wilkinson Reynolds, "The Mill-Site by the Bridge at Pleasant Valley and the Visit there of Mrs. Clinton," Dutchess County Historical Society, *Year Book*, 1932, 77-78; *Public Papers*, II, 409, 411, 417.

⁴ Simms, *The Frontiersman of New York*, I, 620; Duane to Gates, *Letters . . . Continental Congress*, Burnett, ed., II, 590.

⁵ Helen Wilkinson Reynolds, "Bartholomew Crannell," Dutchess County Historical Society, *Year Book* 1922, 40-49; Edmund Platt, *History of Poughkeepsie* (Poughkeepsie, 1905), 46-49, 57; *Public Papers*, VI, 50.

Clinton's third child and only son was born. It was fitting and proper that he should be named George Washington Clinton and his fourth sister, the Clintons' fifth child, who was born in October 1783 was called Martha Washington Clinton. Washington Clinton was to live only long enough to dash his father's fondest hopes; for he died a young man in 1813, innocent of all serious achievement. Martha was to die in her twelfth year. Another daughter, Elizabeth, the future wife of Matthias B. Tallmadge, was born at Poughkeepsie in July 1780. The last of the six children of George and Cornelia Clinton was Maria who was to be born in New York City in 1785.⁶ The Clintons were a prolific tribe.

The governor's mansion at Poughkeepsie, however, housed more than Clinton's own growing family. During those five years when the legislature met more often than not at Poughkeepsie—it met in 1778 at Poughkeepsie; in 1779 at Poughkeepsie and Kingston; in 1780 at Poughkeepsie, Albany, and Kingston; in 1781 at Poughkeepsie and Albany; and in 1782 at Poughkeepsie only—notables were constantly in or passing through the town. James Kent in his memoirs comments on the singular advantages to be gained from this parade of "the great men that visited there, such as George Clinton, Washington, Hamilton, Lawrence, Schuyler, Duer, Duche," and many others.⁷ Among those who visited Governor Clinton was Kosciusko who came to consult him on his way to West Point to work on the fortifications.⁸ On February 14 and 15, 1778, the governor was visited by Lafayette who was traveling to Albany, presumably to take charge of an expedition into Canada. Lafayette wrote Washington that he had conferred with Clinton "and was much satisfied with that gentleman."⁹ The satisfaction seems to have been mutual, for the governor regretted that the marquis had been chosen to lead what he considered a quixotic enterprise and wished that he might instead have been given Putnam's command on the lower Hudson.¹⁰

⁶ *New York Genealogical and Biographical Record*, XIII, 129; Ruttenber, *History of New Windsor; Olde Ulster*, February 1905, 56-57.

⁷ Platt, *History of Poughkeepsie*, 50.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁹ J. B. Nolan, *Lafayette in America Day by Day* (Baltimore, 1934), 44; Charlemagne Tower, *The Marquis de La Fayette* (2 volumes, Philadelphia, 1895), I, 283.

¹⁰ Clinton to Lafayette, February 26, 1778, Clinton Papers, Library of Congress; same to same, March 8, *Public Papers*, III, 4-5.

Although there had been some doubt in Clinton's mind whether he would ever be able to return to the field after he assumed his new civil office, he did, as we have seen, return to the Highlands early in August to direct preparations for the expected British attack; he made a hurried trip to Albany later in the month to see for himself the military situation in the north and west; and he took the field in person to oppose Sir Henry Clinton in October. His headquarters was now headquarters for the entire militia of the state. It was now his responsibility to direct the movements of the militia, to cooperate with the Continental officers, to protect and reassure the frontier settlements, to call the militia to arms or to excuse them from service, to see that supplies were available for the men in the field—in brief, to direct the whole strategy of war as far as the New York forces were concerned. In addition, he must send militia to reinforce Putnam at Peekskill and Schuylers or Gates in the north and must replace with state troops the Continentals that Washington had had to order away from the state. He had to keep Washington informed of all important developments; it was probably from Clinton and certainly not from Gates, that Washington first heard of the great victory of Saratoga.¹¹ The task was gigantic; but the young war governor was in his element; he enjoyed the work of direction for which he was, as a matter of fact, much better fitted than for active command in the field; and from few states, if from any, did Washington receive better and more sustained cooperation than from New York.

That George Clinton still enjoyed Washington's confidence to a high degree was apparent in July when Washington, fearful that the enemy were "upon the point of making some capital move," wrote to the New York Council of Safety.¹² He understood, he said, that the Council had authorized Clinton to call out the militia of Ulster, Dutchess, and Westchester until August first when the new legislature was expected to meet; he feared that Clinton's successor might not be promptly appointed, an eventuality that might prove fatal in its consequence; and he asked that the power to call the militia be extended, if

¹¹ Washington received the news from both Clinton and Putnam on the same day, October 18. Washington, *Writings*, IX, 393, 400.

¹² Washington, *Writings*, VIII, 454-55.

possible, to Clinton himself whom he, Washington, would prefer to any other. This confidence must have been flattering to the young governor. President Van Cortlandt replied for the Council that they expected Clinton to take his oath of office almost immediately at which time he would become by the provisions of the state constitution the commander-in-chief of all the militia of New York; a special authorization would not therefore be necessary. Just why General Scott had his dissent recorded in this common-sense reply to Washington, is difficult to understand.¹³

In November when Clinton's headquarters was at Little Britain he received a visit of several days from Colonel Alexander Hamilton who, under Washington's orders, had just seen Putnam and was on his way to visit Gates. The object of his mission was to persuade Putnam and Gates to send reinforcements to Washington's army. Putnam, however, wanted to attack New York City, which Hamilton thought would be suicidal; consequently, the old general paid little attention to the young aide's orders even though they were given in Washington's name. The indignant Hamilton wrote to Washington on November 10¹⁴ that Putnam had refused to cooperate and that Governor Clinton was the only one who had done anything toward moving the two brigades that were to join Washington. The governor had borrowed five or six thousand dollars for the purpose and made it possible for one of the brigades to march. Furthermore the governor had advised Colonel Hamilton to send an emphatic order to Putnam to send all his Continental troops to Washington's assistance, and the order was sent. It is of considerable interest to note that Hamilton, who in the heat of politics in later years was to belittle George Clinton's military abilities, expressed to Washington the wish that Putnam, whose "blunders and caprices are endless," might be removed from his command and Clinton substituted.¹⁵ Whatever his abilities, Clinton was at least entirely loyal to Washington. That was more than could be said for Gates.

A violent attack of fever and rheumatic pains kept Hamilton with

¹³ *Public Papers*, II, 136-37.

¹⁴ Hamilton, *Works*, Lodge, ed., VII, 528-30.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 530.

Clinton at Little Britain for two or three days. Dr. John Jones, whom the governor called on to attend the young colonel, was himself ill; so Hamilton had no doctor and he left only partially recovered.¹⁶ At Peekskill a day or two later he fell ill again and it was the end of the month before he was pronounced out of danger.

One consequence of Hamilton's visit to New York was the inauguration of a friendly correspondence between him and Governor Clinton in the course of which the two men wrote scathingly of Gates, showed themselves to be of one mind as regards the Conway cabal and commented bitterly on the shortcomings of the Continental Congress. Hamilton, for instance, denounced its "Folly, caprice, a want of foresight, comprehension, and dignity," and Clinton replied in the same vein with the comment that "Could our Soldiery subsist on Resolves, they would never want Food or Cloathing."¹⁷ Only a few years later these two men were to be in complete disagreement on the subject of the Congress and its powers.

The state of New York, fortunately for itself, did not occupy the center of the military stage during 1778. Most of Governor Clinton's time, however, continued to be given to such major wartime problems as the defense of the northern and western frontiers, the procurement of supplies, the suppression of the remaining Loyalists, and the fortification of the Hudson. During the first weeks of the year his concern was chiefly with the new works on the river. He had been credited by some with having been the first to suggest the fortifying of West Point;¹⁸ although others would award the paternity of West Point to Putnam. Certainly Clinton was writing Gates as early as October 26, 1777, that he thought it necessary to fortify some strong post on the Hudson to prevent future excursions up the river by British vessels and suggesting New Windsor or, better, Fort Constitution which was opposite West Point. Eleven days later Colonel Hughes wrote Gates that, "The General, Governor Clinton, and General James [Clinton], an Engineer, and your humble servant, were at the forts yesterday, viewing the River, Bluffs, Points, &c., in order to erect some further

¹⁶ J. J. Smertenko, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York, 1932), 84-5; *Public Papers*, II, 541-42.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, II, 865; III, 30; Hamilton, *Works*, Lodge, ed., VII, 536-40; IX, 127-28.

¹⁸ *Public Papers*, II, iii; R. E. Prime, *George Clinton . . . An Address*, 27.

obstructions, which are immediately set about. The Boom will be near Fort Constitution; and a work on the west shore to defend it."¹⁹ The works on the west shore would be at West Point. On November 24 and again on December 20 Governor Clinton wrote to urge upon Gates the necessity of strong works at West Point.²⁰ He had at last realized the possibilities of that superb promontory.

No one wanted the task of directing the fortifying of West Point. In November Congress asked Washington to remove Putnam and give Gates command in the Highlands, but Gates made no move to assume the new post. Meanwhile Putnam, who was still the Continental general officer in charge on the lower Hudson, was ordered by the commander-in-chief to consult with Governor Clinton and General Parsons whose brigade was to assist in the actual work; and Washington, who had no reason to expect coöperation from Gates, told Governor Clinton that it was entirely possible Gates would not serve, in which case he would be greatly pleased if Clinton would take the chief direction of the business.²¹ The governor replied, urging at great length the importance of the river fortifications but regretting that the meeting of the legislature in January and other public affairs would prevent his giving proper attention to the task on the Hudson. Little wonder that the work did not get under way until January.

General Parsons arrived in mid-winter to find West Point under two feet of snow, few tools or workmen or materials, and no one to give directions. "In Short," he wrote to Clinton, "I come to this Command in the most disagreeable circumstances, nothing done, every Thing expected & wish'd for & every Thing in confusion, I have every thing to pick from perfect chaos."²² "Old Put" had dillied and dallied for two long months; Gates had chosen to sit on the board of war and Clinton had been at Poughkeepsie busy with his correspondence and with his reconvened legislature. To bring order out of chaos the Continental Congress turned again to Clinton. It resolved on February 18 to authorize and request him to superintend the business of securing the passes in the Highlands, and to accomplish this it gave him sweep-

¹⁹ E. C. Boynton, *History of West Point* (New York, 1863), 48.

²⁰ *Ibid.*; *Public Works*, II, 589.

²¹ Washington, *Writings*, X, 136.

²² *Public Works*, II, 756.

ing powers—to employ the militia of Massachusetts Bay and Connecticut as well as that of New York, to receive “every assistance” from the commanding officer at Peekskill including money from the military chest, and to receive fifty thousand dollars from the loan office in New York to defray the cost of the work.²³ It was, however, too much to expect of the governor of the state. Clinton made every effort to furnish artillery, materials for the works, teams and provisions; he gave advice when requested to Gates, Putnam, and Parsons; he asked Massachusetts and Connecticut for 2300 militia and his own legislature to raise 700 men to work on the Hudson; and he even called upon the commanding officer at Peekskill for fifteen thousand dollars for the purpose; but he made it clear that he could not, in all probability undertake to superintend the work himself.²⁴ He told the legislature in a message of March 10 that he could not undertake to supervise the work while that body was sitting.²⁵

Although the legislature was to adjourn early in April the governor was both relieved and pleased when it was learned that Major General McDougall was expected to take command on the Hudson at the end of March. He was probably not nearly so well satisfied when Congress on April 15 ordered that Gates be placed in charge of the whole northern department with authority to call out the New England and New York militia and with instructions “to confer with & take your Excellency’s advice & assistance.”²⁶ Clinton told Gouverneur Morris that he had been well satisfied with McDougall and regretted the change. McDougall, who felt himself ill-used, was to evince some satisfaction the next fall when he learned that Gates had finally been shelved, far from all possibility of active duty, at Boston. “In short, Sir,” McDougall wrote the governor, “he is as weak as water!”²⁷ Horatio Gates had never been popular in New York.

²³ *Public Papers*, II, 776, 801.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 811; Hall, *Samuel H. Parsons*, 153; Lincoln, *Messages from the Governors*, II, 31. An act to provide for the raising of 700 men was passed over the veto of the council on March 31, 1778.

²⁵ Lincoln, *op. cit.*, 31.

²⁶ *Public Papers*, III, 197.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 310; Hall, *Samuel H. Parsons*, 199.