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Early American History: My 2 a.m. Walking Tour

By JAMES S. KAPLAN
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NEW YORK -- While many of you are snug in your beds in the wee hours of July 4, dreaming, perhaps, of your day to come at the beach, the golf club, or your home barbecue, I will be leading a 2 a.m. to 6 a.m. tour of Revolutionary War sites in Lower Manhattan.



Lowermanhattan.info

The tour stops at Bowling Green, where the U.S. custom house was renamed in honor of Alexander Hamilton.

Massachusetts and Virginia quickly come to mind as places rich in Revolutionary War history, but two of the most significant battles (of Long Island and of Saratoga) were fought in New York state.

Furthermore, three of the most important Revolutionary War generals -- Richard Montgomery (the Battle of Quebec), Alexander Hamilton (the Battle of Yorktown) and Horatio Gates (the Battle of Saratoga) -- are buried in Lower Manhattan.

I begin the tour on the west side of City Hall Park, rich in July 4 tradition. Not only is it where George Washington on July 9, 1776, had the Declaration of Independence first read in the city, but it is where, on July 6, 1774, Hamilton, then a young student at King's College (now Columbia), gave a spellbinding speech in support of resistance to the king. In addition, it is the area where, in the 1790s, Revolutionary War veterans would hold elaborate July 4 ceremonies celebrating their victory and the Declaration of Independence. These ceremonies would become a form of protest against the increasingly aristocratic policies of Hamilton's ruling Federalist Party and lead to the formation of the Democratic Party.

A block or two north is Foley Square, where we discuss English immigrant Thomas Paine. (The northwest end of the square contains a park named for him.) After persuading the American colonists to declare independence from the king, Paine became a key figure during the French Revolution and narrowly escaped execution in the Reign of Terror. In 1801, Paine returned to the U.S.; he died nearby, in obscurity and poverty, in 1809.



At about 3 a.m., the tour reaches the Brooklyn Bridge pedestrian walkway. From there we gaze across the East River to the Brooklyn Heights site of the daring nighttime river escape on Sept. 28, 1776, of Washington's 9,000-man army after his disastrous defeat at the Battle of Long Island. Leaving the bridge, we walk about two blocks to St. Paul's Chapel, which contains the grave of Gen. Montgomery, whose daring assault on Quebec almost made Canada part of the U.S. As one of the only structures in New York that survived the fire of 1776, St. Paul's was considered a post-Revolution symbol of the city's rebirth. After it survived the 9/11 attack virtually undamaged, the chapel again became a symbol of New York's resilience.

After a restroom and food stop (a challenge at 3:30 a.m.), our group of 50 to 100 people proceeds to Trinity Church's graveyard, where Gen. Gates lies in an unmarked plot, its

precise location lost to time. (This is also where Hamilton's marked burial site can be found.) In 1772, Gates, a former British officer passed over for promotion, thought he would try his luck in America. He was a Virginia neighbor of George Washington's brother Sam, and a strong supporter of American independence. When war broke out in Massachusetts, Gates offered his services to the American cause. And after the Battle of Bunker Hill he went to Boston with George Washington to serve as the army's supply officer.

In August 1777, the Continental Congress placed him in charge of the faltering American army in northern New York state. The British, under the command of Gentleman Johnny Burgoyne, aimed to capture Albany and control the river route between New York City and Canada. If Gen. Burgoyne succeeded (which appeared highly likely) it was almost certain that the Revolution would be over. But Gates was able to pull together New England and New York militias with certain elite Continental Army troops and outmaneuver and capture Burgoyne's 10,000 man force at Saratoga.

This stunning victory changed the balance of power in the colonies and induced the French to enter the war on the side of the Continental Army. Most historians consider it the most important battle in the Revolution and the clear turning point in the conflict.

While today many sources credit Benedict Arnold as responsible for the victory at Saratoga, I disagree -- for reasons that you will have to come on my tour to hear. I believe that most of the Revolutionary War veterans celebrating July 4 in the 1790s would have agreed with me that Gates's reputation at the time as the Hero of Saratoga was well deserved, and that there were good reasons why, after the battle, many in the Continental Congress thought that he should replace Washington as the army's commander in chief.

Leaving the Gates gravesite, we then proceed to Bowling Green, where we discuss Evacuation Day -- Nov. 25, 1783 -- when the British departed New York. Then we head to Fraunces Tavern, site of Washington's farewell address to his men, where I discuss his letter to the Newport Jewish community, which set forth the policy of religious and ethnic tolerance that is the hallmark of our nation today. This marks the end of the tour.

Why do we take our walk so early in the morning? The short answer is that the tour was begun by the 92nd Street YMHA more than a quarter-century ago, and when I took over the leader's duties in 1999, I inherited the 2 a.m. start time. When the Y discontinued its walking tour after 9/11, I asked the Fraunces Tavern Museum (whose mission is to foster interest in the American Revolution in New York City) to permit me to continue it under their auspices and with the same hours.

You wouldn't believe the number of participants who tell me that 2 a.m. to 6 a.m. is perfect for them because that is the only time they have nothing else scheduled. More important, however, is the fact that Lower Manhattan's revolutionary past is more easily accessible at that time. With the city's sodium-vapor lamps, there are no problems seeing monuments and statues that are obscured by traffic and pedestrians during the day.

In 1904, the Tammany Hall district leader and philosopher George Washington Plunkitt bemoaned the fact that the upper classes would flee New York for their houses in Newport and the Adirondacks on July 4, leaving the celebrations -- marked with a reading of the Declaration of Independence and four hours of speeches -- to the Tammany Hall political machine, which was supported principally by recent immigrants. Today's city is still a haven to the foreign-born. But the July 4 events that grab the local media spotlight are Nathan's hot-dog-eating contest and Macy's fireworks.

Looking for a more intellectual way to mark the day in New York? I invite you to call the Fraunces Tavern Museum at 212-425-1778 (or visit its Web site at www.frauncestavernmuseum.org) to get tickets for my tour.

Mr. Kaplan is a tax and estates lawyer and a walking-tour historian in New York.