In honor of President's Day, dive into our rich entanglement with the nation's first president.

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George Washington at Valley Forge

John Ward Dunsmore / Library of Congress

On Monday, Feb. 20, we celebrate President’s Day in honor of George Washington’s 285th birthday on Wednesday, Feb. 22. Honestly, most of the country is probably just celebrating their much-needed day off from work, but tales depicting our country’s first leader can instill a sense of unity, so we encourage you to read on.

When George Washington was sworn in as the first President of the United States, he received praise akin to a king. Still, his remarkably modest nature and desire to serve the people honestly pervaded both of his terms, to the extent that he made clear in his second inaugural address (clocking in at under two minutes, it is the shortest address ever delivered):

That if it shall be found during my administration...I have in any instance violated willingly or knowingly
Much of Washington’s legacy was forged during his leadership during the Revolutionary War. And although the importance of events in cities like Boston and Philadelphia are well acknowledged, the weight of localities in the Hudson Valley throughout the conflict tends to be overlooked. Here, we present just a handful of the occasions where local history became entangled with one of our greatest Founding Fathers.

1. Washington announced the Revolution’s ceasefire from his Newburgh Headquarters.

It’s widely known that Washington called a number of places headquarters across our region throughout the war. He occupied the Elijah Miller House in North White Plains as a command post on three occasions, in 1776, 1778, and 1781, and the John Kane House in Pawling in 1778. One of his more strategic locations was at Fishkill’s Van Wyck Homestead, now a museum, where Washington established the Fishkill Supply Depot acting as a major logistical center and housing thousands of Continental troops until 1783.

However, it was at the Jonathan Hasbrouck farmhouse in Newburgh, commonly known as Washington’s Headquarters, where some of the general’s most important contributions took shape, including his announcement of the Cessation of Hostilities to end the war in 1783.

2. The sword Washington is holding in the larger-than-life Washington Crossing the Delaware painting was forged in Fishkill.
Possibly one of the most iconic pieces of art depicting American history, Emanuel Leutze’s *Washington Crossing the Delaware* currently hangs in New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art. It’s hard to grasp its true authority just looking at it in a textbook, but in person the oil-on-canvas piece looms overhead at almost 21 feet wide.

The sword sheathed at Washington’s hip, The Bailey Silver & Ivory Hilted Cuttoe, was forged by Fishkill’s John Bailey, a prominent silversmith and sword cutler from England. Washington’s nephew, Samuel T. Washington, inherited the green-dyed, ivory-hilted blade, donating it to the U.S. government in 1843. The sword is now owned by the Smithsonian Institution.

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**3.** A militia unit composed of local Native Americans helped Washington defeat the British on several occasions.
The **Stockbridge Militia**, formed in 1777, comprised New York-based Native American tribes, including the Wappinger, an Eastern Algonquian-speaking tribe primarily based in what is now Dutchess County. They participated in battles from 1777 to 1778, including the Battle of Saratoga and the Battle of Monmouth, both ending in the American’s favor.

In 1778, the Stockbridge Militia encountered [British Queen’s Rangers](#), led by Lieutenant Colonel John Graves Simcoe, in what is now present-day Yonkers, although some sources say [White Plains](#). The skirmish was a decisive British victory, and is commonly known as the Stockbridge Massacre.

**4. Washington’s use of experimental stealth tactics during the Battle of Stony Point led to a victory that, although small, was quite critical to America’s morale.**
July 1779, the Continental Army defeated British troops at Stony Point with a well-planned, nighttime attack.

The Battle of Stony Point, taking place in July of 1779, would not rank among the top 10 battles in order of importance. Lasting less than a half hour, Washington’s Army eventually abandoned the Point knowing they didn’t have enough men to defend it.

However, Washington’s deployment of the Corps of Light Infantry, called “the Navy Seals of the day” by Michael Sheehan, historical interpreter at the Stony Point Battlefield, to take Fort Montgomery just after midnight on July 16 was risky, experimental, but ultimately successful. Just 1,300 American troops, ordered to use only fixed bayonets in their assault, took on a force of about 8,000 British men, eventually capturing the fort by 2 a.m. The victory earned the Continental Army an emotional lift, proving to the British that they could no longer take America’s rag-tag army lightly.
Map depicting the fortifications of West Point in 1780, at the time Benedict Arnold attempted to surrender it to the British.

Pierre Didot

5. Washington considered West Point a top strategic position in the nation.

Designed in 1778 by Thaddeus Kosciuszko, West Point was fitted with forts, batteries, and a 150-ton iron chain used to control traffic across the Hudson River. In 1779, Washington moved his troops to be stationed at the military base, which was never captured in spite of Benedict Arnold’s plan to surrender to the British.

While Arnold went on to serve the British Army in 1780, British Major John André, one of the chief spies involved in Arnold’s plot, was captured near Tarrytown with papers exposing the plan, and subsequently hanged in Tappan.

6. Washington established the Badge of Military Merit, the precursor to the Purple Heart.

In spite of the Continental Congress forbidding Washington from granting promotions in rank to recognize merit, he created the Badge of Military Merit in 1782 as a way of honoring “virtuous ambition in his soldiers,” Washington’s orders read.

The award was open to enlisted men, permitting them to “pass all guards and sentinels as could commissioned-officers,” according to the National Purple Heart Hall of Honor’s website.

The award, and the intent behind it, was abandoned until 1932, when General Douglas MacArthur established the Purple Heart in Washington’s honor. One hundred thirty seven World War I veterans were awarded the honor at Temple Hill in New Windsor in May of 1932.