

When the thirteen colonies rebelled against British rule in 1775, “divide and conquer” became the strategy for restoring imperial control. The point where the British hoped to divide the colonies was the Hudson River.

“Hudson’s River” separated New England from the rest of the colonies, and was the main route by which the regions communicated and provisioned one another. For the British, it was the easiest way to transport troops from Canada into the colonies. If Britain could control both ends of the river, the colonies would be cut in half.

When the British occupied New York Harbor in July 1776, they threatened the entire Hudson Valley. The Americans employed extensive technical expertise to stop them from sailing upriver. One American innovation was David Bushnell’s *Turtle*, the first working submarine. Assigned to sink British ships, the *Turtle* never managed to attach its torpedoes to the ship’s metal-lined hulls. Americans abandoned submarine warfare for the time being.

Placing obstacles in the river to block British ships seemed more promising. To protect Fort Washington in northern Manhattan, they adapted a Dutch device called the *chevaux-de-frise* (“Frisian horses”) for underwater use. With iron-tipped spears projecting from sunken bulwarks, the *chevaux-de-frise* were meant to rip open ships sailing through a shallow point in the river. A secret gap in the line allowed American ships to pass through unharmed, but spies revealed the information to the British, who sailed through and captured Fort Washington in November 1776.

The Americans now made their stand in the highlands, about 50 miles north of New York City. To block the river completely, they needed a chain. Employing an ancient tactic, the Continental Army first commissioned a chain to stop the British from reaching Lake Champlain via the Richelieu River. Then, the first Hudson River Chain, designed by Thomas Machin and forged at the Ancram blast furnace, was deployed on the Hudson in November, but snapped twice in strong ebb tides before it was removed for the winter.

In 1777 a reinforced chain was installed at a location less vulnerable to strong currents. Unfortunately, the highland forts that protected the chain, Fort Montgomery and Fort Clinton, were vulnerable to attack by land. Instead of trying to breach the chain, British troops captured the forts in October. After removing the chain, the British ravaged the Hudson Valley, burning Kingston along the way.

The British were heading upriver to rendezvous with General John Burgoyne’s army that was marching south from Lake Champlain. In the north, the Americans used their knowledge of the river and surrounding terrain against Burgoyne. Their fortified position at Bemis Heights blocked Burgoyne’s advance and prevented his retreat following the Battle of Saratoga. Burgoyne’s surrender to the Americans caused the British forces sailing upriver to retreat back to New York City and led to greater international support for the Revolution.

The Americans now had a breathing space to rethink their Hudson River defenses. Noting that the British never tried to break the earlier chain, they sought a more secure location for a new, heavier chain. They found it at “the West Point,” where the river narrows drastically after a sharp S-curve. West Point was ideally situated for artillery, which could command the river and the surrounding land. It was a virtually impregnable location for Thomas Machin’s new chain.

The links of the “Great Chain” were forged at the Sterling Iron Works and assembled at Samuel Brewster’s foundry. Installed in April

1778, the new 65-ton chain stretched about 1,600 feet on log rafts from West Point to Constitution Island, blocking the river north of Peekskill. The British never tried to break the chain. Instead, they tried to cut traffic between the South and New England by seizing Stony Point, well south of the chain, in May 1779. The Americans recaptured it the following July.

The only real threat to the Great Chain came when General Benedict Arnold, who became commander at West Point in August 1780, offered to turn the fortress over to the British. Arnold told the British that a fast, heavy ship could snap the chain, but after his plot was exposed, they never tested his theory.

After the war, most of the Hudson River Chain was traded to iron foundries, while some links were given to veterans as mementoes. Sixteen links are preserved at the United States Military Academy, established at West Point in 1802, as a memorial to the industry and ingenuity that kept the river free.



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## West Point and the Great Chain

This is one of a 10-part educational series created by the NYNPA NIE Program © 2008

*Photo: Links forming the Great Chain across the Hudson, located at Trophy Point. Image courtesy of the United States Military Academy at West Point.*

### Newspaper Tie-ins to Today:

The Great Chain was considered an innovative defense for the river at the time. Look through the newspaper for developing technologies. How might these new products or services change our lives? How many of these emerging technologies are in New York State?

The location for the Great Chain was ultimately determined by the geography of the river and the surrounding countryside. What stories in recent headlines are largely affected by geography? (Example: The March 2008 floods in the mid-west caused by the overflowing Missouri River.)

Most of the Great Chain’s links were re-used or, in a sense, recycled. Recycling is more wide-spread now than in the 1700s. Can you find examples of recycling or re-using of materials to conserve natural resources in today’s edition of the newspaper?

For more information on the Hudson-Fulton-Champlain Quadracentennial go to [www.exploreny400.com](http://www.exploreny400.com).