

# The Passaic County Historical Society



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## Richard Varick of Hackensack Patriot, Soldier, Founder

by  
Robert Leslie Cohen

*“...next to Washington, he was the greatest figure in American history in his generation...”*

William H. Richardson, Jersey City Historian, 1934

The flowing river and the area around it was called by the Lenape Hocquaan (hook) and sauk (mouth of a river).<sup>1</sup> The sound of these words led the early Dutch settlers to call it Hackingh, as a hook, and by 1645, Hackinkeshacky which became Hackensack by 1685.<sup>2</sup>

Hackensack in the mid-1700s was a charming village of “Jersey Dutch tranquility and prosperity.”<sup>3</sup> The village green had a sandstone Dutch church on the north side and next to it stood the small stone courthouse of Bergen County. By 1733, several weavers, a saddler, a blacksmith and a schoolteacher had settled in a hamlet along with two doctors and a tavern. There were also a slave quarters, bolting house and a dock built on Doctor’s Creek, a small tributary of the Hackensack River that has long been filled in, and one on the Hackensack River. There was a road and ferry network that had developed connecting Hackensack with New York City and with the hinterland to the west.<sup>4</sup>

But most of all at the time of Richard Varick's birth, March 25, 1753, Hackensack was a little farming village as well as county seat. There were no names on any of the streets, but off the area where there were some homes around the village green including the Varick's, where the present day court house parking lot starts, there was what was called Front Street and Back Street. They were more or less cow paths where people could walk in single file or take a cow to pasture. The only cross streets were Bridge and Court Streets right off the green. Along Front Street were a few lanes leading to the farms and orchards. Today we know the names of Front and Back Streets as Main and State Streets and these lanes are now called Salem and Mercer Streets.<sup>5</sup>

It was into this little village that Richard's grandfather Abraham, a boatman and bolter, settled and built a house in 1718. Parts of the house remained intact until the early 1960s. The Varick property extended from close to the church down to the river.<sup>6</sup> Richard Varick was born to John and Jane (Dey) Varick. His father was a merchant. Not much is known of Varick's very early life and childhood. Richard was one of six siblings that survived to adulthood. We can gather he must have had some nice experiences as a youth playing in the orchards and pasturelands of rural Hackensack as well as swimming and sailing in the pure waters of the Hackensack River. We do know he was tutored at home and studied Latin, French and other subjects taught by tutors. Despite the fact he was a trustee of Columbia College for many years, there is no evidence he graduated or attended Columbia, then known as King's College.<sup>7</sup>

After his tutoring in 1771, Varick started the study of law in the offices of John Morin Scott who was a very successful lawyer in New York City. Scott was also very involved in the Whig or Patriotic cause both before and during the Revolutionary War. In fact, during the War he was appointed a Brigadier General and was a member of the Continental Congress in 1782 and 1783.<sup>8</sup> Under Scott's tutelage and supervision, Varick studied the law from 1771 to 1774. Despite not attending a formal law school, Varick did receive a thorough legal education and was not the only clerk in Scott's office. They were all educated in the legal system of the time, which included reading famed jurists such as Coke and Blackstone. As Scott became more active politically during this time, more legal work was done by his clerks.<sup>9</sup> In fact, Scott was often away, taking part in the activities of the Sons of Liberty as one of its leaders. So, Varick studied and apprenticed law for three years, gaining acceptance to the New York Bar in 1774. And not only was he educated in the law, but heavily influenced by his mentor as to his upcoming political leanings. Varick had to have been an outstanding student because after his acceptance to the Bar, Scott offered him a partnership in his firm.<sup>10</sup> This law practice would be short lived as unrest in the colonies turned into full-fledged war only eight months after Varick started his legal practice.

Scott exerted a strong influence over Varick's choice in politics to the Patriot side. Upon the outbreak of hostilities, Varick immediately enlisted in New York City's militia battalion. This enlistment ended in a matter of a few days as on July 1, 1775, the young man was appointed Major General Philip Schuyler's secretary with his former mentor Scott helped to make the arrangements.<sup>11</sup> Our newly minted officer was commissioned with the army rank of Captain in General Schuyler's First New York Regiment. This led to immediate military activity as

Schuyler was commanding General of the Northern Department of the Continental Army.

In July of 1775, General Schuyler moved to Fort Ticonderoga to use this fort as his base of operations to make an assault on Canada. In Albany on his way to Ticonderoga, Schuyler and Varick met General Benedict Arnold and the three would remain friends and allies until Arnold's most unfortunate act of treason in late 1780. Up until that time Arnold was probably, if not, the best field commander in the Continental Army, certainly in the top echelon.

The army was split into two groups, one under command of General Montgomery and one under Arnold. Needless to say, because of a variety of misfortunes including a serious injury to Arnold at the very gates of Quebec and Montgomery's death, the Continental Army was forced to retreat and here we come to perhaps the most important pyrrhic victory for the British of the entire Revolutionary War (including Bunker Hill), the Battle of Valcour Island.

But let us briefly get back to Varick, who under Schuyler had three jobs: personal secretary to Schuyler, unofficial quartermaster for the forts held by the Northern Army, which he combined with being the Northern Army's Deputy Muster Master General.<sup>12</sup> In the meantime, based on Varick's competence at his jobs, he was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel.

At this time General Arnold needed to stop the British from advancing down Lake Champlain through to Albany and down the Hudson River Valley, thereby cutting the United Colonies in two and perhaps ending the War. In order to stop the British advance, Arnold's strategy was to build a flotilla of ships to meet and stop the British advance at Valcour Island on Lake Champlain. Schuyler ordered Varick to help supply the materials for Arnold's fleet, and the supplies were urgently needed to build and supply Arnold. Varick wrote to government officials and business people in Albany, Kingston, Poughkeepsie, New York City and the governments of Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island to help procure the workmen and required items.<sup>13</sup>

This large task was hindered by bad roads, "reluctant wagoners," and even farmers bringing in the harvest refused to carry supplies for the fleet or for the Forts. Varick and others had to pay some wagoners out of their own pockets to get supplies moved to the appropriate places. Despite these obstacles and personal frustration to Varick, the fleet was built and given to Arnold to command.

Arnold, with the fleet put together by primarily Varick's getting the material, sailed onto Lake Champlain and on October 11, 1776 surprised the oncoming British and stopped them. Though Arnold's fleet was eventually defeated, the British, because of the delay they incurred at Valcour Island, were forced back to Canada for the winter, thus allowing the Americans much needed time to regroup. This battle, though the British technically won, was possibly the biggest tactical victory of the Continental forces during the Revolution. The incredible efforts of Varick to get the supplies and manpower to Arnold helped achieve this tactical victory.

Varick continued as Muster Master General until 1780. A muster master was responsible to vouch for the members on the payroll of the regiment in order to represent its actual strength. The chief officer at headquarters was Muster Master General. This was the precursor to the Inspector General of the modern U.S. Army. Varick served as Deputy Muster Master until January 12, 1780 when the department was abolished by the Continental Congress.<sup>14</sup>

During Colonel Varick's sojourn in the Northern Department, however, another critical campaign took place: the battles and events leading to the critical and decisive Battle of Saratoga, thus ending the British strategy to try and divide the Northern colonies from the southern along the line from Canada down Lake Champlain and down through the Hudson River Valley to New York City, thus strangling and in effect, ending the unification of the colonies.

Leading the British Army was General John Burgoyne who opposed the American army headed by General Schuyler who was then relieved by General Horatio Gates at the critical Battle of Saratoga. General Horatio Gates had with him the hero of Valcour Island, General Benedict Arnold. Varick, in the meantime, reported to Schuyler of the weakness at Fort Ticonderoga, which later fell as Burgoyne made his way south. Varick informed Congress of the fall of Ticonderoga in July of 1777.<sup>15</sup>

General Schuyler took the blame for the loss of Ticonderoga and General Washington, upon Congress's request, was asked to replace Schuyler, which he refused to do. But Congress took the task upon themselves and Gates was named Commander of the Northern Department.<sup>16</sup>

While these developments continued, Schuyler abandoned Saratoga but used a "scorched earth" policy making it difficult for Burgoyne to supply himself. Schuyler retreated to Stillwater. Burgoyne, feeling heavily squeezed by this lack of supplies, tried to gain those much needed supplies at Bennington, but his large foraging party was repulsed and severely defeated by General John Stark's troops. It was at this time that news reached the American forces Schuyler had been replaced by Gates. Varick's assignment at this time was Deputy Muster Master General, and as the British came down toward Saratoga for their eventual decisive loss, Varick mustered four Continental brigades for the American side. Varick, while performing his duties very capably as a subordinate to Gates, much favored Schuyler and maintained a correspondence with him.<sup>17</sup>

In the meantime, the Americans in September 1777 became entrenched at Bemis Heights, a dominant hill south of Saratoga. Varick and General Arnold on September 14<sup>th</sup> looked for a better position but found none better than Bemis Heights.<sup>18</sup> On September 19<sup>th</sup> the armies engaged, and it was Varick's opinion that had Arnold been in total command, the Americans would have won the battle on that day. The action after the indecisive battle at Bemis Heights resumed several days later with a fierce disagreement ensuing over strategy between Gates and Arnold. Arnold threatened to leave for Philadelphia to take his case to Congress but decided to remain after virtually all the senior staff urged Arnold to stay. Varick, throughout this period, supported General Arnold to the hilt. Varick, at this time, was an aide to Arnold and participated in the Battle of Saratoga where

Arnold played a key role in the victory. On October 17, 1777, Richard Varick personally observed the surrender of the British Army to General Gates. After this key battle, main attention turned to the Southern Department.

Varick remained with Gates in the Northern Department but was concerned about his father who had been captured by the British and was imprisoned in New York City. His younger brother John, a medical student, was able to visit his father. Varick asked both Gates and Governor Clinton for aid in gaining his father's release. John Varick was released after thirteen months imprisonment in exchange for a Tory.

Varick returned to Hackensack in 1780 to resume his law practice, partially as a result of lack of action and gradual winding down of the Muster Department by Congress. Varick also wrote Schuyler a letter to this effect and asked his former commander to keep him in mind should a military opportunity occur.<sup>19</sup> Varick among others of the Patriots suspected a British action in the area of both Hackensack and Paramus, and message was sent to Major Stuart of the Continental Army to furnish troops in the vicinity. The plan was too late to be heeded. A British force of over three hundred Regulars under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Duncan MacPherson of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Regiment, along with Hessians made the incursion from Manhattan and attacked. While the attack was eventually repulsed, Hackensack did suffer some damage. The courthouse was set on fire and the British and Hessians tried to burn every Patriot's home in the village. Because of a favorable wind and good fortune, only the courthouse and two homes burned to the ground. There were, however, numerous broken windows in Patriot's houses and some plundering took place, including the taking of approximately 50 prisoners, while several others escaped.<sup>20</sup> Thirteen weeks later, all prisoners were exchanged; a custom of war at the time. Varick joined the Patriot Bergen Militia and served on patrol with them every other night.

Varick remained in Hackensack until an offer came to him to rejoin his old comrade in arms, General Arnold, to become his aide-de-camp at Arnold's new command, West Point. In August 1780, while both in the Bergen County Militia and practicing law, the young Colonel Varick was contacted by Arnold with the request. General Schuyler recommended to Arnold that he appoint the precocious Varick and Arnold complied with the request. He joined Arnold at his headquarters and joined another Arnold aide-de-camp, Lieutenant Colonel David Salisbury Franks, who had been with Arnold as an aide since 1776.

Shortly after joining Arnold's staff at West Point, Arnold's egregious mistake and treason took place. In the weeks leading up to the infamy, both Varick and Franks became increasingly disenchanted with the conduct of their commander, and on many occasions one or both of these honorable men spoke to Arnold about his untoward behavior. At this time, the intermediary between Arnold and General Henry Clinton, Commanding General of British forces in New York City, was major John Andre', Adjutant General of the British Army in America. Arnold also used the services of a local Tory, Joshua Hett Smith, who while early in the war was an active Patriot, later possibly under the influence of his brother, William Smith who was the former Royal Chief Justice of the Province of New York, became a Tory.<sup>21</sup>

At that time, Arnold would occasionally see Smith even in the presence of Varick and Franks, and both felt something “odd” was occurring, but could not put their fingers on it. They believed Arnold was greedy for money but did not suspect him of more.<sup>22</sup> As Arnold continued to see Smith, both aides-de-camp’s suspicions about Smith’s loyalty continued to increase. Varick, despite Arnold’s protestations to the contrary, felt most strongly that Smith’s loyalty was questionable and Varick “told the General [Arnold] so.”<sup>23</sup> The rest of the infamy is well known: Arnold escaped shortly before General Washington arrived at his (Arnold’s) headquarters soon after the capture of Andre’, on whose person was found evidence linking Arnold to revealing the fortification of West Point. Andre’ was imprisoned in Mabie’s Inn in Tappan, New York, was tried, convicted, and hanged there. Arnold did write a letter from the British ship *Vulture* absolving both of his aides of complicity.

Both Varick and Franks, to clear their names of any suspicions, asked for court martials and both were cleared of any wrongdoing. Prior to the military proceeding Esther Dey, Varick’s cousin, wrote Varick on October 13, 1780, expressing her support. (Varick’s mother, Jane Dey, was the sister of Colonel Theunis Dey, Commander of the Bergen County Militia. General Washington had made his headquarters at Dey’s Georgian-style mansion in July, October and November of 1780.) Esther noted, “There’s no one here that has the least distant suspicion of your disaffection to your country...<sup>24</sup>” The actual trial of Varick was called a Court of Inquiry. Numerous pieces of evidence were introduced to this court, all demonstrating beyond any doubt Varick was totally innocent. The finding of the court was unanimous. They stated he was worthy of “a degree of merit which does him great honor as an officer and particularly distinguishes him as a sincere friend of his country.”<sup>25</sup>

After the court of inquiry made its findings known and after the Arnold (military) family was broken up, Varick took up the practice of law in upstate New York.

On April 4, 1781, General George Washington asked Congress for additional help in organizing and reproducing his military correspondence to prevent damage and loss.<sup>26</sup> George Washington, under resolution of Congress, appointed Colonel Varick as his Recording Secretary.<sup>27</sup> Washington wanted to employ “a man of character to whom entire confidence can be placed,” to command a team of writers in copying thousands of pages of letters and organizing them. In a letter to Richard Varick dated May 25, 1781, Washington stated, “I do hereby appoint you my recording secretary at Headquarters.”<sup>28</sup> In another letter to Varick of his instructions as Recording Secretary, his duties would include “1. all letters to Congress. 2. all letters and instructions to officers of the line, 3. all letters to Governors, Presidents and other executives of States, 4. letters to Foreign Ministers, foreign officers, 5. letters to officers in service to the enemy,”<sup>29</sup>

Washington, who kept a large correspondence and was actually paid via his meticulously kept expense account versus receiving a salary, stated, “As you know, [my baggage] they contain all my papers which are of immense value to me ...” Varick started as Washington’s Recording Secretary in July 1781 and

continued until the War's end in December 1783.

Most of the work done by Varick and his team was in the village of Poughkeepsie, New York. His clerks were George Taylor, Jr., Oliver Glean, Edward Duncomb, Zachariah Sickels, Peter Hughes, and John J. Myer.<sup>30</sup>

Documents were delivered to the Recording Secretary's office by the trunkload under escort by Washington's personal guard. Varick and his staff actually started with the documents from the very beginning of the war and copied Washington's letters and orders into their books. These folio volumes were made up by William Frickett, a stationer and binder from Philadelphia. These volumes bound in undressed calf with parchment backs are known as the Varick transcripts of Washington's letters and are part of the Washington Papers in the Library of Congress.

At the conclusion of the war, when Washington was traveling to Mount Vernon from his headquarters at Newburgh, New York, he requested strong trunks "well clasped and with good locks," and with his name on them and identifying year, to travel with him to Mount Vernon. Despite these many trunks that traveled with the Commander, a group of letters still needed to be finished, so Varick and his staff stayed on to complete the task.

To the dismay of Varick, a bundle of papers for transcription had not turned up. It came to the Colonel's attention this group "had been found in a swamp," and were too wet to copy. These important documents had fallen off a wagon and Varick made sure they were retrieved, rehabilitated and finished and then sent on to Washington. As to the muddied papers, Colonel Varick wrote, his hand "had folded, sorted ... and packed up ... several Bundles," and by December 13<sup>th</sup> these papers were also on their way to Mount Vernon.<sup>31</sup> Such was the diligence of Varick and his band of scribes.

It might be mentioned that once work was finished at Poughkeepsie, Varick caught up with Washington at the DeWint House in Tappan, New York where Washington would meet with General Guy Carleton to discuss the British evacuation of New York. This meeting took place in May 1784. It marked the first time a representative of Great Britain "had accorded the new United States the honors of a sovereign power." Colonel Varick was present at the ceremony assisting General Philip Schuyler. Varick commented after the arrangements were made, and HMS Perseverance fired off a seventeen gun salute, an "Elegant Dinner (tho not equal to the American) was prepared and we sat down in perfect harmony."<sup>32</sup>

As to Varick's work for him as his personal Recording Secretary, General Washington wrote, "I take this first opportunity of signifying my entire approbation of the manner in which you have executed the important duties of recording secretary; and the satisfaction I feel in having my papers so properly arranged, and so correctly recorded; and beg you will accept my thanks for the care and attention which you have given to this business and beg you be persuaded, that I shall take pleasure in asserting on every occasion, the sense of entertainment of the fidelity, skill and indefatigable industry manifested by you in the performance of your public duties."<sup>33</sup>

Richard Varick, a Lieutenant Colonel in the Continental Army who last served as General Washington's personal secretary at the conclusion of his duties in 1784, resumed his law practice in New York City. But his brilliant post war career was just beginning. As Varick's final three years of wartime service were spent with Washington, no shadow of the Arnold treachery could in any way be attributed to him. Shortly after resuming his law practice, he was appointed at the age of thirty, City Recorder of New York City. He remained in that position from 1784 to 1789 under Mayor James Duane.<sup>34</sup>

It was also during this time Colonel Varick met Maria Roosevelt, and after a two-year courtship, married her on May 8, 1786. They settled at 52 Wall Street. Later, Varick lived on Broadway just above Pine Street. He then built a house on Pine Street near Broadway. The present Varick Street takes its name from having been cut through the property in which Mr. and Mrs. Varick lived.

During the time Varick was Recorder of the City of New York, he was asked by the Legislature of New York along with Samuel Jones to revise all of New York State's statute law.<sup>35</sup> After completing this job in 1789, the Jones and Varick revision became largely adopted by the New York Legislature. This revision amended the Bill of Rights and removed feudal aspects of the law that were based in large part on British law.

It should also be mentioned during this time in the 1780's Colonel Varick started speculating in real estate.<sup>36</sup> While Varick was not a delegate to the national Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787, he did serve two terms as Speaker of the New York Assembly. In 1789, Varick was asked to be Attorney General of the State of New York.

When Mayor James Duane was appointed a Judge, Varick was appointed Mayor of New York City by Governor George Clinton. In those years the Governor appointed the Mayor of New York City. Varick was a Federalist by party affiliation during his twelve-year mayoralty of New York, and saw the population of the city double from approximately 30,000 to approximately 60,000. The main problems which faced him as mayor was handling expanding immigration, the yellow fever epidemics which occasionally beset the city, the need for a supply of fresh water, and relations with the state government.

It should be mentioned Varick backed the unpopular Jay Treaty of 1794, and along with Alexander Hamilton, tried to quell a minor riot which occurred around City Hall as the populace at the time were more pro-French even though the Jay Treaty did assuage English intentions at the time.

As a result of the Jefferson Republicans gaining office in 1801, Varick was not reappointed as that honor went to Edward Livingston.<sup>37</sup> Varick continued, however, to find much to occupy his adult years.

With Jacob Radcliff, Anthony Dey and others, Paulus Hook was bought, divided into lots and sold by these developers who incorporated themselves as the Associates of the Jersey Company, and so became a major founder of the present day Jersey City.<sup>38</sup> When the Associates took over, there were fifteen people living on Paulus Hook. Alexander Hamilton drew up the bill to incorporate the town



and it was passed by the New Jersey Legislature in 1804. Varick, who was very active in this company became its president. In 1816 a new charter was passed by the New Jersey Legislature incorporating Jersey City as a separate municipality.

Richard Varick, whose excellent legal career paralleled his activities while pursuing his political career in later life, also served as a trustee of Columbia University, was President of the American Bible Society, and served on the American Sunday School Union. One of his great attachments was to the Society of the Cincinnati, a group of former Revolutionary War officers who founded America's first patriotic society. He served as President of the New York State Chapter from 1806 until his death in 1831.

Needless to say, his funeral in New York was a huge affair, and one of his pall bearers was the great artist and aide to General Washington, Colonel John Trumbull.<sup>39</sup>

To sum up the life of this forgotten founder would be to describe a life of a very important contributor to our early Republic: a man who believed in a cause that he valued dearly and that he worked and took risks for all his life, but especially when young and in the service of the very young United States. Here was a man who was one of the first to truly live and attain "the American Dream."

## END NOTES

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### About the Author

Perhaps the historian's most important attribute is a persistent desire to explore events which shaped a particular time or era. In his study of the Revolutionary War and other 18<sup>th</sup>-century occurrences, Robert L. Cohen demonstrates that researching local history is not simply an antiquarian pursuit, but more frequently an attempt to better understand our national history.

Mr. Cohen was born in Passaic and raised in Hackensack, a town laden with Revolutionary War associations. He was educated in the Hackensack public schools, and from there went on to Rutgers University, where he majored in history. Continuing his studies at Rutgers, he received a Master's degree in education. Mr. Cohen took additional graduate level courses at Columbia, Temple, the University of North Carolina, and Old Dominion University.

After a stint in the U.S. Naval Reserve, Mr. Cohen entered the social work profession. He was employed by the Passaic County Board of Social Services for twenty-nine years, and during his tenure, he earned a Master's degree in social work, also from Rutgers. He retired in 1997 as a staff development and training administrator.

After leaving the agency, Mr. Cohen embarked on a second career. He became Curator of the Wortendyke New World Dutch Barn Museum in Park Ridge, where he familiarized himself with the Jersey Dutch legacy. Mr. Cohen's research on the development of the Wortendyke barn, and its place in history, proved fruitful. He subsequently published a profile on the site in *De Halve Maen*, journal of the Holland Society in America. In addition, he contributed the article on historic barns for the *Encyclopedia of New Jersey*.

Mr. Cohen has served on the governing board of the Great Falls Preservation and Development Corporation, an advocacy group whose goal is to support the restoration of Paterson's Great Falls National Historic District. In 2005, he was elected a trustee of the Passaic County Historical Society, where he contributes his time and expertise toward advancing the society's historical and cultural endeavors.

– Edward A. Smyk

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