



Marinus Willett

New York City's Forgotten Revolutionary War Hero and Statesman

By James S. Kaplan

On June 6, 1775, a column of heavily armed British troops, with carts full of rifles and muskets, began evacuating New York City to join the British forces in Boston for the Battle of Bunker Hill. As the troops moved out, an unarmed cabinetmaker named Marinus Willett jumped in front of the lead horse, approximately two blocks north of Fraunces Tavern at the corner of Broad and Beaver streets in Lower Manhattan, and refused to let the carts pass. He announced to the surprised British that no arms other than those personal to the soldiers were permitted to leave the city, and that under an agreement with the city's ruling council, the carts of light arms would have to remain.

David Matthews, a Tory who was the city's mayor, arrived to protest that there was no such prohibition on the British taking the guns to Boston, but Willett stood his ground. Soon a crowd gathered at Broad and Beaver streets, and other Patriot members of the city's ruling committee arrived to voice agreement with Willett.

Perhaps fearing that firing on the crowd would create an incident like the Boston Massacre and alienate the city's divided populace, the British commander acquiesced to Willett's ordering of the cart drivers to turn away from the evacuating troops and take the arms to the property of Patriot sympathizer Abraham Van Wyck.

For the Sons of Liberty and other Patriots, this "Broad Street incident" would make Willett a hero—one whose bravery in defiance of the British would be repeated many times in his subsequent career as an officer commanding New York regiments.

After the Revolution Willett became an important figure in New York City politics, fighting for democracy against

aristocracy, until his death at the age of 90 in 1830, 55 years after he faced down the British troops.

Climbing the Ranks

Born on July 31, 1740, Willett came from an established English family that had fallen into what one contemporary called "reduced circumstances." His father, Edward Willett, was a schoolteacher and tavern owner. In his late teens Willett enlisted to fight with the militia in the French and Indian War and participated in the unsuccessful English attack on Fort Ticonderoga. Injured in the attack, he was hospitalized at the newly constructed Fort Stanwix.

When he returned to New York City he took up the cabinet-making trade. Like a number of working-class artisans, he also became involved with the Sons of Liberty, a quasi-secret society opposed to the British monarchy and its Colonial representatives.

In June 1775, Willett received a commission as a lieutenant colonel in Alexander MacDougall's New York regiment.

Under the command of General Richard Montgomery and Colonel Benedict Arnold, Willett participated in the Americans' failed attempt to take over Canada.

After George Washington was defeated at the disastrous Battle of Brooklyn in the summer of 1776, which left New York City in the control of the British for the rest of the war, Willett was assigned to fight first in Westchester County and then in upstate New York's Mohawk Valley. There he became second-in-command to Colonel Peter Gansevoort at Fort Stanwix.

In the summer of 1777 British and American Indian troops surrounded the fort, hoping to use it as a base for attacking the American army then massing under General Horatio Gates at Saratoga. Willett, as spokesman, defiantly refused to surrender. While the British ambushed a relief force of militia under General Nicholas Herkimer, mortally wounding him, Willett left the fort and led the troops in a daring raid, destroying the enemy's vacant camp and supplies, and undermining the morale of the Redcoats' American Indian allies, who soon withdrew from the action.

Willett then made another run through enemy lines to direct a second relief force, led by Benedict Arnold, to the fort. Willett's forces prevented the British from attacking the Americans from the west, and thus played a significant role in Gates' victory at the Battle of Saratoga, a turning point of the Revolution.

After fighting in the Battle of Monmouth in 1778, Willett was reassigned to the Mohawk Valley. He was in charge of efforts to retain the area for the Patriots, which put him in frequent contact with American Indians—some sympathetic to the Patriot cause, some hostile. His work on the northern frontier, though not always completely successful, was highly respected by Washington and his senior officers.



Marinus Willett, ca. 1791. Oil on canvas. Bequest of George Willett Van Nest, 1916 (17.87.1).
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, USA.

A New Diplomatic Role

At war's end Willett returned home to New York City. During the Revolution and for a brief period afterward, New York state law required that the city's many Loyalists forfeit their land to the state. Thus many prime properties, such as the Delancey estate previously owned by a powerful Tory family, became available for sale at bargain prices. Willett took advantage of this opportunity and purchased part of the estate, calling his new home Cedar Grove. In the next 40 years he would become one of New York's wealthier landowners.

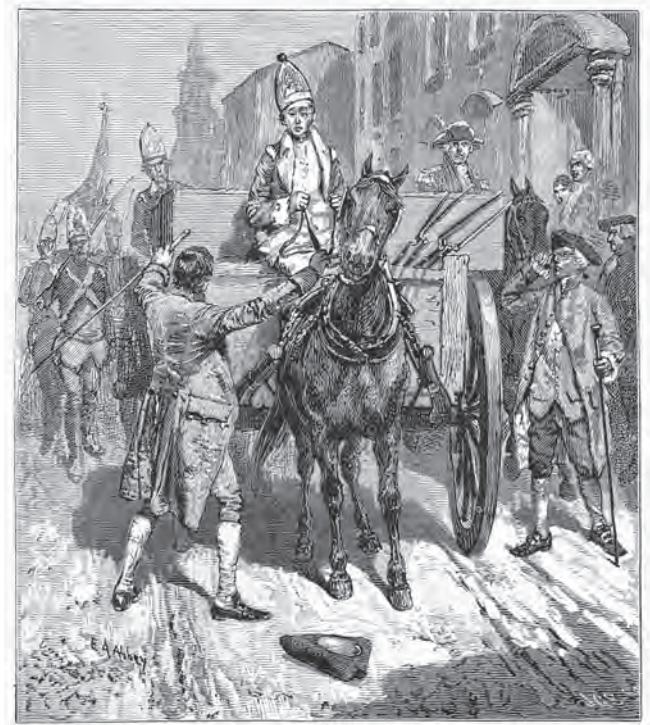
He also became a part of the new post-war ruling elite, helping to reshape the city's government on more democratic principles. In 1784 Willett was appointed to the important and lucrative position of New York City sheriff, and in 1789 he was elected as an anti-Federalist delegate called to ratify New York's new constitution.

Later in 1789 he helped found the Tammany Society. Unlike the Society of the Cincinnati (see story on page 28), this civic organization was open to both officers and enlisted men. Ultimately the Tammany Society took on a political role and, through its quasi-affiliate the New York City Democratic Party, held a tremendous influence on the city's politics for about 160 years.

One year after the ratification of the New York Constitution, Willett and the Tammany Society played an important role in one of the new nation's first diplomatic triumphs—the successful negotiation of a peace treaty with the Creek American Indians of north Georgia. The powerful Creeks posed a threat to the government's control of a significant portion of the South. Even though Willett had been an anti-Federalist, Washington and his Secretary of Defense Henry Knox, who knew of Willett's work with American Indians during the Revolution, asked him to undertake the delicate negotiation with the Creeks.

Willett traveled in secret through the wilds of north Georgia to the Creek villages to meet Alexander McGivillary, the half-Scottish Creek chief who was the Creeks' key strategist. Willett invited McGivillary and 27 other Creek chiefs to meet with Washington and Knox in New York City, where they were entertained by members of the Tammany Society. The diplomacy led to the Treaty of New York, in which the Creeks retained their autonomy in exchange for ceding a significant portion of their hunting land to the government.

Washington and Knox were so impressed with Willett's mediation that in 1792 they appointed him brigadier general to lead an expedition of federal troops against the American Indians in the Ohio Valley. To Washington's surprise, however, Willett turned down the appointment, saying that he didn't believe it was a wise policy to be making war against them.



An 1875 wood engraving of the Sons of Liberty, led by Marinus Willett, seizing British arms in New York in 1775.

An Influential Connection to Tammany

After the U.S. Constitution was ratified, there were efforts to undo the effects of the forfeiture laws and re-establish wealthy New Yorkers to their pre-war positions. The Tammany Society became the leading opponent of these efforts, and it formed a new political party—the Republican-Democratic Party (today's Democratic Party)—to help retain control of city government.

Led by Aaron Burr, the Tammany Society ran a vigorous and well-organized campaign in which it appealed to veterans to uphold the democratic ideals of the Revolution. The campaign also recruited celebrity candidates to run for the state assembly, such as New York's first governor, George Clinton, and Gates, the hero of the Battle of Saratoga. The Democratic candidates won a stunning upset victory. With the support of electors from New York state, Thomas Jefferson gained the presidency in 1800, and candidates affiliated with the Tammany Society won city government offices. In 1807 Willett was appointed mayor of New York City as the candidate of the Tammany faction, although he would hold that post for only one year.

James Madison's declaration of war against England in June 1812 caused dissent in the Tammany Society ranks. DeWitt Clinton split with his former Tammany allies and supported the Federalists, largely centered in New England, in opposing

the war. He even ran as a Federalist against Madison in the 1812 presidential election. Madison was narrowly re-elected, but the razor-thin vote didn't end the controversy over what was known in the Northeast as "Mr. Madison's war."

However, Willett and the Tammany Society continued to strongly advocate support for President Madison and the war effort. On August 10, 1814, war supporters rallied in front of New York's recently completed City Hall. Asking for indulgence for an old man of 74, Willett spoke of how he and men of his generation had fought the British under much more difficult circumstances. He said he was living proof that American militiamen could defeat trained British soldiers.

To him it was inconceivable that after all that men of his generation had sacrificed, American citizens would not stand by their elected leaders in a time of war. According to William M. Willett, Marinus' son, who used his father's manuscripts to publish *A Narrative of the Military Actions of Colonel Marinus Willett* in 1831, the speech "was cheered with unbounded

applause" and reportedly inspired an upsurge in support for the war and enlistments in the New York militias, which were critical to the defense of the city.

Willett remained a revered elder statesman whose advice was occasionally sought by younger leaders. On his visit to America in 1824, the Marquis de Lafayette made a special trip to meet with Willett at his home at Cedar Grove.

Willett lived to see the elimination of property qualifications for voting in New York; his former ally and adversary Governor DeWitt Clinton successfully open the Erie Canal in 1825; and the election of Andrew Jackson in 1828.

After his death at Cedar Grove in 1830, reportedly more than 10,000 people attended his funeral at New York City's Trinity Church. He received encomiums from every major newspaper, many of which declared his service to the people of the New York would never be forgotten.

Rescuing His Memory From Obscurity

The Col. Marinus Willett-Mohawk Valley DAR Chapter, Frankfort, N.Y., founded in 1905, still commemorates the hero's memory, but he is largely unknown, even to New Yorkers. In 1892, the Sons of the Revolution erected a plaque in Willett's honor at the Morris Building on the northwest corner of Beaver and Broad streets, the site of his brave stand. The plaque remains on the side of the skyscraper at 60 Broad Street, but it's so inconspicuous that most people—even most experienced tour guides—are unaware of it.

Nevertheless, people ignored in one generation may receive greater recognition in later generations, as the life of Thomas Paine illustrates. The grave of General Horatio Gates was lost in Trinity Church graveyard for more than 150 years, but last year the New York State DAR dedicated a marker recognizing its existence.

While Willett's grave in Trinity Church graveyard has not been lost (in fact there is a marker placed by the Sons of the American Revolution in 1969 highlighting it), Willett himself is probably even more obscure than Gates. However, if Gates can be rescued from obscurity after so many years, there is hope that Marinus Willett will be too, as more and more people learn of his many accomplishments in the nation's critical formative period from 1775 to 1830. 🌀

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Marinus Willett is buried in New York's Trinity Church graveyard near fellow Patriots.