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A Rare View of West Point

This eighteenth-century view of West Point, as seen from the east side of the Hudson River, was created in 1782 by Pierre L'Enfant using pencil, pen, and ink. L'Enfant was an artist and engineer who enjoyed a successful military career, but he is most famous today as the author of the L'Enfant Plan, which laid out Washington, D.C.

L'Enfant drew this view of West Point for military purposes at the request of General Henry Knox (1750–1806), then commander of West Point. In addition to showing the scope of Washington's 10,000-man-strong Continental Army encampment at nearby Verplanck's Point, it is a remarkably accurate depiction of the topography of Orange County, New York.

Identified by General Washington in 1781 as the most important strategic position in the colonies during the American Revolution, West Point, located in Highlands, New York, has been home to the American military since 1778. The United States Military

Academy, the oldest continuous military post in the country, is the most famous occupant of the town.

The renowned 1790 full-length oil painting, *Washington at Verplanck's Point* by the American artist John Trumbull, shows the Founding Father near the scene pictured in L'Enfant's work. The painting was a gift from Trumbull to Martha Washington and is today in the collection of Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library in Delaware.

Born and raised in Boston, Henry Knox owned and operated a bookstore in the city and specialized in military history. When the Revolutionary War broke out in 1775, he befriended General George Washington and quickly rose to become the chief artillery officer of the Continental Army. He later served Washington as the country's first Secretary of War (1789–94).

Knox was a witness to the Boston Massacre, a supporter of the Sons of Liberty, and may have participated in the Boston Tea Party in 1773. On June 16, 1774, Knox married Lucy Flucker,



whose father had been a royal governor of Massachusetts; the couple had thirteen children.

In 1796 Knox retired to what is today Thomaston, Maine (then part of Massachusetts), and built Montpelier, a magnificent three-story mansion said to be unequaled in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts for its grandeur. The famous general grew fat as he built a business empire on borrowed money. Although he had significant interests in ship-building, lumber, and brick manufacturing, Knox was a bad businessman and ran up huge debts to support his extravagant lifestyle.

Knox died bankrupt at Montpelier on October 25, 1806, age 56, from an infection he contracted after swallowing a chicken bone. He was buried on his estate in Thomaston with full military honors. In Maine he is generally remembered as an avaricious tyrant.

Fort Knox, the famous U.S. Army post in Kentucky, home to the United States Bullion Depository (where a large portion of the country's gold reserves are kept), was named after General Knox. He was also, less flatteringly, the model for the evil and greedy Colonel Pyncheon in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*, the story of a gloomy New England mansion haunted since its construction by crushing greed,

fraudulent dealings, unexplained deaths, and accusations of witchcraft.

Pierre Charles L'Enfant was born in Paris on August 2, 1754, the third child and second son of Pierre L'Enfant (1704–87), a painter in the service of King Louis XV, and Marie Charlotte Leullier. The young L'Enfant studied at the Louvre and the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture. Recruited by Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, L'Enfant left school in 1777 to fight in the American Revolution on the side of the rebelling colonials. He arrived in America at the age of 23 and served with General Lafayette as a military engineer in the Continental Army; he was commissioned as a captain in the Corps of Engineers on April 3, 1779.

L'Enfant was wounded at the Siege of Savannah on October 9, 1779 and became a prisoner of war at the surrender of Charleston, South Carolina, on May 12, 1780. He was exchanged in November 1780 and served on General Washington's staff for the remainder of the conflict. After the war, L'Enfant designed the layout of the new nation's capital, which still retains the street pattern he envisioned. In spite of his magnificent work for the new republic,

L'Enfant was penniless when he died in Maryland in 1825. He is buried in Arlington National Cemetery, where his grave overlooks the Potomac River and Washington, D.C.

Only two other versions of this 1782 view by L'Enfant, both watercolors, are known: the Library of Congress's *Panoramic View of West Point, New York, Showing American Encampments on the Hudson River*, and an astonishing panorama held by the Museum of the American Revolution in Philadelphia that is nine feet long and seven inches tall. The NEHGS version, *View of West Point and its Environs*, which is four feet long and nine inches high, came to the Society with impeccable provenance: it was an 1875 gift of Rear Admiral Henry Knox Thatcher, grandson of General Henry Knox. This rare piece of American history is on view on the fifth floor of our Newbury Street headquarters. ♦

Left: Portrait of Pierre Charles L'Enfant. Attributed to Ramsey. Circa 1940.

Below: *View of West Point and Its Environs*, by Pierre Charles L'Enfant. 1782.

Right: Portrait of General Henry Knox. Engraved by Johnson, Fry & Co. 1862.

All from the NEHGS Fine Art Collection.

