



*By David Osborn
Site Manager, St. Paul's Church National Historic Site
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Washington's Two Journeys Past St. Paul's Church

What a difference 13 years can make.

In mid October 1776, George Washington traveled past St. Paul's Church. He was on a reconnaissance mission, riding over from his main base with the American army in northern Manhattan and inspecting defensive positions. His troops stationed near St. Paul's, under the command of Colonel John Glover of Massachusetts, were using the church building to store pork and flour in large wooden barrels. The British were attempting to flank the American position and had landed a large force at Westchester Square (today's Bronx) on October 12. That assault had been repulsed, but there was little doubt the Redcoats would attempt another landing, probably north of the initial location. Ever mindful of topography and geography, though, Washington thought the area was "defensible, being full of Stone fences, both along the road and across adjacent Fields."

The commander-in-chief was 44, and had led the Patriot army for 16 months. But as he trotted near St. Paul's that fall day, the situation for his forces, and indeed the independence movement, was desperate. Over the previous seven weeks, American armies had been routed in Brooklyn and Manhattan by superior British forces. Washington himself was nearly captured at the Battle of Kip's Bay on September 15. The tall Virginian was deeply frustrated with problems of maintaining his army, as well as the inability of the civilian government, the Continental Congress, to adequately provision his forces in the field. In a letter to his brother around this time, he flatly stated that "I was never in such an unhappy, divided state since I was born."

In mid October 1789, Washington once again visited the St. Paul's vicinity, and the world seemed quite different. He was 57, serving his first term as President of the United States. The nation's first chief executive was on a goodwill tour of the new country, heading up to the New England states from the capital at Federal Hall on Wall Street in lower Manhattan by taking the Boston Post Road through lower Westchester County. All the challenges of the war, culminating in the victory over the British, were behind him. It's difficult to imagine that Washington did not reflect back on his journey to the area 13 years earlier, when the landscape of the future looked much different. But, ever the Virginia planter, his diary entry for October 15, 1789 reveals a farmer's perspective on traveling through country he had not seen in some years, emphasizing the rocky terrain:

“The Road for the greater part, indeed, the whole way, was very rough and Stoney, but the Land strong, well covered with grass and a luxuriant Crop of Indian Corn intermixed with Pompions (pumpkins) which were yet ungathered in the fields. We met four droves of Beef Cattle for the New York Market (about 30 in a drove) some of which were very fine -- also a flock of Sheep for the same place. We scarcely passed a farm house that did not abd. (abide) in Geese. Their Cattle seemed to be of good quality and their hogs large but rather long legged. No dwelling Ho. (house) is seen without a Stone or Brick Chimney and rarely any without a shingle roof -- generally the Sides are of Shingles also. The distance of this days travel was 31 miles, but as these places (though they have houses of worship in them) are not regularly laid out, they are scarcely to be distinguished from the intermediate farms in which are very close together and separated, as one Inclosure from another also is, by fences of Stone, which are indeed easily made, as the County is immensely Stony.”