

John Suffern, of SUFFERN, NY

Suffern, NY is the site on the W3R-NHT at which the comte de Rochambeau made encampment on August 25, 1781, on his way to Yorktown, and again on September 13, 1782, in victorious return. Suffern is west of the Hudson River and is the last town in NY before one passes into NJ. Its most important geographic description is that it is at the entrance to the Ramapo Pass, once called the "Point of the Mountains." At the time of the Revolutionary War, this area was referred to as Smith's Clove, or the area near Sidman's Bridge.



The Ramapo Pass as seen from New Antrim (now called Suffern NY) -- detail from "Six Mile", by Jules Arnault. Used with the the permission of Carolyn Suffern.

In 1763, my fourth great-grandfather John Suffern with his brother James emigrated to North America from their home in County Antrim, Ireland, the place where their Huguenot ancestors eventually had settled after fleeing France in 1585. John and James landed in Philadelphia on August 6, 1763. The family in France from which this Huguenot branch had split was named "Suffren," also the name of John's distant cousin, French admiral Pierre André de Suffren. This man's name is on the Victory Monument at Yorktown for his role in keeping British ships from our shores by engaging them in battles in the Indian Ocean.

In 1773, John Suffern and his wife Mary settled in what now is called Suffern, NY. John was a shrewd man who realized this location was a good place to establish his home/store/tavern and later post office. He named the place "New Antrim," after his home in Ireland. He later went on to acquire significant land holdings in Rockland and Chemung Counties; own other business interests as well as to become a judge and a state senator.

The location of the Ramapo Pass soon became even more strategically important as America's War of Independence broke out. In his book, *Romantic Suffern*, Saxby Vouler Penfold wrote the very existence of this pass was downplayed as much as was possible to avoid the focus of the British, or it might have been as famous as other places significant to Revolutionary War history. The letters of General George Clinton document the extreme importance General Washington placed on controlling this pass. Had the British gained control, they would have had access to the Hudson Highlands. This would have allowed them to separate the New England colonies from those to the west significantly weakening the patriot cause. They also would have had free access to reinforcements from Canada.

One can read in history books that in July 1777, General Washington wrote a letter to Colonel Stephen Moylan from the "Headquarters at the Clove," John Suffern's home and tavern. General Washington also wrote from Suffern's tavern a letter to Anthony Wayne commanding Wayne to report to him prior to the battle of Stony Point. Colonel Aaron Burr used John Suffern's home as his headquarters as did General George Clinton and other important military figures who stopped at "Suffern's." Sometimes, it is hard to realize it actually was Suffern's tavern that was being visited for the name Suffern is written in Revolutionary War documents as Suffern, Suffran, Suffren, Suffrence, Sufferen, Sufferin, Severen, Sovereign and Sovereigns!

These are some of the facts and stories usually cited about John Suffern and his home. Other stories passed down within our family as well as being published in various places reveal a more intimate and to me, more charming glimpse of General Washington's interaction with the Suffern family.

In 1946, Mrs. Charles Carroll (Martha Wentworth) Suffren (they used the French spelling,) widow of the grandson of Judge Andrew Suffern, grandson of John, gave to my father a large partners' desk made from the lumber of cherry trees that once lined the lane to John Suffern's home. In the documentation that came with the desk, it is written that in the summer of 1777, as General Washington crossed from Verplanck's Point at King's Ferry trying to make his way to Morristown, he got lost. He went up this lane to John Suffern's home to ask directions and his "officers plucked the cherries, (and) Washington reproved them." After inviting General Washington in for refreshments, John Suffern freely granted permission to enjoy the cherries and the "cavalcade rode away feasting as they went."

When these cherry trees became old and gnarled, John Suffern had them cut down and made into lumber from which he expected his coffin would be made. Upon his death in 1836, this lumber was forgotten as John Suffern was buried. In an article published in the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* on February 20, 1939, Mrs. Suffren wrote, Judge Andrew "had the sacred cherry wood made into the old desk... He treasured it greatly, and used it in his law office. (It was made from) "cherry-wood (that) knew the presence and even the touch of the fingers, of the Father of his Country. "

This story and desk have special meaning for me. I was two years old when this desk was given to my father, Edward Greene Suffern. Upon spying the cubbyholes in the desk, I immediately crawled into what became a favorite place to be.

Another charming tale of General Washington's interaction with the Suffern family is about the day he stopped by as the Suffern family was enjoying strawberry ice cream. General Washington confided he had important matters to discuss with John Suffern and sought privacy. With that, John Suffern took General Washington up the hill to the strawberry patch he owned hidden that was from view by the bushes along the road. It is reported General Washington greatly enjoyed the strawberries - of course, the conversation is unknown. It is my understanding it is upon this former strawberry patch that Good Samaritan Hospital on Lafayette Avenue in Suffern now stands.

My last and my most treasured story of General Washington and my family occurred in the winter of 1780. In those days of war, it was not deemed safe for a man or boy loyal to the patriot cause to be out and about. Rogues like Claudius Smith and others presented too much of a threat, but John Suffern was erecting a new barn and he needed nails. It was decided to send his eight-year-old daughter Betsy/Elizabeth, my third great-grandmother, to Boonton, NJ, to buy the needed nails and so Betsy set off on her horse, spending the night in Boonton.

Somehow or other, General Washington found out his little pal Betsy was fairly close to his headquarters in Morristown. He sent for her the next day and so little Betsy rode on the additional distance. She then was 36 miles from her home. Once in Morristown, General Washington asked Betsy if she were brave enough to carry a message hidden in her shoe home to her father. Betsy agreed to do so - thirty-six miles, in winter, on a horse, eight years old!

This past spring, I visited for the first time, General Washington's headquarters in Morristown and was told to this day, this tale is related in their tours. My drive from

Morristown to Suffern on interstate I-287 was a road unfamiliar to me. Even in the comfort of my car, it seemed a significant distance. I am very proud of Betsy Suffern who retained her maiden name by marrying a distant cousin from Ireland also named John Suffern. Eventually Betsy/Elizabeth and her husband moved to the area of Elmira, NY, to manage her father's vast land holdings there. I have some letters written by this remarkable woman to her father – they are a treasure to me.

I do need to note that in 1846, a French man appeared at the home of John Suffern's grandson James in Hillburn, NY, seeking refuge, saying his name was "Jules Arnault." Monsieur Arnault lived out his days at the home of James Suffern serving as a French tutor to the Suffern family children among other things. In family records it is written he was a fine violinist and a gentleman. He also was an extraordinary artist. Judge Andrew Suffern commissioned him to paint the two paintings Mrs. Suffren also gave to my father in 1946. One of these paintings is of John Suffern's home. The other is referred to within our family as the "Six Mile" painting. It is written that Judge Edward Suffern, son of John and father of Andrew, said when he sat on the front porch of his (prominently-featured) large white house, all land he could see was his extending six miles into Bergen County, NJ. The row of buildings mid-line across the painting is present-day Washington Avenue in Suffern. This is the road little Betsy would have ridden on her way to and from NJ, as well as the road one takes if one is walking to Yorktown, VA! In the background, is the "Point of the Mountains," the opening to the Ramapo Pass.

In the painting beside Judge Edward's home are a small stream, the Mahwah River, and a bridge. (Avon Corporation now is on this site.) In his book, *Vanishing Ironworks of the Ramapos*, James Ransom wrote that the comte de Rochambeau pitched his field tent beside this bridge, but that like General Washington, he stayed in the room in the front left corner of John Suffern's

home. Ransom also reported that John Suffern's journal indicated he had ordered from Charles White of Philadelphia, seven cases of gin, timed to be delivered before the comte de Rochambeau and his troops arrived!



John Suffern's home and tavern in New Antrim (now called Suffern NY) -- detail from a painting by Jules Arnault. Used with the the permission of Carolyn Suffern

John Suffern's home was located at the intersection of present-day Lafayette and Washington Avenues in Suffern, across the street from the Lafayette Theatre, beside the village green and gazebo.

In family records given to my father by Mrs. Suffren when she gave him the paintings, it is written that upon his death, the trunks of artist Jules Arnault were opened. It then was discovered he was, in fact, Jean André, marquis de Suffren de St. Tropez, head of the de Charny branch of the Suffren family. He was fleeing France as the last vestiges of the Bourbon dynasty were falling in France. (Please see "House of Bourbon" Wikipedia.) He also is the nephew of famous admiral Pierre André de Suffren noted on the Victory Monument at Yorktown.

Monsieur Arnault/de Suffren had been seeking shelter with his cousins in America. Both he and John Suffern are buried in

the cemetery of the Ramapo Reformed Church in Mahwah, NJ, the church John Suffern helped build. (Copies of these paintings by “Jules Arnault,” are hung in the Suffern Room of the Suffern Free Library, 210 Lafayette Avenue, Suffern, NY.)

In his book, *A Panorama of Suffern at Incorporation*, Craig Long, historian of the village of Suffern, wrote that the name of the village was changed from New Antrim to Suffern upon incorporation in 1896. This stemmed from the Erie Railroad’s naming their depot “Suffern’s” in thanks to Judge Edward Suffern for granting to them right-of-way across his six miles of land. Craig Long also reports the ribbon was cut to open the Erie Railroad on September 23, 1841.

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