GENERAL DUPORTAIL AT VALLEY FORGE

By ELIZABETH S. KITE

The Valley Forge Park Commission must be given the credit for having rescued from oblivion General Washington’s Chief of Engineers during the American Revolution; Louis Lebèque de Presle Duportail. No more effective monument could be erected to his memory than the restored fortifications at Valley Forge; and yet, even to members of the Commission, this important French Officer remains little more than a name. American historians have been silent regarding him. This silence is unjust. Documents today available show that among the foreign volunteers who came to the aid of the struggling Colonies, none was animated with a more ardent zeal for the cause of liberty nor was possessed of an equally thorough knowledge of the science of war.

The cause of the neglect is to be found in the attitude of Americans toward the French officers who came to this country during the spring and early summer of 1777, before the Treaty of Alliance was signed between this country and France. In all about fifty volunteers, some of them men of experience and distinction in the French army, the greater part young and belonging to the nobility, appeared in Philadelphia, all of them expecting to be given positions of prominence by Congress. The situation was embarrassing. Certain of the more spirited American officers threw down their arms, refusing to serve if foreigners...
were to be placed over them. In the end the greater part of these volunteers were granted funds from Congress and given liberty to regain their native country if they chose. Many however remained, joining the ranks as volunteers. By their own merits they were soon raised to positions of importance and served this country faithfully and well. Their names today are for the most part forgotten. Historians have singled out Lafayette and bestowed upon him a nation’s gratitude, while ignoring his compatriots. The services of these Frenchmen, in many cases, deserve very special and detailed study.\(^2\) This is particularly true of Duportail.

Congress, in 1776, through Benjamin Franklin, sent a special request to the French Government for “a few engineers, not exceeding four.” Duportail, member of the Royal Corps of Engineers, was chosen by the Minister of War and was allowed to pick his associates. He selected Messrs. de la Radière, de Laumoy and de Gouvion. The whole transaction was carried on secretly, but received the express sanction of the King. These officers reached Philadelphia by way of the West Indies early in July, 1777. In view of the fact that they had come in response to a direct appeal from Congress, this body was inclined to be friendly but was obliged by the disorganized state of the army to request them to patiently bide their time until their cases could be given special consideration. It was not until November 17th, that a definite place in the army was given them. On that day Duportail was made Brigadier-General and joined Washington soon after at Whitemarsh. The first Council of War at which General Duportail was present was held on the 24th. Along with the other generals he was asked to send in writing his opinion of what should be done in the present emergency.

To understand the situation it is necessary to recall that in November, 1777, the decisive victory of the

\(^2\) Thomas Balch, *The French in America* (Philadelphia, 1891–95), II.
army of the North at Saratoga was of recent occurrence. In the light of that victory Washington’s partial successes at Brandywine and Germantown looked like defeats. It was natural that his Generals should burn with desire to retrieve their losses and that they should be ready to demand that they be led to an immediate attack upon Howe before he had time to entrench himself in Philadelphia.

From its first line the reply of Duportail struck home to the mind of Washington. Here was indeed an officer upon whose judgment and knowledge he could rely. The words came like hammer-blows:

Take care that the successes of the North do not lead to disasters here where circumstances are entirely different. . . . Look at Germantown. . . . Your Excellency was completely victorious over General Howe but his army conquered yours! . . . Learn then this lesson—Take care of your men . . . see that you have an army of "regulars" before you attack where success is not certain. . . . Remember, retreat is not defeat. . . . The British can never conquer America so long as her army is intact. . . .

Duportail was never popular with his brother officers. He seemed to them too distant and reserved. Besides he was too wise, too deep in the confidence of the Commander-in-Chief. It was Duportail’s advice that carried weight. Instead of an attack upon General Howe, it was decided to go into winter quarters. Soon after the site at Valley Forge was the one selected.

Looking at the restoration effected by the Valley Forge Park Commission one cannot but be struck with the master mind who planned and directed those fortifications. The position, naturally strong, is dominated by the height called Mount Joy, so named by William Penn and included in the manor which he gave to his daughter Letitia, nearly a hundred years before. From this height, which commands a view of the whole region sloping off toward Philadelphia, every avenue by which the enemy could approach was in full view and pro-

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*See Note 1. *supra.*
ected by an outer line of entrenchments with redoubts placed at strategic points. Behind, the hill drops in abrupt cliffs forming the chasm worn ages ago by Valley Creek. On the eastern slope of Mount Joy the second line of entrenchments was strengthened by the three bastions: Fort Washington to the south, Fort Huntington in the center and the Star Redoubt at the northern extremity, commanding the approach to Washington’s headquarters and Sullivan’s pontoon bridge over the Schuylkill.

On December 20, 1777, the army left its temporary encampment at Gulph Mills and marched to Valley Forge. While the men busied themselves in building huts and arranging the camp, Duportail, aided by one of his associates, carefully surveyed the ground, prepared a map and studied the most effectual means of providing for its defense. Actual work on the fortifications was begun about the fifteenth of January and by the beginning of April the situation had been rendered practically impregnable. When one considers the frozen ground, the scarcity of tools, the inexperience of the workers and their forlorn condition both as to food and clothing, the promptitude with which the whole works were executed is calculated to fill the mind with wonder. On April 7, 1778, President Laurens wrote from York, Pennsylvania, where Congress was sitting:

The present newly adopted encampment Genl. duportail assures me is tenable against the enemy’s utmost endeavors by their present powers.4

The movement to preserve the Valley Forge camp can be traced to Centennial year, 1876. At that date

4 Colonel John Laurens, son of Henry Laurens, President of Congress, was an aide-de-camp of Washington and detailed to attend General Duportail as interpreter, wherever the latter went. All the memorials of Duportail written at Valley Forge were translated by Colonel Laurens. At this time the French General was studying English so the two were much together. These documents, the French originals and the translations, are all in the Washington Papers, in the Library of Congress.
Plan of Valley Forge encampment, designed and drawn by Duportail, December, 1777. The original is owned by The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
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the camp site had to a large extent been reclaimed as farming land so that many of the fortifications had been ploughed over until all trace was lost. Maps however were available which gave the general outline of the camp and its fortifications. A great impetus to the completion of the work came when it was discovered that a contemporaneous copy of Duportail’s original plan, made by an assistant engineer, was in the possession of Cornell University Library. Through the exertions of the late Governor of Pennsylvania, Samuel W. Pennypacker, this plan was obtained and is now in the possession of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Of still greater interest however, is the original plan or “brouillon du plan du camp de vallée forge,” as he calls it, which Duportail drew and on which he located the proposed defenses as he rode over the ground on horseback, his outline map posed before him on the pommel of his saddle. Undoubtedly the Commander-in-Chief rode with him and together the advantages of every position were freely and fully discussed. Later, at his own headquarters, Duportail inked in his pencil markings. When the army evacuated camp the following Spring the “plan” was left behind and was only found, more than a century and a quarter later, when the late Lawrence McCormick of the Bellevue Stratford Hotel, Philadelphia, bought the place, then known as “the old John Harvard House” and began its renovation. Tucked away in a cubby-hole in the attic the “plan” was found among other Revolutionary relics. Mr. McCormick deposited the precious document with The Historical Society of Pennsylvania where it is now preserved.

*This information has been obtained from the very able acting Superintendent of the Valley Forge Park, Jerome J. Sheas, who for more than thirty years has been connected with the work of restoring the camp. Mr. Sheas says that the objects located on the “plan” are so accurately indicated that one has to only dig at the spot and the foundations of the fortification will surely appear.*
The fate of the Duportail's headquarters has been no less interesting. Through the generosity of a public-minded citizen, an Alumnus of the University of Pennsylvania, Henry N. Woolman, it has become the property of that institution of learning. Mr. Woolman writes under date of August 12, 1932:

In 1926 I purchased from Mr. Thomas M. Royal, Cressbrook Farm which had previously belonged to Mr. McCormick of the Bellevue Stratford Hotel. It consisted of 178 acres and on it was the beautiful old colonial house which was occupied by General Duportail, the French engineer for General Washington at Valley Forge.

That spring I offered to donate the farm to the University of Pennsylvania as a nucleus of a campus for the Undergraduate Departments of the University of Pennsylvania.

After five years of study by various committees the Trustees of the University accepted the gift and the property was deeded to the Trustees last year.  

Duportail, as yet, has no marker at Valley Forge. To remedy this defect it is proposed to inaugurate a celebration for the nineteenth of April, 1933, the One Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of the announcement by General Washington to the allied armies of the cessation of hostilities. Four days earlier (April 15, 1783), Congress, then sitting in Philadelphia, ratified the preliminaries of peace signed in Paris the thirtieth of the preceding November. Approached in this connection Mr. Woolman writes:

*In offering the gift, Mr. Woolman in his address said in part as follows: "The tract of 178 acres at Valley Forge . . . [is] a nucleus of a campus that ultimately should be of sufficient area to contain within itself all those important factors of student life involved in work, study and play . . . Valley Forge . . . standing alone above the Nation's Shrines, symbolizing self-sacrifice and faith and devotion to the cause of democracy, . . . instantly grips the imagination as a place preeminent in situation for growth in spiritual as well as intellectual matters on the part of young American manhood . . . Pennsylvania has an honored birthright at Valley Forge . . . Cressbrook Farm, the Valley Forge site, in the shadow of the great encampment, brings our University face to face with one of the most momentous decisions in our history."
I will be very glad to allow the farm to be used on the 19th of April, 1933, for the celebration of General Duportail at Valley Forge.

At Cressbrook Farm therefore the marker will be placed. The Engineering Department of the United States Army, recognizing as it does Duportail as its founder, will have the leading rôle at this celebration. General Pershing and other notables will take part along with numerous patriotic, historical, educational and Franco-American associations. There will also be recognition of the fact that news of the open alliance of France with the United States, hope for which event buoyed Washington during the dreadful winter of 1778, was received and first celebrated by the army at Valley Forge.7

**DUPORTAIL, AMERICAN CITIZEN AND FARMER**

In 1778, while serving in the Continental Army at Valley Forge, Duportail, along with the other generals, swore allegiance to the United States, Washington in his case acting as witness. The citizenship thus acquired served the French general in good stead when fifteen years later he fled from the Terror in France to seek refuge in America, intending to buy land and to establish himself there.

Better than most Americans, Duportail knew the country of his adoption. During five years he had covered the whole range of it, riding on horseback from post to post; north, south, east, west, over and over again. He knew the climate, character of the soil, with the range of productiveness of each part. Where then should he choose to establish himself? There was never any question in the mind of Duportail as to

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7 So far as is known, Rev. W. Herbert Burk, D.D., in his Washington Memorial at Valley Forge, has the honor of having been the first American to give public recognition to the French Alliance. One of the panels of the stained glass windows of the commemorative chapel portrays the arrival of the treaties at Valley Forge.
where the choice of his heart lay. With sure, invincible attraction he found himself led to the scene of the most important of all his services to America; those that centered around Valley Forge. Even amidst the miseries of that dreadful winter of 1777–1778, the natural advantages of that section of the country, its climate and the general beauty of its wooded hills, greatly impressed him. Particularly was he enchanted with the tumbling streams that came down from those hills, with the crystal-clear “great springs of water” that abounded among them, and with the majestic, winding Schuylkill. During the summer of 1780, while enduring the miseries of a prison-camp near Charleston, South Carolina, he had written the French Minister, visioning the latter as “enjoying the cool shade of some pleasant country-seat near Philadelphia.” This vision he now wished to make real for himself. It remained only to select the spot, and, most important of all for his purpose, find someone who was willing to sell.

The region around Valley Forge, originally included in Letitia Penn Manor, had been broken up into farms so that, by 1778, it was practically all in a state of effective cultivation, and to a considerable extent owned by members of the Society of Friends to which William Penn belonged. Early in the eighteenth century a strip of land on the right bank of the Schuylkill, known as “Swede’s Ford Tract,” extending a mile along the river and with a depth inland of two miles, had been purchased and settled by Swedes from the region of the Delaware. All this land, including the Valley Forge section which lay ten miles to the southwest, was, in 1778, loosely included in the County of Philadelphia. In 1784, when definite boundaries were drawn and new counties made, Swede’s Ford Tract found itself in Montgomery County and in the town-

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*Archives of the Montgomery County Historical Society.*
ship of Upper Merion. At that date the waters of the Schuylkill were still crystal clear and alive with fish so that the shad fishing industry was a thriving one and especially carried on by the Swedes settled there. All this had a great appeal to Duportail who wished to leave as far as possible behind him the bitter memories of the last few years. Some part of Swede’s Ford Tract, therefore, he wished to possess as his own. He was attracted in particular to that part of it which followed the Swede’s Ford Road for it was along that highway that fifteen years earlier he had come with the American Army on its way from Whitemarsh encampment to that of the Gulph, last resting place before taking up winter quarters at Valley Forge.

How well Duportail knew that road! It was at Swede’s Ford that the improvised bridge of wagons, floored with rails from near-by fences, was prepared so that the army could pass over. It was there that the sacredness of the cause in which he found himself engaged first burned itself into his soul. It was there he stood watching the long line of ill-fed, scantily clad, often bare-foot soldiers file by and saw everywhere horses as well as men ready to drop from hunger and exhaustion. But it was precisely in the midst of all this agony that hope was born in him and confidence in the future of that army, for, at the head of the troops, sharing their hardships and suffering, rode Washington. No wonder that Duportail found himself now drawn as by magnetic power to this very spot.

Duportail however, was not the only émigré who sought shelter from the French Revolution in the farm lands of the United States. Louis Marie and Guy de Noailles both bought farms in Montgomery County. Many other French names occur in the records. Among these is that of James Philip Delacour who, in 1792, bought a large segment of Swede’s Ford Tract. It was to him therefore that Duportail made known his desire to settle in that locality. The result was that on June
8, 1795, this gentleman turned over his whole plantation of 189½ acres, "to Louis Lebèque Duportail" and received the sum of "2,368 pounds and 15 shillings lawful money of Pennsylvania." The recorded deed gives a lengthy description of the land, settling accurately its boundaries. It is there definitely stated that the land runs for a considerable distance along the Swede's Ford road, but there is no mention of its touching the river. To remedy this defect, on the twenty-fifth of September of the same year, Duportail bought of "John and Margaret Eastburn for the sum of fifty-five pounds lawful money of Pennsylvania," a piece of land, situate on the south east side of the road leading to Norristown ford on Schuylkill included between and bounded by said road the said river and the plantation of the said Louis Lebeque Duportail, containing by computation three acres more or less . . .

The length of river frontage thus acquired measured a little over a quarter of a mile and the farm is henceforth listed as composed of 194 acres. Returning to the first deed it is important to note that though he there acquired no land directly on the river he was careful to secure the right "to half part of the shad fisheries opposite Swede's Ford Tract" as well as "free egress, ingress, and regress . . . for carrying out seins and putting fish on shore."

Behold then our erstwhile Major General (*Maréchal de Camp*), French Minister of War, settling down to the life of an American farmer, without regrets or loss of time pouring over past sufferings. He must have brought a servant with him and probably a French cook, though such accessories are taken too much as a matter of course for any special mention to be made of them; yet through his American career when serving in the army we learn, incidentally, that such was the habit of the day. Although now an American

*In the Montgomery County Court House, Norristown, Pennsylvania.*
farmer Duportail was still a gentleman of the old school and considered such accessories as of prime necessity. Otherwise, he was living the life of the country, adapting himself to such a dwelling as he found ready built upon his property. Immediately he bent every effort of mind and will to make his farm pay. As proof of this we have but to glance over the list of books taken from the inventory of Duportail’s estate. The list is as follows:

Smith’s Wealth of Nations
Our Own Gardiner
Roads and Dictionary
Rural Economy
Hints to Gentlemen of Property
Leslie’s Husbandry
Inquiries on Plaster of Paris
The Famous Kalandar
Practical Farmer
Vindication of Randolph
Speech of Ames in ye House of Rs.
Sketch on Rotation of Crops
Progress and State of the Canal Navigation in Penna.
Description of certain lands in Massachusetts
Disquisition concerning Ancient India
On Fattening of Cattle
Douglas (a tragedy)

FRENCH BOOKS
Dictionnaire du jardinage
Théorie du jardinage
Boyle’s Dictionary in French and English
Les éléments de la langue anglaise
Nouvelle grammaire allemande
Dictionnaire de Bromare—15 vols.
Guide du Voyageur en Swisse
Constitution of the French Republic.
Testament politique
Map of Connecticut
A French Map
Map of Pennsylvania

These books were all so worn from constant usage that the appraiser found it difficult to set a value on them. They were finally sold for ten dollars the lot. Undoubtedly, Duportail spent much of his free time pouring over these books, especially whatever pertained to the cultivation of his farm. At the time of his death his barns were full of hay, rye (thrashed and unthrashed), of oats, of old rye straw, etc. Always he

10 In the office of the Register of Wills, Montgomery County Court House, Norristown, Pennsylvania, the papers connected with the settlement of the estate of General Duportail are kept on file.
kept horses; most of the time six, though the number and value varies somewhat during the five years the tax lists contain his name. Usually he has at least four cows, though the number falls at times to two; then rises to six. All which shows that he was not averse to a "trade" when the right opportunity offered. In 1796, his farm and dwelling was assessed at $1746; but, in 1799, the value noted had risen to $1996, undoubtedly owing to the improvements made during that time.

In 1801, Duportail disposed of parts of his farm to two different purchasers. Knowing as we now do that he left America for France the following year it might be supposed that already he had begun to rid himself of his property in view of returning permanently to France. Nothing apparently was farther from his thought. On June 24, 1801, he sold his dwelling, barn and all improvements along with 9 acres, 8 perches of land, to Alexander Crawford, for which he received the sum of $730.60. Next day, June 25, for the sum of "273 pounds 15 shillings, lawful gold or silver money of America" he sold to Samuel Holstein, a neighbor whose land joined his, 18 acres and 76 perches, with buildings, improvements, ways, woods, watercourses . . . together with the benefit of the great spring of water . . . and other privileges particularly mentioned in the indenture from the said James Philip Delacour to Louis Lebeque Duportail . . . reserving . . .

And here we come to the clause which proves that the former French Minister of War intended to keep right on with his farming interests in America although he had already been notified that his disabilities as émigré had been removed and freedom secured for his return to France. The deed above mentioned goes on to say that special reservation is made of his right to the shad fisheries opposite Swede's Ford Tract and also the right of roadway through the property [connecting his remaining property with] the Swede's Ford Road, together with the fruit and ornamental trees planted and growing on the
verge of each side thereof, with liberty of planting, cultivating
and pruning as many more as he or they [his heirs and assigns]
may from time to time deem necessary . . .

The 1801 deeds here spoken of, not only make these
reservations, looking to continued activities on the
farm (which still contained about 166 acres), but later
documents reveal the fact that he had already selected
a site for a dwelling which pleased him better than did
does of the original buildings bought with the farm,
and that he had begun the erection of a dwelling more
to his own taste. In the meantime came the order from
Napoleon for émigré officers to return home. When or
how the message was conveyed to him does not appear.
The decision to comply must have come suddenly.
Judging from the fact that the tax lists were sent out
toward the end of March each year and that none was
recorded for “General Duportail, Farmer,” for 1802,
the call must have come early that year. What is cer-
tain is that he left one Isaac Huddleston11 as his agent
to look after the interests of his plantation. Later,
after news of Duportail’s death reached America, the
court, February 3, 1803, appointed this same agent ad-
ministrator of the estate. Isaac Huddleston’s report
is dated January, 1804, and among “Disbursements”
is mentioned the sum of “117 pounds 17 shillings and
6 pence” given to

several persons in the lifetime of Louis L. Duportail, agreeable
to his instructions when he left America, in finishing a new
House and Barn and digging a well, which were left unfinished
by him—and other improvements on his farm, & harvesting and
threshing his grain etc.

For his trouble in managing the estate, Huddleston
charged 37 pounds, 10 shillings which, with commis-
sions, fees, etc., brought disbursements up to £227.17.9.
This sum is shown as met by the sale of the accumu-

11 Isaac Huddleston was a young Quaker doctor who settled in Nor-
rístown in 1793. As a cultivated young man, the two had undoubtedly
been early drawn together. See Auge, Men of Montgomery County.
lated hay, oats and rye, and by the collecting of numerous lesser and greater debts scattered among surrounding farmers. There appear to have been no outstanding obligations against the estate.

The remaining real estate of Duportail was sold at auction by the sheriff of Montgomery County in 1805, which with a few articles, sold also at auction, netted $6322.47. The report is signed and approved in behalf of the heirs of the late General Duportail, whose atty. in fact I am;

Peter S. Duponceau

Philadelphia 2, Oct. 1810.

In addition to the above there is the account of Robert Porter, "administrator de bonis non," showing the receipt of "sundry sums received at various times," amounting to $3191.91, and dated September 28, 1811. After deducting fees, commissions and other state charges, and including "postage on two letters to A. G. Le Beque de Presle (Brother and apparently only heir of General Duportail), Peter S. Duponceau appropriated what remained of the above sum ($2949.15\frac{1}{2}\), as his own lawyer's fee.

12 The Duportail estate was bought at Sheriff's sale by Elisha Evans, who kept the Rising Sun Inn at the Norristown end of Schuylkill Ford. Mr. Evans laid out the tract in town lots and called the place Evansville. This was later changed to Bridgeport. Information given by Mr. Charles Major of Norristown.

13 Peter S. Duponceau came as a lad of seventeen to America and remained here as an American citizen. The famous Beaumarchais, purveyor of French secret aid, introduced him to Baron von Steuben as interpreter, for the lad already was a fluent linguist. Both came over in Beaumarchais' ship, the Flamand and arrived at Valley Forge in February, 1778. Von Steuben and Duponceau were both consigned to Cressbrook farm. In later years, Duponceau, having married and settled in Philadelphia, became a successful lawyer acquiring even a fortune thereby. His later years were devoted to philological studies. He was especially interested in Indian languages and wrote many treatises on their structure and relationships. He died President of the American Philosophical Society. At the time of his death, he was a member of forty learned societies, fourteen of them outside of the United States.