

Simeon De Witt: Letters from the Revolutionary War

Simeon De Witt and his former classmates kept in touch through eight years of war.

BY KEN BRANSON

One of Rutgers' first graduates was one of the nation's first soldiers—and a vivid correspondent of history.

Young Simeon De Witt witnessed some of our nation's greatest—and most dangerous—early moments when he joined the Continental Army in 1776 after graduating from Queen's College, the small private school in New Brunswick, New Jersey, that would eventually evolve into today's Rutgers.

The university would go on to be home to countless men and women serving in conflicts from the Civil War to the war in Afghanistan over its 250-year history. But it all started with De Witt, eventually a chief surveyor for General George Washington and his contemporaries.

In a series of letters to his former classmates preserved by Rutgers Special Collections and University Archives, De Witt captured his own hopes and doubts in the passionate prose of a young man finding his way, much like those who have followed.

"My apprehensions were alarming indeed," De Witt wrote of the 1777 Battle of Saratoga. "But I resolved rather gloriously to perish in the tempest than ignobly to turn my back or

stand an idle spectator ... the critical moment big with the fate of my country, myself, when liberty and all seemed to hang in suspense."

De Witt's regiment was part of the reserve and was never committed to the battle, which would become one of the Revolution's key turning points, but they saw the flames and heard the artillery "shaking the worlds around us."

"I can assure you never has such a storm threatened our state," he later wrote. "Every inhabitant sat trembling at its approach till the favor of providence threw the enemy into our hands."

After the battle, De Witt described the British surrender as "the most glorious, grandest sight America ever beheld or perhaps ever shall see."

De Witt's letter about Saratoga offers a rare panorama of battle—rare, Rutgers historian Peter Silver says, because individual soldiers' views of such events usually were limited. "Most soldiers lived in an information and visual tunnel," he notes. "They saw what was directly in front of them and around them."

Silver points out that 18th-century communication was slow and uncertain, even in peacetime. "Before the war, people lived with an uncertainty about whether their letters would

Simeon De Witt served as surveyor general for the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War.



De Witt's
February 14, 1778,
letter to classmate
John Bogart,
recounting his
experience at the
Battle of Saratoga.

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be received," Silver says. "They would send two or three copies to make sure, and they would number their letters, so their correspondents would know if they'd missed one. And in terms of time, we're talking weeks to get a letter from one place in America to another."

The war made everything worse, Silver notes. "People's information horizons shrank," he says. "All the information links they had were just chopped off."

For De Witt and his classmates, their friend John Bogart, a tutor at the college, was their one sure link with each other. With British forces occupying New Brunswick, Bogart had moved

with the remaining faculty and student body to Readington in Hunterdon County. De Witt and about a half-dozen close friends in the Army contacted Bogart throughout the war so he could help keep them informed of each other's activities.

Occasionally, members of DeWitt's group discovered too late that they'd been within a few miles of each other and didn't know it.

De Witt was finishing a gloomy letter to Bogart on May 9, 1781, when an old college friend, David Annan, appeared at his camp in Morristown, New Jersey.

"Wonderful wonder of wonders!" De Witt wrote. "I am quite another man. My spirits have gone afloat. We had a long talk with each other and raised the ghosts of all our former transactions. He is as droll if not droller than ever, full of laugh and jocularly."



This compass was made by Benjamin Pike and presented to De Witt by George Washington. De Witt used it to conduct land surveys for mapmaking.

The visit came at the perfect time. De Witt had just survived one of the coldest winters of the war, once writing to Bogart that “the other day one of my ears froze as hard as a pine [knot].”

Unlike his friends, whose interests were literary and philosophical, De Witt was a mathematician and surveyor and, by then, the chief surveyor in Washington’s army. In that capacity, he drew maps that would guide Washington to battle, including the final engagement at Yorktown, Virginia, in 1781, when Lord Cornwallis’s army surrendered to Washington—a historic event at which De Witt was present.

He went on to a long and distinguished career as the surveyor general of New York, helping to design the streets of New York City and Norfolk, Virginia, as well as determining the route of the Erie Canal—but not before seeing the toll of war across the young country.

“You see where we now are, in a country which bears the melancholy vestiges of war,” he wrote shortly before the Yorktown surrender. “What cruel changes does the destructive hand of war make wherever it approaches.”