

Unlocking Two Revolutionary War Era Maps

THE RATZER MAP: New York on the Eve of Revolution

In the late 1760s, Lieutenant Bernard Ratzer, an engineer and surveyor in the British Army, completed a detailed military map of New York City and its environs. Ratzer's *Plan of the City of New York*, seen above, captures the bustling commercial city and the rural farmland of Brooklyn on the eve of the American Revolution.

During the 1760s, revolutionary sentiment ebbed and flowed in New York. On November 1, 1765, more than 10 years before the Revolutionary War, mobs brandishing lanterns, candles, and torches filled the city streets, denouncing the Stamp Act and other British attempts to tax the American colonies. Preparing to subdue further riots and resistance, the British commander in chief, General Thomas Gage, ordered engineer John Montresor to create a map of New York City and the harbor. Montresor quickly and furtively conducted a survey, noting that his mission, if discovered, "might endanger one's house and effects if not one's life."

By late 1766, Parliament had repealed the Stamp Act and the riotous spirit that had permeated New York had cooled. That winter, Bernard Ratzer continued the work begun by Montresor, conducting extensive surveys and filling in much of the detail that his predecessor, working hastily under more

dangerous conditions, had left out. The Ratzer map displayed here was first published in 1770. It depicts Manhattan up to what is today 50th Street, as well as parts of Brooklyn, Queens, and New Jersey. Across the bottom of the map, Ratzer presents a



A Plan of the City of New York & its Environs [surveyed in Winter 1775], John Montresor, 1968. m-1775(1968).fl; Brooklyn Historical Society.

perspective view of New York City as seen from Governors Island; the bluffs of Brooklyn's coast, marked "Long Island," can be seen to the right. Once the Revolutionary War commenced in 1775, the British again turned their attention to New York City. If they could gain control of that valuable port city, the British Army would then have access to the Hudson River and the interior of the continent, making it easier to crush the American rebellion. Ratzer's detailed map would become a key military tool in the battle for New York.

THE RATZER MAPS AT BROOKLYN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The rare first edition of the Ratzer map shown above was given to the Long Island Historical Society (today Brooklyn Historical Society) by Henry Evelyn Pierrepont in the late 19th century. Pierrepont, a successful merchant and real estate developer, was a founding member of the Long Island Historical Society and of Green-Wood Cemetery, where he is buried.

In 2010, as part of a massive cataloguing project at Brooklyn Historical Society, the map was rediscovered, in very poor condition. Conservator Jon Derow restored this exquisite map, one of only four known copies of the first state (or first edition) printed in 1770.

Working together in a strategic partnership, Brooklyn Historical Society and Green-Wood Historic Fund purchased the portion of a Ratzer map seen to your left from William Reese Company in 2013. The map was used by General Hugh Earl Percy during the Battle of Brooklyn in August 1776. This map, along with other relics of his military career, were preserved at his family home of Alnwick Castle until it was sold by his descendants.

Lord Percy's map is a perfect complement to BHS's first edition Ratzer map. The joint purchase underscores the fact that BHS and Green-wood hold some of Brooklyn's most important historical artifacts. The map is doubly meaningful because the Battle of Brooklyn was fought on land that eventually became Green-Wood Cemetery. Purchase of the Lord Percy map was made possible by a grant from the B.H. Breslauer Foundation, with additional funding provided by the Green-Wood Historic Fund, and a group of generous Brooklyn Historical Society Trustees.

THE RATZER MAP IN USE: Lord Percy's Map, 1776

Ratzer's map was put to use during the Battle of Brooklyn in August 1776. The portion of the Ratzer map to the left was marked by Hugh Earl Percy, a 34-year old British general who had distinguished himself during the fighting around Boston the previous year.

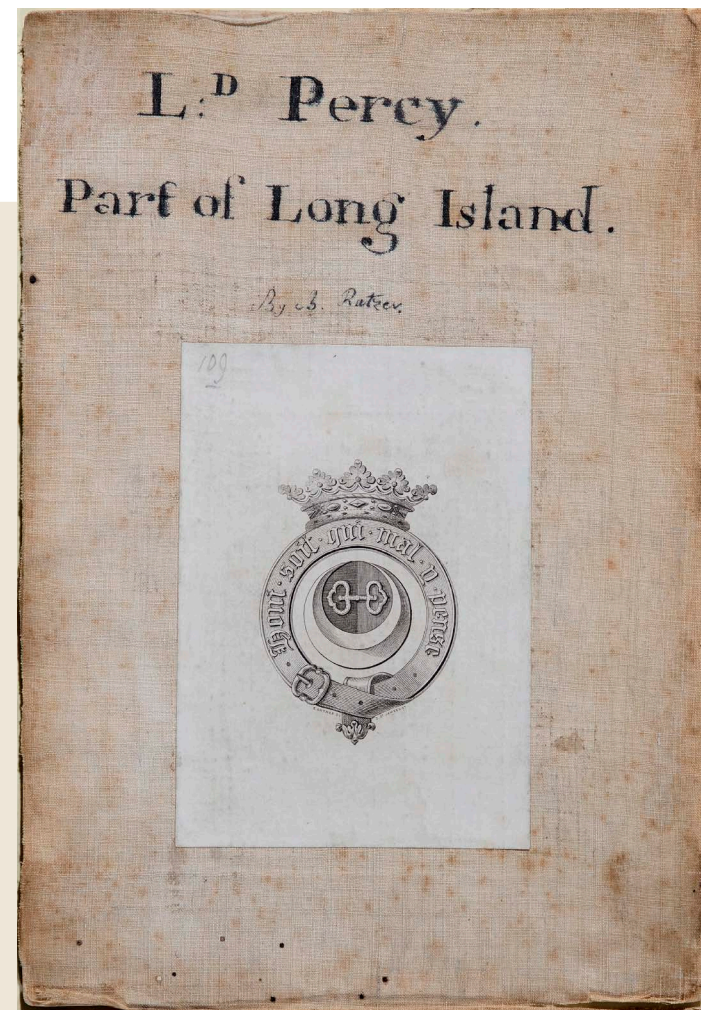
In red ink, Percy marked the positions of American trenches, batteries, and forts protecting Brooklyn Heights, the mouth of the East River, and Gowanus Creek. For example, the dotted red circle numbered "24," just north of Gowanus Creek, indicates the site that Percy apparently believed to be Cobble Hill Fort. In actuality, that Fort stood further north, at present-day Court Street and Atlantic Avenue. What is the significance of these numbers? Presumably, they are the continuation of a numerical series that begins on the missing upper half of the map. The red notations on the map suggest the cold calculations of a British general preparing to subdue the positions of a weaker enemy.

In order to reach these positions, eliminate them, and seize the strategic high ground of Brooklyn Heights, the British first had to overcome the Americans' outer line of defense on Gowanus Heights, a long, east-west ridge partly visible at the bottom of the map, which includes what is now Green-Wood Cemetery and Prospect Park.

On the night of August 26, 1776, a large British column marched eastward across southern Brooklyn to sweep around the left flank of the American line. Meanwhile, two other British columns were harassing and distracting the Americans on their right flank and center, further to the west. On the morning of August 27, the British fired two signal guns, alerting the columns to attack in earnest. Almost entirely surrounded, the Americans fled to the relative safety of Brooklyn Heights.

The British took some eight hundred prisoners, but they decided not to immediately storm the army backed up against the East River. Instead, as the British slowly besieged the American lines, George Washington evacuated his 10,000 troops to Manhattan on the night of August 29. The Americans had escaped to fight on for seven more years, and the British lost their best chance to win the war with a single, decisive battle.

— Barnet Schecter, Independent Historian



Detail of back of map, including Percy's family bookplate.