

Whatever satisfaction the race (and the weather) might thus have given to the public and Columbia, it did not please the government, in view of a sudden recurrence of the traditional fear of a war with France, and New York State again took over the island for a quarantine station and the erection of new fortifications to replace those now fallen into disrepair.

In a message from Jan. 4, 1794, to the United States Congress, Governor Clinton reminded the lawmakers of "the naked and exposed condition of our principal seaport and urge the necessity of immediately providing for its defense." Congress thereupon made a survey of the construction needed to put the island on a proper war footing, reporting that the expense of installing batteries, embrasures, and platforms for 24 guns, plus a redoubt, powder magazine and blockhouse, would total around \$3,500.

This did not seem nearly enough to Clinton, and he said so with such vehemence that Congress grudgingly provided an appropriation of \$150,000. The governor was still far from satisfied with what he felt was a woefully inadequate sum for the work needed; it was a soldier of a family of soldiers - his brother James was a Continental brigadier and his cousin was Sir Henry Clinton of His Britannic Majesty's forces - and he was determined that Governors Island should provide something more than a theoretical hazard to hostile advances. So when Congress turned down his pleas for yet more money, he followed the precedent set in 1779 by the royalist sympathizers in New York and improvised his own system of free labor for the desired fortifications.

Appealing to the patriotism of selected groups of citizens such as the Columbia College students and faculty, German and Irish social clubs, the Tammany Society, and the trade guilds of cooper, masons, stone-cutters, carpenters, and - implausible as it may seem - tallow chandlers, wig-makers, and hairdressers, Clinton secured enough skilled volunteer workers to begin his building program. The governor himself organized the working parties and, despite his 55 years, took his turn at pick, shovel, and barrow. With the savings, thus effected in labor costs, Clinton was able to provide the essential materials and equipment needed. By spring the island's new defenses were sufficiently impressive to give authoritative support to the governor's order that hereafter, the warships of all foreign powers must keep one mile south of Governors Island. Even though the resident forces at that time consisted of only one captain, one surgeon, two first lieutenants, one cadet, four noncommissioned officers, four musicians, four artificers, and 34 pri-

vates. (One may be excused for wondering how it was possible to obtain the services of even these few troops, for our Army's pay scale of the period ran from \$8 a month for a private to a munificent \$200 a month for a major general.)

Hardly had the new works been completed before they were suddenly called upon to take part in an actual Franco-American crisis, although fortunately not of the bellicose nature that had been anxiously anticipated for so long. Early in the fall of 1794, the French frigate *Semillante*, Admiral Sura commanding, nosed her way through the Narrows and obediently dropped anchor far south of Governors Island. In accordance with naval etiquette the *Semillante* thereupon fired a salute of 15 guns. International courtesy required that Governors Island return the salute, gun for gun, without delay, but the island preserved the silence of a tomb. Outraged, the French admiral dispatched a staff officer to call upon the American commanding officer for an explanation of his discourteous reticence, and the consequent report of the occurrence to Governor Clinton shows that even then protocol had its problems:

Governors Island,

October 11, 1794

Sir:

Yesterday morning Admiral Sura sent a lieutenant to this island to learn from me as a commanding officer whether it would be proper or whether it had been Customary to Salute the Flag of the United States at such a distance and what number of guns would be given. In answer to his Salute, I informed the Lieut. that the Admiral lay at such a distance I thought it improper to Salute but should it so Happen that the Admiral did Come Up within 1 mile in a Southerly Direction of this Island according to Your Excellencies orders I should Return his Salute. But as to Stipulate for the number of Guns it was out of my power, but that Our National Salute was thirteen at present. Agreeable to Your Excellencies Order some time ago, I shall attend to Returning the Salute should the Admiral come up. Your Excellency will please to understand that Admiral Sura lays at the Watering place so called near Staten Island.

I am Sir. Your Excellencies
Most obedient, & Humble servant,
Corn. R. Sedam Capt.

But, the dictates of diplomacy carried the matter to even higher levels and a month later Secretary of War Knox informed the commanding officer on Governors Island that the Minister of the French Republic had made the affair the subject of an