

**Revolutionary Westchester:
John Odell, General Washington's Westchester Guide**

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When impending war threatened in the spring of 1776, the first man to volunteer for the Westchester Militia at the Tarrytown Green under the giant white-wood tree was 19-year-old John Odell. During the war Odell served as a private in the local militia, a lieutenant in the Mohawk Valley, and as a Westchester Guide, one of an elite group of local men who acted as scouts, pathfinders and advisors for Continental Army officers. As the war dragged on, Odell's skill and perseverance earned him a well-deserved reputation that eventually brought him to the attention of General George Washington. Two of the homes he lived in within the Town of Greenburgh still stand nearly 250 years later, and other historic markers and his gravesite in Westchester also keep alive the legacy of Odell's amazing life.

John Odell (1756-1835) was born in Cortlandt Manor on October 24, 1756, the third of 11 children of Jonathan Odell (1730-1818) and Margaret Dyckman (1732-1783). Around 1774, the Odells, including 18-year-old John, moved onto leasehold in Philipse Manor, a 436-acre farm on the banks of the Hudson River. Their farmhouse had been built originally in 1693 as a one-room, square, stone structure by Jan Harmse, but in the 1740s occupant Matthys Conklin expanded it.

The Odells descended from English ancestors who married into Dutch families, including the Dyckmans and the Vermilyes. Two Odell brothers married two Dyckman sisters, Jonathan Odell to Margaret Dyckman and his brother Abraham Odell (1725-1799) married to her sister Rebecca Dyckman (1732-1783).

The Odell family reportedly spoke the Dutch language and acted in the manners of the Dutch rather than the English. Even in the 20th century the family pronounced their name as if it were written Odle, with emphasis on the initial vowel, as in "OW-dil" or "OW-dul" (or "OH-dil" or "OH-dul") as opposed to on the second part as in "o-DELL," and it was variously spelled in the records of the time, as Odle or Owdle or, increasingly, Odell.

It is possible, given the layout of the building and its location on the Old Albany Post Road, that the house also served as a public tavern and/or inn. Commonly referred to today as “The Odell Tavern,” the building, well preserved, is located on private property at 100 South Broadway, and, to this day, remains the oldest building in Irvington and one of the oldest in the county. In an advertisement by a post rider of the “Constitutional Post Office” in the New York Journal and Advertiser in 1775, notice is given that newspapers and letters will be left at various taverns along the way, one of them “Owdles.” John’s brother Abraham Odell (1760-1820) ran a blacksmith shop across the road, and he and his cousin Jacob Odell both served as post riders during the Revolutionary War.

Much of the economic bounty of Philipse Manor in the colonial and post-Revolutionary era came from the use of the forced labor in agriculture by enslaved persons by the Philipse family as well as the tenant farmers, several of whom owned between one and nine enslaved individuals. According to the 1790 federal census, four enslaved persons lived on the farm of John’s father, Jonathan Odell. After several gradual emancipation laws, New York State abolished slavery completely in 1827.

When the tenants of Philipse Manor were threatened in July 1776 by the presence of the British warships *Phoenix* and *Rose* in the Tappan Zee, local men, such as John Odell and his brothers, volunteered for the militia. From the moment he volunteered at the outbreak of the war, John Odell served continuously for eight years and in various capacities. For the first six months of the war, during the summer of 1776, at the age of 19 or 20, John Odell served as a private in the company of Captain Stephen Oakley in the militia regiment commanded by Samuel Drake. Militia enrollment reflected community involvement, more so than just individual choice or centralized bureaucracy. John volunteered at the mustering grounds in Tarrytown, but since John had many cousins in the Yonkers and Kingsbridge area, he chose to serve alongside them in their company, rather than serving in one made up of men from his neighborhood around his home in Tarrytown or Dobbs Ferry.

Shortly after enlistment, Odell marched with his company to New York City where he assisted with the construction of fortifications along the Hudson River. Around August, Odell was taken ill with “the Camp Distemper or Dysentary” and returned to his family’s home (the Odell Tavern), where he “lay very sick” for six weeks. As soon as he recovered Odell returned to New York City and joined the company just before the American army retreated out of New York to Kingsbridge. At Kingsbridge, Odell assisted the company with erecting some of the outworks around Fort Independence. He was taken sick again with the same distemper, and again returned his family’s home to recuperate, until the autumn.

John’s family farmhouse itself was an important site during the war, playing a fortuitous role in the early history of the fledgling New York State government. After the British defeated George Washington’s Continental Army at the Battle of Long Island on August 27, 1776, the New York Committee of Safety’s members fled the city and began travelling up the eastern shore of the Hudson River. They stopped on August 31, 1776 at “the house of Mr. Odell,

Philipse's Manor," where they continued to coordinate their resistance, including correspondence with General Washington, and passing resolutions advising residents to move their livestock out of reach of the approaching British army.

A few months later, in November 1776, several units of the British army withdrawing from the Battle of White Plains camped on Jonathan Odell's farm, although John was away on service at the time. Jonathan Odell was taken prisoner and the occupying army stripped the farm of its orchards, wheat and hogs. Caesar, an enslaved person of African ancestry, offered valiant resistance against the British attempts to commandeer the products of the Odell farm. While the British army might have simply been taking needed resources, it is likely that they were also aware of the active patriotism of the Odell family.

In January 1777, the Continental Army attempted to recapture Fort Independence at Kingsbridge, which Odell and the Westchester militia had helped to build, but which had been taken when the British moved up to White Plains in the fall of 1776. John Odell, along with his cousins Abraham and Michael Dyckman, served ably as guides. Regrettably, poor planning by the Continental Army leadership and the arrival of a massive snowstorm forced them to withdraw without achieving their objective. After this failure, General Washington looked skeptically upon the use of militia in battlefield combat. However, as the conditions in Westchester evolved in the ensuing war years, Washington would use the militia as a home guard, and would be forced to accept the importance of skilled local guides, such as John Odell, who would eventually come to the general's attention.

In July of 1778, the Continental Army returned to White Plains and General Washington created innovative light infantry and cavalry units to be drawn from Continental Army battalions. In Westchester's difficult topography and hotly-contested terrain, these light infantry units could move quickly to carry out hit-and-run raids, scouting missions, and foraging expeditions. Detailed knowledge of the woods, rivers and rugged terrain was essential, and trusted locals who had such intimate knowledge were recruited as guides. Commanders and soldiers from New England, Pennsylvania, Maryland and Virginia were guided around Westchester by 15 to 20 such scouts, including John Odell who rose to distinction.

When he was appointed guide, Lieutenant Governor Pierre Van Cortlandt presented him with a pair of pistols and with a dapple-grey horse that he rode throughout the war. As was customary at that time, the guides were not officially a part of the Continental Army establishment, but the hazards and stress were real, and their assistance proved vital. The duty Odell performed as a guide, he later said in his pension application, "was very difficult and hazardous and often in the night time and it was necessary for him to be almost constantly on the alert moving up and down the American lines to see if any enemy was out and to get intelligence of the enemy's movements and to lead and conduct the parties and troops when under march through the said County of Westchester."

Standing six-feet tall, John Odell was noted not only for his physical bearing, but also his keen mind and cool disposition. Odell developed a technique with his saber that was suited to his large frame and lengthy limbs: he would lean far back in the saddle so as to strike a pursuer from a great distance. Odell's marshal prowess was so notorious that a £100 reward had been offered by the British for his capture, and it was said that he was so well respected by the enemy that they always approached him cautiously. Odell kept on his guard, prepared for surprises, and when things went awry, as they often did in the no-man's land between the lines, Odell's prior planning turned out to be invaluable.

In August of 1778, Odell was assigned to one of Washington's light infantry companies. The commander, from Maryland, had set up camp at an advanced position close to enemy lines, near Philipse Manor Hall in today's Yonkers, on the hilltop that is now Oakland Cemetery. On September 16, British forces surrounded the camp before springing upon the surprised men. Many of the panic-stricken patriots dropped their muskets and began to surrender, but Odell encouraged the men to take up their arms, and led them west across the Saw Mill River to safety.

Later that month, on September 20, John's cousin, Isaac "Uck" Odell, served as guide on an expedition near the border of today's Hastings and Dobbs Ferry in which American forces annihilated an elite troop of Hessian Jägers, in an encounter which has since been called "The Battle of Edgar's Lane."

By 1780 the main theater of the Revolutionary War had shifted to the south, but conditions in the embattled region between the lines in Westchester County deteriorated as rival bands of local patriots and loyalist militia fought in brutal hit-and-run raids. John Odell's local knowledge, bravery and quick thinking saved American soldiers many times, and provided valuable assistance to the officers he served under, and he soon made major contributions to the French-American alliance that would ultimately win the war and establish the independence of the new United States.

Officers and soldiers ignored the sage advice of John Odell, Westchester Guide, at their peril. In February of 1780, John Odell served as guide to Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Thompson, in charge of 250 men from Massachusetts stationed at the post at Youngs' House (on Grasslands Road, Route 100C in Valhalla, near the modern Blythedale Children's Hospital). Odell advised Thompson to retreat in the face of an advancing party of loyalists backed by regular British troops. When the officer insisted, "I am ordered to defend this post," Odell cautioned him, "Not against impossibilities!" Thompson sent Odell to recall several detachments that had been out on patrol, but when Odell saw that the parties were too far away to be safely recalled in the face of the British advance, he watched on horseback as the battle unfolded. One account claims that he carried away to safety the daughter of homeowner Joseph Youngs.

From May to December 1780, Odell served in the Mohawk Valley as a Second Lieutenant, with his cousin Michael Dyckman as First Lieutenant, in one of six companies in a regiment of levies protecting residents against British-allied loyalists and Native Americans.

The Franco-American alliance marked a major turning point in the larger war, and it played out right here in Westchester County, with John Odell at the center of events. On July 2nd and 3rd of 1781, John Odell served as the principal guide for General Washington as the Continental Army approached Westchester to await the arrival of the French army. (The French arrived after the Continentals.) With Odell as guide, General Washington made a short halt “at the Church by Tarry Town” (now known as the Old Dutch Church in Sleepy Hollow), before joining the French forces in a giant encampment that stretched from Dobbs Ferry across Greenburgh past the Bronx River. Odell provided guidance on topography and local conditions, as we can see in a note written on July 6 from “Camp Phillipsburgh,” by Quartermaster General Timothy Pickering to George Washington: “I have asked Odell the guide, the distance between Storm’s bridge [Elmsford] & the one on the Dobbs ferry road.” Odell informed him of the distance (it was “about three miles”), and also pointed out the location along the route of some fallen trees that required cutting.

On July 22nd and 23rd, John Odell guided General Washington and the American troops when the generals led over 5,000 soldiers on a massive scouting expedition of British-occupied New York City. They found that British fortifications were too strong for Washington’s desired attack on New York City, and by mid-August the generals received word that the French fleet, then in the West Indies, would only come as far north as the southern theater, not to New York. They then abandoned any plan to attack the British in New York City, and decided instead to risk a march of more than 400 miles, from the Hudson River to Virginia, where they ended up successfully trapping and defeating General Cornwallis at Yorktown on October 19, 1781.

Humor, charm and luck attended John Odell’s wartime experiences. One time when Odell visited his sweetheart Hannah McChain at her home (in today’s Hartsdale, along the Sprain Brook north of Ardsley Road), some loyalists of the neighborhood heard of his presence and they raided the house, but Hannah had secreted Odell in the garret where he lay prone upon a plank under the roof, and the searchers failed to find him.

Another story is told in which Odell and some patriots drove out a group of loyalist militia that had occupied a house in Tarrytown. The next morning when the commander called to attention the patriots who had stayed in the house, Odell could not find his breeches, so the woman of the house offered him one of her petticoats. Odell mounted his horse, and rode forth to appear before his commander, clad in the woman’s undergarment. The road was thereafter called “Petticoat Lane.” (Today the road is Old White Plains Road, and the house still stands, at one time an antiques store, now a private residence. A historical marker in front of the house dating to 1965 refers to the naming of Petticoat Lane.)

Even though the victory at Yorktown had effectively ended the war, news travelled slowly, and bitterness continued in Westchester. The war here was not over, and Odell continued his service as a guide to Continental Army officers in the embattled region between the lines. In the spring of 1782 Odell advised a commanding officer planning an ambush to station his men inside, rather than behind, a particular barn, outlining to the officer a plan to spring out of the large, front doors to surprise the enemy when they arrived. The officer insisted on posting the men behind the barn, and when the enemy's vanguard of horse approached, the men lying in wait behind the barn peeped around the building, thus revealing their position and causing the enemy horsemen to flee and their ambush to fail. During the return to American lines, a Loyalist soldier shot Odell's fellow guide and cousin, Abraham "Brom" Dyckman of Kingsbridge. Odell helped pull Brom away from immediate danger, but the wound proved mortal. (A historical marker at the corner of West First Street and South 11th Avenue in Mount Vernon now marks the site of the incident, and a memorial to Brom Dyckman is located at the Presbyterian Church in Yorktown Heights).

In January of 1783, John Odell's party returned from a successful raid, and, before the various members of the party went their separate ways, they stopped—against John Odell's advice—at Albert Orser's house along the Hudson River north of Sing Sing Kill (Ossining), short of the relative safety that would have been afforded by crossing the Croton River to the north. Just then a party of loyalist militia on horseback attacked; and Odell was chased by two of the enemy captains onto the frozen Hudson River. The pursuers cut at Odell with their sabers, and one struck his hat and the bridge of his nose, leaving a mark that would remain the rest of his life. Odell escaped by pulling up his horse suddenly and striking a blow to one of his pursuers, then rushing toward Teller's Point (now Croton Point Park).

The year the war ended, in 1783, John Odell married Hannah McChain. John and Hannah resided at first at her house where he had been hidden in the garret during the war; but, in 1785, he bought 185 acres and the house where General Rochambeau had made his headquarters in 1781 (along today's Ridge Road in Hartsdale).

John's brother Abraham, also a soldier in the war, and afterwards serving in the state assembly and for almost 20 years as the Supervisor of the Town of Greenburgh, purchased the nearby Joseph Appleby property, which had been Washington's Headquarters during the encampment (located along today's Secor Road, near the Hartsdale-Ardsley border, and now the property of radio station WFAS). Thus, brothers John and Abraham Odell acquired the former Philipsburgh Encampment headquarters of Generals Rochambeau and Washington, respectively.

In 1786, John Odell was commissioned as a captain in the state militia, and in 1797 a lieutenant colonel, for which he was later called "Colonel Odell." In the 1830s he received a pension for his service as a lieutenant in the Mohawk Valley. But Odell generally avoided further military service, politics and public office. John Odell had one daughter, Hannah, with his first wife, Hannah McChain, and a son, John Jackson Odell, with his second wife, Abigail Brown. His descendants continued the tradition of military service: his son John Jackson Odell became a major serving in the Westchester Militia under General Pierre Van Cortlandt, Jr.

during the War of 1812, and Jackson's son, Dyckman, in turn was a sergeant in the Civil War. Dyckman's son, Otis, served in the Spanish-American War and his daughter, Edna, served as a nurse with the Red Cross in France during World War I. His grandson, Roland served in WWII.

Because of good luck and some preservation efforts, two surviving historic homes inhabited at one time or another by John Odell still stand: the Odell Tavern in Irvington and the Odell House Rochambeau Headquarters in Hartsdale. For many years after the Revolutionary War, the Odell Tavern was the site of Fourth of July celebrations at which war veterans held the seats of honor. When Jonathan Odell died in 1818, his son William took over the homestead, and over the years pieces of the land were sold off, including, in 1835, to James Alexander Hamilton, son of Alexander Hamilton, for his nearby estate, "Nevis" (named for the Caribbean Island where Alexander Hamilton was born.) The Odell Tavern is now on private property.

John Odell's descendants continued to occupy the Odell House (Rochambeau Headquarters) in Hartsdale. In 1965, the house, the colonial furnishings and two remaining acres of the original 185-acre farm were deeded to the New York chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution, to be preserved, restored, and open to the public as a museum. It was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1973.

By the 1990s, the poor condition of the house made it unsafe. At that time, many of the remaining furnishings, tools, books and papers were stored in two shipping containers behind the house. On July 10, 2019, the Town of Greenburgh took the first steps toward ownership of the property; and, in December 2019, received a \$600,000 matching grant from New York State for restoration of the structure. Ownership was transferred finally to Greenburgh on March 4, 2020.

Information on the house and how to donate funds needed for the matching grant can be found at [Friends of Odell House Rochambeau Headquarters](https://www.odellrochambeau.org/).
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A massive collection of family papers, documents and other objects that had been held with the house have been processed and catalogued, by the Friends of Odell House. The finding aid is now available on the WCHS website.

John Odell died on October 26, 1835, and is buried in the Old Dutch Church Burying Ground at Sleepy Hollow. In his pension application of 1830, John Odell summed up his contributions when he wrote of himself: "At times when the country needed the services of all of its citizens, he embarked with zeal in the cause of his country."

