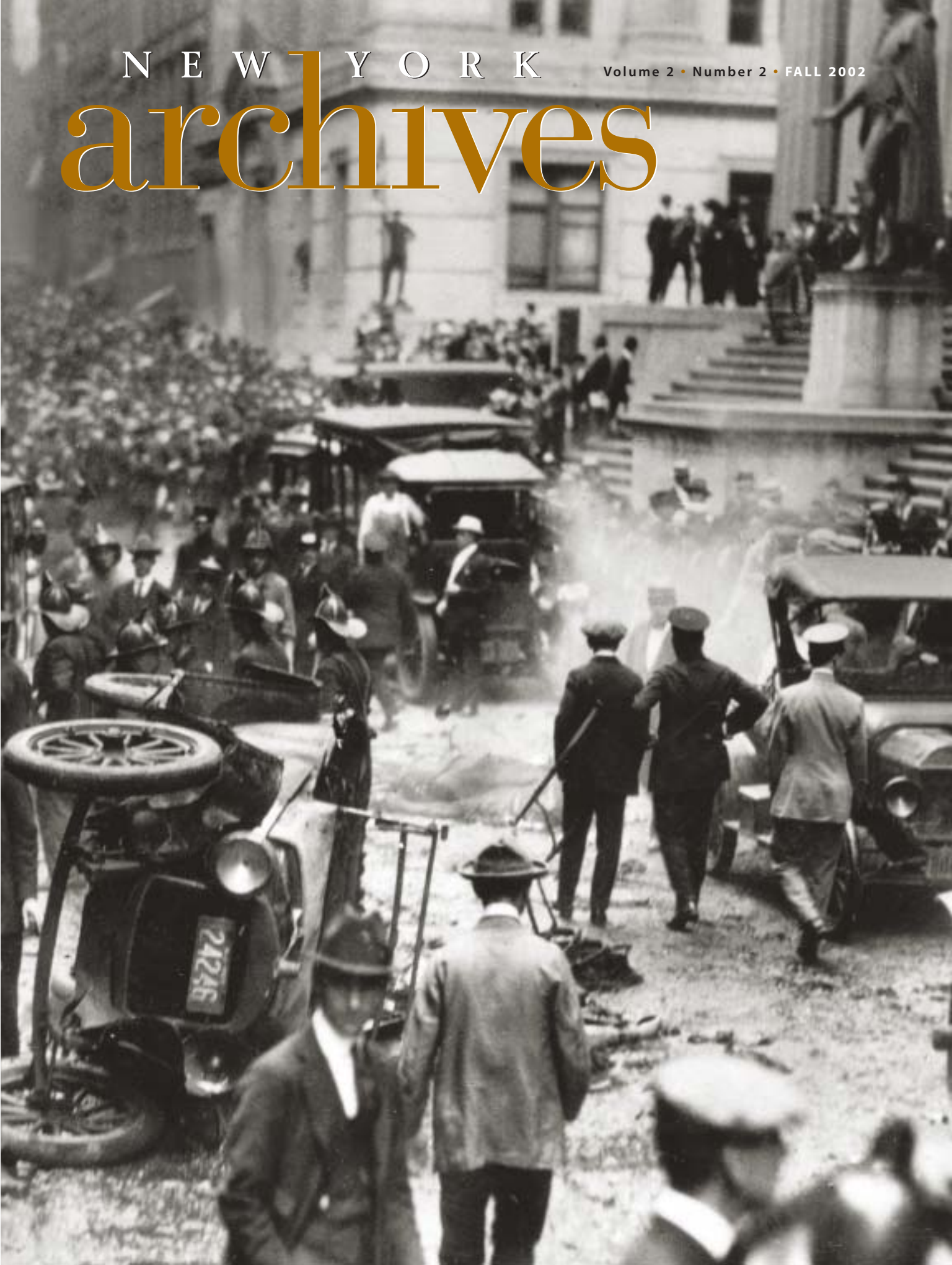


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WEST POINT

DUTY • HONOR • COUNTRY



NEW YORK STATE ARCHIVES

A company of cadets forming for infantry drill at the United States Military Academy at West Point, September, 1911.

BY JOSEPH P. FRANKLIN,

Major General, U.S. Army (Retired)

THE “KEY TO AMERICA”

Celebrating 200 Years

In 1775, New Yorkers Christopher Tappan and James Clinton visited and surveyed the Hudson River Valley after the Continental Congress charged the New York Assembly with defense of the Hudson River against British forces in the colonies. Fifty miles above New York City, Tappan and Clinton discovered that the wide, tranquil river suddenly narrowed into a sharp, S-shaped bend with steep cliffs rising to rocky terrain on either side. The swift water and limited space forced ships to slow down so they could negotiate the dangerous passage. Maps taken from Tappan and Clinton’s surveys named the promontory on the western bank of the river “West Point.”

Recognizing the strategic value of this terrain in controlling navigation on the Hudson, local militia began to build forts on the surrounding hills south of West Point, near Bear Mountain. Inexplicably, West Point itself was not fortified. The intent of these defenses was to prevent the British from using the waterway as a means to isolate New England, considered the heart of the

rebellious colonies. To further impede British navigation, an iron chain was forged and stretched bank to bank across the river. Called the “Great Chain,” or the “West Point Chain,” the links were attached to log booms, since the huge chain would have sunk without these floating supports.

Foreign Aid at West Point

However, the American rebellion was confronting an experienced and numerically superior force, and in 1777 British troops captured and destroyed the forts and the Great Chain. Fortunately, the American victory at the Battle of Saratoga persuaded the British to withdraw to New York City. But as the opposing armies went into winter quarters at the end of 1777, the outcome of their conflict was far from certain.

Then a series of events centering on West Point set the stage for the eventual triumph of the fledgling United States. In January, 1778, General Samuel Parsons marched a garrison of troops from Peekskill across the frozen Hudson to occupy the ground that today

is the site of the United States Military Academy. Thaddeus Kosciuszko, the Polish nobleman who had come to America in 1776 to design the fortifications at Saratoga and to help plan the defenses of the Continental Congress in Philadelphia, was given the rank of colonel and traveled to West Point in 1778 to complete its defenses, which had been designed by the French engineer Lieutenant Colonel Louis de la Radière. Captain Frederick von Steuben, the Prussian Army officer who

foreign friends made a difference for the American army. To keep an eye on British attempts to move up the river, in 1779 George Washington established his headquarters at West Point, calling it the “key to America.”

A Traitor in Their Midst

But the road ahead was not without perils. Major General Benedict Arnold persuaded Washington to give him command of West Point. Arnold had earned his rank by

TO KEEP AN EYE ON BRITISH ATTEMPTS TO MOVE UP THE RIVER, IN 1779 GEORGE WASHINGTON ESTABLISHED HIS HEADQUARTERS AT WEST POINT, CALLING IT THE “KEY TO AMERICA.”

had journeyed to America to join the rebellion in 1777, arrived at West Point in 1779 to begin drilling and disciplining America’s untrained Continental Army troops in the manner he had begun the previous winter at Valley Forge. These technical skills brought to the battlefield by

courageous service in many major battles, including Saratoga. He was reputed to be one of Washington’s best commanders, and West Point was seen at the time as America’s strongest military post. However, Arnold’s second wife was from a Philadelphia family loyal to the British Crown,

Background: This 1776 map shows the S-shaped bend in the Hudson River that contributed to West Point's strategic military value.

and he may have begun to plot his treason as early as 1778, when he commanded the defenses of that city. In addition, many grievances were shared by the officers of the Continental Army, among them low pay and lack of political support, which undoubtedly contributed to Arnold's traitorous behavior.

By 1780, Arnold had found a British officer, Major John André, to help him carry out his scheme: turn West Point over to the British, and profit personally in the bargain. But André was caught in civilian clothes with the plans of West Point's fortifications—in Arnold's handwriting—hidden in his stocking. André was hanged as a spy at Tappan, New York, but Arnold escaped

THOMAS JEFFERSON...ARGUED THAT THE CONSTITUTION DID NOT GRANT POWER TO THE GOVERNMENT TO PROVIDE FOR A NATIONAL ACADEMY OF ANY SORT.

on a British ship and lived out the rest of his life with his family in England. The British did not ultimately test the defenses of "America's strongest military post," Washington eventually marched south to victory at Yorktown in 1781, and the new United States found a temporary peace with its fractious trading partners in Europe.

No Support for an Academy

Historians, poets, and philosophers have recorded since time immemorial that the end of war quickly erodes support for all things military. For America, it meant the fading from memory of Washington's Continental Army, the trained and disciplined units that had ultimately been victorious. With so many other pressing matters to address, the people and their political representatives soon came to believe that the militia—the "Minute Men" who had won the battle of Bunker Hill so brilliantly in 1775—could be the guarantors of America's military defense. This opinion fit conveniently with the lingering fear that a standing army would become an elite force that supported exactly the sort of dictatorial regime Americans had risked their lives to escape. None of this bode well for the establishment of a military academy, so from 1785 until 1790, with New York City serving as the United States' capital and Washington elected its first president in 1789, there was faint support for any sort of regular army.

As commander of the Continental Army, General Washington had envisioned the creation of an academy to train the nation's military leaders in the art of war. As president, he continued to press for an academy, citing the risky and unsatisfactory alternative of depending on foreign

professionals to provide the expertise for modern warfare. Critical among the technical skills needed were gunnery; aiming and adjusting artillery fire; and engineering, situating, and building fortifications. Nonetheless, reflecting the politics of the day, Thomas Jefferson, Washington's secretary of state, argued that the Constitution did not grant power to the government to provide for a national academy of any sort. Jefferson was also opposed to the creation of an elite class of military professionals commanding the power that a standing army could wield.

The Need for Education

World events would eventually bring changing attitudes. In addition to the threats posed by hostile foreign interests, education in America became a central concern for the country's future prosperity. While major institutions of higher learning had been educating a small portion of the populace for over a century, their curricula were focused on scholarship, philosophy, and religion. There were no universities for scientists, engineers, or builders. In recognition of the need to impart some technical skills to the country's small army, Congress in 1794 authorized the grade of cadet, and a military school was finally built at West Point. The Army's tiny Corps of Artillerists and Engineers was moved



WEST POINT MUSEUM COLLECTION, UNITED STATES MILITARY ACADEMY

French engineer Lieutenant Colonel Louis de la Radière designed the defenses at West Point, Polish nobleman Colonel Thaddeus Kosciuszko helped to complete them, and Prussian Captain Frederick von Steuben trained troops there.

there, and Colonel Henry Burbeck, Chief of Artillery, set up a school in rudimentary gunnery and engineering for cadets and junior officers.

Unfortunately, the school burned down in 1796, and the idea of a military academy languished. In 1799, one of Washington's last earthly acts was to write a letter to Alexander Hamilton, then commanding general of the Army, seeking to endorse a previous correspondence from Hamilton to the secretary of war that laid out plans for establishing a military academy at West Point. President John Adams was a strong supporter of the Navy, since he felt that plying the seas for trade was the lifeblood of the colonies and that using resources to support the nation's merchant and warships was sound policy, unhampered by sensitive domestic issues. But Adams harbored grave doubts about a standing army. Like many

of the Founding Fathers, he perceived the threat such an army could pose to the hard-fought liberties they had created and protected; thus the idea of a military academy did not move President Adams to action.

It remained—until Thomas Jefferson became president in 1801—for the coincidence of military threats against the nation's interests to point out the need for a standing army and a military academy to train their leaders. Congress was moved to draw up a bill creating a Corps of Engineers which "...shall be stationed at West Point...and shall constitute a Military Academy." In that same year, the secretary of war directed that all cadets training to be artillerists should report to West Point. A school opened in the final days of 1801, and four officers and one civilian were assigned to West Point as instructors and administrators.

A Change of Heart for Jefferson

Although originally opposed to the idea of a military academy, Jefferson had undergone a change of heart as president, motivated in part by the possibility of putting the new academy in Virginia, where cadets could be drawn from families supportive of his own policies and politics. However, prevailing sentiment favored the more remote location at West Point, since any mischief that the professional army officer corps might foment could be more easily isolated and dealt with if kept away from the capital, which by then had moved to Washington.

President Jefferson finally signed the academy bill into law on March 16, 1802. Thus two Virginians, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, became the founders of the United States Military Academy at West Point (Sylvanus Thayer, army officer and educator, is

known as the "father" of West Point). Coincidentally, Washington and Jefferson had also established the first engineering school in America, the first institution of higher learning in America not founded by a religious order, and the oldest continuously occupied military post in the United States. And from the very beginning, it has been New York State that has hosted this great and unique institution. ■

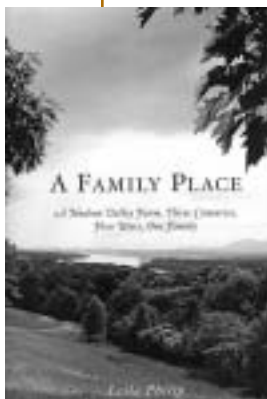
The U.S. Military Academy Library (<http://usmalibrary.usma.edu>) maintains extensive documentation of the history of West Point, the Academy itself, and Academy alumni in its Special Collections and Archives. These rich historical collections include extensive book, manuscript, photograph, and cartography holdings, among other formats.

The USMA Archives Collection, comprised of official records of the Academy from its founding in 1802 through the present, is an Affiliated Archives of the National Archives and Records Administration. It includes cadet records, curricular documentation, and information on the campus, as well as correspondence, orders, and other administrative material.

A Tie That Binds

Three Centuries of Family in One Place

BY LEILA PHILIP



Leila Philip spent four years researching and writing *A Family Place: A Hudson Valley Farm, Three Centuries, Five Wars, One Family* (Viking, 2001; Penguin Putnam, 2002), from which this article and these slightly modified excerpts are drawn. The book is a memoir/family history that chronicles the long, complex history of her family's tenure on the land and her own pursuit of that past. In the course of her research, the author would learn that the Philip and Van Ness families had owned one farm—a triangle of roughly 290 acres in Claverack, Columbia County—since 1732, and would discover a cast of fascinating historical characters, including a slave who fought alongside his former master in the Civil War.

T*alavera was not just a house and not just the past. It was not just my father's dream, and it was not just my aged rival. Somehow Talavera had absorbed my own childhood, becoming me.*

When my father died suddenly in 1992, my family and I faced the unexpected challenge of how to hold onto Talavera, our ancestral farm and home. But even as I threw myself into the effort to save this family place, I wondered why we were trying. The economics of farming in the Hudson Valley were dismal, yet we never discussed selling Talavera or not farming the land. I began to ask myself, what forces would propel a family to sacrifice almost anything to hold onto a piece of land?

I decided to search the past for answers. My quest was made easier by the fact that my family never threw anything away. One day I found a moldy clipping, stuffed inside an old riding boot, about my grandfather's political campaign for New York State Assembly. This intrigued me, and I began to open closets and doors, finding everything from ancient letters to journals to newspaper clippings to farm and household account books and papers.

Talavera, the author's ancestral home in Claverack, New York, is located on a hill overlooking the Catskill Mountains to the west and the Berkshire foothills to the east.

It took me two years to search out, clean, and sort these materials into what has become an archive, the "Philip Farm and Family Papers." Then I began the work of mining them for stories about the people who had lived in my family's house or who had farmed the land. This was possible because, together with a collection of family papers that had been removed from the house in 1975 and acquired by the New-York Historical Society, the materials described the continuous ownership of one farm by one family for almost three centuries. In short, they provided a unique case study of agriculture in the Hudson Valley, as well as documentation of Philip and Van Ness contributions to the early political, social, and economic life of New York.

But I was also interested in the possibility of recovering the stories of people whose lives had been lived off the record and who were, for the most part, left out of it. These included stories of women in the family, as well as an account of a slave named Tom (Thomas W. Johnson), who had been brought north by my great-great-uncle and who fought alongside him in the Civil War. Researching Tom's story would lead

me in and out of the Maryland State Archives and U.S. Naval records—a search undertaken only because of the tantalizing clues in those fragile, decomposing family letters that held perhaps the only record of a man's life. They made it possible to restore him, however imperfectly, to history.

The first hint of Tom's existence and eventual place at Talavera emerged when I uncovered my father's notes about my great-grandfather's brother, John Van Ness Philip, who had written his mother in 1854 to announce that he was returning home to make money by farming Talavera. I was determined to find that letter. The irony of this proclamation was simply too great. Here was my own family, struggling to hang onto a farm that by 1992 needed *our* support, while in 1854 a young man could consider building his own fortune through it. My mother had never seen the letter herself, so she could only advise me to search through the Van Ness-Philip papers at the New-York Historical Society.

Day after day I searched folders and read letters. I discovered that John Van Ness left home at eighteen to seek his fortune as a midshipman. He was in love with the sea, and traveled the



LEILA PHILIP

Six days after Fort Sumter was fired upon, Lt. John Van Ness Philip re-enlisted in the U.S. Navy, taking with him a freed slave named Tom.

world from California to Constantinople. His log books revealed his fascination with travel, as well as his intense love for Columbia County, a place he reverently described as “the mansions of magic.” I found that in Maryland, on August 8, 1852 at age twenty-nine, John Van Ness married Laura Johnson, the daughter of the wealthy John Johnson, the last chancellor of Baltimore.

One afternoon, as I was about to leave for the day, I forced myself to look through one last folder labeled “Miscellaneous Correspondence 1850s.” At first, I didn’t even realize that I’d found the elusive letter. Writing from Annapolis in 1854, Lieutenant John Van Ness began by telling his mother about

considered a poor business decision, or because he was ashamed at having inherited a slave, is not clear. “He will never leave us I am certain,” added John Van Ness, “and then we will have a good servant. He can do almost anything and I am sure that he can earn his money in a short time.”

An Arcadian vision of a gentleman farmer at Talavera: that seemed to have been John Van Ness’s dream. But once he was settled in at Talavera—which, revitalized by his interest and investment, had been transformed into Claverack’s third largest dairy—news of a terrible war traveled north.

Six days after the first shots were fired at Fort Sumter, John Van Ness re-enlisted in the U.S. Navy

LEILA PHILIP



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Above: Talavera, scene of a gathering of the Philip family and their servants, c. 1880, takes its name from the Battle of Talavera de la Reina in Spain, Napoleon’s first land defeat. Left: Mining the family papers, the author was able to reconstruct the life of her “renegade” Aunt Bessie (shown here with her horse Hari Kari), who led much of her life “off the record.”

his delightful discovery of a pay bonus. Only at the end did he proclaim his intention to come home and farm the land. He went on to explain his reasons, which were decidedly financial: “Two horses and an expensive wife add a little to a fellow’s expenses.”

On April 1, 1856, John Van Ness signed a deed purchasing Talavera from his cousin for fifteen thousand dollars. Soon after, he and Laura moved north to Talavera, bringing with them three black servants and a slave named Tom whom Laura had taken as part of her inheritance from her father earlier that year. “It would kill him to be sold away from us,” John Van Ness wrote to his younger brother William Henry (my great-grandfather) about their decision to bring Tom north. His tone was apologetic. Whether this was because bringing Tom was

and gave a rousing speech in the Hudson City Hall where he called upon all able-bodied men to uphold the Union. The next day the Hudson Daily Star considered his talk the lead news item. “The addresses were full of ardor for the cause of our country,” proclaimed the newspaper, “the principal one being from our noble citizen J. Van Ness Philip, who though retired to the quiet pleasures of his farm and his home, like the illustrious Washington and Cincinnatus of old, leaves his plough at the call of his country and braves the hazards of the sea and the hostile foe, to sustain the honor of the old flag under which he has served for twenty years. All honor to such noble patriotism as this say we.”

John Van Ness wrote his brother William Henry that he was getting ready to depart—and that he

planned to take Tom with him into the war. "I am getting ready as fast as possible, making underclothes too and when my orders come I will leave on the next train. Tom goes with me as my servant. He is crazy to go."

This situation—that a freed slave would follow his master into the Civil War to fight against slavery—was not without precedent. Although all black men were barred until 1863 from enlisting in the Union Army, they could join the Navy immediately.

It took me almost a year to track down any records of Tom, but I was determined to find them. If my family had collaborated in any way in

U.S. Navy was a faithful slave's desire to further serve them.

When Tom was wounded after a particularly fierce skirmish with a Confederate ship, John Van Ness wrote his family to detail Tom's recovery. In an 1862 letter to his brother some days after the event, he recounted Tom's desire for revenge: "Tom is getting along very well. There is no danger to be apprehended from his wound. I went to see him this morning and asked him how he was getting along. He said, 'first rate.' He would like to be on his legs so that he could 'go at em again.' But Tom, said I, you must not feel so. You know the bible says you must forgive your enemies. 'Love, sir' answered Tom—'I'll forgive the rest of em, but I'll never forgive the fellow that shot me.' But, said I, you can't tell exactly who shot you. 'But I must shoot

LEILA PHILIP



In 1966, John Van Ness Philip, Jr. and Julia Philip, the author's parents, transformed Philip Orchards (established in 1911) into a pick-your-own apple orchard.

reducing a man to a cash figure on a page, I wanted to see it. John Johnson, John Van Ness's father-in-law and Tom's original owner, had died intestate. Tom was at the bottom of the Johnson estate list, after a lengthy accounting of bond holdings. He was the first entry under the heading "Sundry household and kitchen furniture": "Negro man, Tom, slave for life, 21 years of age—\$850.00." Reading those words would leave me feeling sick.

John Van Ness's decision to bring Tom to Talavera probably freed him, since slavery had been abolished in New York by 1857, and he mentions wages for Tom; but whether Tom himself felt able to leave Talavera and strike out on his own was another matter. It seems clear from letters that the family wanted to believe that Tom's desire to serve in the

Here was my own family, struggling to hang onto a farm that by 1992 needed *our* support, while in 1854 a young man could consider building his own fortune through it.

somebody else. I got to shoot one of em,' said Tom. I saw that he was bent upon spilling an equivalent amount of blood so I discontinued the conversation."

John Van Ness's letter went on to express concern for Tom, but he clearly viewed Tom's role in the Navy as an extension of family service. When I read the letter, however, I had to assume something different: that Tom wasn't fighting in the war to serve John Van Ness or the family. He was on board the Cuyler to serve himself—to fight for the existence of the Union and freedom for all slaves.

The rest is history—at least my family's history. Tom ultimately recovered from his wounds. But John Van Ness contracted yellow fever off the Florida coast and died in 1862 at the age of thirty-nine. Tom returned to Talavera, bringing home John Van Ness's sword and clothing, but shortly thereafter completely disappeared from the records. And almost three centuries from its origin, Talavera remains a farm, owned by the Philip family. ■