

# FLAG FEAT OF 1783 GOES UNSUNG HERE

**Sailor's Climbing Greased Pole  
With Banner as British Left  
151 Years Ago Is Ignored.**

## AN OLD TRADITION PASSES

**Day Used to Be Marked Each  
Year at Battery, but It Now  
Evokes Only Dim Memories.**

It was 151 years ago yesterday that the last longboat filled with British Red Coats pulled away from the Battery after having occupied the city for seven years.

As they departed a tradition was born. They had cut the cleats off the flagstaff at Fort George in what is now Battery Park, they had unreefed the halyards and, for good measure, had greased the pole.

John Jacob Van Arsdale, a young sailor who later became a captain in the navy, tried three times to climb the pole while General George Washington and his staff and a large part of the populace looked on.

On his fourth attempt the boy sailor was successful. Some one had run to Golet's iron mongery in Pearl Street for some nails and cleats, and with these in his pockets and with the halyard tied around his waist he started up, nailing cleats as he went, now one to the left, now one to the right.

### Up Went the Flag.

Van Arsdale reefed the halyards and slid to the ground while the Commander-in-Chief and the other spectators applauded. The American flag with the thirteen stars was hauled up and thirteen guns were fired from the fort.

Every year, after that, some descendant of Captain Van Arsdale would appear at the site of old Fort George to raise the flag. Evacuation Day was a popular holiday—far more popular than Independence Day—and the whole town would turn out for the ceremony.

In later years the Old Guard would parade down to the Battery, with thousands of residents behind and with detachments of troops from other States taking part. Several Presidents attended the ceremony. And always some member of the Van Arsdale family would be there to do his part.

### A Tradition That Died.

Records indicate that up to twenty years ago the lineal descendants of John Jacob Van Arsdale kept the tradition alive. Then it died. Just how that happened no one seemed to know yesterday.

Miss May B. Van Arsdale, who is Professor of Household Arts at Teachers College, recalled dimly that somewhere in the family possessions was a little plate with an illustration of the flag incident, but she couldn't remember where.

"I remember the story about some member of the family taking part in the ceremony each year," she said, "but that's about all. I got a letter once from some gentleman in London who knew the legend and who had found my name in a book somewhere in London, but I didn't have much information on the subject."

Mrs. Martha E. Van Arsdale of 315 West 113th Street recalled the tradition, too, but only vaguely. No member of her family ever took part in the flag-raising ceremony, so far as she knew.

In Larchmont Mrs. Minnie K. Van Arsdale racked her memory for details of the legend and the tradition, but could offer no help.

### No Help at the Battery.

In Battery Park John T. Moran, the acting park superintendent, seemed a bit bewildered by the whole story. He had never heard of it. He asked Francesco Gaetano, but Francesco shook his head, too.

"If any one ought to know, it's Francesco," Mr. Moran explained. "'Twas him and John O'Connor (he's a war veteran, by the way) who raised the flags this morning."

Mr. Moran tried Max Mednick and Rudolph Volpat, who were getting ready to haul the park flags down. It was sunset and the light in Liberty's hand had just winked into life across the bay. Max and Rudolph had never heard of the ceremony, or the Van Arsdales, or even of Evacuation Day.

Up at 276 West Seventy-first Street, in a lonely old house near the river, where she has lived more than half a century, is Mrs. Robert M. Van Arsdale. But Mrs. Van Arsdale is in her 100th year, hard of hearing and bedridden.

"She does remember little things, now and then, about the Revolution," confided a white-haired housekeeper, "but she never said anything about that flag in all the years I've known her and I couldn't ask her now."

So, it seems, the tradition is dead, and no one quite knows why; so dead, indeed, that when Max Mednick and Rudolph Volpat were hauling down the flag from the staff that marks the site of old Fort George, one could not help noting that it was not even the American flag. It was the city flag. The Stars and Stripes flew at the top of the newer and higher pole to the east.

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