Fort Lee found its place in American history during the 1776 British campaign to control New York City and the Hudson River. Having resisted the British siege of Boston, General Washington turned his attention to the defense of New York City and the Hudson River Valley. Besides constructing fortifications at New York and Long Island, Washington felt it imperative for the army to build and strengthen its defenses along the Hudson River.

The British plan, meanwhile, was to control the length of the Hudson with the overwhelming dominance of its Royal Navy. This plan, if successful, would split the Colonies in half—bringing an early end to the American rebellion.

In July 1776, the Americans began to fortify this site, which they first named "Fort Constitution." The name "Fort Lee" was later adopted to honor General Charles Lee, whose army had achieved a major victory at Charleston, South Carolina, that summer. During this time, on the high ground of northern Manhattan opposite Fort Lee, work had already begun on Fort Washington. On July 12, Admiral Richard Howe sent two British ships, the Rose and the Phoenix, up the Hudson. Cannon fire from Fort Washington alone had little effect on their passage. Washington realized that with the loss of Fort Washington, Fort Lee was of little military value. He ordered General Nathanael Greene, the commander at Fort Lee, to begin preparations to evacuate the fort. An orderly withdrawal, however, was not in store for the Americans.

On November 20, just four days after taking Fort Washington, General Howe ordered General Charles Cornwallis to convey 5,000 men across the Hudson several miles north of Fort Lee. When word of the advancing army reached Washington, he ordered an immediate retreat, before the Fort Lee troops could be cut off and captured by the British force. Most of the American supplies and artillery had to be left behind. These were indeed among the darkest days for the cause of American independence, leading Thomas Paine to pen his famous words, "These are the times that try men’s souls..."
PARK GROUNDS

On a cliff-top bluff where the Continental Army positioned its batteries over the Hudson in 1776, the 33-acre grounds of Fort Lee Historic Park blend scenic beauty and history.

At the north end of the Historic Park, two overlooks command spectacular views of the George Washington Bridge, the Hudson River, and the skyline of upper Manhattan. (Restrooms and a drinking fountain are available in season.)

In the southern portion of the Park, winding pathways lead past a reconstructed blockhouse to gun batteries and firing steps. Opposite the barbette battery, authentically recreated eighteenth-century soldiers’ and officers’ huts, with a well, woodshed, and baking oven, serve as the focal point for historical programs.

VISITOR CENTER

The Visitor Center is at the heart of the Historic Park, providing information on the role of Fort Lee in the American Revolution. Two floors of displays help tell the story of the tumultuous New York campaign of the fall of 1776—culminating in the Continental Army’s “Retreat to Victory” across the Jerseys.

Construction of the 11,000 square-foot building began in 1974 and was completed for the American Bicentennial celebration in 1976. In addition to its historical features, the facility contains a 150-seat auditorium, a gift shop, restrooms, drinking fountain, vending machine, and information desk. The main floor is barrier-free.

PROGRAMS

SCHOOL YEAR. From September through December and March through June, schoolchildren studying the American Revolution come to Fort Lee to experience life as recruits in an eighteenth-century army. This five-hour living history program combines discussion, demonstration, and participation to give students a hands-on lesson in Colonial life. Information about fees and how to reserve for your class is available at the information desk.

SPECIAL EVENTS. Throughout the year, the Historic Park serves as a site for cultural, historical, and recreational programs. Lecture programs are held at the Visitor Center, while at the southern end of the Historic Park, staff and volunteers can be seen interpreting eighteenth-century ways. Call or stop by the Visitor Center for details, or visit us online at njpalisades.org.