

Excerpts From Rev. Ammi R. Robbins' 1776 Journal

One of the most graphic accounts that I have ever come across concerning the trials and tribulations of Colonial soldiers is the journal that Norfolk's minister, the Reverend Ammi R. Robbins kept during his deployment to Canada in the year 1776. We know that conditions were desperate, but that knowledge by itself cannot convey just how bad things were unless you can find something written by an educated, observant participant, and these accounts are rare indeed.

This journal was published in New Haven in 1850, and is titled: "Journal of the Rev. Ammi R. Robbins, a Chaplain in the American Army, in the Northern Campaign of 1776". It speaks for all the countless patriots that took up arms to win their freedom in the Great War of Independence, but who either never wrote home, or whose letters have been lost.

It begins: "A brief journal of some of the more remarkable events in my tour to Canada". "Monday, March 18, 1776 – Took an affectionate leave of home, came to Canaan, and proceeded with a considerable retinue to Sheffield. Very bad riding but proceeded to Nobletown and lodged comfortably".

The following day he arrived at Albany, where the troops he was with remained until April 3 when they proceeded up the Hudson River sometimes in a vessel called a bateau (a double-ended flat-bottomed rowboat commonly used in those days in Canada and in the northern American Colonies), and at other times on foot. On April 5, they arrived at Saratoga (this was a year and a half before the famous battle there).

As they neared Lake George "stopped to view the place of the fight in the year 1755, and the manner of Col. Whiting's retreat, saw where Col. Williams was killed, old Hendrick, Etc. At four P.M. arrived at Lake George, went into the fort, dined comfortably. Old Fort William Henry is so gone that scarcely any traces are left. Fort George is a small stone fort, with a convenient brick barrack in the midst, containing six rooms for soldiers". (Fort William Henry, a wooden fort, had been captured and burned by the Indians accompanying the French Army in 1755).

Monday, April 8 ... "this day two companies of Pennsylvania troops came in, and sundry of ours, numbers are left sick, and many poorly; how easy 'tis for God to bless or blast our designs".

April 11 – It rained hard all night, high winds this morning, ice on the lake melts fast; news today of the taking of a large prize by the American fleet, which was going to the southward – six hundred barrels of powder and two hundred cannon. At night, Gen. Schuyler arrived".

On April 20 the ice had sufficiently melted that the army could embark in their bateaus to go the length of Lake George where they loaded much of their equipment onto wagons for Fort Ticonderoga, three miles away. "Here are great and surprising works of the French, still to be seen. This is a most advantageous point of land on which the fort stands, which seems to be the center to command South Bay, Lake Champlain and Lake George".

Sunday, April 21 – "I breakfasted and then went to see several sick in the hospital – Oh, 'tis terrible to be sick in the army, such miserable accommodations, it is enough to kill a man's spirit when first taken to go into the hospital. Towards night viewed the place of Abercrombie's defeat in 1758. Saw where the dead were flung in, and numbers

of human bones, thigh, arms, etc., above ground. Oh, the horrors of war. It seems to me I never so much longed for the day to approach when men shall learn war no more, and the lion and lamb lie down together”.

On April 25, the army began their trip north through Lake Champlain, which he describes as looking like Long Island Sound with islands. On May first they were about half way between the northern end of Lake Champlain and the St. Lawrence River. As late as the season was, the weather remained very cold, with wind and snow. “The military situation looks dark – we seem in an enemy’s country, and if defeated at Quebec we are surrounded with foes on every side”.

May 4 – “At sunrise embarked. It rained till 10; we passed the mouth of the Sorrel (it has been renamed the Richelieu River), where is another beautiful town, then entered the Grand Lake (Lac St. Pierre today). Side wind, very rough, I never had so clear an idea of the hazards and fatigues of sailors and soldiers as this day. Poorly and weak, and the sea made me very sick, vomited till I could vomit no more, sundry sick on board”.

The next day they sailed down the St Lawrence to Trois Rivieres, where they all put up in barracks. He makes the comment there is discouraging news from Quebec about small pox.

May 7 – “We were alarmed at 2 o’clock this morning by two expresses (couriers on horseback) from Quebec, giving account of the arrival of the fleet (British), fifteen sail, who yesterday came along by Quebec; our poor feeble, sickly army is obliged to retreat with great precipitancy. Great numbers sick with the small pox we had to leave, and some others; the ships pursuing up the river, firing at our army on the land and on the bateaux. This is the most terrible day I ever saw. God of Armies, help us. Three ships came near by us, firing as they came, and our boats and people in a scattered condition, coming up. Distress and anxiety in every countenance. The small pox thick among us, from the poor fugitives that come up; we are in hourly expectation of the ships attacking us – our boats, provisions, etc. The whole conspired to give an idea of distress. At 11 Gen. Thomas came up and immediately a council of war was called, Gen. Wooster present and a great number of gentlemen. The result is, to retreat with the whole army back to the River Sorrel (130 miles), as in case of defeat here, ‘twill be absolutely fatal. Saw several other chaplains, worn out with fatigue, etc. Many officers lost all, to the clothes on their backs. Gen. Wooster goes by water with the boats; Gen. Thomas brings up the rear by land. All the men except enough for rowing and the invalids go by land. I am still unwell, very much weakened with the disorder that has attended me these four days past; am obliged to go by water. We set sail at sunset and were hampered all night by high winds and strong currents”.

All that night and all the next day they rowed against the winds and currents. On the ninth, they reached Trois Rivieres where they slept for three hours. “Great are the fatigues of our march, enough to destroy the strongest constitution. My eyes very sore, but otherwise as well as can be expected. Praise to God”.

Rev. Ammi R. Robbins' Journal, Part 2

Friday, May 10 (1776) "Serene and very calm weather, and 'tis a great mercy as the ships can by no means move on and the army can. We took a dish of tea at sunrise and proceeded up towards the great lake, called St. Peter's Lake. Heard of the army being attacked by land, but nothing remarkable. The people here grow more insolent, but we have no fears from them as yet. Proceeded slow because strong currents out of Grand Lake, came up to the mouth of it and put in the south side. Struck fire and cooked some dinner, fish, etc".

Saturday, 11 "Feel poorly, and much worn out, distressed for the army; surely our cause is good and we shall prosper. We have to endure continual hardships, and little sleep, but having obtained help we are enabled to proceed on our way. Early, before sunrise, entered St. Peter's Lake. Perfect calm, rowed within five miles of west end, when a hard gale came ahead, and we were in a terrible situation, but through mercy, near night, got through into a narrow river, which leads to Sorrel. Lodged, much fatigued – came up with my boy and chest, which arrived safe before me. Numbers arriving and many with small pox".

Lord's Day, 12 – "Rowed up to Sorrel, landed at 9 o'clock. Found two Boston regiments arrived, also sundry others. No public exercise today (religious services), as troops are in such confusion. Conversed with sundry gentlemen, who indeed feel greatly distressed; our days are days of darkness. Feel very gloomy today on every account, low in spirits by reason of my disorder which has brought me down, which together with the fatigues and fearful forebodings, has been almost too much. Still I believe our cause is just, and we shall prosper."

He received three letters, one of which was from his wife. He answered them at once and sent them back with a Sheffield man who was returning home.

Monday, 13 – "Walked out this morning into camp, which now makes a very considerable appearance. Our regiment almost all back, but a few scattering ones in boats. General (Benedict) Arnold is coming from Montreal; they are erecting the old battery to command the river, but a strange discouragement seems to prevail in the army among the officers. There is jealousy and want of confidence; we are in a most critical situation. The small pox strikes terror into our troops".

Thursday, 16 – "We arrived at Chamblee near night, all in confusion. Here we are in a great country and know not who are friends or who are enemies. Our army in a most sad state, no provisions, nor supplies, only men; nor half enough of them".

Friday, 17 – "Very feeble, walked out, advised with Gen. Wooster, who gave me a permit to go to New England when I please, talked to the doctor about it, am at loss, may I be directed to what is best. On the whole conclude 'tis really my duty to go. Found Mr. Eli Pettibone (a Norfolk man) who is in Col. Warner's regiment, concluded to go with them as it is next to impossible, if not utterly so, to get an opportunity this month".

"Remarkable Providence – All out of provisions here and at Chamblee and elsewhere, but while struck with terror and apprehension, five boats appeared in sight with a great number of barrels of pork – In the mount, God appears. It is Saturday night,

but all is confusion. Maj. Safford of Bennington is very kind to me, he gives me the offer to go with him in his boat in the morning”.

“Lord’s Day, 19 May, 1776 – News from the Cedars, that there is an attack. Four hundred regulars, about two hundred Indians and Canadians; Col. Beadle, Patterson, etc. opposed them – know not the event.” (outcome)

Later that day a detachment of troops began the journey south that would take them through Lake Champlain, as they retraced their steps back to the Albany area. The trip through Lake Champlain took them four days, but they were long, arduous days. Rev. Robbins, like so many Continental soldiers, was in poor health, brought on, and constantly aggravated, by the effects of poor diet, terrible living conditions and almost no medical facilities. Even though their spirits were low, they were convinced that they were fighting for a just cause, and that at the end, whenever that might be, the Americans would prevail. Robbins apparently has dysentery, an illness all too common among the troops on both sides of the conflict. His description of the discomforts encountered in traversing of Lake Champlain speaks for countless soldiers in the War of Liberation, most of whom were not as eloquent as was Rev. Robbins.

(Sunday night, May 19) “My diarrhea continued – very weak, took some brandy toddy with a bit of sea bread and lay down by the side of a barn and slept three hours.

Monday, 20 – My disorder continued – very weak – committed myself to God. Was called at 3 o’clock and at 4 we set off. My spirits a little revived, but oh, how weak; bit a morsel of sea bread, but had not moisture enough to swallow only by the help of lake water. Pleasant calm morning, we rowed to Point-au-Fere, the white house, got a breakfast of tea with a little milk which seemed to revive me, but afterwards was exercised with great pain – weak and faint.”

After rowing several miles down the lake into a strong headwind, they landed on an island and... “lodged under some bushes – poor accommodations but such as soldiers often have. It was very windy and rained some, but I slept on the ground; have not undressed or pulled off my boots for three days and two nights.”

Finally on Friday, May 24, the party reached the southern end of Lake Champlain and resumed their southward journey. Robbins found himself to be weaker than he had previously thought, and decided to purchase a horse. This took two days, and in the meantime they began to hear news from below, which caused him to observe: “Oh, the distracted state of this poor unhappy country; it’s a comfort that the Lord reigns.”

Rev. Ammi R. Robbins' Journal, Conclusion

Monday, 27 – “I find I am gaining strength, yet am so thin, that people who have seen me before, scarce know me. I think I know in some degree now, what hardship is”.

Tuesday, 28 May 1776 – “Capt. Smith procured horses for us, started and came to Dorset, then to Manchester, Sunderland, Arlington, Shaftsbury and then Bennington.”

Wednesday, 29 – “Arranged for a horse that would take me to Lanesborough [Mass. – just north of Pittsfield] and a little boy to bring it back. News of the secret confederacy of Tories and the discovery of their plot. People this way are much in fear on account of internal enemies. O, what will become of this unhappy country, we are distressed and perplexed, cast down but not destroyed”.

He arrived at Lanesborough late on the following day and stayed with a former classmate until the following Monday, June 3. While there, news came of a battle in which the Continentals lost 100 men, but had succeeded in driving off the enemy. He fears that he has broken his constitution in this campaign, but believes the goals before them of procuring freedom are greater than the discomforts of any individual.

Wednesday, 5 – “Rode home and found my dear family well, after having experienced and seen the most abundant displays of Devine goodness and mercy. O for true gratitude”.

The next entry is on Tuesday, July 2. “Took leave again of dear friends at home to join the regiment.”

Thursday, 4 July 1776 – Came to Albany, drew 30 dollars, bought sundry things and saw many friends.” [And didn't have any idea of what was taking place in Philadelphia.]

Three days later he arrived at Lake George. The first thing he did there was to visit the smallpox hospital, where he commented upon the dreadful suffering.

On the ninth, having sailed northward from Fort Ticonderoga about twenty miles, he rejoined his regiment. “Found our regiment who were exceedingly rejoiced to see me – all – officers and soldiers. The camp in a most sickly state, ten or twelve in some instances have been buried in one day, but at present the sickness abates”.

Wednesday 10 – “Alas, the camp is in a most pitiful situation, a great many sick and complaining. The chaplains come to see me – went with Mr. Avery to the hospitals and never was such a picture of wretchedness – men not alive, and men breathing their last. This day unhappy difference between Dr. Sutton and Lieut. Converse. Miserable creatures we are, not to let alone contentions when marching in such a broad phalanx to the grave. Slept on the ground”.

Thursday 11 – “Rainy all day, uncomfortable in the tent from rain, tents are very miserable shelter in a hard rain. All look down and gloomy. We want good generalship”.

Saturday 13 – “Feel pretty well tho' stomach-sick at turns because of the terrible nausea in the camp and hospitals”.

On the sixteenth, orders were received to march to Ticonderoga, where they remained until the twentieth, when they embarked by bateau, rowing up the short river connecting Lake George and Lake Champlain. Once at the north end, a sail was hoisted and, with a fair wind, they soon arrived at the village of Lake George.

Sunday 21 – “Rose early and visited the west hospital, so far as I could stand it, but not the rest until night. Never was such a portrait of human misery, as in these hospitals. Prayed several times.”

Tuesday 23 July – “News of French fleet of fifty sail on the coast, in consequence of Mr. Dean pledging the public faith of the Continent, that Independence be declared, etc., etc”.

For the next several days his routine of visiting and praying with the sick continued, with his health slowly deteriorating daily. A doctor finally told him that his condition would not allow him to return to the regiment for at least three or four weeks, and that he should go home to recuperate. He writes on July 29: “I envy brother Avery his health. He will go through the hospital when pestiferous as disease and death can make it with a face as smooth as a baby’s and afterward an appetite as healthy as a woodchopper. I cannot – after inhaling such diseased breath, am sick and faint, besides their sorrows take hold of me. I would not shrink from the work. Our war is a righteous war; our men are called to defend the country; whole congregations turn out, and the ministers of the gospel should go and encourage them when doing duty, attend and pray for them and with them when sick, and bury them when they die. I hope to return to my work”.

On July 30, he began the trip to Norfolk, and on August 3, he arrived. He was supposed to restore his health, but remained for only 16 short days before starting north once more to rejoin his regiment, driven by his sense of duty.

From August 22, when he reached Saratoga, until October 31 when he returned home for the final time, his time was divided primarily between hospital wards from there northward to Crown Point. The army was in position awaiting an enemy attack, but as the only way south in those days was through Lake Champlain, they knew any advance by the British army would be preceded by naval activity. This action took place on October 13 when Rev. Robbins wrote: “A smart cannonading from the fleets began in the morning. A noon express arrived with accounts of the battle on Friday down the lake. Towards night five vessels that were left of the fleet came in in a shattered condition. The rest all destroyed. I walked over to headquarters, visited the wounded and a horrible spectacle they were”. Mid-October was considered too late in the season for the British to begin any sort of land military campaign, so after spending the remainder of the month visiting hospitals and praying with the troops, he received a furlough and once again returned to Norfolk. The final sentence reads: “Now, O for a heart full of gratitude and praise and resolution to live thankful, humble and faithful, being laid under the greatest obligations thereto”.