

The Convention Troops in Connecticut

Early summer 1777 saw General John Burgoyne, with 8,000 English and German troops leave Canada for Albany, New York. Here he was to meet with Col. St. Ledger, coming down the Mohawk, and Gen. William Howe, ascending the Hudson from the vicinity of New York City. The object was to militarily isolate New England from the rest of the colonies.

St. Ledger was unexpectedly overpowered at Fort Stanwix, and Howe, for a complex set of reasons, failed to arrive at the Albany rendezvous. Burgoyne alone followed his orders and came face to face with American general Horatio Gates at Saratoga with a superior force, which resulted in the defeat of General Burgoyne's army. In order to save face, the British requested that this affair be recorded as a "convention" rather than a "surrender". This was agreeable to the victorious Americans and thus the soldiers who laid down their arms have come to be known as the "Convention Troops".

The terms of the surrender provided that Burgoyne's troops march out of their camp with flags flying and lay down their arms upon orders from their own officers. A free passage was to be granted the army back to Great Britain on the condition that none of them would serve in North America again during the war. The army was to march to Boston, where they would be placed on vessels "by the easiest, most expeditious and most convenient routes."

The march of one company of foreign troops is recorded in a journal kept by Oliver Boardman of Middletown, Connecticut, now in the possession of the Connecticut Historical Society. The first entry is on September 2, 1777, the last on October 27, 1777.

On Monday, October 20, Boardman was one of 50 troops from his regiment to guard 128 prisoners of war to Hartford. On the evening of the 20th, they crossed the Hudson by ferry and put up at Green Bush, New York. On Tuesday, October 21st, they marched to Kinder Hook, New York. On Wednesday, the 22nd, they reached Hillsdale, New York. On Thursday, the 23rd, they marched to Sheffield, Massachusetts. On Friday, the 24th, they marched to Rockwell's in Colebrook Center, Saturday, the 25th, brought them to Simsbury. On Sunday, the 26th, they marched to Hartford and turned 123 prisoners over to the sheriff, five of the prisoners having died en route.

In the latter part of October 1777, a small group of Convention Troops passed through Norfolk, where they camped on the green for a few days. One Hessian, by the name of Abram Si Hunchupp, [That spelling does not ring true to my ears, but for the time being, we will go along with this account's spelling.] pronounced "Sunchupp" was taken ill and brought into the home of Capt. Michael Mills, where Mills' wife unsuccessfully attempted to nurse him back to health. He was buried at Loon Meadow, on the road from Norfolk to Colebrook in a lot that belonged to Mills. On an apple tree over his grave was carved "Here lies Abram Si Hunchupp" Years later, a hired man, gathering firewood, chopped down the ancient apple, not knowing its history, thus the exact location was lost.

Also during that autumn of 1777, a Hessian soldier by the name of Hendrich Bale deserted his company in Norfolk, where he remained and married a woman named Sara Hotchkiss.

No doubt there was a considerable flow of prisoners passing through our area for quite some time. Burgoyne's army consisted of some 6,000 men, don't forget, and if Boardman's account can be considered as representative, for every 3 prisoners, there was an American militiaman. I would venture to say thjat the locals saw this troop movement as one long disruption. It is hardly surprising that stories about hessians still abound locally. One of them from Norfolk may give some cause to question its accurateness. This concerns the leg irons dug up there. None of Burgoyne's army was shackled in any way; however, there is always the possibility of someone breaking some law, which ended with them being clapped in leg irons. There is nothing to indicate those irons were used by anyone involved in this mass movement of troops.

The information concerning the movement of Burgoyne's army may be found in The Connecticut Quarterly, vol. III, No. 2, April, May, June, 1897, page 144.