

False Information

An article appeared in the March 20 edition of the *Torrington Register-Citizen*, written by (or at least the information contained was supplied by) a local real estate agent. I do not subscribe to, nor do I read this paper, as it has proven to contain numerous examples of both errors of omission as well as errors of commission, and has since I can remember. However, on March 20, a friend from Barkhamsted asked me if I had seen the article about an old tavern that is for sale in Norfolk that has a historical connection with British General Burgoyne in 1760. Right away a series of red flags appeared in my head; the entire premise of the article had to be severely flawed. I went home, accessed the web site for the Torrington paper, and read the article.

For many years local papers have been guilty of perpetrating blatant falsehoods upon an unsuspecting public when it comes to historical inaccuracies. I have written about an example of this that appeared in a 1936 article about the Phelps Tavern in North Colebrook. In the past few years the pace seems to have picked up with these poorly written and poorly researched articles. More often than not, the source is a realtor; apparently it is more lucrative to sell a colonial (in the historical sense of the word) than one constructed at a later date, and if a historical person, the more significant and recognizable the better, can be associated with that piece of real estate, so much the better.

I'm sorry, but enough is enough. I feel that as a regular correspondent to *The Winsted Journal*, it is my duty to speak out about these blatant instances of downright lies. It is against the law for an auto dealer to turn back the odometer of a used car, and I think it is past due that similar laws should be written that apply to real estate agents.

What has gotten my dander up this time? It has to do with a dwelling on the Colebrook-Norfolk Road that is claimed to have been visited by General Burgoyne in 1760 with a few of his men. It goes on about how he lounged on the lawn of this then inn, regaining his strength after a meal there. With ambiance like this, who could afford to snap up this prime piece of real estate, offered at such a moderate price?

Alright, let's go back and see if we can get to the roots of this persistent historical blunder. Stories abound about "Burgoyne's army passing through here after their defeat at Saratoga in 1777." I put that in parentheses because this is a false statement; his army did not march through here. Small segments of it did, however, under guard by Colonial militias. Some were marched through Connecticut, others through Massachusetts, all on their way to internment in the Boston area. They were not accompanied by their officers. Special factors came into play after the defeat of Burgoyne's army at the Second Battle of Saratoga. Burgoyne, in order to save face after having been beaten by the rag-tag colonials, asked the American general if the capitulation could be referred to as a "convention" instead of a "surrender". This was agreed to, as after all, we were victorious, and the terminology didn't change the military results.

At this point, I am going to give you a rundown of the major events in the life of General John Burgoyne, which proves that he never stepped foot in Norfolk, or probably Connecticut, for

that matter. These dates come from the Encyclopedia Britannica, 11th edition, volume 4, page 819, in case you doubt me.

John Burgoyne was born in 1722 and died in 1792. His military career began early, but really began with his involvement in the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), where he became a Lt. Colonel in the foot guards. In 1761 he sat in parliament for Midhurst, and in 1762 he served as brigadier-general in Portugal.

In 1768 he became a member of parliament for Preston, and for the next few years he occupied himself chiefly with his parliamentary duties. By this time he had become a major-general, and on the outbreak of the American War of Independence, he was appointed to a command. In 1777 he was at the head of the British reinforcements designed for the invasion of the colonies from Canada. In this disastrous expedition he gained possession of Fort Ticonderoga, for which he was made a Lt.-general, but, pushing on, was detached from his communications with Canada, and hemmed in by a superior force at Saratoga on the 17th of October, his troops laid down their arms. This battle ultimately proved to be the turning point of the war.

The indignation in England against Burgoyne was great, but perhaps unjust. He returned to England at once, with the permission of the American general, to defend his conduct, and demanded, but did not get, a trial.

In 1782 however, when his political friends came into office, he was restored to his rank, and made commander-in-chief in Ireland. After 1783, he withdrew more and more into private life. He died suddenly on the 4th of June 1792.

So there you have it – General Burgoyne never did anything that would enhance the value of any piece of property in Norfolk (or Colebrook, Winchester or New Hartford, for that matter).

Norfolk became a town in 1758, and the road this supposed inn was located on, The Old North Road, was constructed on orders from the Connecticut Legislature in 1761. I doubt that they had much business from British generals who never stepped foot on the North American continent before 1777.

If any of you ever consider purchasing a piece of property that the real estate agent claims has special historical significance, please do yourself a huge favor and contact the local historical society; they will be able to give an honest opinion, and it will be free (although a contribution is always appreciated).

Historic Bytes

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