

The Facts About Buried Hessian Soldiers in Colebrook

In the years prior to the last decade of the twentieth century, all residents of town, young and old alike, were told the story of Hessian soldiers that were buried in the cellar of 250 Smith Hill Road. At this location Capt Joseph Rockwell had, in 1767, constructed the second dwelling house in Colebrook, the first being his brother Samuel's in Colebrook Center. Here are the facts concerning the events that took place during those Revolutionary years:

In the spring of 1777, the British General John Burgoyne began to march his army of some 10,000 troops, consisting of British regulars, paid Hessian troops, Canadian militias and no small number of Native Americans southward from Quebec and down the Hudson River Valley with the intent to cut off the New England colonies from the rest of the British colonies strung out along the east coast of what is now the United States. Had this ploy been successful, in all probability the outcome of the war would have been completely different.

However, the British plans were thwarted, and on October 12, 1777, at what has come to be known as the second Battle of Saratoga, the British General laid down his arms. The army of 10,000 had by this time been reduced to 5,799. This remnant was to be marched to the Boston area, where they were to be repatriated back to the Continent. A member of the Connecticut militia, one Oliver Boardman of Middletown, wrote one account of the movement of a small segment of the British army through Colebrook. Boardman states that he and forty-nine others escorted 128 prisoners, at least some of whom were Hessian soldiers, from Saratoga to Hartford, Connecticut. No doubt there was a considerable flow of prisoners passing through our area for quite some time. If Boardman's account can be considered as representative, for every 3 prisoners, there was an American militiaman. I would venture to say that the locals saw this troop movement as one long disruption. It is hardly surprising that stories about Hessians still abound locally.

Boardman's first entry is on Sept 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 Greenbush, New York (8 or 10 miles southeast of Albany). Tuesday, October 21st found them at Kinderhook, N.Y. On Wednesday they reached Hillside, N.Y., about 5 miles west of the Massachusetts border. Thursday they marched to Sheffield, Mass. On Friday, the 24th, they marched to Rockwell's in Colebrook Center. Saturday, the 25th brought them to Simsbury. (Although in all probability it was in the section of Simsbury that was to break off at a later date and become Canton.) On Sunday, the 26th, they marched to Hartford and turned 123 prisoners over to the sheriff, five of the prisoners having died en route.

Those stories give any serious student of history cause for concern, however. One such story prevalent in Colebrook revolves around the Joseph Rockwell House at 250 Smith Hill Road. This building, or perhaps more accurately, its predecessor, was built in 1767. A great deal of building took place during the ten years following the construction of these two dwellings, not the least of which was Richard Smith's 11 building complex erected in 1770 about a mile east of Joseph Rockwell's house on the Old North Road (Smith Hill). Deer Hill Road, running down hill from Joseph Rockwell's to the forge and

its supporting buildings, was built in 1772. The reason for giving all these seemingly superfluous facts will become clear when the rest of the story reveals itself.

The story goes like this: (and every one of us was taught that it was factual) “When Burgoyne’s army was marching through Colebrook, the winter weather was terrible; snow lay deep, and the temperature was bitter cold. As there were so few houses in town, these troops, through necessity, were housed wherever they could be accommodated. The severity of the weather caused several deaths to occur. Under those primitive conditions, with the frozen ground covered deeply by drifting snow, the only place that afforded unfrozen ground in which to dig graves was in the cellar of Mr. Rockwell’s home.” (Some accounts report 2, others as many as 6 Hessians buried in this cellar.)

When the present owners purchased the property more than 80 years ago, they were told this story, which was sworn to as being the gospel truth. In all this time, not a soul has questioned any part of this tale.

Let’s back up a little. In the mid 1990s, while doing research on another matter, Walt Landgraf stumbled upon some documents concerning Richard Smith, a Boston merchant during Colonial times who had cornered the iron market in New England and built a large forge in the southeast corner of Colebrook. The nature of these papers cast new light on the enterprise, suggesting that what took place there was not at all what it appeared to be; instead of being just another forge, it apparently was capable of producing high quality steel. The implication was enough to cause a group of interested citizens to undertake in-depth research that has yielded a tremendous amount of information concerning the goings-on in our corner of the county during Colonial times. One bit of information was a map of the forge complex that identified 11 buildings. Beside the forge, there was a large charcoal house, a store, blacksmith shop, sawmill and dwelling houses for the workers.

Let’s sort out some facts here. We are talking about 1777, not 1767; there were plenty of buildings in this section of town. More importantly, the month is October. The ground certainly would not have been frozen, nor would it have been snow-covered. No concrete evidence has surfaced suggesting that any British prisoners of war, Hessian or otherwise, were ever buried in Colebrook. This is not to say that there aren’t graves in the area containing bones of such men; there are. Norfolk has at least two, Abram Si Hunchupp, and another who was apparently buried in their cemetery. In the notes of a town meeting of February 16, 1786, the town voted not to advise Deacon Humphry one way or the other as to what he should do with the bones of the Hessian [*sic*] soldier that he had dug up out of the burying yard. (My guess is that he reburied them just outside the boundary of the burying ground; after all, who is to say what religion that soldier had believed in – “He’s not going to lie in repose in our hallowed ground, thank you!”)

My advise to the residents of 250 Smith Hill Road is to rest easy on dark, stormy nights – no ghosts of Hessian soldiers are going to rattle their sabers in the murky corners of your cellar!

The fall of 1777 was not to be the last the residents of this neighborhood saw of General Burgoyne’s army, however, The following winter of 1778-1779 saw them marching through once again, this time heading southwestward with Charlottesville, Virginia, their goal, where they were to remain until the end of hostilities in 1783. The reason for this seemingly circuitous route was the presence of British military and

administrative headquarters in Manhattan. General Howe would have dearly loved to recapture Burgoyne's army, thus he was given a wide berth.

This march southward was conducted differently from the march from the Albany area to Boston the previous year where small groups of soldiers passed through following a variety of routes. Now several hundred at a time pressed on for several days, then made an encampment for two or three days in order to rest up, then moved on to repeat the cycle. It was one of these stops in New Hartford that gave the name "Burgoyne's Heights" to an upland east of West Hill Pond.

As a postscript to the battles that were fought during that crucial summer of 1777, and whose names are forever woven into the fabric of our nation, the following might be of interest: In the era prior to nuclear powered warships, all aircraft carriers were named for battles or for early warships. The U.S.S. Saratoga, CV-3, compiled an impressive record during the Pacific campaign of WWII, surviving the war to be sunk in the atomic bomb tests at Bikini. The U.S.S. Ticonderoga, CVA-14 had a long and honorable career. The U.S.S. Oriskany, CVA-34 was one of the flagships for Task Force 77, the designation of the U.S. Navy's fighting group in Korea during that conflict. I have spent many months on a destroyer protecting her. She was "our" carrier; I suppose that might explain the special interest that I have for this particular period of our history.

Compiled by Robert Grigg, Municipal Historian, Town of Colebrook, Conn.