

War of Independence – Burgoyne 1

In keeping with our policy of addressing events that occurred during the period when the United States gained its independence, we are going to present a three part series covering one of the most crucial campaigns of that war, and which had, unlike most others, local involvement.

Before we start, let's get our terminologies established. Most people refer to this war as the "Revolutionary War". It is more accurate to use the term "War of Independence", the reason being that the American colonists were not attempting to overthrow the government of their parent, Great Britain, but rather to free themselves from the fetters they perceived the British parliament had burdened them with. That taken care of, here is the history of Great Britain's General John Burgoyne, the battle of Saratoga and the Hessian soldiers we hear so much about in these parts:

The British Secretary of State, Lord George Germain, was one of the most influential members of the British Ministry, the body that formulated and coordinated the war effort in the American colonies. In 1776 they decided to divide the colonies into two parts by conquering the Hudson River valley. (After a year, all that had been realized of this plan was the conquest of Manhattan. All other lands north to the Canadian border lay in the hands of the American forces.)

The British decided that 1777 was to be the year the military achieved the division goal. An army in Canada commanded by Lt. Gen. John Burgoyne was to invade New York. From this army a detachment of 1,000 men led by Col. Barry St. Ledger was sent by way of Lake Ontario, to land at Oswego and proceed inland, capture Fort Stanwix (east of Lake Oneida Lake, near Rome and Utica) on the upper Mohawk River, come down the Mohawk Valley and rejoin Burgoyne at Albany.

General Howe, the senior British officer in the area, was to move from the vicinity of New York City northward, destroying all colonial opposition that he met in the lower Hudson River valley, and meet Burgoyne at Albany.

The defeat of the British plan originated with a slip of memory on the part of Lord George Germain. He had sent peremptory instructions (orders that must be carried out immediately with no possibility of debate) to Burgoyne to proceed down the Hudson Valley and similar orders for Howe to proceed up the same valley. Germain was a stickler for detail, and whenever important documents were drawn up in those days, copies had to be made by clerks. Germain noticed an irregularity in the papers intended for Howe. He had scheduled a holiday into the country, and left instructions for the clerk to re-make the copy of Howe's orders, which he would sign and send off upon his return from his holiday. At this point, a courier was dispatched to Canada with Burgoyne's orders. The fact of the matter was that when Germain returned, he completely forgot about the orders awaiting his signature that were in a pigeon hole in his desk; several weeks went by before the oversight was discovered. The delay was fatal. When Howe finally did receive those orders in late August, he had already departed the New York area with his army via ships for the Chesapeake Bay, and was then proceeding northward with the intention of engaging General Washington's army at Brandywine, in Delaware.

The importance to the outcome of the American's struggle for independence hung upon the cooperation of Burgoyne and Howe, and the fate of the War of Independence hung on the success or failure of this campaign.

Towards the end of June 1777, Burgoyne had a well-trained army of 8,000 men, and was sailing southward on Lake Champlain toward Fort Ticonderoga. 4,000 of these were British regulars, 3,000 were Hessians or German, a few were Canadian and 500 were Indians.

Burgoyne was a gentleman of culture and education, eloquent, generous and brave. He was a Member of Parliament, as were several of his officers. Baron von Riedesel commanded the Germans.

The American commander in the north was General Schuyler, who had recently placed Arthur St. Claire in command of Fort Ticonderoga with a garrison of 3,000 men. Thus manned, the fort was considered to be impregnable. The problem was that the Americans neglected to secure a round-topped mountain immediately to the south of the fort, and the British, realizing this, wasted no time in dragging cannon to the summit, from whence they could look directly down onto Fort Ticonderoga. St. Clair, thus compromised, saw his only option as the evacuation of his force by boat across Lake Champlain. He probably would have avoided detection had it not been for the lights of a burning house that backlit them, alerting the British forces who pursued and harassed them for several days. The Union Jack was soon flying over the fort that had been captured by Ethan Allen two years before.

At this point, a Colebrook resident might well ask why all this detail is given, and what relevancy does it have here. The answer lies within the psyche and attitudes of the colonials seeking independence from Great Britain. Much pride was felt in the exploits of Ethan Allen, a native son of Litchfield County, and a man of such dynamic character that many of his actions and sayings became the substance of legend and folklore during his lifetime. To have the fort that he had so dramatically captured given up without a fight resulted in an apparent British victory, caused many men throughout New England and New York, and certainly our corner of Litchfield County to drop their plows or scythes and march off to join the Continental Army.

There is another interesting twist of fate in the abandonment on the part of the Americans and the subsequent re-fortifying by the British. The people of New England and New York were aroused as never before since the battle of Lexington. But the passage of two years since Allen's dramatics had witnessed a change in military priorities, and the fort was now of no great importance; as a matter of fact, it was actually an impediment to its possessor, who had to station a considerable number of troops there to retain possession, when in fact they would be desperately needed elsewhere.

An air of overconfidence may well have further weakened the British. When news reached London that the citadel had fallen, King George rushed into the queen's chambers clapping his hands and shouting, "I have beat them! I have beat all the Americans!"

In actuality, Burgoyne had done nothing to capture the Hudson Valley, but had instead, as later events were to prove, done himself harm by having to station a portion of his army at Fort Ticonderoga.

Next week we will analyze the military engagements and what went wrong for the British and right for the Americans.

Historic Bytes
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