

War of Independence – Burgoyne 2

Last week we set the stage for the British army to commence its operation that would culminate with the severing of New England from the rest of the colonies and put an end to the rebellion. From the very beginning, things did not go well.

The American commanding general, Schuyler, now took measures to thwart the obvious British attempt to control the Hudson Valley, and had all cattle and provisions removed for miles around, forcing Burgoyne to draw all his provisions from Canada or even England. Schuyler caused trees to be dropped across roads, destroyed all bridges and placed large boulders and tree trunks in the fords of the streams. At one point, Burgoyne was able to move his army only 26 miles in 24 days. Every day his army grew smaller and weaker through injury or sickness, while Schuyler's army grew daily with the arrival of militiamen and patriots from the entire region.

The date was now mid August 1777, and in the next two weeks British forces in this area would suffer two severe defeats in the battles of Oriskany and Bennington.

Oriskany turned out to be the bloodiest battle of the entire War of Independence. It took place near Fort Stanwix, on the upper Mohawk River near Rome and Utica, N.Y. At the end of the day, when the British retreated, both sides had lost 1/3 of their men. (American forces, under Herkimer, who was killed, initially numbered about 800 men. The survivors of St. Ledger's original 1,000 retreated back to Canada.)

Burgoyne's army was now beginning to suffer from hunger. The Patriots had assembled a supply of stores and ammunition at Bennington, and the British decided they must have them. On August 13th, 500 Germans and 100 Indians with 2 cannon were sent to capture them. The British committed a fatal error when they either didn't know or perhaps disregarded the fact that John Stark, veteran of Bunker Hill and other military engagements, was in the immediate vicinity. If you don't know who Stark was, or other patriots mentioned here, make an effort to familiarize yourselves with them, for it was these men of leadership and charisma around whom our forefathers rallied.

The annals of victory, on the field of battle as well as the athletic field, are full of examples of speeches made by the commanding officer/coach in which a statement was made that became a part of cultural lore, and thus exerted far more influence than could have been anticipated at the time it was spoken. One such example is John Stark's speech to his men prior to their engagement with the British in what was forever afterwards known as the Battle of Bennington, in which he said "They are ours tonight or Molly Stark is a widow!" And so they were, and Molly Stark's husband survived the battle for 45 years. Stark was justly proud of his wife, who was highly respected by all who knew her. The British expeditionary force was utterly defeated, and Burgoyne's army continued to starve.

On September 19, 1777, the engagement known as the first Battle of Saratoga took place. Neither side could claim victory, but the advantage lay with the Americans. On October 9, the second Battle of Saratoga was fought as the desperate Burgoyne sought to fight his way out of there and retreat back into Canada. This time the British army was soundly defeated, and on October 12 Burgoyne asked for a conference with General Gates. The number of men surrendered was 5,799, with all canon, muskets and munitions. The entire number of British losses for the complete campaign exceeded 10,000. The lack of food and the conditions under which they had been forced to exist

for the duration of this campaign, probably explain why so many seemed to die on the relatively easy trip from the Hudson Valley across New England. There seems to be hardly a town in this region that does not have legends of buried Hessians.

One result of the outcome of this battle, often downplayed in our current history books, is that when the news reached England in February 1778, Lord North rose in the Commons and proposed that every point for which the Americans had demanded change at the outbreak of hostilities be yielded by Parliament. This humiliating act passed both houses and was signed by the King in March 1778. But it was now too late, and the Americans refused everything except total independence.

The agreement drawn up concerning the fate of Burgoyne's army called for them to be sent to the Boston area in small groups, and then to be repatriated back to the Continent, thus the west to east route of the Hessians and other British components through Norfolk, Colebrook, New Hartford and other surrounding towns. For various reasons, this repatriation never took place, mainly because Congress found one excuse after another not to honor the pact. The march of one company of Burgoyne's defeated army is recorded in a journal kept by Oliver Boardman of Middletown, Connecticut, now in the possession of the Connecticut Historical Society. His 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 Greenbush, New York (8 or 10 miles southeast of Albany). Tuesday, October 21st found them at Kinderhook, New York. 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 became 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.

Also in the latter part of October 1777, a small group of this defeated army passed through Norfolk, where they camped on the green for a few days. One Hessian, by the name of Abram Si Hunchupp, (pronounced "Sunchupp"), was taken ill and brought to the house of Capt. Michael Mills, where Mills' wife unsuccessfully attempted to nurse him back to health. He is 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 the body of Abram Si Hunchupp". Years later, a hired man, gathering firewood, chopped down the ancient apple, not knowing its history; thus the exact location of the grave is lost.

Also in the 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.

Next week we will conclude this episode of our War of Independence, and we will explode a long-held legend concerning Hessians in Colebrook.