

### War of Independence-Burgoyne 3

Last week we ended with segments of Burgoyne's surrendered army passing through our area. No doubt there was a considerable flow of prisoners passing through our area for quite some time. This British army, although greatly reduced in numbers, still consisted of some 6,000 men, and 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.

Those stories give any serious student of history cause for concern, however. One prevalent in Colebrook revolves around the Joseph Rockwell home (now 250 Smith Hill Rd.), whose predecessor on the site had been built in 1767. It was the second dwelling house built in town, the first being his brother Samuel's at the Center (now Draper's house at 561 Colebrook Rd.). 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 one mile east of Joseph Rockwell's house on the Old North Road (Smith Hill). Deer Hill Road, running down hill from the Old North Road to the forge and its supporting buildings, was built in 1772. The reason you are being given 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 the 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 Glynn family purchased the property during the latter part of the First World War, 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 cornered the iron market in New England and built a large forge in the southeastern section of Colebrook. The nature of these papers cast new light on this 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 small amounts of 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. 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 man who was apparently buried in their cemetery. In notes of a town meeting held on 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 he might have believed in – “He’s not going to lie in repose in our hallowed ground, thank you very much!”)

My advice 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 autumn of 1777 was not to be the last the residents of this neighborhood saw of Gen. Burgoyne’s army, however. The following winter of 1778-79 saw them marching through once again, this time heading southward 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.

Thus ends our involvement with this episode of the Great War of Independence. It ended, that is, for the residents at home, but the brave and dedicated men who made up the Continental Army and the state militia represented all of the towns around here in every battle and skirmish from Lexington to Yorktown.

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 famous early warships. The U.S.S. Saratoga, CV-3, compiled an impressive record during the Pacific campaign of WWII, surviving the war only 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. In 2004 she was sunk in the Gulf of Mexico to provide an artificial reef for aquatic life.