

A SUMMARY OF THE EVENTS OF 1777 WHICH LED TO GENERAL STARK'S MARCH TO AND VICTORY AT BENNINGTON

1. British Plans for Invading the U.S.A. from Canada

On May 6, 1777, British Major General John Burgoyne and his staff landed in Quebec. He brought orders making him Commander-in-Chief of a British invasion of the United States along the traditional Lake Champlain-Hudson River route which had so often been used during the French and Indian War. This was a route, incidentally, thoroughly familiar to John Stark of New Hampshire. General Burgoyne, or "Gentleman Johnny," as the British termed him, was assigned the task of directing a two-pronged offensive against the Americans. First was his own attack straight south from Montreal to Albany; second was a diversionary thrust from the west designed to get to Albany by way of Lake Ontario, Oswego, and the Mohawk River.

Burgoyne was in charge of the main attack; Lieutenant Colonel Barry St. Leger was commander of the offensive down the Mohawk. The two columns, it was assumed, would have no real trouble in meeting in Albany late in August, 1777. They would there be in easy reach of the main British army in North America, that commanded by General Sir William Howe in New York. General Howe would leave a strong garrison in that city, move into Pennsylvania, and capture Philadelphia, the United States capital city. This would involve a conflict with the main American army under General Washington, then in New Jersey. But the London War Office was confident that in no case would the Americans be able to blunt any of these attacks. Since the mighty British Navy ruled the Atlantic, the British would win the war by the autumn of 1777.

Such were the ambitious plans conceived by the British leadership in 1777. Except for Howe's movement against Philadelphia, none of these efforts was to succeed, and Burgoyne's attack on Albany--thanks in large measure to John Stark and his New Hampshire men--was a total disaster.

2. The Initial Successes of the Burgoyne Expedition

When Burgoyne left Canada in the third week of June, he had with him 3700 British troops, 3000 German troops--mostly from the Duchy of Brunswick, perhaps 400 Indians, and some Canadians and American Tories. Moving easily south, this impressive army reached Crown Point on June 27, and approached the old French fort of Ticonderoga on June 30. Here there were a few more than 3400 American troops commanded by Major General Arthur St. Clair. Speedily convinced that it was impossible for his smaller army to hold Ticonderoga, St. Clair ordered the evacuation of the fortress on the night of July 5-6. While his troops hurried south, Burgoyne's advance forces on July 7 caught up with the American rear-guard at Hubbardton, Vermont, and gave them a beating.

The British offensive moved ponderously onward, and by the first week in August Burgoyne was camped on the upper reaches of the Hudson River near modern Stillwater, New York. But by now he was behind in his timetable. His commissary officers were running short of food, fodder for the horses, spare

horses and oxen, grain, and flour. Friendly Tories advised him that there were ample stocks of all these in the "New Hampshire Grants," near a place called Bennington.

3. Vermont's Appeal for Help and New Hampshire's Response

In the astonishment and dismay that came to New England following the army's failure at Fort Ticonderoga, the Vermont authorities sent a frantic appeal for help to their sister states: New Hampshire, Massachusetts, New York, and Connecticut. Only in New Hampshire was the response prompt and decisive. The State Legislature met at Exeter in special session on July 17, 1777, and took immediate action.

John Stark, who had been in retirement at Derryfield since his resignation from the Continental Army on March 22, was urgently summoned to Exeter. There the Legislature on July 19 conferred upon him the rank of Brigadier General of State Militia; urged men to enlist for two months under Stark's command; instructed them to muster into the service at old Fort No. 4 in Charlestown; and offered each man \$10 a month and travel money. The whole expedition was to be solely a State effort, and Stark was to operate his forces in such a manner as " . . . shall appear expedient to you."

In three days, so great was the magnetism of Stark's name and reputation that 1405 New Hampshire officers and men enlisted, and were en route to Charlestown. The names of all these volunteers have been preserved in Volume XV of the State Papers of New Hampshire. Among them were 163 veterans of Stark's command at Bunker Hill in June, 1775. General Stark organized his little army into three regiments. That commanded by Colonel Moses Nichols of Amherst had ten companies. That headed by Colonel Thomas Stickney of Concord had ten companies. And that commanded by Colonel David Hobart of Plymouth had five companies.

4. The March to Bennington

Stark had been urged by the authorities in Exeter to report to Fort No. 4 by the 24th of July. He probably reached that place a day or so later. When he arrived there was an immense amount of work to do before the army could start. The men had to be outfitted; food supplies had to be arranged for; and basic military stores had to be accumulated. By the end of the month there came in a shipment of a ton of lead, 500 pounds of musket balls, 1600 flints, and 17 barrels of gunpowder. On Sunday, August 3, Stark pulled out of the Fort, with nearly a thousand men in his army, and headed west across Vermont.

The expedition struggled through the wilderness and reached the hamlet of Peru on Thursday, the 7th. The next day, Friday the 8th, they came to Manchester and camped there for a brief respite. Here Stark met General Benjamin Lincoln, a Continental Army officer. He made it clear to Lincoln that the New Hampshire forces were acting entirely under Stark's command, and that Stark himself would decide how these men would be used to meet Burgoyne's invasion. Lincoln was willing to accept any help on any terms, and he and Stark got along reasonably well.

On Sunday the 10th, Stark and his men marched into Bennington and camped in what today is termed "Old Bennington." A Council of War was soon called by Stark, which included all the colonels present in the combined forces of New Hampshire, Vermont, and Massachusetts. He was acknowledged to be the officer in charge, and his were to be the orders for the coming battle. There were then present in or near Bennington 1300 men from New Hampshire, 390 from Vermont, and 350 from Massachusetts, or somewhat more than 2000 in all.

Now the British took the initiative. On the 13th Burgoyne ordered 600 men under Lieutenant Colonel Baum to leave the main British encampment on the Hudson River and proceed to Bennington to seize the supplies there. That afternoon they were in Cambridge, New York, proceeded by numerous Indians. Stark immediately sent out a small force of his men to ascertain what was developing only a few miles away. On the 14th these Americans met the Baum column west of Bennington in the valley of the Wallomsac River, up which the British were advancing. The Americans drew back; the British, not liking what they saw, went into camp on a high hill on the left-hand side of the tortuous road; and Stark prepared to take his whole army out to meet the enemy. Baum's hill was located just west of the present New York-Vermont state border.

The situation not being favorable for an immediate attack, Stark pulled his forces back to a new campground further west than the one first used, and waited for the morrow. Friday the 15th saw a torrential rain, and nothing much was possible that day by either side. Lieutenant Colonel Baum, realizing that he was confronting an unexpectedly strong force of Americans, sent back to Burgoyne for reinforcements, and a relief column of about 600 men under Colonel Breyman was immediately ordered to join the beleaguered Baum.

5. The Battle of Bennington: Part One

On Saturday, the 16th of August, the skies cleared and the weather turned hot and humid. Stark prepared for an assault on the hill occupied by Baum's forces. Colonel Herrick and his men were to circle the hill and attack it from the northwest; Colonel Nichols was to do likewise from the northeast.

General Stark and the rest of the troops were to make a frontal assault across the Walloomsac. All went off just as Stark had planned. The actual fighting commenced at 3:00 p.m. and it was all over by 5:00 o'clock. Baum was mortally wounded and his men surrendered. Much equipment including two three-pound cannon were captured. Long lines of prisoners were marched into Bennington, guarded by jubilant New Hampshire soldiers. The rest scattered on the battlefield to see what they could find that was useful. The victory seemed to be complete.

6. The Battle of Bennington: Part Two

Shortly after 5:00 p.m., however, General Stark learned that 'a second' enemy force was approaching Bennington from the west. This was, of course, the British column led by Colonel Breyman. Hastily assembling such men as he could, Stark was fortunate in that Vermont Colonel Seth Warner brought into

action at this time about 150 fresh troops. Contact was made shortly after 6:00 o'clock, and continued until dusk when Stark ordered that action be terminated. He feared that in the gathering gloom and battle confusion his men might shoot their comrades. Breyman pulled the remnant of his force together, and they hurried back along the road recently traversed with such confidence. But they left behind many dead, numerous prisoners, and much equipment.

When the news of this double setback and total defeat reached Burgoyne, he was thunderstruck. He might well have been. In his report of the encounter General Stark summarized the American triumph as follows:

"We obtained four pieces of brass cannon, one thousand stand of arms, several Hessian swords, eight brass drums, and seven hundred and fifty prisoners. Two hundred were killed on the spot; wounded unknown. The enemy effected his escape by marching all night, and we returned to camp."

Stark reported his own losses as "about thirty killed and forty wounded." He praised the conduct of all his officers and men, and was careful to mention the contributions both of the Vermont and Massachusetts forces.

7. Conclusion

General Stark's great accomplishment at Bennington was not fully appreciated at the time, nor has it always been since then. Thomas Jefferson put it well when he once said:

"This success was the first link in the chain of events which opened a new scene to America. It raised her from the depths of despair to the summit of hope, and added unfaded laurels to the veteran who commanded."

And the great British historian, Trevelyan, recently has written:

"Bennington . . . proved to be the turning point of the Saratoga campaign, which was the turning point of the War."

It is gratifying to know that the Continental Congress soon came to see the merits of Stark and on the 4th of October, 1777, gave him the rank of Brigadier General in the Army of the United States. It was a deserved recognition.

As a final note to the significance of the Battle of Bennington, it may be observed that on October 17 Major General Burgoyne at Saratoga, New York, surrendered his entire army to the Americans. It was the greatest victory of the Revolutionary War to date. Stark's achievement at Bennington had led directly to this collapse of Burgoyne's 1777 campaign.

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