The History Behind the “Battle of Saratoga / Gates’ Song”

By: Kevin Fleming

The British attempt to seize control of the Hudson River Valley ended in disaster at the Battle of Saratoga in October of 1777. Lieutenant General John Burgoyne approached the impending engagement with the American forces at Saratoga with trepidation. The previous June, Burgoyne’s army set out from Lake Champlain, advancing up the Hudson River Valley towards Albany. His main body consisted of 7,000 British and German soldiers along with some Canadian troops and 500 Native American scouts. Burgoyne also dispatched 1,200 troops, half of whom were Canadian or Native American under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Barry St. Leger to advance on his right flank along the Mohawk River.[[1]](#endnote-1) In July, the British forced General Arthur St. Clair to abandon Fort Ticonderoga after they emplaced cannons on the nearby Mount Defiance.[[2]](#endnote-2) British forces pursued St. Clair’s forces to Hubbardton. Although the Americans inflicted two hundred casualties, they sustained over three hundred of their own and were again forced to withdraw.[[3]](#endnote-3)

British advances strained their supply lines, and efforts to gather provisions from the countryside proved difficult. Attempts to plunder provisions from individual farmsteads brought in little, and bred resentment between the British and local civilians. The raid Burgoyne directed to capture the American supplies collected at Bennington typified this challenge. The raiding party suffered defeat at the hands of John Stark’s “Green Mountain Boys,” losing nine hundred casualties in the process, including its commander (see song “Riflemen at Bennington”).[[4]](#endnote-5) Even success hampered British progress. Garrisoning the captured Fort Ticonderoga compelled Burgoyne to pull additional soldiers from his front-line forces.[[5]](#endnote-7) Compounding his difficulties, Burgoyne’s detached right wing also stalled as it moved towards Albany.

By August, St. Leger’s men had encircled the American forces sheltered at Fort Stanwix. Local militia mobilized under the direction of Nicholas Herkimer, a prominent citizen and wealthy fur trader who was a native of the Mohawk Valley.[[6]](#endnote-8) The British and their Native allies ambushed Herkimer’s force on its way to relieve the besieged Fort Stanwix. Severely wounded, Herkimer organized a desperate defense. The militia rallied and held their position, despite suffering a fifty percent casualty rate. But his force failed to lift the siege and Herkimer died from his wounds shortly after the engagement.Undeterred by Herkimer’s defeat, General Philip Schuyler ordered Benedict Arnold to relieve the beleaguered defenders at Fort Stanwix. Attempting to intimidate the British, Arnold enlisted the help of Hans Yost Schuyler, a local Loyalist and distant relative of General Schuyler. Arnold threatened to execute Hans’s family if he did not march to St. Leger and falsely claim 3,000 American soldiers were advancing on his position. As the song explains, Arnold’s deception scared St. Leger. By the time Arnold’s smaller force reached Stanwix, the British had lifted the siege and withdrawn northward.[[7]](#endnote-9) This action and future heroic deeds by Benedict Arnold would be omitted from later versions of the song circulated after his treason. These also omitted entire verses detailing St. Clair’s actions at Fort Ticonderoga and the British victory at Hubbardton. While some omissions are doubtless due to a natural shortening of a very long song’s lyrics as they passed from singer to singer over the years, others, like Arnold’s erasure, are likely purposeful.

Burgoyne hoped British reinforcements from New York City would liberate him from his precarious position. In July, General William Howe had informed Burgoyne he would not send troops northwards unless Washington chose to abandon Philadelphia.[[8]](#endnote-10) Howe nonetheless did ultimately send troops north in October. These forces captured Peekskill and destroyed the colonial battery at Constitution Island, across from West Point. British forces continued as far north as Kingston, but did not advance far enough to aid Burgoyne. Ignoring the recommendations of his War Council, Burgoyne had by then already continued his southern advance through Saratoga towards Albany.[[9]](#endnote-11)

Horatio Gates arrived in Albany on 18 August to reassume command of the American’s Northern Department. Fired three months earlier, Gates was reinstated by Congress after Philip Schuyler’s surrender of Fort Ticonderoga. Gates’s force comprised both regular forces and militiamen. Washington also dispatched Colonel Daniel Morgan’s Virginia riflemen to augment his force. Anticipating the British advance, American forces established a strong defensive position at Bemis Heights, south of Saratoga and the village of Stillwater, under the direction of Thaddeus Kościuszko.[[10]](#endnote-12)

Avoiding a frontal assault against an entrenched enemy, Burgoyne attempted to flank Gates’s left. American forces met the British advance at Freeman’s Farm on 19 September, repulsing multiple bayonet charges. According to the song, American forces withdraw due to nightfall. In reality, British reinforcements threatened to collapse the American flank. Despite their retrograde, the Americans inflicted nearly 600 casualties.[[11]](#endnote-13) Riflemen proved particularly effective in these circumstances. As Burgoyne recalled after the battle, “there was seldom a minute’s interval of smoke in any part of our line without officers being taken off by a single shot.”[[12]](#endnote-14)

On October 7, Burgoyne again ordered an advance to determine the Americans’ defensive array and gather much-needed provisions. American forces led by Arnold secured a decisive victory, collapsing Burgoyne’s right flank. In the attack, Arnold was shot in the leg and crushed by his wounded horse. The British suffered nearly nine hundred casualties, including Major General Simon Fraser, who was mortally wounded by a colonial rifleman. Holding an untenable position, Burgoyne withdrew his whole remaining army north to the village of Saratoga.[[13]](#endnote-15)

Gates pursued Burgoyne as New Hampshire militia units sealed off his escape by seizing the northern river crossing and the road to Fort Edward.[[14]](#endnote-16) Surrounded and with little hope of relief from New York City, Burgoyne surrendered his 6,000-man army. The Saratoga campaign had far-reaching impacts. The British failed to sever New England from the rest of the colonies and win a decisive campaign that might have brought them victory in the war. The Americans meanwhile gained inspiration and confidence from their victory and, most importantly, made their prospects seem promising enough that France finally agreed to enter a military alliance with the United States.[[15]](#endnote-17)

1. Edward G. Lengel, “Chapter 13: From Defeat to Victory in the North: 1777-1778,” chapter eds. Clifford J. Rogers & Samuel J. Watson, in *The West Point History of Warfare)*, eds. Clifford J. Rogers and Ty Seidule (West Point Press, 2024), 13.8. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Kevin Weddle, *The Compleat Victory: Saratoga and the American Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 116-119. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Lengel, “From Defeat to Victory in the North: 1777-1778,” 13.14. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Lengel, “From Defeat to Victory in the North: 1777-1778,” 13.21. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Lengel, “From Defeat to Victory in the North: 1777-1778,” 13.18. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
6. Weddle, *Compleat Victory*, 59, 183-189. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
7. Weddle, *Compleat Victory*, 201-217, Appendix D. The song also references Lieutenant Colonel John Brooks, who joined Arnold’s relief force. Brooks was the commander of the 8th Massachusetts Regiment and served in Brigadier General Ebenezer Learned’s Brigade. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
8. [William Howe to John Burgoyne, July 17, 1777](https://clements.umich.edu/exhibit/spy-letters-of-the-american-revolution/gallery-of-letters/howe-burgoyne-letter/), The Henry Clinton Papers, William L. Clements Library. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
9. Lengel, “From Defeat to Victory in the North: 1777-1778,” 13.26. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
10. Lengel, “From Defeat to Victory in the North: 1777-1778,” 13.15, 13.23-13.24. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
11. Weddle, *Compleat Victory*, 284. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
12. John Burgoyne, *A State of the Expedition from Canada: As Laid Before the House of Commons* (J. Almon, 1780), [122.](https://archive.org/details/stateofexpeditio00burg/page/122/mode/1up) [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
13. Weddle, *Compleat Victory*, 313-326. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
14. Weddle, *Compleat Victory*, 331. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
15. Lengel, “From Defeat to Victory in the North: 1777-1778,” 13.29, 13.34. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)