



The American Revolution

A Historical Series Sponsored by William Hightower Chapter #35
Sons of the American Revolution

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Article 9-1

The Grand Plan in Action:

Our next series of articles will deal with how this grand plan actually played out in history. How could General John Burgoyne have known that he was about to open Pandora's infamous box? We shall explore each episode in this great historic drama, down to its explosive conclusion in the small wheat-field acreage belonging to a Tory loyalist by the name of John Freeman, who lived on the outskirts of a tiny New York village named Saratoga.

British General Burgoyne had ample advice suggesting to him that the exercise of caution was necessary in the execution of his grand strategy. He chose to discount that advice. So, in June, 1777, he amasses an army of over 7,000 troops and optimistically believed he would have vast support from Native Americans as well as Tory allies. He proceeded south out of Quebec, via Montreal, Canada, and headed for Lake Champlain. Burgoyne and his army, upon leaving Quebec begin to experience the immense

difficulties of moving such a large force over primitive and hostile terrain. This army struggled through delay after delay, and only with great difficulty appeared on the shores of Lake Champlain in August. With completion of his assault on the area, Burgoyne had control of Lake Champlain, and Forts Crown Point and Ticonderoga of upper New York State. Even with the hardships and difficulties of logistics, things seemed to be going as Burgoyne had planned. It was getting late in the season as August approached, and anticipated fall snows would soon prevent Burgoyne and his army from executing his strategy, so time was of the essence.

It is at this point that Professor Murphy's Law kicks into effect..."if it is possible for something to go wrong, it will do so, and it will do so at the most inopportune time..." At this very August moment, General Burgoyne's 7,000 man army was strung out in a long line stretching from Lake Champlain down into northern New York. Up the Mohawk Valley his partner in arms, General Barry Leger and his army were approaching Fort Stanwix on the Mohawk River, which was held by the Americans. Leger thought he was about to assault a partially destroyed fort manned by about 60 Americans. Reality was that the Americans had repaired the fort, and several hundred men were present to defend it. Reinforcements from Colonel Benedict Arnold and his militia army were on the way to Stanwix. Leger surrounded Fort Stanwix, and began his siege of the garrison by first trying diplomacy and intimidation. None of his bluffing worked on the Patriots, so the real shooting began, and General Leger learned that the repaired walls were steep and strong, and that the garrison would be impossible to take without his artillery. His artillery was miles away, slowly moving toward the fort, but local Patriots had felled

trees across the primitive road to such a degree as to make passage without clearing impossible; more delays.

An advance detachment of New York militia under command of Nicholas Herkimer suddenly appears on the scene on 6 August 1777, and a very fierce fire fight between the British, mostly Iroquois Indians, and the Americans erupts. The American force is repulsed, but the Indians are so badly beaten and demoralized, that they desert the siege. This is recorded in history as the Battle of Oriskany, New York.

Following this setback, the British are momentarily relieved to have their artillery arrive. General Leger has his guns in place as soon as possible with the intention of blasting the fort into small pieces. Reality sets in once again, when he sees with his own eyes, that most of his guns cannot be placed close enough to the fort walls to do any real damage. So, another delay, while the British dig trenches in order to get their artillery into more favorable position. General Leger finally had his artillery in place and was ready to make the crushing assault on the Americans, which he had dreamed of achieving, only to learn from Oneida Indians coming into camp, that American, Benedict Arnold was only a few miles away rapidly approaching with several hundred men.

Prudently General Leger called a war council in order to get the opinion of his field commanders. The last of a 200 man Iroquois troop deserted camp, while this council was in session and Leger's commanders voted to retreat. By the time Benedict Arnold and his force arrived at Fort Stanwix, the siege had been lifted and the British retreated back up the Mohawk River.

This Battle of Fort Stanwix was a major American victory, because it defeated the first prong of General Burgoyne's three pronged pincer strategy for defeating America. This was the first of several bitter disappointments for General Burgoyne and the British/Canadian invasion army.

General Burgoyne was not immediately made aware of General Leger's failure to achieve the western pincer movement. Burgoyne was occupied with problems of his own. His supply line had become stretched perilously thin, and was operating inefficiently, causing the British to rake the countryside for supplies and draft animals. The foraging parties and Iroquois-British allies had generated much ill will with the inhabitants of the area, so much so, that heavily armed British units were necessary to impose British will on the countryside, and have it render its goods.

British General Burgoyne ordered Lieutenant Colonel Friedrich Baum and his Hessians along with Canadian militia and Tory Loyalists to raid the town of Bennington, Vermont, in the New Hampshire Grants. On 16 August 1777, this armed column of 700 men were to gather as much forage and as many draft animals as possible. General Burgoyne and Lieutenant Colonel Baum were unaware that the town of Bennington was protected by Colonel John Stark with 1,500 militia and Green Mountain Boys.

What appeared to be an easy foraging expedition developed into a major battle. Baum's expedition encountered the advanced skirmishers of John Stark's militia army and sharp fighting commenced. The militia backed off and regrouped as they were expecting to engage Native America war parties, who had been raiding the area and were startled by meeting what was obviously the Hessian Army.

In the course of this action rains developed and the Hessians had difficulty fighting as their powder became moistened, but somehow the rebels kept their powder dry, and their fire upon the Hessians was deadly. In the course of the afternoon Colonel Baum's detachment became surrounded by the Bennington militia. Hessian support arrived in the form of Lieutenant Colonel Breymann's column, and heavy action followed with many casualties on both sides. The tide of battle turned in favor of the Americans, and a decisive victory was obtained with many Hessian prisoners taken.

This battle goes down as a crippling defeat for Burgoyne, because the intended purpose of the column was to obtain much needed forage and draft animals, which did not happen. Second, the Iroquois Native Americans supporting Burgoyne got their fill of combat, and did not obtain any of the spoils of conquest Burgoyne had promised them, so they withdrew and returned home. The result of this battle reduced General Burgoyne's army by 1/3, leaving him with less than 5,000 hungry, fatigued and demoralized men. In the coming days several things conspired to make General Burgoyne's situation even more precarious.

Burgoyne decided to recall and withdraw his support troops from the garrisons where he had placed them along his trail of conquest, thus cutting off his line of safe communication back to Canada. This action, while it bolstered his army and made up for its losses at Bennington, isolated the army from its home base. Unknown to General Burgoyne was the fact that American General Benedict Arnold and his Stanwix force was on its way to join American General Gates, whom Washington had ordered north to meet Burgoyne's threat. General Gates had

received 750 men from American General Benjamin Lincoln and New England's militia. In addition, General Gates was joined by Colonel Daniel Morgan and 500 expert riflemen. It can be seen that any of Burgoyne's delays were now aiding the Americans by allowing them to concentrate their forces against him.

By 7 September 1777, Polish military engineer, Tadeusz Kosciuszko had erected defensive trenches and redoubts over the high grounds of Bemis Heights about 10 miles south of the town of Saratoga, New York. This position had a commanding view of the entire area, and served as a sentinel over the only road to Albany, New York. American General Gates and his army occupied Bemis Heights as their base of operation.

Meanwhile, British General Burgoyne was moving slowly and cautiously south in order to cross the Hudson River. By 18 September 1777, he and most of his army were positioned just north of the tiny town of Saratoga, New York, and about 4 miles from the American defensive line at Bemis Heights. It is here and at this time that the first skirmishes between American scouting parties and leading elements of British General Burgoyne's army occurred.

Both British General Burgoyne and American General Arnold realized the position occupied by the left flank of the American army was critically important to the outcome of the impending battle. Burgoyne ordered his army into three columns and directed it to attack the American army in a flanking maneuver by assaulting the American left flank. American Colonel Daniel Morgan rushed to meet this British assault with his 500 sharp shooters. In the following fierce fighting, strategically placed Morgan's men killed nearly all of the British field officers and

halted the British attack in an open field on John Freeman's farm. This first battle of Saratoga would be remembered as the Battle of Freeman's farm.

This first phase of the battle was followed by a lull in the fighting around 1:00 PM, while the British regrouped and reorganized for another attack on the American left flank. American General Gates sent to Colonel Morgan several regiments of reinforcements in order to strengthen the American left flank before the British could mount their second attack. The British attack came in full force, but was contained by the Americans, who held their position and fought fiercely. The battle went back and forth with American Colonel Morgan's riflemen raking the British ranks and killing most of the British field officers and artillerymen. At one point, it was believed that Morgan's men had killed British General Burgoyne, but they killed his horse and an aide, who was attending the general. It was at that juncture that the center of the British line almost collapsed and an American breach of the British line was narrowly averted, when the British 26th regiment bolstered the center and saved their day. It was about 3:00PM.

Following this last reversal, the British regrouped with reinforcements and reserves thrown into the fight. British General Fraser attack the American left flank with renewed effort and Hessian General Riedesel sent his reservers forward in a new attack; this time on the American right flank. The battle reached its fiercest pitch and the British pressed the Americans with all they had, which resulted in the Americans giving ground. Fortunately for the Americans, nightfall brought an end to the hostilities.