Battles of Saratoga and Bennington – You Are There (but were we?)

The Battle of Saratoga was a major turning point in the Revolutionary War. It was fought on Sep 19, 1777 (Battle of Freeman’s Farm) and Oct 7 (Battle of Bemis Heights, aka Barber’s Farm). The second battle led to a major victory for the American side. The remaining British-German troops – some 5800 men – under General John Burgoyne (“Gentleman Johnny”) surrendered on Oct 17, 1777. The victory was important for several reasons. First, it demonstrated that American Patriots could marshal an army of mostly volunteers capable of defeating a professional European army. The Patriot forces, which started with about 9000 men in August, grew to over 15,000 strong by the time of the British surrender. Second, the victory convinced the French that they should enter the war on the rebel side, which ultimately led to victory at Yorktown, VA in Oct 1781. Some 5500 French troops would land in RI in 1780 and march to VA in Aug 1781, where they helped defeat British forces under General Cornwallis. (One-third of the “French” troops were German or Swiss.) Third, it showed the weakness of British military strategy, with its extended supply lines and difficult logistics, which included the arduous task of transporting disassembled sail-sloops and heavy 24-foot bateaux. The Patriots could easily replenish both supplies and men, but this was not possible for the British.

It is well-documented that one of our ancestors was a 22-year-old German Brunswick soldier, Ernst F.J. Martini. He was a supply officer (fourier) in the Musketeer Regiment, Liebcompany (first company), under Colonel Johann Friedrich Specht. The commander of the Brunswick troops was Major General Friedrich Adolf von Riedesel. Over 1000 Brunswickers surrendered at Saratoga and were detained as part of the Convention Army, marched by force to Boston and then to Charlestown, VA. Our ancestor Ernst was one of them.

The question is whether any Nelson ancestors participated in these battles on the rebel side. Positive evidence is found in A History of Colrain Massachusetts (Patrie, 1974, p74). The History lists the men who answered the call to battle for the “Bennington Alarm” (Aug 16-19, 1777), including Andrew Neilson. It also lists the men who volunteered and went to Saratoga for Sep 20 to Oct 18, 1777. This list includes John Nelson (sic). The family of our ancestor John Nelson included two sons named Andrew (1757-1786) and John (1747-1820). Both sons were born in Brimfield, MA, but came to the Colrain area around 1774 with their father (History of the Town of Bernardston, 1902, p437). Both were the right age to volunteer for the militia, but what is uncertain is the date of the move to Colrain, MA. John Jr. was married in 1774, but his wife, Anne Fenton, was also from Brimfield, where their wedding took place. Both died in Whitingham, VT. Records for Andrew are sparse, but he lived in Colrain and is buried in nearby Rowe, MA (North Cemetery). He married Sarah McCreliss in 1779, and she was born in Colrain. Andrew’s arrival in the area thus pre-dates 1779. It remains a mystery whether Andrew and John were in the right place at the right time. Military records from MA Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolutionary War (1903) are reproduced below. As militia volunteers, these records suggest that soldiers Andrew and John Neilson probably missed active engagement at the major battles of Aug 16, Sep 19, and Oct 7 at Bennington and Saratoga.

Neilson, Andrew. Private, Capt. Hugh McClallen’s Co., Col. David Field’s Regt.; enlisted Aug 17, 1777; discharged Aug 19, 1777; service, 6 days, including 3 days (69 miles) travel home; company marched from Colrain to Bennington on the alarm of Aug 17, 1777. Roll sworn to in Hampshire Co.

Neilson, John. Private, Capt. Hugh McClallen’s Co., Col. David Wells’ Regt.; enlisted Sep 22, 1777; discharged Oct 1, 1777; service, 15 days, with Northern Army, including 6 days (120 miles) travel home. Roll sworn to in Hampshire Co.

Several possible relatives from Brimfield and Wales may have served in the Revolutionary War. These include William Nelson (May-Aug 1775, Dec 1776-Mar 1777 – did duty at Fort Ti); Lemuel Nelson (Apr 1781-Oct 1783); Samuel Nelson (Jul-Oct 1780, Mar 1781-Aug 1783); and Benjamin Nelson (Apr 1775; Jun 1781-Jul 1783). Our William Nelson was only 15 yrs. in 1775, but enlistments at this age did occur (see Narrative of a Revolutionary Soldier, 2001 reprint). Our Benjamin Nelson was about 17 yrs. in 1775. However, these were common names in early MA (along with John, Paul, George, and Ringo).

The Battles

In Sep 1776, General Burgoyne arrived in Canada with reinforcements of 8000 men. About half of the soldiers were Germans and the majority of those were Brunswickers (not Hessians). The battle plan was for three separate armies to attack Albany, with the objective of isolating New England from the rest of the colonies. New England was viewed as the heart of the American rebellion. A large army under Burgoyne – 9000 strong – would make their way down Lake Champlain to the Hudson River (aka North River), then south along the Hudson to Albany. A second army of 1200 led by Col. Barry St. Leger would go up the St. Lawrence River to Lake Ontario and then follow the Mohawk River east, where they would rendezvous with Burgoyne’s forces. A third army under the command of General William Howe would move north from New York City (then under British control) along Hudson River toward Albany. Having gained control of New York City and the Hudson-Champlain Valley north to Canada, British forces would isolate New England.
The plan unraveled quickly. Gen. Howe did not go north, but rather sought to attack Philadelphia from the sea with his brother, Admiral Richard Howe. They hoped to engage the Continental Army under General Washington. (Howe possibly feared that Washington could retake New York City if the British moved north.) Col. St. Leger’s forces were stalled by supply logistics and rebel forces at Fort Stanwix (now Rome, NY). Following a fierce battle at nearby Oriskany on Aug 6, St. Leger lifted his siege of Fort Stanwix and withdrew to Quebec.

The first part of Burgoyne’s plan was successful. Breaking winter camp and departing from Quebec on Jun 14, 1777, his first objective was Fort Ticonderoga at the southern end of Lake Champlain. It took until Jun 26 to reach Crown Point, NY. The Fort fell easily on Jul 6 after a four-day siege. Retreating rebel forces were pursued and another engagement took place at the Battle of Hubbardton, which ended in a loss for the Americans. Burgoyne left a contingent to guard the Fort and continued on to his next major objective, Saratoga (now Schuylerville), 35-miles north of Albany. The distance from Ticonderoga to Saratoga was only 60 miles, but it was hostile wilderness. With a series of American forts blocking passage along the Hudson, Burgoyne sent his troops via an arduous overland route with their provisions, baggage, ammunition, and horses. A major skirmish with retreating rebels under General Schuyler took place at Fort Anne on Jul 8, which resulted in another victory for the British. The rebels were now constantly harassed by Indian foes, who scalped many including young loyalist Jane McCrea. However, Burgoyne next stalled for 18-days at Fort Edward, waiting for his personal provisions to catch-up (some 30-cart loads). Retreating rebels also disrupted the route south by destroying bridges and blocking roads with downed trees.

With British supplies starting to run low in August, a plan was hatched to raid a Patriot supply depot at Bennington, VT, a 70-mile round-trip from Fort Miller. Burgoyne sent a force of about 1400 men, mostly Germans, but the Americans responded with a force of 2600. The battle took place on Aug 16 at a site on the Walloomsac River near North Hoosic, NY, about 10-miles west of Bennington. British-German forces were overwhelmed by superior numbers, and lost over 900 men (200 killed and 700 captured) and their arms. The British would now have to advance without much needed supplies, horses, arms, and abandoned cannon. Many of their Indian supporters also left and went home to Canada or the Great Lakes. With winter approaching, Burgoyne had no option but to retreat to Fort Ticonderoga or try to advance to Albany. He chose the latter. On Sep 10, his dead-tired troops crossed the Hudson near Saratoga, and set-off along the west bank toward Albany. By Sep 17, the main British army camped within four miles of the Patriots, who were positioned on higher ground at Bemis Heights, about 12-miles south of Saratoga near Stillwater, NY.

On Sep 19, Burgoyne split his army into three columns. The center column of about 3000 men encountered stiff resistance near Freeman’s Farm, where rebel long-rifles under Col. Daniel Morgan picked-off British officers. Rebel sniping from behind trees at enemy in open fields also was common. In the final outcome, British-German troops held the field of battle, but suffered 600 casualties. It was a hollow victory. Patriot losses were 300 killed or seriously wounded. Burgoyne again arrested his attack while waiting for reinforcements from New York City, an 8-day march that never arrived. Burgoyne put his remaining army on short rations on Oct 5.

Although some of his officers favored retreat, Burgoyne decided to attack the rebel’s left flank with a reconnaissance force of about 1700 men, only half of his remaining troops. However, Patriot forces had grown from 9000 to 12,000 as fresh Continental troops ordered-up by General Washington and militia volunteers poured into camp. On Oct 7, 1777, British-German forces launched an attack on the main rebel position at Bemis Heights. The advance was met with stiff resistance at Barbier’s Farm. The Patriots were able to advance and attacked British redoubt fortifications. The British were forced to withdraw to their main fortification closer to the Hudson, but not without loss of 800 soldiers and eight cannon. Desertions to the rebel side were now common. Eventually British troops withdrew to higher ground at Saratoga, where Burgoyne again stalled for time. He had lost 1500 men in two battles, but failed to advance his position. The Americans followed and by Oct 13 had surrounded the enemy.

On Oct 16, Burgoyne finally accepted terms of surrender from General Horatio Lloyd Gates. On Oct 17, 1777, some 5856 British and German soldiers grounded their arms or two-thirds of the force that captured Ticonderoga in early July. (It would take until Dec 4 for news to reach Paris.) The captured soldiers would spend the next three years as prisoners of war as part of the so-called Convention Army. Brunswick sent 5723 troops to North America, and 3015 did not return home. About 1000 Brunswickiers were captured at Saratoga and related engagements, including 44 from Specht’s Liebcompany and our ancestor Ernst F.J. Martini (see C. Reuter, Brunswick Troops in North America, 2007, p52). In recognition of the American victory, Congress declared Dec 18, 1777 as a national holiday “for solemn Thanksgiving and praise.” It was the first official observance of a holiday with that name. However, America’s War of Independence would continue until early 1782. The last British troops finally left New York City on Nov 25, 1783, ending eight years of conflict. Anywhere from 25-70,000 American Patriots died in battle or from wounds, disease, starvation and imprisonment. The Treaty of Paris was ratified by Congress on Jan 14, 1784. On Sep 17, 1787, delegates signed the new Constitution. And on Feb 4, 1789, George Washington was chosen as the first president of the United States.