

Walk Thru A Turning Point in History

by Linda Morzillo

Who were the Neilsons, the Freemans and the Barbers? Before the Revolutionary War and the Battles of Saratoga, they were neighboring farmers. During September and October, 1777, their farms became battlefields and they had chosen sides. The Freemans were Loyalists and became refugees to Canada. The others were witnesses and/or participants at the time of the battles considered the Turning Point in the colonists' struggle to become independent of England. Some historians consider the Battle of Saratoga among the 15 most important historic battles and the American victory gained foreign recognition and support for the colonies.

The British strategy was to gain control of the Hudson River, a natural dividing line that would split the New England Colonies from the Mid-Atlantic and Southern Colonies. A three-pronged movement of armies planned to meet in Albany to accomplish the mission. British General "Gentleman Johnny," John Burgoyne left Montreal in June, 1777 to take control of the Upper Hudson Valley. After his victory at Fort Ticonderoga, he proceeded south but was met with delays and setbacks in obtaining reinforcements and supplies at Fort Edward. This was due to the heavy British defeat on August 16, 1777 at the Battle of Bennington. The site of this battle, led by American General John Stark, is located in Walloonsac, New York, about ten miles west of Bennington, Vermont.

Lieutenant Colonel Barrimore "Barry" St. Leger left Montreal and traveled by boat to Fort Oswego, New York. He eventually followed the Mohawk River, planning to meet General Burgoyne in Albany but turned back because of the failed Siege of Fort Stanwix, located near present-day Rome, New York. General William Howe was to move his army from New York City to Albany, but, instead, moved much of his army by sea on a campaign to capture Philadelphia.

While General Burgoyne was waiting for the other British forces, in present-day Schuylerville, American General Horatio Gates took charge of the Continental Army and militia units about ten miles south at Bemis Heights, between present-day Schuylerville and Stillwater. The land the Americans occupied was mostly wooded with some cleared farmland and it was cut with ravines. Thaddeus Kosciuszko, one of several European volunteers who gave valuable assistance during America's struggle for independence, engineered many log fortifications and placed cannons above the River Road.

There were actually *two* Battles of Saratoga; the first on September 19, 1777. The British, led by General Burgoyne, claimed victory despite twice as many casualties as the Americans. General Burgoyne then decided to wait for the arrival of the force from New York City. General Clinton was placed in charge by General Howe, with orders to aid Burgoyne, but was afraid New York City would become endangered if he were to leave it undefended. General Clinton's failure to move north was probably a main reason why the second Battle of Saratoga on October 7, 1777, seventeen days after the first battle, resulted in a victory for the Americans.

Saratoga National Historical Park consists of four separate units. On the battlefield, walkers will see where the battles took place. Among the highlights on the battlefield itself, are views of the Hudson River and River Road, the restored Neilson House (the door frames, window frames, some floor boards and bricks were from the original structure), and the timeless views of this area. Historians have studied sketches and other written accounts and believe the view of this part of the Hudson Valley is quite similar to the view in 1777.

The other three units, all located in the present-day Village of Schuylerville, are the Schuyler House, The Saratoga Monument and Victory Woods. The Schuyler House was the country home of General Philip Schuyler. The original house was burned by the British; the present house was built in 1777 after General Burgoyne's surrender about a half-mile away. The Saratoga Monument, a 155-foot stone obelisk, completed in 1883, is on the site of General Burgoyne's camp during the battle's final days. The 360-degree view at the top is beautiful! Adjacent to Saratoga Monument is Victory Woods, another area of the final encampment site of General Burgoyne's army.

Many of the place names in Saratoga County and beyond are named for people who are associated with these events of 1777. Among them are Burgoyne, Morgan, Kosciuszko, Stark, Neilson, Freeman, Howe, Herkimer, Gansevoort, Gates, Benedict, Clinton, Morgan, Schuyler and Wilkinson.

Specific details of the Battles of Saratoga are discussed in various degrees of detail in countless books; many are available in public libraries. We strongly recommend that all convention attendees see the short film *Something More at Stake*. This excellent film will enhance your understanding of the events that transpired here in 1777; do check the upcoming convention schedule to find the numerous times this film will be shown. In addition, the informative park website <https://www.nps.gov/sara/index.htm> is a trove of information including ways to access multimedia tools.