

More in-depth historical info:
Saratoga National Historic Park
Stillwater; Schuylerville; & Victory Mills, New York
Thursday, June 13, 2019



Turning Point in the American Revolution

o Most know of that historic “Lincoln Address” resulting from the three-days of battle at Gettysburg, PA, July 1863 that would help determine if the US would remain a single Nation, or be split into two countries (North & South). However, few are as familiar with what happened in the fall of 1777, four score and six years before the combat at Gettysburg. Fighting between British forces & colonial patriots on Bemis Heights & at (old) Saratoga would help determine an even greater pivotal point in our history: to decide, most often by hand-to-hand combat, if there would even be a self-ruling Union formed from 13-colonies that were currently under the control of an English King & British Parliament.

o At Gettysburg, after Confederates’ Picket’s Charge was defeated by Union troops, southern “rebels” had to retreat back south, a major turning-point in that conflict. At the Bemis Heights battlefield, a group of colonial “rebels” also made a battle charge under the leadership of Gen. Benedict Arnold that was won and turned the tide of victory in the patriots’ favor. This sent a strong message to English King George III that there just might become a United States, as well as to French King Louis XVI that encouraged him to join the patriots’ cause by sending French military personnel & supplies so desperately needed against the world’s most powerful military force during that historical period.

o Some historians have ranked what happened here in this Upstate NY wilderness as one of the top-ten all-time battle victories of world history; so important because it turned the tide for the formation of a new country. The rag-tag army of colonial patriots achieved the impossible: forced a British army to surrender for the first-time in over 200 yrs.

o British Gen. Burgoyne developed a plan to split the New England Colonies from the rest of the colonies by conquering Albany, a critical geographic position where two major rivers met, the Hudson & Mohawk, that formed even in that time period a “super-highway” for transportation of persons & materials by water. His 3-prong attack had him lead a powerful force of ~ 8,500 British/Hessian troops & Native Canadians, plus ~1,000 camp-followers out of Canada, up Lake Champlain Valley, & down the Hudson River Valley. Meanwhile, a detachment, led by Lt. Col. St. Leger, would come from the west having crossed Lake Ontario from Canada to Oswego & Ft. Stanwix (Rome); & Gen. Howe coming north up the Hudson River Valley, all converging on a single target - Albany. With St. Leger being turned back at Battle of Oriskany, & Howe deciding to go and occupy Philadelphia instead of Albany, forces of Burgoyne were left alone to fight their way south.

o At first, victories came easily for Burgoyne’s troops at forts in northern NY - Crown Pt., Ft. Ticonderoga, Ft. Ann, & Ft. Edward; plus Hubbardton now in VT. However, while trying to capture provisions at Bennington, VT, he lost heavily on the way at Walloomsac, NY to Gen. Stark’s New Hampshire Regiment. The ~2,350 patriots lost 70 killed or wounded to Burgoyne’s ~1,400 having 207 killed & ~700 captured. The British ranks were thinning, as were the heavy losses of supplies & equipment at each battle.

o With just 40 miles to Albany, Burgoyne needed to get past patriot forces on Bemis Heights that held commanding views & defenses of the Hudson River & the Albany Rd., the most direct route to Albany. On Sept. 19, 1777 he attacked

with ~7,200 troops against ~9,000 colonials, & without victory at this site, on Oct. 7, he again attacked the colonial lines with only ~6,600 against a growing force of patriots, now ~12,000. Both attempts failed. The total two-day casualties for the colonials was 90 killed & 240 wounded; Burgoyne suffered 440 killed, & 695 wounded.

o Winter was approaching, & the death on the 7th of his most trusted field commander, Gen. Fraser, Burgoyne tried to retreat back north to Ft. Ticonderoga, about 60 miles away, where he had additional supplies & soldiers. With ~6,000 exhausted Brits and Germans (the natives already having left) & the camp-followers, he tried a nighttime retreat from Bemis Heights, but only got about nine-miles to the village of (old) Saratoga where he became trapped. His forces tried to withstand the continuous artillery & sniper fire for about a week but, with patriot forces that surrounded him continuing to grow with fresh minutemen & units swelling their ranks to ~ 14,000, Burgoyne asked for terms.

o The surrender agreement called for British arms to be stacked on the grounds of the old Ft. Hardy, located at the confluence of Hudson River & Fish Creek in (old) Saratoga (now called Schuylerville) on Sunday, Oct. 17, 1777. That same day, surviving British combatants, ~6,000, were marched south, as prisoners of war, along the Albany Rd. (lined with silent patriot soldiers) that Burgoyne forces were so intent on capturing so they could get to Albany and complete their mission. According to the terms of surrender, the British forces were then taken to Boston to be shipped back to England. However, when Washington finally saw the terms of the surrender, he cancelled the treaty knowing that these prisoners would be put on home-defense duty so other troops could come here as replacements. He ordered the prisoners to be marched to Charlottesville, VA to sit out the remainder of the Revolutionary War's fighting that did happen with the British surrender at the Battle of Yorktown, VA on Oct. 19, 1781, four-years & two days after Saratoga. The final end came with the signing of the Treaty of Paris on Sept. 3, 1783, nearly six-years after the Battle of Saratoga, but 8 ½ years following initial fighting at Lexington & Concord (Apr. 19, 1775), & the battle on Breed's Hill in defense of Bunker Hill on June 17, 1775.

Highlights of the Walk

Participants will be traversing hallowed fields of battle: Part I – Bemis Heights Battlefield; & Part II – British Battle Encampment at Victory Woods, & Surrender at Saratoga (now Schuylerville).

o **Saratoga Battlefield Walk** – All participants will go to each of the locations cited below, as well as others, along the three-trails of this walk. Unlike the Civil War period, there are no photo records of these events at Saratoga, but each site has information tablets with artists' renditions of the happenings. To see photos & additional background info of the sites, using your computer or Smartphone from home, or while on the trail: Go to <http://sara.toursphere.com>; select "Begin Tour". In walk order, start with: "Battlefield Tour Road", then Stops 2, 3, 77, & 9; then, go back & select in same order of the walk directions: Saratoga Monument; Victory Woods, & Gen. Phillip Schuyler House. For participants' extra info, this resource will be available during the walk via your Smartphone.

Stop 2: Neilson Farm House – This location was selected by generals Benedict Arnold & Enoch Poor as their headquarters on Bemis Heights, highest grounds in the area. Restorations brought building back to nearly how it looked during battles on Sept 19, & Oct 7, 1777.

Stop 3: American River Fortifications – Located on Bemis Heights, it overlooks & defended the Albany Road & the Hudson River making possible for deadly artillery & sniper fire. British Gen. Burgoyne had to remove these obstacles by charging the Heights before his army could continue along the Road & River to Albany.

Stop 77: "The Boot" Monument – A tribute to "...most brilliant soldier of the Continental Army, winning for his countrymen the decisive battle of the American Revolution". Gen. Arnold's name was never added to his monument due to his traitor behavior in the West Point incident.

Stop 9: British River Fortifications – This location was for the "Great Redoubt" on the British highest ground in support of their army's attempting to force patriot units off these hills, as well as protecting their hospital below & behind this position, and their supplies lines following along the Hudson River & the road to Albany.

Saratoga Monument - A 155' obelisk started in 1856, but had delay in construction due to the Civil War, was to commemorate the British surrender, one of top-ten most significant battles in all world history. This "turning point" in war helped lead to establishment of a new nation. Inside are elaborate bronze plaques along the walls & at landings on the staircase leading up to the top of the Monument with windows. At dedication in 1912, there were over 100,000 attendees.

Victory Woods – This area in Victory Mills, NY shows just one site in (old) Saratoga (now Schuylerville) where British forces got trapped for about a week being bombarded by patriot artillery & snipers. Unable to breakout, Burgoyne got surrender terms that ended the fight, Oct 17, 1777. Immediately, captured soldiers were marched south along the Albany Rd. to Albany, then towards Boston to board ships for England. But without approval of the terms of surrender by the Continental Congress, the enlisted men were marched to Charlottesville, VA where they sat out the remainder of the war as prisoners.

Gen. Schuyler House - First house burned down in 1745, French-Indian War; 2nd burned down in 1777 by Burgoyne in his retreat from Saratoga so patriot forces could not use it. His surrender followed 10-days later. Present structure, in part, rebuilt in Nov. 1777 by some British prisoners, believed on foundation of house just destroyed a month earlier.