



...
[Home](#)
 ...
[History Archives](#)
 ...
[Site Map](#)
 ...
[Contact Us](#)
 ...

Sons of Liberty Chapter

Sons of the American Revolution

Revolutionary War Historical Article

The American Revolution Month-by-Month October 1777

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Includes A continuation of September 1777 events.

British General John Burgoyne was headed down Lake Champlain to Fort Ticonderoga while his fellow officer Lieutenant Colonel Barry St. Leger was leading his own expedition and had departed Canada on August 22nd. St. Leger was accompanied by Joseph Brant and his Indians heading toward an apparent target of Fort Stanwix or as renamed during the War of the Revolution - Fort Schuyler. It was intended that after a simple operation of capturing Fort Schuyler that he would move east to link up with Burgoyne.

Plans, as the Scots poet Bobby Burns said, "*Aft gang astray!*" St. Leger arriving at Fort Schuyler on August 2nd, found it so well prepared and heavily fortified as to deny immediate capture by assault but he could subject it to siege. In the meantime, a column of Americans under General Nicholas Herkimer moved to reinforce and relieve the Fort. St. Leger, warned of the approaching column (Footnote 1) with its supply train, set Brant and his Indians to ambush the column. Herkimer favored a cautious approach to the Fort but younger and more aggressive officers convinced him to move fast. As a result the column was caught in a trap at what has come to be known as the Battle of Oriskany. In the ensuing battle General Herkimer was shot in the leg. Normally this would not be a mortal wound but he died a few days later from complications caused by amputation of the leg. It was a blood bath with many Indians later saying that they had never seen so much blood as flowed from the many dead and dying Americans. Although wounded, Herkimer drew his men up in a circle and arranged their firing so that while some were reloading their weapons others were firing, thereby holding off the attacking Tories and Indians until a thunderstorm stopped the fighting. Meanwhile the Fort had sent out a rescue party who attacked the Indian and Tory camps taking prisoners and rescuing the supply train. At this point the attackers broke off the fighting and returned to their camp.

Major General Benedict Arnold had been sent from Saratoga to reinforce Fort Schuyler and on his march passed near the Oriskany battleground. Unaware of what was going on he moved on to the Fort. St. Leger found himself facing not only a reinforced Fort but the most aggressive general in the American army. When his Indians deserted him, St. Leger withdrew his remaining forces on August 22nd and returned to Canada thus denying Burgoyne of any assistance that he might have given him.

Meanwhile things were happening in the north in what would become the first of the Battles of Saratoga, New York. The Battle of Freeman's Farm, September 19th, would have been a solid defeat for the Americans except for Arnold's participation. After a four hour battle Burgoyne held the ground and encamped for the night. But it was a costly victory as he lost 600 men dead, wounded, or captured to the American total of as many as 320. For Burgoyne it was a sign of things to come. For Arnold it would be yet another incident to add to those in which he was not given proper credit or additional rank and responsibility. It was this along with other acts that finally led to his traitorous end as an American officer. Ward takes Gates to task in detail for the near loss of this battle; while not giving General Benedict Arnold credit for saving the day despite the lack of proper and available support from Gates. Ward also criticizes Gates for failing to give Arnold the support which would have made Freeman's Farm a decisive battle in favor of the Americans. Additionally, Ward blames Gates for his failure to use the 4,000 unengaged men under his personal command to seize Burgoyne's transportation and supplies which were relatively unguarded and easily within Gage's reach. Had Gates performed as he should have, Arnold could have scored a decisive victory and Gates would have seized the supply train leaving Burgoyne high and dry to surrender his force or starve. As a result of Gates' ineptness it remained for the Battle of Bemis Heights on October 7th for Burgoyne and his army to be decisively defeated followed by his later surrender to Gates at Saratoga.

Burgoyne had crossed the Hudson on September 13th encamping near Saratoga. Confronting the Americans at Freeman's Farm on September 19th he was prevented a clear cut victory by General Benedict Arnold who after four hours of fierce combat retired from the field. Burgoyne proceeded to claim the ground and to assess his losses which were over 500 men , many of them officers - victims of General Morgan's Rifles.

On September 21 Burgoyne received word that General Clinton planned a diversion on the Hudson. British General Sir Henry Clinton sailed from New York on October 3rd with a small force and captured two forts on the west bank of the Hudson. He then retired to New York. It was a false hope for Burgoyne as Clinton had never planned to aid Burgoyne.

Burgoyne's original force of 8,000 British and 3,000 Hessians had now dwindled to less than 5,000 men capable of combat. On October 7th he led out a 1,500 man force on reconnaissance. This turned into the second battle of Saratoga, also called the Battle of Bemis Heights, in which Arnold inflicted a severe defeat on the British force. Burgoyne began a retreat but was surrounded by the Americans with a force of 20,000 men. On October 14 negotiations began for the surrender of Burgoyne's army. On the 17th the Convention of Saratoga (Footnote 2) was signed,. Burgoyne surrendered his army in what was one of the most important events of the Revolution; the turning point of the War.

Europeans had been watching the war. They were not to cavalierly openly declare war on England in a one-to-one confrontation, however, to covertly assist a viable America and let it take down or wound the British Lion would be another matter. They had assisted the Revolution in the past with money, supplies and officers who voluntarily joined the American service for glory, adventure, or in the search for liberty and independence. Bunker Hill had fostered this feeling, Trenton heightened it, the inability of British General William Howe with a superior force to destroy Washington, and now there was Saratoga with an entire British Army surrendered – finally a British defeat on the open field.

This was the convincing act; France, then Spain, would renew their old rivalry with Britain by emerging from secrecy to openly allying themselves with this new nation. Saratoga, in and of itself, was not the only criteria for this decision but it was the deciding factor. While there would be many rough times ahead, as long as the Patriots maintained their resolve, tenacity and fighting spirit, then from this point on the war was pretty much decided in their favor.

After the capture of Philadelphia, Howe maintained a portion of his troops in Germantown on the outskirts of the rapidly growing City of Philadelphia. Washington thought he could defeat this contingent in an early morning surprise attack. Unfortunately too many things went wrong. The army, split into three sections, was to make an enveloping attack by converging from three different directions. On the morning of October 4th there was a heavy fog and many troops got lost and appeared late at the battle site. The main body was sweeping the field but allowed their momentum to be lost when the British fortified up in a stone house. Instead of isolating the house and moving on, the troops insisted on delaying to try and take the house which proved to be impregnable to the force at hand. Secondly, Loyalists, hearing of the battle, charged in and dispersed the Americans. In this battle the British suffered a smaller number of killed and wounded than the Americans.

Notes: (1) Joseph Brant's sister Molly, living in the American settlement warned St. Leger of the relief column allowing it to be ambushed. (2) While a great victory, the actual convention was highly controversial. The agreement was that Burgoyne and his army would be returned to England; never to again participate in the war. Washington was furious as the strict terms of the Convention would have allowed for the substitution of Burgoyne's army by a different army from England. Burgoyne's army would then be available for duties elsewhere in the empire. Congress nullified the convention but allowed ranking officers to return to their homelands. The rank and file were marched rather randomly as prisoners through the states until they finally found a place of imprisonment at Charlottesville, Virginia where they remained for the remainder of the war.

References: Christopher Ward's *"War of the Revolution"*; Marcus Cunliffe's *"George Washington, Man and Monument"*, Encyclopedia Britannica *"The Revolutionary Years"*, Robert Leckie's *"George Washington's War"*, and Richard Ketchum's *"Saratoga"*,

[Back to American Revolution Month-by-Month Articles](#)

[Back to Historical Archives](#)