

Skenesborough, Forts Anne and Edward, and Beyond

Initial Skirmishes

While General St. Clair led his beaten column southward, his bateaux fleet sailed unhurriedly toward Skenesborough. Its commander, Colonel Long, felt no urge to hurry. He placed great trust in the massive boom of logs strung along its massive chain of inch-and-a-half iron bars, backed by a bridge supported by twenty-four timber piers. Between the piers were log floats fastened together by double chains secured by iron bolts. Long was certain it would take the British a long, long time to break through. His confidence was sorely misplaced.

British gunboats smashed the chain with a few well-placed shots, and the piers were cut. Within a few hours Burgoyne's fleet was running before a northerly wind. The Americans landed at 1:00 p.m. on July 6. By 4:00 the British were less than three miles away. Burgoyne landed his first three regiments to arrive—the 9th, 20th, and 21st—on South Bay's east side, with orders to cross Wood Creek and occupy the road to Fort Anne, the only route southward. Moving those units through the woods to their assigned positions required longer than expected, and they were not ready when the general launched his attack up the mouth of Wood Creek.

Knowing that Skenesborough's stockaded fort was too weak to withstand an attack, Colonel Long sent the invalids and women up Wood Creek, accompanied by a party to row the boats transporting them. Once the boats were away, he set his men to burning the fort and fleet. They succeeded in destroying the stockade, its building, and *Enterprise*, *Gates*, and *Liberty*, but the enemy would arrive in time to capture the schooner *Revenge* and galley *Trumbull*.

The Americans destroyed everything combustible that had been salvaged at Ticonderoga, and what would not burn was abandoned. Their desperate task completed, the colonel and about 150 men fled toward Fort Anne.

Burgoyne's attack on Skenesborough opened before his three regiments were into position to cut off Long's retreat, but he ordered Lieutenant Colonel John Hill to pursue the Americans with his 9th Regiment. Hill set out during the morning of July 7, his progress painfully slow.¹ The road to Fort Anne was execrable, even by contemporary standards—meaning it was all but impassable. The Americans rendered it even worse by destroying the crude bridges that spanned the numerous streams. The result was that the 9th Regiment managed only ten miles during the

seventh and stopped within a mile of the fort. An American appeared early the next morning claiming to be a deserter. When questioned, he explained to Colonel Hill that there were 1,000 men manning Fort Anne. Because he had only 190 men with him, Hill sent a message to Burgoyne asking for reinforcements. The “deserter” promptly slipped away and informed Colonel Long of Hill’s weakness.

Unbeknownst to the British, a 400-man body of New York militia sent by General Schuyler under the command of Colonel Henry Van Rensselaer had arrived from Fort Edward. Emboldened by his agent’s report, Long turned on his enemy and attacked Hill about 10:30 on the morning of July 8.² The scene of the action was a defile about three-quarters of a mile northeast of the fort, where the British were caught on a narrow ledge with Wood Creek on their left and a steep hill on their right. As at Hubbardton, the woods were thick and the terrain so precipitous that Hill’s men of the 9th Regiment could neither form a cohesive line nor obtain a clear field of fire. Some Americans crossed the stream and slipped into the enemy’s rear. To avoid being surrounded, Hill sent his men up the steep slope that hemmed them against the creek. Once on the summit they held the Americans at bay for two hours. Just as they were running out of ammunition, they heard what was described as a “war whoop.” The Americans heard it too, and broke off the attack against the embattled 9th Regiment.³

There had indeed been a “war whoop,” but no warriors—just a lone Englishman, Captain John Money, trying to lead a party of Indians to his regiment’s support. The tribesmen were so unenthusiastic about getting involved in a pitched fight that they lagged behind, leaving Captain Money to strike ahead without them. When he reached the scene of battle, he—with remarkable presence of mind—sounded what he hoped would resemble an Indian war cry. The Americans, by now also low on ammunition, had no stomach for taking on a fresh war party. Thinking prudence the better part of heroism, they beat a hasty retreat to Fort Edward, setting fire to Fort Anne as they withdrew. As unlikely as it was, Money’s ploy succeeded.⁴

General William Phillips soon arrived with the 47th and 53rd regiments and escorted the remnants of the battered 9th back to Skenesborough. Phillips left the wounded at the scene of the battle under the care of Sergeant Roger Lamb, who sometimes functioned as assistant surgeon, and a soldier’s wife. In that lonely spot they ministered to their charges until three of the twenty-four wounded had died and the rest were deemed fit to travel.

At Castleton, meanwhile, General St. Clair could only try to save his column from destruction by retreating. Burgoyne was at Skenesborough, forcing the American commander to “change his line of march, and by a circuitous route through Pawlet, Manchester, and Bennington, he struck the Hudson at Battenkill and joined Schuyler at Fort Edward on the 12th July.”⁵

Except for the units left at Ticonderoga and Mount Independence, by July 10 the British army was reassembled at Skenesborough and Castleton. That day’s general order recited the successes of Hubbardton and Fort Anne and announced that “Divine Service will be performed on Sunday next [July 13] at the head of the Line, and at the head of the Advanced Corps, and at sun set on the same day a feu de joye will be fired with Cannon and small arms at Ticonderoga, Crown Point, the Camp at Skenesborough, and at the Post of Breeman’s [sic] Corps.”⁶

General Burgoyne and his soldiers had reasons aplenty to congratulate themselves and to have recourse to the God of Battles, thanking Him for past mercies and beseeching future guidance and protection. The 18th century was not conspicuous for religiosity, and soldiers were notoriously impious. But men respected forms, and faith or superstition moved those who faced

danger to invoke supernatural help.

Burgoyne Ponders His Options

The British commander stood in special need of guidance, for he stood now on the horns of a difficult—and what would prove to be controversial—decision. If his campaign had later been successful, few would have faulted him for the decision he was about to make. But because it failed, and failed so catastrophically, contemporary and future analysts freighted that decision with much of the burden for that failure.

In his “Thoughts on Conducting the War from the Side of Canada,” Burgoyne identified Lake George as providing the “most expeditious and most commodious route to Albany.”⁷ That route would take the army to Fort George, the northern terminus of a sixteen-mile road to Fort Edward and the portage to the Hudson River. He believed it to be the shortest route from Ticonderoga to the river, and the least vulnerable to delaying action, ambush, and flank attack. He noted further that an alternative was “the route by South-Bay and Skenesborough...but considerable difficulties may be expected, as the narrow parts of the river [Wood Creek] may be easily choked up and rendered impassable; and at best, there will be necessity for a great deal of land-carriage for the artillery, provisions, &c: which can only be supplied from Canada.”⁸ As was the case with all of his “Thoughts,” the general was projecting proposals, and he did not commit himself to following specific courses of action in the face of changing tactical situations.

For instance, the general had not foreseen that the Americans would retreat from Ticonderoga by way of Skenesborough. He had, in fact, hoped to capture the garrison when he took the fort. To the extent that he may have thought about an American evacuation and retreat while he formed his proposals, he probably expected them to withdraw down Lake George. From his perspective in 1776, that seemed the most logical course for a garrison driven from Ticonderoga to take.

St. Clair did not act as Burgoyne had hoped. The American commander had not waited for his enemy to besiege or assault his post, and refused to reward Burgoyne by allowing him to make the men of the garrison prisoners of war. Nor did St. Clair retreat down the lake nor along the road that ran parallel to the lake’s western shore, for the British seizure of Mount Hope interdicted that route by dominating the gorge and its waterway between the lakes. The American general took the only feasible route left to him, the waterway up South Bay and the land route to Skenesborough.

Burgoyne correctly considered defeating the retreating Americans more important than capturing posts. He needed to employ a tactic for pressing the pursuit and, if possible, to bring his quarry to battle—an elusive objective in the northern frontier’s forests and scattered clearings. He thus had to decide whether to adhere to his original proposal, which might enable him to get between St. Clair and Schuyler, or to follow another course in light of new problems and opportunities.

One option available to Burgoyne was to employ his advanced corps, supported by light artillery, as a flying column to attack Fort Edward, which during July’s third week would have fallen quickly. His main force could have descended Lake George and seized the fort of the same name with its forty cannon and store of ammunition, cutting off St. Clair’s retreat. General Gates, a better strategist than some of his contemporaries, British and American, believed that if Burgoyne had chosen that option he would have reached Albany by the end of July. But

separating his advanced corps from his main column would have been a gamble, and Burgoyne, while an “old gamester,” would not take the risk inherent in that option.

Two other options remained open for the British commander. First, he could break off the pursuit of the retreating American army, return to Ticonderoga, drag his bateaux, gunboats, artillery, and stores up the gorge from Lake Champlain to Lake George, move his entire force down the lake to Fort George, and portage overland to Fort Edward and the Hudson. That was the course favored by most of his critics. Alternatively, he might continue moving his troops along the land route from Skenesborough, but send the gunboats, bateaux, and heavy artillery by Lake George. Burgoyne chose the second alternative.⁹

Some of the expedition’s officers believed that the general’s deviation from the route he originally proposed entailed excessive effort and delayed reaching Fort Edward and the Hudson.¹⁰ Parliamentary critics, especially among the government’s supporters, argued that it contributed materially to the defeat at Saratoga. Contemporary and later writers vied with one another in finding language adequate to express their condemnation and eagerness to discredit his motives and execution.

Of these critics, the author of the best Loyalist history of the war in New York, Judge Thomas Jones, claimed that if Burgoyne had returned to Ticonderoga and embarked his army upon Lake George, he might have passed the lake in twenty-four hours. He attributed the general’s contrary decision to Phillip Skene’s corrupting influence, writing that if Burgoyne had

fairly and openly told the truth, he would have declared that the route he pursued was by the advice of Colonel Philip Skene, the proprietor of Skenesborough, and whose estate there, by clearing out Wood Creek, and making a firm substantial road from thence to Fort Edward, with strong bridges over all creeks, and causeways through the swamps and morasses, had Great Britain succeeded in the contest, would have been rendered more valuable by several thousand pounds.¹¹

Hoffman Nickerson embellished the judge’s indictment of Colonel Skene’s character with an apocryphal story to the effect that Skene had kept his mother’s desiccated corpse in his basement for years instead of burying it so that he could continue to collect her annuity, supposedly proving that he was the sort who would not be above advising a general with an eye to his own profit. So much for how some detractors interpreted the general’s motives for making the choice he did.¹²

But what does an examination of Burgoyne’s own rationale for his decision reveal? Most students of the campaign have noted what Nickerson labeled “weak” reasoning by Burgoyne: that taking the Lake George route would have entailed a retrograde move back to Ticonderoga. That was part, but not the sum, of Burgoyne’s explanation. “Questions have been made by those who began at this period to arraign my military conduct,” Burgoyne wrote later in his own defense,

whether it would not have been more expedient for the purpose of rapidity, to have fallen back to Ticonderoga, in order to take the convenient route by Lake George, than to have persevered in the laborious and difficult course by land to Fort Edward? I considered not only the general impressions which a retrograde motion is apt to make upon the minds both of enemies and

friends, but also that the natural conduct of the enemy in that case would be to remain at Fort George, as their retreat could not then be cut off, in order to oblige me to open trenches, and consequently to delay me, in the meantime they would have destroyed the road from Fort George to Fort Edward....¹³

The great number of boats also, which must necessarily have been employed for the transport of troops over Lake George, were by this course spared for the transport of the provisions, artillery, and ammunition.¹⁴

This single passage from the “Narrative” section of his *State of the Expedition* encompasses or suggests several factors—strategic, tactical, and logistical— affecting Burgoyne’s choice of options, which will be addressed in more detail below.

The Loyalist Angle

First, let us examine Burgoyne’s statement concerning “the general impressions which a retrograde motion is apt to make upon the minds of both enemies and friends.” An important strategic consideration favored continuing to operate in the country east of Lake George. Abandoning the land route to Fort Edward would remove even an implied threat to New England, one of the alternatives included in Burgoyne’s “Thoughts.” To make that threat credible, he posted von Riedesel at Castleton to “assist my purpose of giving jealousy to Connecticut and keeping in check the whole country called the Hampshire Grants.”¹⁵ Both Baroness von Riedesel and Lieutenant Colonel Kingston, Burgoyne’s adjutant general and military secretary, later confirmed this motivation, with Kingston adding that the hope was that the “alarm towards Connecticut” would “give encouragement to the loyal inhabitants, if any such there were.”¹⁶

The subject of encouraging loyalism merits more attention from historians than it has received, with the lack of study due at least in part to the fact that it did not figure explicitly in the papers documenting plans for the campaign’s eastern phase. But the goal was problematical. Supporting loyal Americans and recalling the disaffected were objectives that at once inspired and complicated military and political objectives; vanquishing the rebellious, however, simply required their military defeat and restoring political and social order. In any case, Britain both overestimated loyalist strength and failed to exploit effectively what real and potential sources of popular support did exist.

Although explicit discussion of loyalism received limited attention in the Burgoyne-Germain correspondence, all parties assumed that both Burgoyne and St. Leger would be operating in regions containing many people who would, given the opportunity, declare for the King. Their assumptions were not founded entirely upon illusion. Exact figures are unobtainable, but many who lived along the Champlain-Hudson line and in the Mohawk Valley were either secret or open loyalists or persons at least lukewarm to rebellion. Many inhabitants of the Hampshire Grants, like other border people, were susceptible to the influence of a military presence in determining their political commitment. Whatever the actual or potential number of loyalists, Philip Skene probably exaggerated it to Burgoyne, and the general’s native optimism provided fertile ground in which hope became certitude.¹⁷

With his army providing the military presence he expected would be decisive in restoring political loyalties, Burgoyne’s general order for July 12 appointed Colonel Skene “to act as

Commissary to administer the Oath of Allegiance, and to grant Certificates of Protection to such Inhabitants as sue properly for the same, and to regulate all other matters relative to the Supplies and assistance that shall be required from the Country or voluntarily brought in.” The general’s expectations had already received apparent confirmation by the arrival of

Some hundreds of men, a third part of them with arms...professing themselves loyalists, and wishing to serve, some to the end of the war, some for the campaign. Though I am without instructions on the subject, I have not hesitated to receive them, and, as fast as companies can be formed, I shall post the officers till a decision can be made upon the measure by my superiors.¹⁸

Burgoyne intended to employ them to “keep the country in awe,” and bring in cattle. Their most important contribution would be psychological, in the “impression which will be caused upon public opinion, should provincials be seen acting vigorously in the cause of the King...”¹⁹ The new arrivals were embodied into the provincial units then “in embryo but very promising,” commanded by Lieutenant Colonels John Peters and Ebenezer Jessup of the skeleton Queen’s Loyal Rangers and King’s Loyal Americans.

But for all of his and Skene’s optimism, the local recruits would not measure up to the commander’s hopes in either numbers or effectiveness.

Consideration of the Routes

The water route led along Lake George and thus through Fort George, at its southern end. Lack of intelligence affected Burgoyne’s assessment of Fort George’s potential role. His knowledge of its physical condition was limited. He did know, of course, that the lake protected its front, a steep hill defended its rear, and marshes made its sides difficult to attack. If the Americans at the fort made a determined resistance, they would delay him until after he could post cannon on the hill. That would buy them time to destroy the sixteen-mile portage road to the Hudson, and he would not reach Fort Edward within a month. On the other hand, if he followed the land route, he could threaten Fort George from the rear, obliging its defenders to retreat or risk capture. Burgoyne certainly overestimated the fort’s strength, but, in light of what he knew, his concerns were logical.

Other factors made the choice of the land route less patently foolish than has been claimed. Lake George lies 221 feet above the level of Lake Champlain. Access between lakes was via a gorge up which boats, artillery, and supplies had to be dragged more than three miles, a task that, when eventually undertaken, required eleven days of arduous labor. Lieutenant Hadden’s terse account is worth a read in this regard:

From ye 14th to the 25th we were employed in bringing forward the guns, Stores, and provisions; and in transporting Guns & Batteaux’s from ye Saw Mills Creek to Lake George. The road is tolerably level, and where it wanted repairs the Rebel Prisoners were employed[,] being furnished with Tools and working under Guard. We had about Two hundred of them confined in a barn, and when they were not wanted either for the above purpose or Removing Guns and Stores, amused themselves in beating Hemp.²⁰

Subjecting the expedition's line and flank companies to that fatiguing ordeal would have adversely affected their combat readiness. The land route was demanding enough; using the Lake George route would have been that much worse.

Comparative distances presented problems that Burgoyne and his staff had to weigh in deciding how to move toward the Hudson and their enemy. If the entire army or the main column, less the advanced corps, followed the Lake George route, it first would have to return from Skenesborough to Ticonderoga, a distance of thirty-six miles by water. The length of the "Carrying Place from Saw Mill Creek to Lake George," up the gorge was, as noted, slightly more than three miles. Lake George, according to Governor Thomas Pownall's reckoning, was thirty-six miles long.²¹ The length of the portage between Lake George and the Hudson was sixteen miles. Therefore, if troops and stores were transported by the water route, starting from Skenesborough, then going by way of Lake George, the shortest possible distance was ninety-one miles.

Was there another alternative—perhaps following the Lake George route, but not descending the lake by boat? In the previously-quoted passage from his defense of his decision to advance by land on the Skenesborough side, Burgoyne argued, "The great number of boats also, which must necessarily have been employed for the transport of the troops over Lake George, were by this course spared for the transport of provisions, artillery, and ammunition."²² That statement seems to imply that no road paralleling the lake existed. However, Major Samuel Holland's 1776 map, "The provinces of New York, New Jersey, with a part of Pennsylvania and the province of Quebec (drawn by Major Holland, surveyor-general of the northern district in America), shows a road west of and running parallel to the lake."²³ Was Burgoyne ignorant of the map's existence? That was possible, but unlikely, for the map was known in Canada. Any general who presumed to plan a campaign on the northern frontier would certainly avail himself of all relevant cartographic information.

That is assuming, of course, that the map, published in 1776, was actually available to Burgoyne when he drafted his "Thoughts" during the early weeks of 1777. But he had, in any case, participated in Sir Guy Carleton's 1776 campaign, and thus may have known about the road even before the publication of Holland's map.

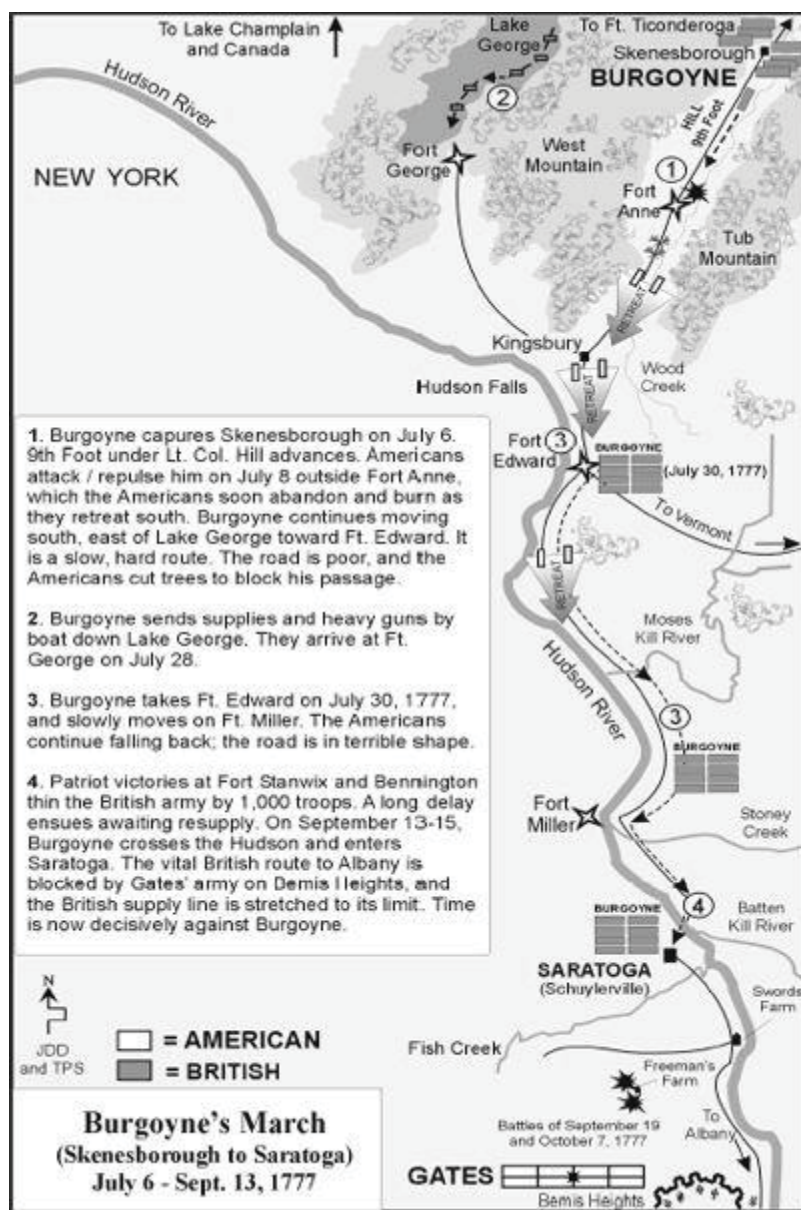
Assuming Burgoyne knew a road lay west of the lake, it is possible that he rejected it as a feasible route for moving troops because it was about fifty miles long, and because of its condition. If, as was probable, it resembled contemporary frontier tracks, his decision to reject it would not have been an unreasonable decision.

A summary of the various routes' comparative features is in order. The distance from Skenesborough to Fort Edward via the lake entailed seventy-five miles of water transport, a three-mile "carrying Place," and a sixteen-mile portage between Forts George and Edward. In contrast, if the main column marched southward from Ticonderoga, it would have to traverse at least sixty-six miles of rough, muddy, wilderness road to reach the Hudson. In favor of the latter option was the fact that there had been no Americans between Ticonderoga and Fort George to render that part of the road hazardous.

The length of the next section of the route Burgoyne's army would have to traverse, from Skenesborough to Wood Creek, was twenty-three miles, including a four- or five-mile portage. In May 1777, Colonel Udney Hay reported to General Gates that the road was reasonably easy, the worst part being a three-mile stretch between Forts Anne and Edward that required constructing a causeway, a task that would take thirty men three weeks.

As discussed in the next section, General Schuyler would soon commit a large body of men to obstructing that very road, changing it from “tolerably easy” to almost impassable until cleared and repaired; but comparing the routes as they existed during the second week of July makes approaching the Hudson by land less the result of whim or corrupt influence than a considered professional decision.

It is also important to note that, once Burgoyne made his decision and set things in motion, the army reached Fort Edward on July 29, while General Phillips and the supply fleet arrived at Fort George about noon on the twenty-eighth. Moving the bateaux, gunboats, artillery, and stores over the portage from Lake George to the Hudson consumed even more time. Thus, transporting the army down the lake route would have saved no time at all. If the men as well as the impedimenta had moved by boat, the army would have arrived at the Hudson even later, because there were not enough boats to carry both men and supplies simultaneously.²⁴



The Americans Degrade the Chosen Route

By July 10, Burgoyne's right wing occupied the "heights of Skenesborough in two lines; the right flank to the mountains covered by the regiment of Reidesel [sic] dragoons en potence: the left on the Wood Creek." The rest of the Brunswickers occupied positions on Castleton River, with Breymann's Corps on the roads to Putney and Rutland, and the Regiment Hesse-Hanau at the head of East Creek. Fraser's Corps was in the center, "ready to move to either wing of the army."²⁵

Two days later, those outlying units rejoined the main body at Skenesborough,²⁶ and for two weeks the British army remained there. What caused this delay, one that eroded that army's initiative and gave the Americans time to recover from reverses and gain strength in numbers, materiel, and morale? Regardless of the route chosen and its condition, Burgoyne had to await the arrival of supplies from Canada before he could move his army from Skenesborough. Two factors added to his problem.

The first was that the delivery of stores was delayed by deficient transport. The shortage of carts severely affected the arrival of every type of materiel. "The army, was very much fatigued (many parts of it having wanted provisions for two days," the general wrote on July 11, "almost the whole [of] their tents and baggage), assembled in their present position."²⁷ Most of the 500 carts contracted for in Montreal had broken down because they were built with green wood. When Captain Money was asked during the parliamentary investigation, "How many carts and ox-teams could be mustered at any one time?" he answered, "I think only 180 carts...the number of ox-teams I really forget, but I believe between 20 and 30."²⁸

The second factor was what General Schuyler had his men doing while they waited. Schuyler, who had arrived at Fort Edward and command, faced fearsome prospects and had to turn his limited energies to all the details that attended rallying a beaten army to effective resistance. While Schuyler lacked important martial talents, he possessed an impressive fund of business sense and organizational talent, qualities for which, at that moment, were in greater need than a battle-wise commander. What Schuyler did was put his ax men to work, very busily. In so doing, they made a significant contribution to Burgoyne's eventual failure by rendering the road to Fort Edward so nearly impassable as to require its practical rebuilding.

"The British," wrote Sergeant Lamb in a brief but graphic description of this American handiwork,

were obliged to suspend all operations for some time and wait and wait at Skenesborough for the arrival of provisions and tents; but they employed the interval clearing a passage of the troops, to proceed against the enemy. This was attended with incredible toil. The Americans, under the direction of General Schuyler, were constantly employed in cutting down trees on both sides of every road, which was in the line of march. The face of the country was likewise so broken with creeks and Marshes, that there was no less than forty bridges as to construct, one of which was over a morass two miles in extent.²⁹

Lieutenant Hadden's journal entry for July 12 contributes commentary about what Burgoyne's army could not do as a result of the American activity:

After the Action at or near Fort Anne, the 9th Regiment were withdrawn and joining the Army at Skenesborough, no other Detachment was sent out, and the Enemy tho' not victorious were the real gainers in this affair, the advantage they made of it was to Fell Trees across Wood Creek and the Road leading by the side of it to Fort Anne. The clearing of which cost the Army much labour and time, and gave the enemy spirits & leisure to wait those reinforcements which enabled them to retire deliberately, always keeping near enough to prevent our sending out small Detachments: a large Corps advanced to Fort Anne (in place of the 9th Reg't) wou'd have increased the Enemies Fears and prevented these delays.³⁰

Schuyler's delaying tactic and the labors of his men succeeded decisively. British and German work details slaved daily until July 21 restoring the road, rebuilding bridges, constructing a causeway, and clearing Wood Creek. This backbreaking, enervating labor sapped vigor and did nothing to enhance morale.

While his ax men bought valuable time with their valiant efforts, much more remained for Schuyler to do. The morale of dispirited men had to be restored. Reinforcements had to be marshaled. Scarce supplies had to be collected and allocated. Schuyler had to solicit additional provincial human and material resources from governments hard-pressed to meet existing demands. He had to enlist time to serve those vital ends.

American folklore, sometimes given credence by serious students who should know better, has depicted a pleasure-loving Gentleman Johnny Burgoyne living a sybaritic life in Philip Skene's wilderness mansion while allowing a crippled but virtuous foe to recover. He did so while exposing his weary, exploited men to the fatigues of reopening an invasion route that an abler, more humane commander would have avoided.³¹ The general was indeed fond of high living and very responsive to feminine graces, and he may well have lightened the hours with drink and dalliance. Generals, including some who have enjoyed distinguished careers in more recent wars, have often done so. Contemporaries, however—including that sometimes-censuring gossip Baronin von Riedesel—who were in a position to know about how Burgoyne spent what free time he had are silent on the subject. What can be documented is that the time he spent at Skenesborough was not passed in idleness.

Sunday, July 13, was so sodden that Burgoyne ordered the soldiers to not strike their tents. But the weather did not cause him to cancel the feu de joye and prayers. Because the day was "set apart for rejoicing, all working Parties are to be remitted, except such as may be necessary for the cleanliness of the Camp."³² The inclement weather forced the troops to form in the front instead of in the line of battle, i.e., by battalions drawn up in line facing the designated front. The artillery fired first, then the advanced corps, followed by the brigades firing in turn. The ceremony concluded with the chaplains reading appointed collects from the Book of Common Prayer. The locals who witnessed it would never forget it.

While British fatigue parties worked at reopening Wood Creek and the road to Fort Edward, other soldiers performed camp duties and assembled supplies preparatory to resuming the march, tasks that rain and mud rendered more than normally arduous.³³

Burgoyne's Artillery Millstone

The artillery train was a significant part of Burgoyne's plan and the conduct of the

campaign, but it also progressively increased the burden the army bore in the ever-more-difficult advance.

Like Sir Guy Carleton, Burgoyne expected stiff American resistance at Ticonderoga and Forts George and Edward. Since the winter of 1775-76, Burgoyne had been impressed by American skill in entrenching, a fact emphasized in his “Reflections on the War in America.” He anticipated that he would need an overwhelming preponderance of firepower to overawe the Americans and destroy the cover behind which they could mount strong resistance. Thus, the original train provided by Carleton consisted of 138 guns, including heavy, medium, and light cannon, together with howitzers and mortars of different sizes. When Ticonderoga fell with surprising ease, the general reduced the original train by dispersing eighty of his guns—some to his ships, some to remain at Ticonderoga, and some back to Canada. The field train that accompanied the army after those reductions amounted to 43 guns ranging from twenty-four-pounders to three-pounders, with howitzers and mortars. These were divided between the British and German forces, and on the British side between some guns for Fraser’s Advanced Corps, with the remainder apportioned into three brigades of Royal Artillery.³⁴

Critics have condemned the train of forty-three pieces as being excessive, and as having conspired with the choice of the Skenesborough-Fort Edward route to fatally flaw the campaign’s execution. Burgoyne’s eventual defeat has tempted analysts to seek out and magnify individual contributing factors, but persuasive analytical assessment has been more elusive than some have admitted.

Every gun, its ammunition, and their transport obviously added to Burgoyne’s problems, and those burdens became more onerous with each additional mile. Yet no one would have argued that he could achieve his objective without artillery at all. In fact, because the campaign was an offensive one, success required that his artillery capability exceed his opponent’s. Carleton, Burgoyne, and Phillips—the last an experienced artillerist—also believed that American tactics and the war theater’s character imposed peculiar requirements. This conviction informed Burgoyne’s justification of the size and composition of his field train. In his later defense he began by citing truisms supported by experienced observation. Artillery, he wrote, “was extremely formidable to raw troops,” and “in a country of posts it was essentially necessary against the best troops; that it was yet more applicable to the enemy we were to combat,” he continued, Admittedly, there was an element of obvious post-facto rationalizing in that lengthy and labored defense.

because of the mode of defence they invariably adopted, and at which they were beyond all other nations expert, that of entrenchment covered by a strong abatis, against which cannon, of the nature of the heaviest above described, and howitzers, might often be effectual, when to dislodge them by any other means might be attended with continued and important losses... [B]ut further reasons for not diminishing the proportion of guns to six-pounders in this train, were first, their use against block-houses (a species of fortification peculiar to America); secondly, a probability that gun-boats might be requisite for the security of the water transport; on some part of Hudson’s River; but principally the intention of fortifying a camp at Albany, in case I should reach that place, should meet with a sufficiency of provision there (as I was led to expect) and should find it expedient to pass the winter there, without communication with new York.³⁵

There was more, however. The general was painfully aware that the Americans could field more men than he. But he also knew that, man for man, the British soldier was a better campaigner. That fact made trained men especially valuable. They were scarce in Britain—hence the reason for hiring men of German extraction. England could not easily replace soldiers lost in America. Artillery was especially effective against green, part-time soldiers, entrenchments, and fortifications. Cannon would help neutralize the American numerical advantage. Burgoyne’s reasoning was similar to American reliance upon technological weaponry in overcoming comparable disadvantages during the Korean, Vietnamese, and Iraqi campaigns, and more cogent than some have conceded.

Provision for moving the heavier guns, gunboats, bateaux, and stores down Lake George proceeded while headquarters remained at Skenesborough House. The transfer from Lake Champlain to Lake George continued from July 14 until July 25. On Saturday, July 26, the descent of Lake George got underway, and about noon two days later, the supply flotilla arrived at Fort George.³⁶

Burgoyne Receives More “Help” and Reaches the Hudson

At Skenesborough, meanwhile, Burgoyne’s army received an augmentation that quickly became a liability. The western Indians raised by Charles de Langlade and Saint Luc de la Corne put in their appearance on July 20. The general had hoped for 500 “brave and tractable” warriors. Shadowy events in Canada frustrated that hope. Funds provided to Langlade to engage Indians disappeared. The Frenchman claimed that someone had stolen most of the money, which was true enough, but Captain Arent De Peypster, commandant at Mickilimackinac, suspected that it was Langlade—whose reputation for chicanery was well-earned—who had embezzled the missing cash. With what Langlade had left he recruited about 150 outcasts intent on murder and looting, with as little risk to themselves as possible. Burgoyne greeted them with the same fatuous oration he had delivered at the camp at Bouquet Ferry on June 21. Events subsequent to that exercise in moral suasion demonstrated two unpleasant facts: (1) The Indians’ contributions to military success were almost nil, and (2) Burgoyne, even with Alexander Fraser’s help, could not control them.

On the day the army departed Skenesborough, a raiding party provided grisly confirmation of the general’s concerns. After a foray into Camden Valley in the vicinity of modern Salem in Washington County, New York, the warriors paused at the farm of loyalist John Allen, where they killed and scalped the entire family and ransacked the house. It was a gruesome prelude of trouble to come.³⁷

By July 22, fatigue details completed reopening the road to Fort Edward. Fraser’s Corps advanced to Fort Anne during the twenty-third. Burgoyne prepared to follow with the main column; invalids and prisoners were sent back to Ticonderoga. One hundred fifty convalescents and “men least able to march,” together with fifty men each from among the Germans, British, and Provincials, remained at Skenesborough “for some days” under command of Major Paulus Aemilius Irving of the 47th Regiment. Rations for the rest of the month were issued. Still without their mounts, von Riedesel’s dragoons formed the advanced guard, and a company of the rear regiment constituted the rearguard. The Provincials marched behind the British regiments, and the carts carrying the baggage followed immediately ahead of the rearguard. Provost Lieutenant Hetherington and his provost guard followed a “quarter of a mile in the Rear of the whole...to

take up all stragglers.” The British, Canadians,³⁸ Loyalists, and Indians moved the fourteen miles to Fort Anne and Fraser’s Corps at Jones’ Farm in the “Pitch Pine Plains” during July 25. Two days later, Burgoyne ordered the 21st Regiment to reinforce Fraser, leaving a subaltern and twenty men to function as the commanding officer’s escort. While the main column marched southward, headquarters remained at Fort Anne until July 24, when it moved to the camp at the Pitch Pine Plains.³⁹

Fraser’s Corps reached the crossroads about two miles from Fort Edward, where it was joined by the main column minus the 21st Regiment left at Jones’ Farm to cover communications with Skenesborough. Before leaving the Plains, Burgoyne issued orders in anticipation of arriving at Fort Edward. The Advanced Corps would camp on the heights beyond the fort while the Loyalists, Canadians, and Indians would be in front, in line with Fraser’s left flank. Headquarters, guarded by the German dragoons, would be near the fort in the “Red House.” The British right wing took up a position on “rising ground on this side of the Plain.” The left [German] wing remained at Fort Anne to aid in transporting provisions and stores until ordered to rejoin the British.⁴⁰

The British, Provincials, and Indians occupied the vacant fort during July 30. Twenty-three days had elapsed since Burgoyne’s men arrived at Skenesborough. Some American writers, failing to give Schuyler and his ax men their due, have contemptuously noted that the rate of Burgoyne’s advance was only one mile a day. Negotiating those twenty-three miles under the conditions Schuyler imposed, however, was a creditable performance. “It was no small feat that Burgoyne should have reached Fort Edward on the 30th of July,” observed Sir John Fortesque.

Arriving at the dilapidated and recently-abandoned colonial fort meant that Burgoyne’s army had finally reached the Hudson River, which Carleton had failed to do in 1776. One stage, the passing of the lakes, was past. But the riparian approach to Albany lay ahead, and the British commander knew that still more daunting tests would attend the campaign’s next phase. The impressive distances covered had lengthened and made more vulnerable his line of communications while compounding his logistical problems—all without yet seriously engaging his enemy. It was true that, except at Hubbardton, the enemy’s performance had been unimpressive, but Burgoyne and his subordinates were professionals who realized that as long as the American Northern Department’s military capability survived, British objectives remained unfulfilled.

Reaching Fort Edward and the Hudson was the campaign’s turning point. Every advance after July’s final week was to be illusory, exacting humiliating and unavailing sacrifices. The rest of this narrative is a history of the destruction of John Burgoyne’s plan for “conducting the War from the Side of Canada.”

The Infamous Murder of Jane McCrae

Even before the British army reached Fort Edward, an event occurred that has entered American folklore and proved to be a curious harbinger of the future. An Indian band arrived at Fraser’s camp at the Pitch Pine Plains with captives and a scalp. One captive was a militiaman named Samuel Standish; another was Mrs. McNeil, a corpulent Scots widow whom Benson Lossing nearly three-quarters of a century later identified as Brigadier Fraser’s cousin.⁴¹ The scalp came from the head of Jane “Jenny” McCrae. Fortunately for history, Samuel Standish

gave an eyewitness account—the only documented one—of what had happened to the two women.

Jane, a daughter of a Presbyterian domine, came north from New Jersey to live with a brother, Colonel John McCrae of the 13th Regiment of the Albany County Militia, whose home was about half way between Fort Edward and Schuyler's Saratoga estate. Like many Hudson Valley families, the McCraes were divided in their loyalties. Jane and perhaps two of her brothers wereoyalists; her fiancé was a neighbor, David Jones, a lieutenant in Peters' Corps serving with Burgoyne. When Colonel McCrae's family sought refuge in Albany, Jane elected to await her lover at Mrs. MacCrae's house at Fort Edward. Sometime during July 27, the women left for Fraser's camp with a party of Indians.

Fifty-six years later, Samuel Standish filed a brief sworn account of Jane's murder when he submitted his claim for a Revolutionary War pension. He was a twenty-three-year-old militiaman living in West Stockbridge, Massachusetts, when he received his second summons for duty. On July 8, he marched with Captain Aaron Rowley's Company, Colonel John Brown's Regiment, to Fort Anne. He was on guard detail at Fort Edward on July 17 when Indians attacked the picket post, firing upon the guard. Standish was (according to this account) unwounded and ran down the hill toward the fort, but was captured before he could reach safety. He subsequently saw Jane McCrae and Mrs. McNeil, who Standish identified as Jane's aunt, with another group of Indians. The two parties quarreled, and one of the warriors shot and scalped the young woman. Standish said that he recognized the women because American soldiers had offered to escort Jane southward, but she had declined, saying that she was not afraid to stay.⁴²

Samuel told a more detailed but unsworn story when Jared Sparks interviewed him in 1830. After recalling how he had been on picket duty about half a mile from Fort Edward and was attacked, wounded in the foot, and captured, he related that he and his captors

arrived at the top of the hill at the place where he had stood centinell [sic], near a large pine tree & spring of water. Several Indians were gathered round the spring, and in a few minutes he saw Jenny McCrae and Mrs. McNeil walking up the hill with a party of Indians. They came near the spring and stopped. In a short time violent language passed between the Indians and they got into a high quarrel, beating each other with the irmuskets. In the midst of the fray, one of the Chiefs in a rage shot Jenny McCrae in her breast, & she fell & expired immediately. Her hair was long & flowing, and the same chief took off the scalp, cutting so as to unbrace nearly the whole part of the head on which her hair grew. He then sprang up, tossed the scalp in the face of a young Indian standing by, brandished it in the air, and uttered a savage yell of exultation. When this was done the quarrel ceased, & the whole party moved off quickly, for the fort had already been alarmed. They went as soon as possible to Genl. Fraser's camp, which was then five miles distant on the road to Fort Anne.⁴³

Although they are in substantial agreement, Standish's accounts differed in some details, which is not surprising given his age and the passage of more than fifty years since the events described. The statement given when he applied for his pension is the more credible—it was in his own words and sworn before a local magistrate; the account in the Sparks manuscript is in Sparks' words—and it is possible, even probable, that he embellished the old man's words for

dramatic effect and to conform more closely to developing tradition. Standish's identifying Mrs. McNeil as Jane's aunt is interesting. There was more likelihood that they were kin than that the older woman was General Fraser's cousin, for which we have only Benson Lossing's second-hand identification, based, according to him, on the woman's granddaughter's statement. Lossing loved the dramatic too much to be skeptical about a good story.

Even before the old veteran swore to his spare, straightforward story, legend and romance were already at work creating myths that Hoffman Nickerson wove into a compelling narrative. He built upon Standish's account, consolidating several apocryphal strands to tell how a "beautiful girl of twenty-three, tall and noted for her long and lustrous hair, which would reach to the floor when she stood to let it down" received a letter from her Tory lover, went to Fort Edward to meet him, and died at the hands of Britain's savage allies.

After claiming that Standish was a descendant of Miles Standish of Plymouth Plantation fame and that he was the source of Nickerson's version, Nickerson told that after capturing the militiaman, the Indians "chanced upon the house of Mrs. McNeil, entered it, and dragged out the old woman and Jane McCrae." They hurried the women along a wagon track, tried to mount them on horseback, but could not lift the fat old woman. She and some of the Indians fell behind and out of sight of Jane and her captors. As the girl passed Standish, an Indian shot and scalped her.

The captain continued the story with a description of the scene at Fraser's camp:

Meanwhile Mrs. McNeil, together with those of the Indians who had remained with her, also reached the camp. Although she had not been injured, the Indians had stripped her to her chemise, perhaps of every stitch she had on, and in this state they turned her over to her cousin, General Fraser. At this point a brief flash of humor lightens the tragedy for a moment, for the embarrassed general was not able to find in camp any women's clothes large enough for the fat old woman..., and out of his own wardrobe only his officer's greatcoat was ample enough to cover her nakedness. Meanwhile she was (somewhat excusably) scolding him with even more than her usual fluency for sending his rascally Indians after her.⁴⁴

Nickerson interpreted the tragedy's significance, relating how Burgoyne failed to punish Jane's murderer, and the impact thereof upon the people of the region. No one, not even the affianced sweetheart of a Tory officer and sister of a Patriot colonel, was safe. An "enormous" reaction to the murder gradually manifested itself, as the men of the upper Hudson Valley rallied to the colors.

Nickerson's imaginary version synthesized generations of mythologizing that turned the young Tory maiden into an American heroine whose brutal murder brought outraged volunteers into Schuyler's desperate, demoralized army to inflict fitting punishment upon an unprincipled foe. Those vestals of the patriotic flame, the Daughters of the American Revolution, even named a local chapter for the martyr—the only loyalist so honored.

Writers with varying scholarly pretensions, including William L. Stone, F. J. Hudleston, C. H. Van Tyne, John Fiske, S. G. Fisher, George Otto Trevelyan, and Christopher Ward, repeated and burnished the tradition.⁴⁵ Predecessor mythmongers, not eyewitnesses and contemporary testimony, informed their successive narratives and interpretations.

Evidence, in fact, rebuts them. No news accounts that circulated among the area's scattered

farms and small settlements publicized the McCrae murder. Local loyalists must have heard rumors of the killings of the Allen family and Jane, fellow loyalists, with dismay. Adherents of the rebellion, except those who knew the victims personally, were probably less horrified; given current passions, some may have believed that they received their just desserts for supporting an evil and oppressive cause. Because surviving contemporary documents are silent, we can deduce, not prove, those assumptions.

There are firmer grounds for doubting that Jane's death brought large numbers of volunteers to the American colors. Muster rolls do not record numerous enlistments. To the contrary, they report that desertions continued to be a serious problem. The militiamen who joined the Northern Department's troops did so not as individuals but as members of units called to duty by state and county executives. The men of the Hampshire Grants, whom folklore has seizing their flintlocks and rushing to battle when they learned of Jenny's cruel murder, were already with General John Stark and Colonel Seth Warner by July 24—three days before the killing. The number of militia regiments attached to Schuyler's main force did not increase in numbers between the end of July and August 19, when Gates succeeded Schuyler, and no militia from the upper Hudson and Hampshire Grants joined Gates prior to September 19, the date of the Battle of Saratoga's first major engagement.⁴⁶

The genesis of Jane's apotheosis was a letter General Gates wrote to General Burgoyne on September 2. The British commander had protested treatment of German, British, and loyalist prisoners taken at Bennington, alleging that some had been killed after surrendering, and others dragged through nearby towns and abused by local civilians. Gates responded by accusing Burgoyne, "in whom the fine Gentleman is united with the Soldier and Scholar," of hiring savages to scalp white people and paying a bounty for each scalp. Among the innocent victims of that barbarity, continued Gates, was Jane McCrae, "a young lady lovely to the sight, of virtuous character and amicable disposition," who had been "scalped and mangled in a most shocking manner [by] a murderer employed by you."⁴⁷ When the contents of the letter became public, Gates—in a letter to Governor Jonathan Trumbull—bragged that he had exploited the incident for propaganda purposes.⁴⁸ The impact was less immediately dramatic than traditionally represented. Gates' letter was the first chapter of a romantic legend.

The atrocities perpetrated by Burgoyne's allies had a negligible impact upon American fortunes. They did, however, affect those of the British by demonstrating a fateful problem for a white commander who tried to use Indians as auxiliaries. Their effective employment to achieve military ends depended upon a degree of control that eluded most British leaders.

The news of the McCrae murder, which reached Burgoyne in the evening, shocked him deeply. A humane product of the Enlightenment, he subscribed to canons of civilized warfare that reprobated wanton murder. That the Indians' victims were adherents to the cause he served made the killings especially reprehensible and stupid, offending at once his personal honor code and compromising his moral authority. As he wrote to Brigadier Fraser, "I would rather put my commission in the fire than serve a day if I could suppose Government would blame me for not discountenancing by some strong acts such unheard [of] barbarities."⁴⁹

During the morning of July 28, the army commander took himself to the Indian camp to assert his military and moral authority by demanding delivery of the murderers for execution. But in his relations with the Indians he dealt from a position of weakness. Lord Harrington was a captain of the 29th Regiment's grenadier company. During the parliamentary inquiry into the

campaign, he described what followed:

There were many gentlemen in the army (and I own I was of the number) who feared that he would put that threat into execution. Motives of policy, I believe alone, prevented him from it; and if he had not pardoned the man, which he did, I believe the total defection of the Indians would have ensued, And consequences, on their return to Canada, might have been dreadful, not to speak of the weight they would have thrown into the opposite scale, and gone over to the enemy, which I imagine would have been the case.⁵⁰

The author of *Anburey's Travels* accurately summarized Burgoyne's dilemma. "The situation of the General, whose humanity was very much shocked at such an instance of barbarity," he explained, "was very distressing and critical, for however inclined he might be to punish the offender, still it was hazarding the revenge of the savages, whose friendship he had to court, rather than seek their enmity."⁵¹

The compromised commander surrendered to the apparent logic limned by the Earl of Harrington and whoever penned the *Travels* by pardoning the Indians. He had, about a month before reaching Fort Edward, required that "a British officer or proper conductor" accompany each Indian party. St. Luc de la Corne's followers ignored that policy as a restraint upon their conduct and made it a source of discontent, threatening their continued service. John Burgoyne learned what most commanders should have known already: that motives other than loyalty to a distant king informed Indian involvement in white men's wars. A Sir William Johnson or Daniel Claus could deal with native leaders of Joseph Brant's stature; but Burgoyne was not a Johnson, and St. Luc de la Corne was a duplicitous and vicious partisan, possessing none of Brant's statesmanship.

Pardoning Jane's murderer did not satisfy the Indians. As early as the morning after the "council" in their camp, they began to desert. The lure of easy pillage was fading, and they refused to acquiesce even to the British commander's ineffectual effort to control them.

The Beginning of the End

After reaching Fort Edward, Burgoyne's fortunes began to decline. American victories at Fort Stanwix (August 3) and Bennington (August 16) damaged Burgoyne more than he realized and broke the pattern of inevitable British success. Reaching Fort Edward stretched his supply line to its effective limit, a limit that an approaching autumn would render even more tenuous.

Fatefully, Burgoyne had failed to bring General Schuyler to battle. The Northern Department's main force continued to exist, growing stronger as reinforcements joined it. Schuyler, together with Benedict Arnold, Benjamin Lincoln, Horatio Gates, and the North's civilian governments had not only preserved it, but were making it into a vehicle for potential victory. On August 10, Schuyler began the slow withdrawal from Stillwater, to which his men had retreated, to Van Schaick's and Havers Islands at the confluence of the Hudson and Mohawk rivers. There, first under his command and then under General Gates, the Americans recovered strength, morale, and the strategic initiative.

At Fort Miller, Burgoyne again had to choose between two routes to his objective at Albany. One lay along the east side of the Hudson, and the other along the west side. Albany was

on the west side, the river was wider and deeper there, and the road on that side offered closer access to the town. But the Northern Department's main army was also on the western side, in a position and strength not definitely known to the general.

Slightly strengthened by 300 men, Burgoyne chose the western road. His British regiments crossed to the village of Saratoga (modern-day Schuylerville) during the thirteenth, followed by the Germans. In three columns, they began their three-day march to near the mouth of the Krummach Kill, less than three miles north of the American fortified position on Bemis Heights—setting the stage for a decisive trial at arms.

