

The Bennington Raid

Genesis of the Raid

John Burgoyne took stock of his campaign's progress as he descended the upper Hudson. His men had stood up well thus far to the rigors of the difficult march. They were in good health, and their morale was also good in expectation of ultimate victory. True, some Germans suffered from their peculiarly virulent form of Heimveh, a type of homesickness that was often disabling and sometimes fatal. But most of them, led by officers who commanded their loyalty, conducted themselves creditably in the alien environment. True, the provincials were less numerous and effective than the general wished, but his native optimism promised improvement on that score—especially as the Empire's military presence came to be perceived as overwhelming and permanent.

The rebels' continued retreat was persuasive evidence that the effect of the Crown's presence was rapidly sinking in. Success had attended every engagement, and now American Philip Schuyler had crossed to the Hudson's western bank, leaving the water route from the Battenkill to Canada in British hands. Loyalists and wavering locals were renewing their allegiance in the presence of Colonel Philip Skene and British Chaplain Brudenell. Burgoyne was confident that he would be in Albany before the end of August, and that Brigadier Barry St. Leger would join him there—even if no troops from the lower Hudson did likewise.

Only a lone cloud marred the happy horizon, though it was one that, if not scattered by decisive action, could expand to threaten all prospects of success. Transport and supply dependent upon the lengthening line of communications seemed a greater threat than Schuyler's retreating American soldiers who, except for Colonels Ebenezer Francis' and Seth Warner's men at Hubbardton, had manifested little martial spirit and competence. Burgoyne hoped that relief from reliance upon the Canadian depot was available if horses and cattle believed to be plentiful in the Hampshire Grants [Vermont] could be procured.

And the Grants might hold other attractions. Could their people be wooed from attachment to the rebel cause? While encamped at Castleton, Major General Friedrich von Riedesel, whose unemployed dragoons became more of a liability with every mile, proposed a horse-collecting raid eastward behind the Americans in the Arlington-Manchester area.¹ Burgoyne believed that

detaching an adequate force so far north would take it too far from the march route to Albany, and so rejected the German's suggestion.² One month later, however, the worsening logistical situation persuaded him to reconsider the plan, and the generals drafted orders for a raid into the Grants.

The expedition would march from the Battenkill to Arlington, where loyalists under Captain Justin Sherwood would join it. From there, it would proceed by way of Manchester to Rockingham on the Connecticut River, "the most distant part of the expedition." From Rockingham the soldiers would descend the river to Brattleboro, "and from that place, by the quickest march... to return by the great road to Albany."³ The raid had several goals: "to try the affections of the country, to disconcert the councils of the enemy, to mount Reidesel's [sic] dragoons, to complete Peters' corps, and to obtain large supplies of cattle, horses, and carriages."

The generals' instructions were less quixotic than they seem in retrospect. The hope Burgoyne harbored that the Grants' inhabitants nourished latent loyalist sentiments that would become overt with an imperial military presence was not unreasonable. He had found more sympathizers south of Ticonderoga than some later generations have wanted to remember. New Yorkers in general—and General Schuyler in particular—were cordially disliked by many settlers, some of whom expressed as much enthusiasm for fighting "Yorkers" as for killing redcoats. Colonel Skene and other local Tories exaggerated the loyalty of their neighbors to the east, but the presence of royal soldiers could be expected to test the country's sentiments. Enlarging the army's provincial contingent would result from arousing the people's affection for the old order.

Burgoyne continued to hope to "disconcert" American councils by making them believe that he posed a threat to New England. Some Americans did fear that Britain would strike at the rebellion's heart by bringing the war into the Yankee interior. To delude his foe, the general instructed the raid's leader to "use all possible means to make the country believe that the troops under your command are an advanced corps of the army, and that it is intended to pass Connecticut on the road to Boston. You will insinuate that the main army from Albany is to be joined at Springfield [Massachusetts] by a corps from Rhode Island."⁴

While hoping for additional enlistments was reasonable, expecting the raid to garner some 1,000 horses and a significant number of livestock was not. Horses and livestock in these numbers were not available under the most favorable conditions, and conditions were very unfavorable. Farmers have always been notoriously unwilling to donate their animals to military purposes, even when they favor the army's cause. Frontier New Englanders were no exception. Unless the Grants' settlers' "affections" for the Crown were unusually sacrificial, they could be expected to make the conversion of their beasts into mounts, draught horses, and rations as difficult as possible.

Burgoyne also deluded himself into believing the expeditionary force could be self-sufficient by living off the country, and could accomplish its mission within about two weeks (by which time he expected to be in Albany). He did, however, include the proviso that "should the army not be able to reach Albany before your expedition be completed, I will find means to send you notice of it, and give your route another direction."⁵

From its inception, unreality marked the planning and execution of the Bennington raid. The officer best qualified by experience and the composition of his corps to conduct it was Brigadier

Simon Fraser, yet he was not party to either phase. There is no evidence that he disapproved of the decision to undertake a diversion eastward, but Lieutenant Colonel Kingston's testimony during the parliamentary enquiry was explicit in stating that the brigadier did not approve its being conducted by Germans.⁶ Although the adjutant general urged him to do so, Fraser declined to intrude into his superiors' deliberations. Burgoyne and von Riedesel foolishly ignored Fraser's expertise and the skills peculiar to his corps when they drafted instructions for the man who was to lead it.

Two fatal errors doomed the raid. The first was the composition of the column. The raiding party numbered 486 men from the following units: Brunswick [Braunschweig] dragoons, 150; Peters' Provincial Corps, 150; Captain Alexander Fraser's light infantry, fifty; Loyalists and Canadian Volunteers, fifty-six; German grenadiers, fifty; Hesse-Hanau gunners, thirty; and Indians, 100.⁷ Fraser's light infantrymen and Sherwood's men from Peters' loyalists were English speakers, but only some of the latter were familiar with the region in which they were to operate. Two light field pieces accompanied the column.

The second error was selecting dragoon Lieutenant Colonel Friedrich Baum, a man as innocent as his troops of the mission's requirements, to command the column. Baum had seen action during the Seven Years' War in Europe, but he had little command experience. Philip Skene, "from whose supposed knowledge of the country and influence among its inhabitants much was expected," and the Loyalists bore the impossible task of relating the undertaking and its inexperienced command to the strategic realities they would face.

Why Burgoyne and von Riedesel dispatched a German dragoon officer and a predominantly German force into the American interior is difficult to understand. Military protocol helps provide a partial explanation. The German division made up the army's left or eastern wing, and operations in that sector would normally be entrusted to it. Gerald Howson, in his biography of Burgoyne, wrote that the Germans "were still resentful at remarks that had been passed about the Trenton affair and had tried to restore their national pride by claiming that only their action had saved Fraser from defeat at Hubbardton, a claim that had brought some sarcastic replies. Burgoyne probably felt...to send the Germans would do much to restore their morale."⁸ The idea of the raid originated with von Riedesel, and it was his dragoons who required the mounts. Most important, Burgoyne could not spare his British and German flank companies, the indispensable core of his offensive capability. The dragoons, provincials, and Indians were less essential to success in a set battle and more expendable if the raid failed.

The Raid Begins — and Changes

Baum's dragoons, in their leather breeches, clumsy spurred jackboots, and large cocked hats, marched away from Fort Edward during an oppressively hot August 9. Their immediate destination was Fort Miller, eight miles down a rough and dusty road, where they were to join the men who were to accompany them from Fraser's advanced corps. According to von Riedesel's report to the Duke of Braunschweig, that contingent had moved southward to Stillwater. To make up for that deficiency, 100 Germans from Lieutenant Colonel Heinrich Breyman's Corps were drafted to join Baum. Some Canadians and Indians also joined, but fewer than originally intended.⁹

While the column halted at Fort Miller during the tenth, Burgoyne "changed the route

originally intended for the detachment, and ordered Baum to march directly to Bennington, intelligence being received that the rebels had a considerable magazine there.”¹⁰ That change radically altered the expedition’s objective. Seizing a garrisoned military depot replaced the intent to project a military presence that would produce men, horses, and cattle while confusing the Americans about British objectives. It was hoped that the original mission might be accomplished with out encountering serious armed resistance; capturing the depot was more likely to involve force, if only against despised militia.

When Burgoyne wrote his account of the raid to Lord George Germain on August 20, the general reported that the Americans had done his foraging for him by assembling at Bennington cattle collected in the Hampshire Grants, as well as a “large deposit of corn and wheel[ed] carriages” guarded by militia whose numbers varied daily. He believed that “possession of the cattle and carriages would certainly have enabled the army to leave their distant magazines, and to have acted with energy and dispatch; success would also have answered many secondary purposes.”¹¹ Burgoyne anticipated that taking the Bennington depot would meet logistical needs more quickly and with a greater degree of certainty than a fort night’s excursion through thinly-settled frontier settlements.¹²

Baum’s assembled column left Fort Miller during August 11 and marched about four miles to the mouth of the Battenkill, where fifty J’gers from Major Ferdinand A. von Barner’s Regiment joined it.¹³ It advanced an other fifteen miles over the crest of the watershed separating the Battenkill and the Hoosick to Cambridge during the twelfth, where its advance guard defeated a party of militia, captured eight prisoners, 1,000 bushels of wheat, and 150 bullocks, which Baum sent back to the main army.

The ease of this victory led to Baum’s undoing. According to von Riedesel, Baum “was informed that there were from 15 to 1,800 of the enemy at Bennington, and that they had a very considerable magazine there, besides 2,000 bullocks and 300 horses. Encouraged by the success of his first attack,” explained von Riedesel, “Lieutenant-Colonel Baum proposed to march the next day towards Bennington, and dislodge the enemy from that post.”¹⁴

The decision to attack a reported 1,000-man post with a force about one-third that strong was suicidal. His success against forty or fifty militia at Cambridge could not justify the optimism the baron attributed to Baum. His ignorance surpassed his hubris, for important developments had effected dramatic changes in the local military situation.

Enter Stark and the Frontiersmen

The altered scene in the Hampshire Grants had its focus in that personification of Yankee cussedness wed to Scotch-Irish combativeness named John Stark. A product of the New England frontier, Stark was medium-sized, muscular, brave, and pithily articulate in a manner that invited quotation that was often apocryphal. He was also contentious, suspicious, opinionated, so fiercely individualistic that he refused to serve any cause on terms other than his own, and contemptuous of authority to the point of insubordination.

Few American commanders, including General Washington, had more raw first hand combat experience than John Stark. His association with matters military began in 1755, when he participated in Sir William Johnson’s operations against Baron Ludwig von Dieskau, followed by service as an officer in the legendary Robert Rogers’ Rangers. After participating in

Lord Jeffrey Amherst's capture of Crown Point and Ticonderoga in 1759, Stark returned to the Hampshire Grants and enthusiastically opposed New York efforts to annex what became Vermont. New England's resistance to British colonial policies appealed powerfully to the congenital rebel, and on April 23, 1775, he became commander of the 1st New Hampshire Line and led his regiment at Bunker Hill. From January 1 until November 8, 1776, Stark served as colonel of the 5th Continental Infantry and commanded that regiment in Canada during the summer of 1776. The 5th became the 1st Continental New Hampshire in November, with Stark commanding and participating in the dramatic miracle of Trenton and Princeton. Passed over for promotion to brigadier general, here signed in disgust on March 23, 1777, and returned to the Grants.¹⁵ He took home with him valuable combat experience that enhanced a native gift for leadership.

Stark also carried away other, less useful, baggage. As proud and obsessed with "honour" as Benedict Arnold, Stark despised the Continental Congress. Local loyalty weighed more heavily than identification with a nebulous concept like a nation, a trait shared by more than a few of his contemporaries. But Stark threatened to mortgage important talents and a powerful personality to destructive provincialism. He was gratuitously contemptuous of colleagues, only some of whom merited his low esteem, and he detested General Schuyler on personal, political, and professional grounds. Still, Stark possessed an attribute that made an important and immediate contribution to American victory and opened the way for him to reclaim a place in the fight for independence: more than anyone, including Ethan Allen, he personified the virtues and flaws of the frontiersmen who peopled the troubled country between the Connecticut and the Hudson.

And that country was undergoing a wrenching transition. While British soldiers invaded the Hudson Valley, political leaders in the Grants were forging an organization that on June 8, 1777, declared itself a new, independent commonwealth named, first, New Connecticut, and then Vermont, with a revolutionary constitution: the first in North America to prohibit slavery. Under the able administration of Governor Thomas Chittenden, his colleagues, and successors, the infant state maintained a uniquely independent existence until its admission to the Federal Union after New York relinquished claims to land west of the Connecticut River in 1790.¹⁶

Providing an effective defense against hostile military force was obviously beyond the resources of the embryonic state. Only its parent, New Hampshire, was prepared to meet that need, and its General Court did so on John Stark's demanding terms. On July 18, 1777, it commissioned him a brigadier general of militia, expressly making him accountable only to the General Court or to New Hampshire's Committee of Safety. During the next day it enhanced his independence by explicitly authorizing him to cooperate with the troops of other states or the Continental Army, or to act "separately as it shall appear expedient to you for the protection of the people or the annoyance of the enemy." That authority was a lodestar that Stark followed willingly — even willfully. The General Court commissioned a second brigadier, William Whipple, a signer of the Declaration of Independence.¹⁷

The extreme localism that informed New Hampshire's response to the British threat testified to the weakness of national claims to people's loyalties. It was also a prescription for military disaster that only a remarkable combination of factors avoided.

The first factor was the remarkable speed with which Stark's militia brigade mobilized. Partly this was because the terms upon which he and the General Court agreed stimulated volunteering. Field and company grade officers literally rounded up men of their townships.

Taverns, shops, and churches became recruiting centers. The General Court commissioned Stark on Friday, July 18. By nightfall the following day 221 men had enlisted for two months of active duty, filling three of the authorized twenty-five companies. By Tuesday, July 24, 1,492 officers and men, almost ten percent of the qualified voters, had enrolled — an eloquent manifestation of local loyalties and the energy of the region's leaders.¹⁸ By July 30, Stark's Brigade was ready to march, or at least tramp, its way to Charleston, New Hampshire, on the east bank of the Connecticut River.

As one historian observed, the men who joined Stark's colors were not a "mere mob."¹⁹ They included many veterans of the Seven Years' War, and most were as good marks men as the limitations of the accuracy of the smooth-bore musket would allow. Their lives on the rural frontier conditioned them for field duty. If they were short on discipline, they had physical courage in abundance. The men who answered New Hampshire's call to arms and Colonel Warner's veterans of Hubbardton provided the critical contribution to victory. Many were dangerously un disciplined, but their personal courage and resource fulness carried the day in an action for which formal tactics were ill-suited.

A second factor, sometimes overlooked, was Major General Benjamin Lincoln, whom General Schuyler placed in charge of the New England militia. The Northern Department's commander intended that Lincoln bring those paragons of individualism to join his main army on the Hudson. That was a potentially explosive problem involving dealing with a stubborn, reckless man who would not scruple at insubordination and who enjoyed the enthusiastic support of the people he led. But Lincoln would have the wisdom and moral courage to treat Stark as an ally even when it became obvious that his fellow Yankee would subordinate himself to neither Lincoln nor Schuyler.

The third factor was Stark's skill in conducting the kind of battle that made the best use of the type of men who comprised his brigade, against the kind of force Baum and then Breymann led against them. With all his faults and professional limitations, Stark was a superb leader: bold, willing to take responsibility for his actions, and keenly attuned to and sharing the prejudices and strengths of the men he commanded.

A fourth and critical factor that helped decide the outcome of the Bennington Raid then underway was the qualitative and quantitative deficiencies of the forces Burgoyne committed to the raid. They represented too large a commitment for the probable benefits to be obtained, and yet at the same time were not equal to a successful foray into a little-understood region from which livestock and stores were to be seized and removed. The raid's commanders, Friedrich Baum and Heinrich Breymann, undertook operations in an environment and against an enemy under tactical conditions for which they had no preparation. They were dependent upon appallingly inaccurate intelligence, and led troops in experienced in, and poorly equipped for, irregular warfare in a hilly wooded country traversed by execrable roads.

From Charleston, Stark sent his brigade to Manchester, where Colonel Warner's regiment, joined by Massachusetts and New Hampshire militia, were assembled under the command of General Lincoln. General Schuyler had intended that Lincoln remain in the Hampshire Grants to respond to any move the British might make against New England and to interdict foraging raids. But by the first week of August he finally realized that Albany, and not New England, was Burgoyne's objective. Lincoln was directed to leave Warner in Vermont and march the Massachusetts and New Hampshire militia to reinforce the main army on the Hudson. Complying with these orders, Lincoln directed Stark's Brigade to accompany him westward.²⁰

Stark arrived on the scene and promptly refused to place himself and his men under any command other than his own. Stark and his soldiers owed obedience to no authority but New Hampshire's General Court, and he was determined not to rejoin the Continental Congress until that body made him a Continental general.²¹ Lincoln tried to persuade him that he was arrogating to himself a responsibility that could have dangerous consequences. Stark hotly responded that he was accustomed to taking responsibility for his conduct. When Lincoln reported the brazen insubordination to the Congress, that body resolved to notify the General Court that its granting Stark command autonomy was destructive to military authority, and request that it direct its general to "comport him self to the same rules which other general officers of the militia are subject to, when ever they are called out at the expense of the United States."²²

Lincoln knew that even a successful appeal to the Congress could not be timely enough to break the immediate impasse that Stark had created. Rather than standing upon his obviously valid prerogative as the senior general officer bearing a national commission, he decided to treat Stark as an ally and endorsed his intention to move against the vulnerable British communications line by trying to persuade Schuyler to approve the move. Given Stark's intransigence and the support he enjoyed from his men, that unstable accommodation was the best solution available. Happily for the Americans, it did not produce the disaster that under most conditions should have followed.

Lincoln immediately left for Stillwater to confer with the beleaguered departmental commander, whose days in that troubled post were rapidly drawing to a close. Warner and his regiment of Continentals, along with about 200 recently-enrolled rangers, remained at Manchester.

Stark Encounters the Enemy

On the day of his confrontation with Lincoln, Stark marched his men to Bennington, halfway between Manchester and Schuyler's headquarters. At Bennington was the depot for supplies on their way from the upper Connecticut River to Schuyler on the Hudson. Stark — supposedly — was to remain there, awaiting Lincoln's return with the results of his conference with his commander.

Like most actions taken by Stark, the move to Bennington had the potential for disaster — from which events delivered him. Remaining at Manchester offered a better base from which to threaten Burgoyne's communications, as Stark had proposed. In contrast, Bennington was too far southwest, and to have tried to encircle the British from there would have exposed Stark to attack by Burgoyne's left wing. On the other hand, being at Bennington enhanced the depot's security and halved the distance between Stillwater and Manchester, making contact with Lincoln easier.

John Stark was no patient man, and when word from Lincoln failed to arrive by August 13, he prepared to leave Bennington, apparently for Cambridge. His reason for deciding to move is obscure. He may have experienced an uncharacteristic pang of remorse and intended to join Schuyler. More probably, he decided to harass Burgoyne's rear without waiting for Schuyler's approval. Most probable, his restlessness led him to move without really knowing what he intended. Before he could get his inexperienced men on the march, however, Stark received intelligence that persuaded him to change his mind and earned him an enviable place in history: an enemy column was approaching Bennington.

Colonel William Gregg, whom Stark had dispatched with 200 men to deal with Indian raids, posted himself at a mill on the Owl Kill called variously Van Schaik's, St. Coick's, and Sancoick's. At 8:00 on the morning of August 14, the head of Lieutenant Colonel Baum's column appeared. Gregg's men fired a volley and retreated across the stream. Writing on a barrel head an hour later, a pleased Colonel Baum reported that the Americans "broke down the bridge, which retarded us above an hour; they left in the mill about 78 barrels of very fine flour, 1, 000 bushels of wheat, 20 barrels of salt, and about 1,000 worth of pearl and pot ash." Thinking defensively, Baum ordered "thirty provincials and an officer to guard the provision and pass of the bridge."²³

The Indians were, as usual, proving a serious threat to the British-German expedition's success, looting indiscriminately and destroying what they could not carry away. On a more encouraging note, a number of local people who professed loyalty "flocked in hourly, but wanted to be armed."

Five prisoners taken at the mill, perhaps supported by the professed loyalists, told Colonel Philip Skene's interrogators that between 1,000 and 1,800 militia guarded Bennington's stores, but that they intended to withdraw whenever their enemy appeared. Emboldened by that piece of misinformation, Baum continued his approach march until coming within sight of Stark's advancing column at St. Luke's Bridge over Little White Creek, about four miles west of Bennington.

When he learned that Baum had seized the mill, Stark sent a courier to Manchester with orders directing Colonel Warner to join him, and moved west to engage the largely German enemy. The two columns faced one another while Baum digested some new, disturbing information. As von Riedesel later reported to the Duke of Braunschweig, the Americans expected "a large reinforcement...and intended to attack as soon as the reinforcement joined them." When he received this information, Baum "very properly deferred his intention of pushing on to Bennington, and halted at his post, sending off an express to inform General Burgoyne of his situation, and desiring that Some troops may be ordered to sustain him."²⁴

Stark reacted to his foe's presence by withdrawing more than two miles, while Baum occupied a steep hill 300 feet above the Walloomsac River. In those positions, the two forces settled down for the night. Rain made the fifteenth miserable for the men facing one another among the hills north of the river. Movement became especially difficult. Drenched soldiers carried out their officers' commands as best they could, preparing and eating sodden rations while endeavoring to keep their powder dry.

For Baum's men, the situation was made marginally less trying by the arrival of ninety local loyalists under the command of Francis Pfister (or Phister), a half-pay lieutenant formerly of the "Royal American" Regiment of Foot. This addition increased Baum's total strength to about 700, including Indians.²⁵ But Stark's strength also increased, to more than 2,000 with the arrival of 400 Vermont militia, a company from Berkshire County, Massachusetts, and a band of Stockbridge Indians.²⁶

Baum was aware of Stark's numerical advantage, but he was also confident that his men possessed superior combat capability. Instead of retreating, he deployed his troops in a hastily-conceived, widely-dispersed defensive perimeter. Engineer Lieutenant Andrew Durnford, who survived the coming battle, drafted a map entitled "Position of the Detachment under Lieut. Col. Baum at Walmscock near Bennington," the best source of information concerning Baum's

deployment. The dragoons and half of Alexander Fraser's light infantrymen (rangers) occupied the steep hill above the river where the column had spent the night of the fourteenth. Taking advantage of the wooded site, they raised a redoubt and mounted within it a three-pound gun. The rest of the rangers positioned themselves across the Saratoga-Bennington Road about fifty feet from St. Luke's Bridge and 140 feet north of the rangers. German grenadiers threw up a small work in which the Hesse-Hanau gunners mounted a second three-pound piece. Other grenadiers, Jägers, and Provincials took positions left of the road from Saratoga. Canadians occupied four houses near the bridge, while Loyalists occupied a redoubted post across the Hoosick River about 840 feet southwest of the bridge. Another body of Jägers was in position on the slope of the hill overlooking the river. Durnford did not identify where the Indians were positioned. The lieutenant's plan includes errors that distort the physical setting, but no contemporary document refutes his data's fundamental accuracy.

Colonel Baum's situation was more dangerous than he and his superiors on the Hudson understood. He faced more than 2,000 men with fewer than 800 of his own. His force was too widely dispersed in an effort to defend positions whose extent exceeded his resources. In addition to the strong American force in the immediate vicinity, Seth Warner's troops were on their way from Manchester; any reinforcements for Baum would have to march a long and very muddy twenty-five miles.

As unpromising as his tactical situation was, the German colonel had no other real option available to him. He had to stand and fight. Retreating through the mud, at the mercy of a much larger, aggressive enemy capable of and more than willing to turn retreat into a death march, would be suicidal. Besides, thought of surrender to Stark's ill-disciplined mob probably never occurred to Baum: he was a professional soldier, whose best hope was to hold off the militia until reinforcements arrived, or somehow beat them in the field. After all, most of his men were Regulars, and his enemy was a motley pick-up gang of untried farmers and woodsmen.

Baum's men took up their positions almost under American eyes. Stark watched while the dragoons and rangers fortified the top of the hill, and took in the evidence of activity at the bridge and the Loyalists' redoubt. Individual scouts probably reported details that were not within range of the general's telescope and the personal observations of his staff. The clouds were parting, and the result was a tactical situation more clearly understood.

The American Gamble

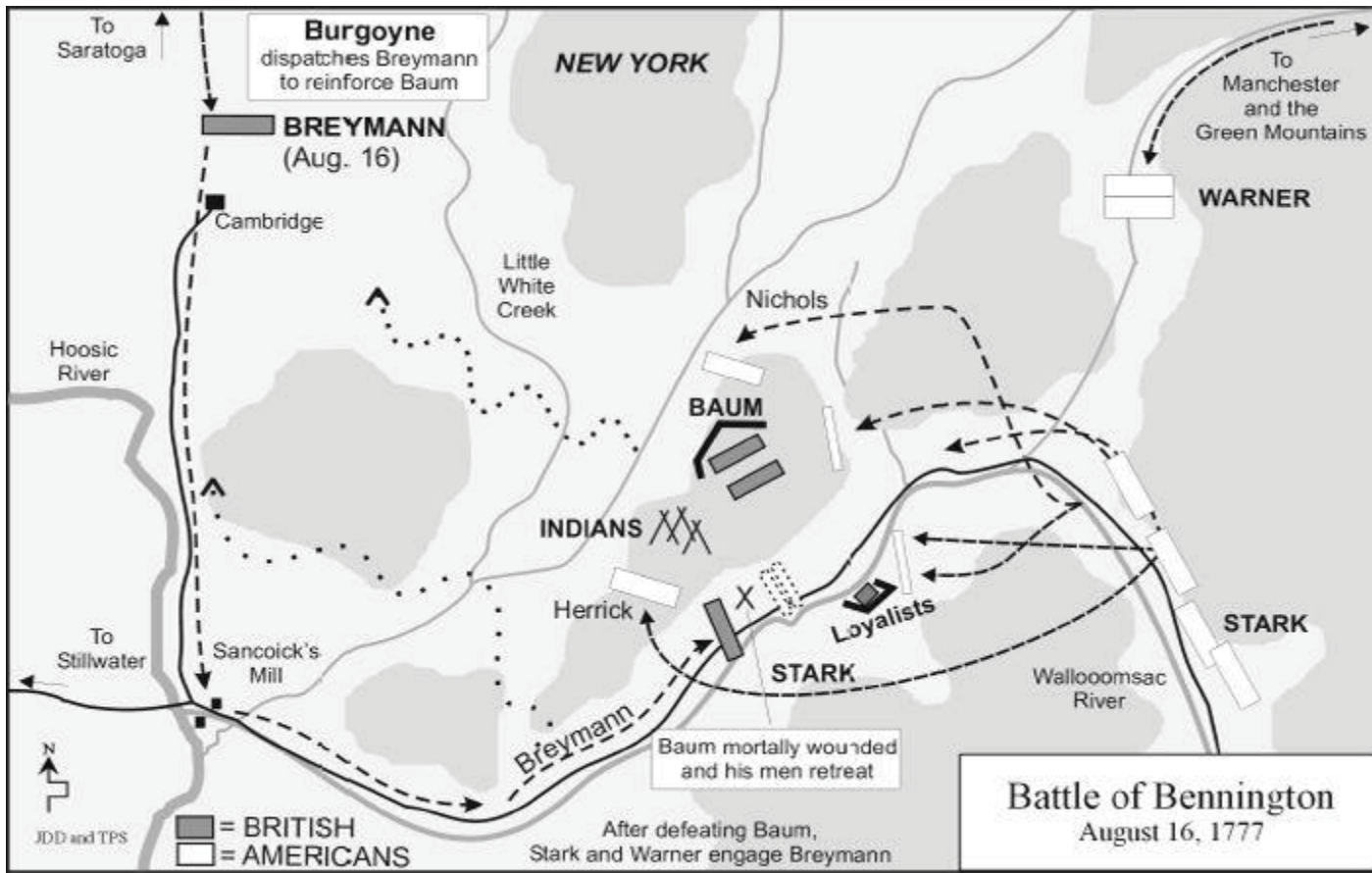
The American response was astonishingly ambitious, yet fatefully successful. Colonel Warner arrived ahead of his regiment, and he and Stark decided to employ the most difficult tactic available to them: a double envelopment. Daunting enough with seasoned veterans, they dared to attempt it with men who, except for Warner's Green Mountain Boys, were as inexperienced as any who ever fought a major engagement. They intended to encircle Baum's position by simultaneously attacking his front, both flanks, and his rear. Improbably, their execution of that maneuver turned out to be flawless.

The rain that had drenched everyone for more than thirty hours ceased during the morning August 16, and the envelopment got underway about noon. Colonel Samuel Herrick led a 300-man composite force of Vermont rangers and local militia against the enemy's right flank. Colonel Moses Nichols took 200 New Hampshire militiamen on a long circuit to get around Baum's left. Two hundred additional New Hampshire men under Colonels David Hobart and

Thomas Stickney moved against the Loyalists in their redoubt southwest of the bridge, while another 100 distracted Baum by demonstrating against the dragoons' redoubt. The plan was that when the sound of firing from Herrick's and Nichols' flanking parties reached him, Stark would launch the decisive frontal attack with his remaining 1,300 men.

Baum may have watched the flanking columns disappear into the woods, but if he did, he failed to understand their import.²⁷ In any event, the two columns remained undetected as they approached their objectives through heavy woods until they were almost in Baum's rear. What Baum did see were small, unorganized groups of men in their shirtsleeves carrying clubbed muskets, the universally recognized signal of peaceful intent, or wearing white cloths, which indicated they were Tories. In the naive faith that their foe subscribed to such rules of conduct, and believing that the majority of the local people were loyalists, the Europeans welcomed the new comers as allies. Amazingly, Baum's pickets withdrew to allow the enemy to enter their lines unmolested.

Both Herrick and Nichols were in position by 3:00 p.m. The latter opened fire first, followed by Herrick. Once this firing was obvious to everyone, Hobart and Stickney attacked the Loyalists' redoubt, and Stark's main body rolled forward with its frontal assault.



The provincials abandoned their redoubt after firing one volley. The American attackers reached the fortification while its defenders were falling back and reloading. The Canadians in the houses at the bridge and the Indians fled without offering any resistance at all. As the chaos spread, the casual parties who had infiltrated Baum's ranks morphed into a fifth column that joined their countrymen and repaid their hosts' gullibility in murderous coin.

Some fugitives from the rear positions joined the dragoons and light infantry in their hilltop fortification, where doomed men sold their lives and freedom dearly. Militia from the flanking units attacked across the open ground behind the redoubt while the American main party under Stark's immediate command scrambled up the steeply wooded slope in Baum's front. They charged in no particular formation and fired individually at close range from the cover of rocks and trees — tactics the defenders were uniquely unprepared to resist.

For two hours, Baum's 200 Regulars, reinforced by the unknown number of fugitives from the rear, repulsed attackers who outnumbered them almost ten to one. When their powder wagon exploded in a spectacular eruption of flame and smoke, the will to continue the lopsided fight went up with it. Practically out of ammunition and exhausted, Fraser's rangers scattered. Baum and his dragoons made a desperate effort to break out. Drawing their heavy sabers, they began cutting their way through the knots of attackers. Having no bayonets, the militia crowded about the frantic Germans, too close to effectively use their muskets. Shocked by the sudden counterattack, the American militia fell back before the slashing sabers, but then gathered themselves and closed in again. When Colonel Baum fell with what would prove to be a fatal stomach wound, the survivors surrendered.²⁸

Burgoyne Sends a Relief Column

General Burgoyne received Baum's request for support at his head quarters in the Duer house at Fort Miller during the night of August 14-15. Major General von Riedesel reported to his sovereign that the colonel's "[r]eport was written in such high spirits, that the General was induced to believe that he requested reinforcements more to enable him to attack the enemy than from any fear of his Corps being in danger of being attacked."²⁹

Although a sense of urgency was missing, to Burgoyne's credit he responded to Baum promptly. James Hadden recorded in his journal that the general first considered sending Fraser's Advanced Corps, but decided that it was too large to be "risqued."³⁰ At 8:00 on the morning of the fifteenth, Sir Francis Clarke, aide-de-camp to the commander, ordered Lieutenant Colonel Heinrich Breymann to march with his Brunswick grenadier battalion and Major Ferdinand von Barner's Jäger battalion, together with a pair of guns, to relieve Baum. Breymann's approximately 700 men set out one hour later. Because wagons were scarce, each soldier carried forty rounds in his pouch, and two boxes of ammunition were loaded onto the artillery carts.

The relief column got underway quickly enough, but it could not sustain its initial momentum. "[T]he troops being forced to wade the Battenkill," Breymann reported to von Riedesel, "were detained a considerable time — the number of hills, excessively bad roads, and continued rain, slowed our march so much, that we scarcely made half an English mile an hour." Each gun and ammunition wagon had to be "dragged up the hills one after another." One wagon overturned, explained Breymann, "and was put into condition to proceed with the greatest

difficulty.³¹

When Breymann's guide lost his way, and a search for the correct route proved unsuccessful, Major von Barner located a more reliable man who led the column in the proper direction. Progress was so slow that nightfall found the muddy, tired men still seven miles west of Cambridge, where they slept on their arms without shelter. Before halting for the night, Breymann sent a note to Baum to alert him that help was on the way. The courier, Lieutenant Johann Caspar Hannemann, reached Lieutenant Colonel Baum about 11:00 that night. Baum acknowledged receipt of the message, and Breymann resumed his march at 6:00 on the morning of August 16.

The horses dragging the two cannon were so weak from hunger that the second day's advance threatened to be as slow as the first. Major von Barner's advance guard commandeered replacements, and the march resumed until the column covered about nine miles, or two miles beyond Cambridge. There it halted while officers closed up the ranks because men were straggling as they slogged through mud churned by horses, cannon carriages, ammunition carts, and marching men.

About 2:00 in the afternoon, a pair of Philip Skene's Loyalists brought in a request that Breymann post an officer and twenty men to secure Sancoick's mill against an expected attack. Breymann sent even more substantial assistance in the form of a sixty-man detachment of grenadiers and Jägers under Captain Gottlieb von Gliessenberg to occupy the mill. The main body of the column followed and, although an ammunition cart broke down, caught up with the advance guard at 4:30. Although Baum's men were at that moment fighting for their lives, Breymann claimed he did not hear any gunfire.

At the mill, meanwhile, Colonel Skene told the German commander that Baum was only two miles distant, and together they moved off to join him. Before they had gone far, fugitives from the fighting blocked their route. The panicked men offered confused and conflicting accounts of the battle. Neither Breymann nor Skene seem to have understood that Baum's command had been destroyed. As the former reported to von Riedesel, "I at that time did not know of his engagement being over; If Colonel Skene knew, I cannot believe that he had reasons for concealing it from me. If I had known, I certainly would not have engaged the enemy."³²

Knowing Baum was in trouble, but acting under the belief he was still fighting, Skene and Breymann hurried forward with their men to support him. About 1,000 yards from the bridge, they encountered a "large number of armed men, some in jackets, others in shirts who were trying to possess a height that was on my left." Clinging to his illusions, Skene assured Breymann they were royalists, and rode toward the men to ask them to declare themselves. He "received no answer other than a discharge of fire."³³

Like Baum, Breymann and Skene were the wrong men for the mission. They were also brave and dedicated soldiers who would persevere. Barner's Jägers charged up the slope against the party that had fired at Skene, while Breymann led the grenadiers and Captain Carl von Geyso's rifle company along the road. Unfortunately for British arms, the Breymann's "army of relief" was in poor condition for a fight. Its men had dragged themselves along an exhausting march for more than a day and half to meet, not comrades on the offensive, but aggressive enemies. Both forces had suffered from the heat and humidity that made every discomfort and danger harder to bear, but Stark's Americans were in much better condition, with soaring morale and a victory under their belts. Although they had just fought a brisk two-hour engagement and were scattered to chase retreating enemy and loot their abandoned camps, they were less heavily

accoutered and had enjoyed at least a brief rest.

Firing down from higher wooded positions, the Americans inflicted disproportionate casualties upon the exposed Regulars, who struggled to deploy along the road while other Americans staged frontal attacks against them. Repeated attempts to overwhelm the Germans failed when Stark's men met the Regulars' steady and disciplined determination to stand their ground and close with their enemy.

Shortly before sunset, Seth Warner's 330 rangers and Green Mountain Men under Lieutenant Colonel Samuel Safford joined the battle. They had arrived about one mile short of Bennington about midnight after marching from Manchester through the same downpour that soaked every man who fought on the Walloomsac. Their approach was about as slow as Breymann's. They ate breakfast and dried their muskets, stopped at the depot, and drew ammunition. It was shortly past noon when they took the road west toward St. Luke's Bridge. About two miles along the road, the men heard fitful fire from the day's first action. Instead of quick-stepping to the firing line, they stopped at Stark's camp, where they drew a ration of rum and dropped their packs. They halted again after crossing the bridge to drink from the river, a stop that the oppressive heat made all but imperative.

Warner's men reached St. Luke's Bridge just as Baum's dragoons rushed down the hill from their redoubt into defeat, ending the Baum-Stark fight. The reinforcements halted here for the third time before continuing along the road almost another one-half mile. By that time Stark had assembled some of his scattered militia and, with Warner's assistance, engaged Breymann near the site of the modern hamlet of Walloomsac. Warner's soldiers deployed to the left into swampy land bordering the river. They soon realized their mistake and, after firing a few volleys, began an orderly move to higher wooded ground north of the road. The position was less than one mile southwest of the abandoned dragoons' redoubt.

Breymann took the initiative by committing his Jägers to an effort to turn the American right flank, and initially the German reinforcements gained ground. But half of Warner's corps countered, as they had at Hubbardton, by adopting their enemy's maneuver in reverse and turning the German left flank. The other half extended its own left in an effort to threaten the Jägers' right flank. With the front stabilized, Stark's men, who had been about to break again, rallied. The fight was equal, briefly, until the German light infantry had nearly exhausted their forty rounds and the gunners had not a shot remaining.

Breymann's desperate men were ignorant of Baum's fate, but it must have been obvious that the men whose attack they had been sent to support were not engaging the enemy. Their cannon were useless, their ammunition gone, and they were outgunned by a howling mass of Americans intent upon their destruction. Their options were limited: retreat or surrender. The latter choice offered little hope for survival. After trying to drag away the guns by hand and losing more men in the attempt, Breymann issued the order to withdraw shortly after sunset.

Their retreat began in good order, with the soldiers maintaining their formations and effectively using their dwindling supply of shot to keep their pursuers at bay. But the overwhelming weight of well-armed numbers drove them so mercilessly that the retreat threatened to degenerate into a rout. The drummers beat the parley, but the militia did not recognize the signal or ignored it. Some men, demoralized by the saturation of short-range fire, took to the woods, where their cumbersome gear made escape all but impossible. It seemed that Breymann's fate, like Baum's before him, was sealed.

That he and his men did not share that fate was due to their personal courage. Breymann

suffered a superficial leg wound, but kept his Regulars (by now all but incapable of retaliating against their tormentors) from disintegration. When darkness fell, his men survived to continue their flight to rejoin the main army, twenty-five long and weary miles away on the Hudson River.

Stark prudently called a halt to his pursuit. Controlling his men was difficult enough in daylight, but it would be impossible in the darkness. In his August 22 report to General Gates, Stark reported, “We pursued them till dark but had the daylight lasted one hour longer, we should have taken the Body.”³⁴

Significantly, the Americans did nothing the next day or thereafter to convert their tactical success into a strategic coup. Lincoln led a force of 500 to 600 men from Schuyler’s army to join Stark in the projected attack against Burgoyne’s left-rear, a move that promised results that would have been more damaging than those accruing from Baum’s destruction. The moment was an auspicious one, but Stark’s militiamen were not capable of sustained action. Their general was ill, and he and his brigade “seem to have been more paralyzed by their easy victory than regular troops would have been by a check.”³⁵ Those men who did not immediately return home contented themselves with enjoying their booty at the scene of triumph — an unheroic anticlimax to a remarkable feat of arms, one about to be compounded by their refusal to remain in service hours before the men of the Northern Department finally confronted Burgoyne himself on September 19.

Assessing the Outcome

Sources disagree in assessing the cost of the Bennington raid. What is not in dispute is that Burgoyne lost nearly 1,000 men compared to fewer than 200 for the Americans. The loss was compounded by the capture of field artillery, muskets, and other arms and supplies.³⁶

The Northern Department and the Continental cause benefited in other ways from the Bennington raid’s failure. The depot’s stores saved by that failure remained available to Horatio Gates’ army while it challenged the British advance. After the victory on the Walloomsac, mere mundane problems of administration and transport of those supplies replaced security concerns. The victory also signaled the disappearance of an organized enemy threat in the country between the Connecticut and Hudson valleys. Baum’s destruction and Breymann’s subsequent defeat cleaved away almost one-seventh of the strength of Burgoyne’s army. Significantly, most of those lost were Regulars. The defeat of those European professionals by a force whose largest component was a newly-raised and untrained militia was a boon to American morale at a critical time in the revolution’s history. The fact the victors significantly outnumbered the vanquished did not diminish the impact of the American success.

The region’s sizable loyalist element and their potential allies among the uncommitted responded to the raid’s failure in a manner that was predictable but difficult to quantify. Whatever they had hoped for from the foray into their country, nothing associated with the battle — except the personal courage displayed by men such as Philip Skene — redounded to their credit. The loyalists generally did not distinguish themselves in valor or sagacity, and optimistic predictions that the presence of royal troops would produce effective provincial support proved hollow. The raid’s defeat discouraged overt, potential, and crypto-loyalists from committing themselves to a palpably weakened cause. Fond illusions of latent Toryism was among Bennington’s casualties.

Arguably, Bennington was the American Revolution’s luckiest victory, one produced by a

fortuitous conspiracy of circumstances. As one student of the battle put it, the combat “can only be compared to the turning up of the double zero three or four times in roulette,” to wit:³⁷

- Burgoyne’s detaching the wrong kind of force, led by men who compounded the general’s error by bad tactical decisions, contributed to American luck;
- Stark’s being at Bennington without the enemy’s knowing it and in time to intercept Baum was the product of chance. He might have remained at Manchester or marched westward to harass Burgoyne’s left wing, which is what he originally intended to do;
- The foul weather favored the Americans by delaying Breymann’s march, then cooperated by clearing just in time for Stark to destroy Baum;
- Stark’s and Warner’s resort to a double envelopment, difficult enough with seasoned veterans, invited disaster when attempted by the kind of men available during the engagement’s opening phase; it should have failed;
- Even the dilatoriness of Warner’s corps operated to American advantage by delaying its arrival in time to provide a rallying force for Stark’s men as they were breaking, and to apply the coup de grace to Breymann’s attacking column.

It is fair to say that success at Bennington was the progeny of audacity wed to fickle fortune.

John Stark and his victorious militia received the lion’s share of the credit for the victory, and on October 4 the Continental Congress rewarded Stark with the coveted prize of a brigadier general’s commission.³⁸ The militia merited much of the praise they received, but alone they would have failed to repel Breymann: Stark’s militia were breaking before the Germans when Seth Warner’s tardy corps arrived to save the day.

However one analyzes the battle, John Stark and Seth Warner had combined to inflict a body blow against Regular troops with a victory that set the stage for Saratoga.

