

## *Prelude to Bemis Heights and “the Airy Scheme”*

### *Assembling the Fractious Forces*

The time for developing new initiatives for frustrating John Burgoyne’s designs was at hand. General Gates knew the British could not long remain at Fort Miller and must soon retreat to Ticonderoga or continue the advance on Albany. There was nowhere between those places they could winter, and spending the cold season at the former would not be an attractive option.

Albany, for strategic and logistical reasons, offered a much better alternative. The lower Hudson provided communications with the premier British base at New York City, and occupying Albany would make supply resources much more readily accessible and in greater quantity than would be the case at the more isolated northern fortress. Finally, bringing his army to Albany and making it available to Sir William Howe for the next campaign was the expedition’s primary purpose. Retreating to Ticonderoga, therefore, would be tantamount to admitting defeat without having engaged the Americans in major combat. Sir Guy Carleton had done exactly that in 1776; Burgoyne was not about to reprise that role in 1777.<sup>1</sup>

By August 22, Gates was convinced Burgoyne would push on. That conclusion required the Americans to move northward toward the enemy and take up a position suitable for either defensive or offensive operations. Van Schaick’s Islands and the junction of the Hudson and Mohawk rivers were not suitable for either purpose. Where should the army move?

The army that would march, however, was growing stronger by the day. Excluding Dan Morgan’s riflemen, the artillerymen, and artificers, the Continentals numbered 6,043 present and fit for duty. Including those additional personnel, the total number of effectives was some 7,000. Militia continued to arrive and be integrated into brigades. The 2nd and 17th Albany County regiments, commanded by Colonels Abraham Wempel and William Bradford Whiting, respectively, and Colonel Morris Graham’s Dutchess and Ulster County Regiment were tucked into John Glover’s Brigade.<sup>2</sup> Colonels Thaddeus Cook and Jonathan Latimore’s Connecticut regiments joined Enoch Poor’s Brigade.<sup>3</sup>

Some 700 to 800 of John Stark’s men from New Hampshire arrived on the Hudson on September 11.<sup>4</sup> The arrival of these veterans seemed, for the moment, to reward the patient

efforts of Gates and Benjamin Lincoln to persuade their fractious commander to commit the heroes of Bennington to the common cause. The story, however, is not that simple.

On his return to Manchester from conferring with Gates about strategy, Lincoln stopped at St. Croix on the Walloomsac to discuss with General John Stark the role required of him, which was to “take command of the one thousand troops, and move toward the [Hudson] river.” Stark “appeared perfectly satisfied” with the plan. A review of his returns, however, revealed that he had only slightly more than 750 men present and fit for duty. Colonel William Williams was to reinforce Stark with about 200 men from the Hampshire Grants, and Lincoln ordered a Colonel Robertson “to join with his few men.” Taught by experience how volatile Stark could be, Lincoln followed their conversation with a letter dated September 6 reiterating Stark’s mission and Gates’ explicit wish to have him occupy high ground east of the river opposite Stillwater.<sup>5</sup>

Stark’s immediate response did not promise wholehearted cooperation. “I received yours informing me of Genl. Gates movement,” he began. “I should be glad to move to the height opposite him on the east side, but the task is too hard for me in my present circumstances. I have but about 800 men, and not one man knows the ground (not so much as one foot).” Not content with that weak demurrer, Stark advanced a transparently specious argument: “The whole of Mr. Burgoyne’s army is on this side of the river—General Gates may as well tell me, go attack Genl. Burgoyne[’s] army with my Brigade, as to desire me to march between him and the enemy.”<sup>6</sup>

Stark followed this piece of nonsense with another written to Lincoln on the seventh in which he pretended that Lincoln had indicated that Gates would depart Van Schaick’s Island during September 6. Stark, however, knew that he had not done so by noon of that day. Because the seventh was rainy, Gates would not reach Stillwater during the eighth. Colonel Williams had only 60 men (not 200) fit for duty, “which together with my brigade will not exceed 700 men, and many of that number are now sick with the Meazels—besides all this I have not one carriage with me to transport my provisions from this place.”

Stark went on to add, with gratuitous effrontery, the following note in an effort to shift the onus of his situation onto Lincoln’s shoulders:

N. B. There is more difficulty prevails—my mens time is almost out and [I] do find it out of my power to detain them longer than while the time is expired, and they are further pleased to say (notwithstanding my endeavours to persuade them to the contrary) that they are looked upon as a very disrespectable body which (they say) may be evidenced by your letter to the State of Massachusetts Bay, in which the continental Troops were placed in the front of the battle [Bennington]—and had the applause of victory—your men immediately after and mine the last of all—these circumstances sir are so implanted in their minds that in no case they should exert themselves as heretofore, once more they think that they should be treated in like manner.<sup>7</sup>

Stark not only misrepresented the tenor of Lincoln’s report, but whatever his men learned about the report’s contents came from their commander, and thus any ideas “implanted in their minds” were derived from him.

In spite of that provocation, Lincoln offered a tempered reply. “In my letter to the Council of Massachusetts Bay, I meant to speak of the troops engaged in the late action in the most respectful terms,” he wrote. “If the arrangement [list of units] is wrong it was not so designed.” Indeed, nothing in the letter impugned the conduct of any soldiers who had served at Bennington.

Lincoln devoted the rest of his letter of September 8 urging Stark to fulfill his assigned role and assuring him that any support needed for the slightly more than one-day march from the Walloomsac to the Hudson would be available. He regretted that Stark's men used the date of their service expiration "as a reason why they should not act the little time they are to continue in camp."<sup>8</sup>

That Gates also controlled his temper is evident in a pair of letters he sent from Stillwater on September 10. "I am astonished," he penned Lincoln,

at my Friend Stark hesitating to perform what he had previously, and with entire approbation, consented to execute; the post I wished him to Occupy, is not more than half [a] cannon Shot from [the] Right of this Army, & by Twelve at Noon, I shall have a good Bridge of communication finished across the River. Inclosed is my letter to him upon the Subject[;] after reading it I think he will not delay one moment the march to that Ground.<sup>9</sup>

Gates' second, slightly more pointed letter, was directed to the man who had so "astonished" him. "I am exceeding Surprised and Disappointed," Gates informed Stark,

at not finding you at the place, where I understood from General Lincoln you had agreed to take post, to Cooperate with me—so far from your being between me & the Enemy's whole Army; the post is not half [a] cannon shot from my Right; & in a line with it; and this forenoon, a good bridge of Communication will be finish'd across the River—I entreat you will not Tarnish the Glory you have gain'd, but march immediately to the post assigned you.<sup>10</sup>

Stark had, in the meantime, realized that his insubordination might very well tarnish his laurels, and on the ninth informed Gates that his brigade would move to the heights opposite Stillwater. Stark was too ill to accompany it, but indicated he would rejoin his men as soon as he recovered. Pending that recovery, "I am Dear Sir in the Greatest Agony of Grief and Pain..."<sup>11</sup>

In this manner, after almost one month of inactivity on the Walloomsac, and led by Colonel Samuel Ashley, the militiamen reached their assigned position during September 11.<sup>12</sup> Their commander, still pleading bad health, did not appear until the morning of the eighteenth—the day his men's terms expired. About noon on that day, in an act of irresponsible localismo, with battle imminent, and despite Gates' offer of a ten-dollar bounty for each man who remained, Stark led his men back to the Hampshire Grants.<sup>13</sup>

### *The American Position*

When Gates decided to take up the place where he intended to stop Burgoyne, he commanded a force that had increased in size to at least 9,000 men, approximately 1,800 more than the British general commanded. The Europeans' professionalism and experience significantly reduced that numerical advantage, but a well-fortified position could more than restore the balance in favor of the Americans.

The search for such a position began on September 8, when the Americans set out on their

northward march. During the morning of the next day they were at Stillwater, across the Hudson from the high ground Gates expected Stark to occupy. But the valley west of the river was too broad to afford a strong position, and Gates moved his men three miles farther to Bemis Heights. There, he discovered that the high ground, if properly fortified and manned, met his tactical requirements. A westward curve of the river and a marsh bordering it crowded the road to Albany onto a narrow shelf of solid ground dominated by bluffs more than 100 feet high on the eastern face of the heights. American occupation of the high ground would inevitably force Burgoyne onto the horns of an unappealing set of choices. If he continued his advance southward, tactical disadvantages awaited. Forcing his way along the road would dangerously expose his men to the American guns, while turning into the hills to drive his enemy from their position would trigger a major engagement against a fortified enemy. If Burgoyne decided against an attack and attempted to retreat north—thereby aborting the campaign—the larger American army would pursue his outnumbered and outmaneuvered Europeans. Any option Burgoyne chose forced him to act on Gates' terms. The selection and occupation of Bemis Heights was a strategic coup for the Americans, and a turning point in the campaign.<sup>14</sup>

At the base of Bemis Heights was a tavern operated by Jotham Bemus. Abutting Bemus' land was a farm belonging to John Neilson. The property contained an older log home, a newer frame house, and a barn with a steeple. Just south of Neilson's farm was another small farm belonging to Captain Ephraim Woodworth, which included his farmhouse. The fortified American camp encompassed all three properties. A sketch drawn by Colonel Richard Varick on the back of a letter to General Philip Schuyler on September 12, the day the Americans occupied their new camp, identified Bemus' Tavern, the Woodworth [Red] House (which Gates selected as his headquarters), three other Woodworth buildings (which became the hospital), Neilson's home, and the brigade camps.<sup>15</sup>

With the camp selected, Gates marched his men into position. John Nixon's Massachusetts brigade manned the right wing overlooking the Albany Road. Next, on line with Nixon and facing north were the brigades of John Paterson and John Glover. The left end of their line rested just below the crest of the hill. Gates' left wing, the two brigades of Benedict Arnold's Division under Enoch Poor and Ebenezer Learned, faced west. Morgan's Corps camped north of the apex and angle formed by the two wings and athwart the road running from Woodworth's farm north to Quaker Springs. The road and another that climbed the hill from the tavern to Woodworth's and thence northwest to Saratoga Lake provided crucial interior lines of communication for the American army.

Although it was a naturally strong position, Gates ordered his front fortified. Soldiers under the watchful supervision of Thaddeus Kosciuszko and Baldwin began immediately to improve upon nature by raising extensive field fortifications, an endeavor that engaged them through September 18 and again from September 20 to October 6.

During the first week of military occupation, the farms on Bemis Heights were fortified with a perimeter protected by a series of breastworks, entrenchments, redoubts, and outposts. By week's end they still did not constitute one continuous line of works, but they dominated the most vulnerable terrain features and interdicted those that might shield an approaching enemy.

The defenses would eventually evolve into a solid line extending from the second ridge west of the Albany Road in an arc to its terminus about 750 feet south of the Woodworth House. Extensive redoubts were built along the ridge immediately above and parallel to the Albany Road, in the low-lying land between the river and road, behind the tavern, at the bridge of boats,

and on high ground 2,400 feet southwest of Woodworth's. Work begun on a redoubt 2,400 feet west of the apex of the main line of resistance was still unfinished on October 7. A line of picket outposts provided perimeter security, and trees felled with the branches pointing away from the fortifications formed an abatis.

Having interdicted the route to Albany with works above and athwart the road, the commanding general and his engineers turned to preventing the British from flanking those works and dislodging the Americans. They secured the area from the river to the ridge west of the crest, incorporating topography into an integrated defensive system. The streams and ravines dictated the locations of the main line of resistance and its complementary outworks. The fortifications were erected to enfilade those features, precluding their use by the enemy. They also needed to command the defiles and the opposite slopes in order to provide the defenders with targets-in-depth should the enemy attempt to cross. Reducing dead areas the British might otherwise exploit required that the defensive components be mutually supportive.<sup>16</sup>

The manner in which the fortification plan responded to strategic requirements and opportunities offered by the terrain testified to the professionalism found within Gates' army. The measures the defenders took would anticipate and frustrate every tactic Burgoyne would employ against them. As events would bear out, the field fortifications on Bemis Heights met the requirements of the local tactical situation to a degree seldom, if ever, surpassed during the war.

Americans had proved especially adept at raising field fortifications, and had been doing so since the beginning of the war. But that Gates' soldiers were able to accomplish as much as they did while simultaneously carrying out patrols, manning outposts, performing camp fatigue, and fighting a day-long battle—all within a period of twenty-four days—was an impressive testimony to their leadership, discipline, and stamina.

### *The Camp on Bemis Heights*

Contemporary sources do not reveal the details of the camp's internal organization. Informed conjecture, however, provides us with a generally accurate reconstruction. By 1777, the Continental Army was less amateurish than is generally believed. Many of its officers and men had served during the previous imperial war, during which they became, to some degree, familiar with British practices and precedents. A remarkable number, including men too young to have served previously, read current British publications and English translations of French and German studies of military science and tactics. Experience gained during the war was instructive, and Continental regiments and some militia units contained veterans with two years of service behind them. Finally, Gates and his chief engineer were professional soldiers who had spent their adult lives in European armies. Conditions in America dictated modifications in practice, as local conditions always did, but they created practical exceptions rather than new standards. In a conjectural reconstruction of Gates' camp one can assume that it generally conformed to prevailing British practices with the modifications imposed by terrain, the wishes of the commander, the size of the regiments, and the availability of tents. Remembering to use the terms "regiment" and "battalion" synonymously, we can develop a representative regimental field encampment.

The standard battalion/regimental encampment had a depth of 320 yards arranged in the following manner:



- At the head was the Quarter Guard, a small detachment commanded by a subaltern [lieutenant] posted 84 yards in front of the battalion's line;
- Fifty-four yards behind the Quarter Guard lay the Parade, a thirty-yard-deep area where the troops assembled for formations, guard mount, and other purposes;
- Immediately behind the Parade was a line upon which the colors, surplus drums, and the "bell tents," in which the muskets were stacked when the men did not "lie upon their arms," were aligned;
- The tents of the several companies lay four yards behind the line of "bell tents," aligned to a depth of thirty to forty-five yards, depending upon the number of enlisted men. Wagons, usually one to a battalion in Europe, more in America, transported the tents, with the men carrying the poles. Common tents for the men measured six and half feet square and five feet high and could accommodate six men, although they were sometimes pitched together in a manner that would shelter as many as eighteen. The camp's streets ran between the company tents;
- To the companies' right stood the battalion's organic artillery, wagon, and gunners' tents;
- Twenty or thirty-two yards behind the companies was a line of subalterns' tents; and twelve to twenty-four yards to their rear were the captains' tents, separated by a street from those of the field officers;
- Behind those was the battalion commander's tent. Then came the tents of the staff officers (normally not present in American regiments);
- Behind those was a line where the officers' horses were tethered;
- Next was the officers' mess tent, and twenty yards behind it were the battalion's kitchen, behind which were the tents of the butchers and sutlers;
- Finally, fifteen yards in the rear were the tents of the rear guard.

A cavalry encampment closely resembled the infantry's except that the horses were tethered in the street between the rows of tents. At Bemis Heights there were neither "bell tents" nor artillery because most, if not all, of the guns were in place along the fortified line. The camp, therefore, had no need for an artillery park. The bodies of men who died in camp were, if conditions permitted, buried in front of the encampment facing the enemy. This was not true for prisoners of war, however. If they died in a hospital or in camp, they were interred as conveniently as possible in the rear.<sup>17</sup>

Because of the nature of the ground and the number of regiments present, the camp on Bemis Heights was certainly more compact than the conventional one described above.

*Gates' Strategy and Burgoyne's Options*

The American fortifications defined their commander's strategy as he had matured it by

September's second week. The defensive-minded Gates wanted to avoid a pitched battle in an open field. As in 1776, he intended to "Defend the main Chance; to attack only by detail; and when a precious advantage offers." His men would continue to improve their position while they settled in to await their enemy's advance. Gates happily released the initiative to Burgoyne: he could throw his troops into a frontal attack against the strong works, try an advance through the densely-wooded area across broken ground against the American left flank, or retreat. As Gates wrote President Hancock two days before occupying Bemis Heights: "[A] few days, perhaps hours, will Determine whether General Burgoyne will Risque a Battle, or Retire to Tyconderoga for I cannot think he will stay long inactive in his present position."<sup>18</sup>

Gates' strategy was more prudent than heroic. His career in the British Army and knowledge of military history had given him a healthy respect for European fire discipline and skill with the bayonet. He knew firsthand how brave the British veteran could be. He respected his Continentals' capacity for courage and resilience, and his opinion of militia was better than that of most professional soldiers. But he was also keenly aware of the limitations posed by militia, and knew they would perform best fighting under cover of fortifications. Defending a fortified position was also less costly than fighting in the open, and Gates was never profligate with soldiers' lives. As we shall see, he modified his strategy during both of the major engagements at Saratoga. But until the second one had ended, his posture was essentially defensive: holding Bemis Heights, and forcing his enemy to choose his poison. This, then, was the centerpiece of his plan for defeating Burgoyne.

### *The American Order of Battle*

The American army on Bemis Heights included twenty-six regiments of foot (twenty-one Continental and five militia) totaling 7,146 men. Gates merged Colonel Morgan's Rifle Regiment with a battalion of light infantrymen drafted from the several Continental regiments commanded by Major Henry Dearborn into a 694-man elite corps under Morgan. Because bayonets could not be fitted onto rifles, and reloading rifles was relatively slow, riflemen were vulnerable to attack between volleys. Brigading musket-armed light infantry with riflemen to protect the latter made taking advantage of the rifle's accuracy more militarily effective. The only cavalry present with the army was Major Elijah Hyde's troop of Connecticut Light Horse, about 200 men. The army's artillery consisted of Stevens' Independent Battalion, 248 men serving twenty-two guns of unknown caliber. Seventy-one men of Baldwin's Detachment of Engineers and Artificers provided important core construction capability. Excluding wagoners, staff, Stark's New Hampshire militia (who marched home the day before the first engagement), and an unrecorded number of Indians, Gates' effective combat strength was 8,359. (See also Appendices C and D.)

Gates organized his infantry into five brigades and an independent light corps. He personally commanded the right division, three brigades of Massachusetts men under Glover, Paterson, and Nixon numbering 3,787 men. General Arnold commanded the left division, comprised of Learned's and Poor's brigades numbering 3,359 men. (Morgan's officially independent corps was tactically part of that left wing.) The small cavalry contingent probably served as a headquarters guard. Contemporary cartographic sources do not reflect the locations of the twenty-two artillery pieces, but given Baldwin's and Stevens' skill and the commanding general's experience, they most certainly would have distributed the pieces to cover the Albany

Road and the field of fire along the main line of resistance.<sup>19</sup>

Gates' army was well-organized and led by generally competent officers. It was numerically superior to Burgoyne's command and it was posted in a position that was, given Burgoyne's resources, almost impregnable. If American morale remained good and unity prevailed, the only way to defeat them was to entice or drive them off Bemis Heights. Surviving sources reflect a confidence among the Americans that even the departure of Stark's Brigade did not shake.

### *Intrigue over Generals*

There was, however, a germ of dissension that soon festered into a potential threat to the unity of command. The overwhelming majority of New Englanders welcomed Gates' succession to command of the Northern Department. This was important for many reasons, not the least of which was that New England provided most of the department's soldiers. But some New Yorkers preferred serving under their native son, General Schuyler—even though the “Proud Patriot” was not personally popular with the soldiery. If the officers of the New York regiments felt strongly about his displacement, they did not commit their sentiments to sources that have survived. Even men such as James Livingston (commander of the New York regiment that had formerly been the 1st Canadian), Henry Beekman Livingston (Schuyler's former aide-de-camp and now colonel of the 4th New York), and Philip Van Cortlandt (commander of the 2nd New York), all members of patrician families and related to the general, subordinated personal feelings to serve loyally the man who superseded their kinsman.

There were, however, two important exceptions: Major Henry Brockholst Livingston, Schuyler's former aide-de-camp who now served General Arnold as an unassigned volunteer in the same capacity, and Lieutenant Colonel Richard Varick, Schuyler's former military secretary who in 1777 served as deputy commissary-general of musters. Both men were fiercely devoted to Schuyler and loathed his successor. They penned almost daily letters to their patron indicting Gates' character and competence.

For example, Colonel Varick's letter of September 12 reporting the move to Bemis Heights criticized the camp's position and layout. “Should we unfortunately be defeated will it not be in Burgoyne's power to take our Baggage [?] I think it past a Doubt,” he wrote. “However, we must not think of It. It is a just maxim that Inferiors should silently obey the Orders of Superiors.” Varick honored that maxim by condemning the reconnaissance details as “too few but those too small to know the movements of the Enemy...they may come Near or run far from us for Aught... [Gates?] Knows.”<sup>20</sup>

Varick wrote two letters to Schuyler on September 16, one at 8:00 a.m. and another three hours later. “I wish to God we had a Commander who could see a little Distance before him without Spectacles [a snide dig at Gates' wearing eyeglasses to correct his nearsightedness] and we would probably make as Brilliant a stroke as at Bennington,” Varick lamented in the first letter of the day. “Wishes are Vain; with [a] cheerful March we shall proceed & rely on American Good Fortune.” A sketch accompanied the second, longer, letter. Varick expected an attack within the next three days, a reasonable “guess” since as a member of the commander's staff he was privy to Gates' assessment of enemy intentions. If that attack came during the day, Varick would assure the British commander “a crippled Army at least provided Matters are Managed agreeable to my Ideas of the propriety of our Mode of Defence.” Modesty was not



Colonel Varick's salient attribute.<sup>21</sup>

Varick was also unhappy with Kosciuszko's fortifications, which did not meet the twenty-four-year-old colonel's high standards. "I don't approve of the more Advanced Works, next the River on the Ridge," he complained to Schuyler, "for the Moment they drive our Troops out, it serves as Work for them against the small Redoubt, as it is at least level, if not higher than It." Varick's eagerness to discredit Gates was leading him to resort to absurdity: the fortified ridge was the crest of a 100-foot bluff so steep that ascending under peaceful conditions taxes a climber's agility and lung power. That was the only part of the American position the British had an accurate view of, and its strength was so obvious that Burgoyne was persuaded he had to get his foe off Bemis Heights.

Varick also claimed that high ground in front of Paterson's and Nixon's brigades dominated their camp. At first blush, there seems to be merit in his observation concerning ground north of Paterson's position: parts were indeed higher. But the British would have found it too broken and densely wooded for battalion formation attacking a main line of resistance, and American outposts occupied the strategic high point. Varick compounded his absurdity when he claimed that high ground covered Nixon's camp as well. The strong "Advanced Work" he deplored earlier formed Nixon's front and covered the main line, behind which the brigade's camp lay; no higher ground threatened it. He also disapproved of the outposts "on all the Hills worth Contending for in our Front," because he abhorred "Detaching the Army in so many parts."

On the day before Burgoyne launched his first attempt to knock Gates off Bemis Heights, Colonel Varick sent General Schuyler more examples of his commander's conduct, one at 8:00 p.m., another three hours later. In the latter he castigated the plans worked out by Gates and Lincoln, of which his staff position gave him some knowledge, telling Schuyler that he "lamented that Lincoln is [off] on some airy Scheme when it is possible that the Enemy may drive us & ruin all he can possibly Effect if he is in North of the Enemy & A Stroke was meditated against Tyconderoga & Fort George, Where he is now we know not with certainty."<sup>22</sup>

The second Gates detractor, Henry Brockholst Livingston, was the son of New Jersey's first elected governor and scion of a famous New York clan. He would lead a public life in the orbits of powerful men and end it as an associate justice of the United States Supreme Court. Livingston began his military career in 1775 as a young captain and aide-de-camp to General Arthur St. Clair. In 1779 he would take a leave of absence to serve his brother-in-law, John Jay, as private secretary during the latter's diplomatic mission to Spain. The New Yorker sorely tried Jay's patience by being sulky, captious, and bad-mannered. More damaging was his penchant for "making indiscreet remarks to Europeans hypercritical of Americans and their government."<sup>23</sup> Captured by the British on his way home in 1782 and jailed in New York City, he was eventually paroled by Sir Guy Carleton. In the summer of 1777, the 19-year-old was a volunteer aide-de-camp to Benedict Arnold, a position in which his tendency to discover, identify, and deplore trivial matters bore mischievous fruit.

The young schemer apparently received a letter from Schuyler criticizing Gates' strategy, because in his own September 13 letter he wrote that he was "perfectly in opinion with you." The Hudson River, he continued,

will render it almost impossible for our two Armies [Gates' and Lincoln's] to act in junction against the Enemy and the great distance between us will put it out the power of one to support

the other in Case of an Attack - - - Gen. Lincoln remains at Paulet [sic], and by his own account, has short of 2,000 Militia, nor can I learn that he has orders to make any further movements toward the rear of the Enemy.<sup>24</sup>

Livingston continued, decrying...

[the army's being] greatly at a loss for Intelligence - - No large Parties have been sent out to harass them - - and the small scouts seldom bring in any information of consequence - - I should think Detachments of 200 or a thousand might be [of] great Service in Skirmishing with the Enemy - - It would make fighting familiar to our Troops and dishearten the Foe.<sup>25</sup>

The future Supreme Court jurist contradicted himself by reporting to Schuyler that three detachments, one numbering 200 men, had reconnoitered the enemy and brought in prisoners.<sup>26</sup> His next three letters reported the activities of *nine more scouting sorties*.<sup>27</sup> Despite these obvious contradictions, he continued in the same vein, accusing Gates of insufficient aggressiveness. "It is really astonishing that we have lain so long near together without the least Skirmishing - - - I should [think] our numbers were such to justify sending out Parties of 200 or 2000 without much danger to the Army," he argued. "These might harass the Enemy by attacking their detached parties, and could always retreat or be supported in case of necessity."<sup>28</sup> Moving beyond mere words and behind-the-scenes treachery, Livingston further distanced himself from order and harmony on Arnold's staff by waging a duel with Major Leonard Chester, an "extra aide" to the general, in which neither principal was injured.<sup>29</sup>

In persons less closely associated with the American command echelon, Varick's hubris and Livingston's captiousness—as documented in what the former termed "sub rosa" correspondence with General Schuyler—might be dismissed as silly products of immaturity and immodesty. But because these men were close to Arnold, the question whether their criticisms reflected that general's views can be neither ignored nor answered conclusively. If they did reflect Arnold's opinions or, more important, contribute to them, their letters to embittered Philip Schuyler were important and provide useful insights into the dangerous quarrel that would erupt between Arnold and Gates following the combat of Freeman's Farm (the details of which Varick and Livingston would report to Schuyler with obvious relish). An omen of that rupture appeared in a postscript to Varick's September 12 letter: "I forgot to tell you that a little Spurt happened on Wednesday Eveng between Gates and Arnold Inter Nos."

The unhappy truth is that these young officers perceived themselves as Schuyler's agents, and their personal loyalty to him compromised their professional commitment to the common cause.

### *The Two Armies Probe Each Other*

While Livingston, Varick, and Schuyler exchanged embittered opinions of Gates' preparations for defeating Burgoyne, the officers and men on Bemis Heights exerted themselves in further strengthening their fortifications and trying to assess their enemy's strength and discern his intentions.

During the first night in their new camp, his deputy adjutant general, Colonel James Wilkinson, led a light cavalry detachment within sight of Burgoyne's encampment at Saratoga. There, he found a 70-man picket at General Schuyler's manor house, listened while enemy drums beat assembly, and captured three uncooperative men of the British 20th Regiment.<sup>30</sup> During the next day, 200 of Morgan's riflemen under Lieutenant Colonel Richard Butler reconnoitered the country around Saratoga Lake and Jones' Mill, where a party of Lieutenant Colonel Ebenezer Jessup's Provincials were posted with orders to attack the Loyalists "if he finds it practicable." According to Henry Livingston, that "Enterprize failed for want of knowledge or through Cowardice of the Guide - - - Butler was misled, & returned without Effecting any thing - - -." On September 14, Arnold and 200 riflemen scouted the area between Bemis Heights and Van Vechten's Mill to determine whether it provided a more "eligible" place to encamp. A 100-man British picket guard saw them and deployed, but Arnold decided not to attack them because they could be too easily supported by the enemy's main body.<sup>31</sup> The reconnaissance found no alternate height of sufficient size, so the Americans continued fortifying Bemis Heights.

The next day, September 15, Arnold repeated the maneuver. Varick reported to Schuyler that "Genl. Arnold is this day gone out with a Large Party. I don't know his Intentions, probably to try the East Side of the River, as he seemed very desirous to have a prospect of the Enemy's Camp from the High Hill on that Side—if he proceeds on this Side he may fall in with some of the Enemy."<sup>32</sup> No other source records the nature or results of that reconnaissance.

Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Colburn of Alexander Scammell's 3rd New Hampshire Continental Regiment directed what turned out to be the most productive reconnaissance. Colburn crossed the river on the fourteenth and from a height later called Mount Willard, observed British movements on the far side. He reported that the enemy had crossed to the Hudson's west side and was camped near the Continental Barracks north of Schuyler's country house, with an advanced post located about one mile south of the main body, i.e., a short distance south of the house.<sup>33</sup> Colburn returned to Bemis Heights during the evening of the fifteenth and reported that Burgoyne's men had struck camp at 2:00 in the afternoon and advanced about a mile and half. Scouts on the western side of the river captured a member of the British 29th Regiment's grenadier company, who confirmed the accuracy of Colburn's observations.

### *Prelude to Battle*

Horatio Gates now knew beyond any doubt that John Burgoyne intended to advance against his position. At 3:00 in the morning of September 16, the American army commander ordered his men to stand at arms.<sup>34</sup> This was a prudent—if somewhat premature—precaution because substantial probing, reconnaissance, and skirmishing preceded the main combat.

While Burgoyne's command was camped above Van Vechten's Mill, he dispatched scouting parties downstream by boat that approached within three miles of the American lines. Expecting the enemy to repeat that ploy, Arnold ordered Colonel Philip Van Cortlandt of the 4th New York Regiment to take a party by bateaux to within two miles of Van Vechten's, conceal their boats, wait for the scouting craft to pass, and get into their rear and cut them off. Van Cortlandt returned to camp at 11:00 the next morning. When his quarry did not venture down river, he aborted his

mission in favor of a reconnaissance of the British position and reported, inaccurately, that they were camped on both sides of the river.<sup>35</sup>

The aggressive American scouting confirmed that Gates' expectation was correct: Burgoyne was going to try to force him off Bemis Heights. The American general ordered his men to strike their tents and load their baggage onto the unit wagons—normal preparations for battle—by daybreak on September 18.

According to Gates himself, he would attack his enemy “only by detail, and when a precious advantage offers.” He now decided that his opponent was offering him just such a precious advantage, and so ordered Arnold to attack the enemy during their approach march while they were at a tactical disadvantage.

With his entire division and Morgan's Corps, Benedict Arnold moved out of the American camp's left wing and marched to a point slightly more than two and one-half miles north of Bemis Heights, where about 10:00 a.m. he and his men came upon a small party of enemy soldiers and women digging potatoes in a field northwest of Taylor's house, south of the British encampment. Instead of driving ahead to capture them, Arnold's Americans opened fire, killing or wounding several of the foragers.<sup>36</sup> Varick told Schuyler that, because the “Woods was thick & very brushy the Genl. did not think proper an Engagement there Least [sic] our Own Men should kill Each Other & he ordered his Troops to return ....” By 4:00 that same afternoon, Arnold's Division was back in the American camp.

The eighteenth of September was not a happy day for General John Burgoyne, for he remained ignorant of his enemy's strength and his fortifications. Gates' pickets had plagued his march all the way from Saratoga. Now, Burgoyne had lost soldiers while foraging, killed by an obviously alert and active foe. From his headquarters in the Swords house, Burgoyne issued a combination general order that both dealt with the foraging issue and made dispositions for the approaching battle. Deploring the loss of effective soldiers for mere potatoes, the British commander decreed that commanding officers were authorized to hang any man caught trespassing beyond the army's advanced sentries. Two days' rations were to be issued, baggage would remain in the wagons, and as soon as the bridges were repaired, the men would resume their advance toward Bemis Heights. The British leader also directed that one subaltern officer orderly from each of the three corps was to be sent, on horseback, to attend the commander. Anticipating immediate action, Burgoyne concluded: “In the case of an Action, the Lieut. General will be found near the center of the British Line, or will leave word there where he may be followed.”<sup>37</sup>

Gates was already certain that combat was imminent, and Burgoyne reinforced the belief lingering within British ranks: a battle for Bemis Heights was now inevitable.

### *Benjamin Lincoln and the 'Airy Scheme'*

In his letter to General Schuyler, Richard Varick scoffed at Benjamin Lincoln's move—“Lincoln is [off] on some airy Scheme.” Varick could not have been more wrong. Before we continue with the main narrative and bring the armies within shooting distance of one another, it is important to discuss and understand Benjamin Lincoln's contributions to the Colonial victory. Underrating Lincoln and his service in the Northern Department has become such an easy and common exercise that some students have emphasized his “great bulk and loose jowls” at the expense of his important contributions to American success. Horatio Gates was fortunate to have



in Lincoln a dedicated surrogate whose self-effacing patience and tact faithfully served his commander and the cause they shared.

At the end of August, General Lincoln was at Bennington, still trying to act as an honest broker between the Continental Army and John Stark while working to enhance the effectiveness of the militia east of the Hudson, a region rich in loyalists and peevishly sensitive frontiersmen. Lincoln reported to Gates on August 26 his plans for utilizing militiamen as they arrived, expecting five companies to come in before the end of the day. He added intelligence brought to him by three of his men who had returned to camp after escaping captivity. These men reported that the enemy had a large number of ox teams and supplies at Fort George; that there was some artillery at Fort Anne; that the British 62nd Regiment, some Germans, and the artillery train were located at Fort Edward; and that Burgoyne's main force was at Fort Miller, planning to locate its winter quarters in Albany.<sup>38</sup>

The letter Lincoln wrote to his commander on September 4 provides a brief but helpful glimpse of his plans for operations in his sector. Lincoln dispatched a "person" to Burgoyne's headquarters in William Duer's house at Fort Miller who contrived somehow to collect the following intelligence: the British "flying camp," Fraser's Corps of 1,700 men, was three miles below Fort Miller; the Germans were encamped about halfway between Fraser and headquarters; about 300 men, commanded by a major, remained at Fort Miller; and there were some 150 men at Fort George and 500 at Ticonderoga. Lincoln was tantalizingly silent about the identity of that "person" and how he succeeded in collecting his useful information. Another informant claimed that an "English regiment and 15 or 16 light pieces were at Fort Anne," and that Burgoyne intended moving his heavy artillery across the river to Stillwater.<sup>39</sup> The number of field pieces was inaccurate, but the other information was generally reliable.

Collecting intelligence, however, was not General Lincoln's most important function. He was to do what he could with the available resources to coordinate operations against Fort Ticonderoga and other enemy posts along the long and tenuous British line of communications, and to cope with a difficult John Stark, whom victory along the Walloomsac had not made less fractious. As time would prove, Lincoln realized more success in the former than in the latter.

Despite having no more than 2,000 men available at Pawlet, Vermont, Lincoln anticipated his commander's needs when, on September 13, he detached 500 Massachusetts militiamen on each of three missions under Colonels John Brown, Central Berkshire County Regiment; Samuel Johnson, Essex County Regiment; and Benjamin Ruggles Woodbridge, 1st Hampshire County Regiment. Lincoln described their assignments when he reported to Gates in a letter written at Pawlet on September 14. The department commander forwarded to Gates a letter received from Massachusetts Brigadier General Joseph Palmer describing "the weak state of Ticonderoga." In addition to that tempting bit of information, Lincoln had learned from informants that the enemy held a considerable number of prisoners at "Lake George landing" under a "very small guard," and that there was, at the same location, a large magazine of stores. Taking advantage of that intelligence "would perfectly coincide with the original design of my being sent there; vizt. If possible, to divide and distress the enemy...."<sup>40</sup>

Lincoln anticipated Gates' approval. While he remained at his Pawlet headquarters with his remaining 500 men, his three subordinates promptly put the plan into operation. Because the British had evacuated Skenesborough, Woodbridge's assignment was accomplished there without incident. Woodbridge's next objective was to secure Brown's avenue of retreat, should that become necessary. Brown, Arnold's old nemesis, had the more ambitious mission of the



triumvirate of colonels: (1) to attack the enemy outpost at the “landing at Lake George,” located at the lake’s northern terminus, release the prisoners held there, and destroy its magazine; and (2) “attempt Ticonderoga,” where Brigadier Henry Powell with some 900 men of the British 53rd and the Prinz Friedrich [Erbprinz] Regiments and some Canadians manned Burgoyne’s line of communications’ strongest post. Colonel Johnson had orders to support Brown by engaging the Germans on Mount Independence.<sup>41</sup>

Powell was too secure in the old French masonry fort to be overawed by Brown, who lacked the siege artillery necessary to carry the bastion. His response to the American’s demand for surrender was a terse one: “The garrison entrusted to my care I shall defend to the last.” Brown and Johnson bombarded Mount Independence without any noticeable result except the expenditure of precious gunpowder. After four fruitless days, Johnson and some of Brown’s men retired.

With his remaining 420 men, Brown embarked upon Lake George to attack Diamond Island, about twenty-five miles south of Ticonderoga and three miles north of Fort George, where Captain Thomas Aubrey, with two companies of the British 47th Regiment, guarded a supply depot. By the time Brown’s flotilla, which had been delayed by unfavorable winds, attacked about 9:00 a.m. on September 24, a British prisoner captured and paroled at Ticonderoga reached the island and warned Aubrey. After engaging in an artillery duel, the Americans burned their boats and retired to Pawlet via Skenesboro.<sup>42</sup>

Varick was wrong again. The attempts to seize Ticonderoga and Diamond Island were unsuccessful, but Lincoln’s “airy Scheme” accomplished its missions: the release of the American prisoners at Lake George Landing; the discouragement of Burgoyne’s troops (who learned of these events immediately after having failed to dislodge their foe from Bemis Heights); the securing of intelligence that those troops had no more than four weeks’ supplies; and the raising of American morale on Bemis Heights. Lincoln’s “airy Scheme” also demonstrated the vulnerability of Burgoyne’s line of communications.

