

## *Freeman's Farm*

### On Tory Ground

John freeman and his wife Effelina moved onto “Great Lot 16” of the Saratoga Patent, about one and one-half miles north of Bemis Heights sometime during 1766. On January 2, 1768, they leased 170 acres for “three lives” from the patentee, General Philip Schuyler, at a rent of six pence per acre, with the first payment due January 1, 1773.<sup>1</sup> By the autumn of 1777, John was a moderately successful farmer living in a solid, probably frame, house. Three other buildings—a log barn and two farm structures—stood near his home. After selling most of his livestock to the British army, he still owned thirteen sheep, an unspecified number of “Young Cattle,” and some hogs, probably a sow and her litter.<sup>2</sup> Lieutenant William Cumberland Wilkinson’s map of the battlefield shows two of Free man’s buildings, fenced cultivated fields and meadow, and a fenced and partially cleared pasturage.<sup>3</sup>

Sometime prior to 1770, the Freemans acquired new neighbors when James McBride leased ninety-seven acres from General Schuyler. Wilkinson’s map shows five McBride buildings, three fenced cultivated fields, and three fields in pasture.<sup>4</sup>

Like neighbors Jotham Bemis and Ezekial Ensign, John Freeman, his son Thomas, and James McBride were loyalists. The older Freeman’s fidelity was especially active. According to Thomas’ testimony supporting his claim for compensation, his father served as a guide during the British advance from Canada. After the army reached the Stillwater area he sold most of his animals to the commissary, and father and son enlisted in “Jessup’s Corps,” the unofficial designation for the King’s Loyal Americans.<sup>5</sup> They were among the loyalist Provincials whom Burgoyne permitted to leave the British camp before the army’s surrender. Thomas served until 1783; John died at South River prior to 1788.<sup>6</sup>

Also like Jotham Bemis, the Freemans and McBrides were not stereotypical Tories. The deep-rooted conflicting interests that obtained between patentee landlords and their tenants complicated New York’s role in the Revolution. The great majority of the population were tenant farmers holding their farms by indentures. Mutual resentments occasionally flared into open hostility, as they did in 1740, 1757, and more recently in 1766, when 200 armed tenants on

Livingston Manor—which, like most of the Saratoga Patent, lay in Albany County—rose against their landlord. The Saratoga Patent was spared the worst features of those troubles, partly because leases were longer and less blatantly exploitative. But even when the causes for friction were less grievous, conflicts of interest were present. If the landlord happened to be a loyalist, his tenants tended to adopt the revolutionary cause; if he was a prominent Whig, as in the case of the Schuylers and Livingstons of Albany County, tenants were often pro-British.

Burgoyne's expedition converted many of the tenantry from crypto-loyalists into overt supporters of the Empire, and a substantial number enlisted in Peters' and Jessup's Corps. Others, such as Jotham Bemis and his wife, were sufficiently active to attract the attention of the Commissioners for Detecting and Defeating Conspiracies.<sup>7</sup>

## Burgoyne's Dilemma

The nineteenth of September of 1777 dawned unseasonably warm. Fog hung over the Hudson, blanketing both the American fortifications on Bemis Heights and Burgoyne's bivouac north of Kromma Creek (or the Great Ravine). The British commander had arrived at the proverbial moment of truth—the soldier's most dreaded predicament: forced to act on his enemy's terms.

It was unthinkable for Burgoyne to remain where he was, suspended between Canada and his objective of Albany. His camp was indefensible, vulnerable alike to attack from the hills that would pin his soldiers against the river and to being cut off to the north, ending all hope of extracting himself from his intolerable situation. Retreat was even less feasible. There was no way he could move his men and stores 100 miles to Ticonderoga without turning the withdrawal into a death march, harassed and eventually destroyed by Gates' 9,000-man army, General Benjamin Lincoln's force of 2,000 militia, and Colonel Seth Warner's Green Mountain veterans. In the unlikely event that Burgoyne could reach Ticonderoga, the post's supplies could not sustain the survivors against the rigors of a northern winter without resupply from Montreal, a difficult and dangerous undertaking.

Burgoyne's only viable option was to fight Horatio Gates. That reality reduced him to choosing one of two very unattractive alternatives. He could keep his army in column on the road to Albany and try to force his way past batteries posted athwart the road and on Bemis Heights' bluff. While he might be able to overrun the former, the fortified batteries on the bluff were secure against attack from the river valley. Any column marching broadside to that line could not survive an attempt to march through the narrow passage between Bemis Heights and the Hudson. The choice was nearly no choice at all.

The second option was to somehow lure or drive the Americans out of their fortified camp and open the way to Albany. Courage, determination, and professionalism might yet beat the obvious odds, save Burgoyne's army, and redeem British fortunes in the north. Perhaps snatching victory in this quarter, added to Sir William Howe's occupation of Philadelphia, would deal the rebellion the body blow that would end it. Burgoyne, "the old gamester," chose the latter of two unattractive options: he would advance against Gates' fortifications and engage him in battle.

## A Primer on Warfare of the Era

Before describing the first major engagement, a brief digression examining Revolutionary-

era infantry combat is useful for understanding the form the battle assumed.

One of the most enduring and treasured American traditions attributed to American success in its war for independence was a stark difference in tactics. The British and their German auxiliaries, captives of an antique, outmoded military heritage born on Europe's open battlefields, marched into battle in close formation against American sharpshooters fighting as individuals from the cover of trees, boulders, and walls. The events at Concord in 1775, and King's Mountain in 1780, lent apparent support to that perception, but even in those atypical firefights American marksmanship has been overrated. The overwhelming majority of battles did not take place under frontier conditions. "It was certainly not the backwoods rifle, a weapon virtually unknown in New England in 1775," explained one writer, "and which was not for another three-quarters of a century to develop into a practicable arm for general use, that won the war."<sup>8</sup>

The infantry's basic weapon was the flintlock smoothbore musket that fired a lead ball approximately  $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch in diameter (.75 caliber), to which a fourteen-inch bayonet could be attached (diminishing its accuracy). Loading required twelve motions, in the course of which the soldier tore off one end of a paper cartridge with his teeth, sprinkled a few grains of powder into the priming pan, and finally rammed cartridge and ball down the muzzle with the ramrod. The average soldier could fire two (and sometimes three) rounds a minute. Some experts might get off as many as five shots. Because the bayonet made it more difficult to use the ramrod, effectively only one round could be fired once bayonets were fixed. Some men in their haste did not bother to use the rod at all, pounding the musket butt on the ground to lodge the cartridge and ball. This method diminished the shot's effectiveness. Too rapid a rate of fire compromised the musket's effectiveness, which depended upon volley fire delivered by unit.

The battle line consisted of two ranks usually formed in open order (rather than shoulder-to-shoulder) with minimum depth between ranks. A rank of "file closers" sometimes followed about six paces behind to replace casualties. In the attack, the soldiers advanced while maintaining their alignment, knowing they were relatively safe until they stepped within about 100 yards of the enemy. Because deferring fire until about fifty yards distant from their opponents was desirable, strictly enforced fire discipline was essential. In fact, prevailing professional opinion held that it was better to receive, not deliver, the first fire, to sustain the inevitable losses, and then fire when close enough to the foe to ensure that every shot found a mark.

Firing was normally by volley as opposed to "at will" or individual firing. Loading and firing were done by command, with little or no aiming at a specific target. Except at close range, marksmanship was generally quite poor. The musket's smoothbore, rudimentary sight, and fixed bayonet militated against accuracy. Target practice received less attention than drill, and supply problems made powder and ball, always expensive, too dear to permit frequent target practice anyway. The volley was directed, on command, simply ahead, or perhaps to the left or right oblique. The objective was to lay down a curtain of fire ahead of one's troops at the desired rate of one shot every fifteen or twenty seconds, assuring at least two volleys before closing with the enemy. The men then resorted to clubbing with their muskets or stabbing with the bayonet, with which the British were famously effective.

It is important to remember that the ranks were normally in close, not extended, order. They thus formed a compact mass, presenting a solid target while firing at another compact body of men at pointblank range. Smoke produced by black powder quickly enveloped the line, making

effective personal control of the unit difficult. While accuracy was superfluous, controlled speed was imperative. Speed allowed defenders to pour as many bullets into the attacking force as possible; speed allowed the attackers to close with the enemy before they had been too severely decimated to retain strength sufficient to carry their objective. But speed had to be subject to control. Many officers agreed with General James Wolfe when he wrote that firing very rapidly was unnecessary and that “a cool well-leveled fire with the pieces carefully loaded is more destructive and formidable than the quickest fire in confusion.”<sup>9</sup> Because the men usually carried no more than thirty rounds, uncontrolled fire was not only less effective, but quickly exhausted the ammunition supply. Burgoyne’s General Order for September 21, which praised the conduct of officers and men during the fighting on the nineteenth, tempered his praise with a revealing paragraph in which he again reinforced the preference for the bayonet over the ball, and the particular importance of firing only on an officer’s order.<sup>10</sup> These were the words of an experienced officer—wise advice that reflected knowledge of the foot soldiers’ basic weapon.

Burgoyne’s General Order also reflected an easily forgotten truism of military history: there are limits to the degree to which tactical doctrines and the commanders who apply them can control the actions of even the best-disciplined soldier during the confusion, fear, and excitement of combat. In that environment, fire discipline tended to deteriorate into “rolling fire,” a euphemism for firing “at will,” with every man reloading and pulling the trigger as rapidly as he could, with the company officers losing control in the resulting din. The rigid drill upon which volley fire depended worked against regaining control. The soldiers were so absorbed in the mechanics of reloading and firing and in dulling the natural desire to run away that the only way officers could break the routine was to get in front of the men and strike up their muskets’ muzzles—a dangerous and difficult undertaking. British light infantrymen and fusiliers also carried regular muskets; artillerymen were usually armed with carbines, a shorter and lighter version of the musket.<sup>11</sup>

And then there was the rifle. In spite of this weapon’s limited military utility, some German light infantry units, called Jägers (German for hunters), carried a short rifle. Interestingly, the Continental Congress’ first military decision, even before naming George Washington commander-in-chief, was a resolution “that six companies of expert riflemen be immediately raised in Pennsylvania, two in Maryland, and two in Virginia.”<sup>12</sup> Pennsylvania’s response was so enthusiastic that Congress raised that state’s quota to nine companies, organized as Colonel William Thompson’s Pennsylvania Rifle Battalion, later the 1st Continental Infantry. Disciplinary problems compromised their usefulness during the siege of Boston, and riflemen fell from favor as reliable soldiers.<sup>13</sup>

The regiment was the British Army’s basic organization, but that was an administrative, rather than a tactical, term. The titular or administrative commander was the colonel who contracted with the Crown to raise and equip a regiment. Except for units designated “Royal,” the regiments were their colonels’ property, and they intended to profit financially and socially from that species of property by selling commissions, receiving a bounty for each recruit, negotiating lucrative contracts for uniforms, and retaining for each colonel the captaincy of one company. A captain-lieutenant exercised personal command of the “colonel’s company.” The Crown paid the colonel an annual sum he was expected to use in paying the soldiers, buying clothing, and enlisting replacements. Because there was no pay scale for general officers, the salary of each depended on his being titular colonel of a regiment—that might or might not be

part of his command as a general. For example, Burgoyne's regiment was the 16th ("Queen's") Light Dragoons, from whose ownership as the colonel and the captaincy of one company he derived his income; but his regiment did not accompany him on his expedition.

The tactical unit was the battalion, but the terms "regiment" and "battalion" were practically synonymous during this era because regiments usually consisted of one battalion. The active tactical commander, the man who commanded in garrison or in the field, was the lieutenant colonel, who also had the captaincy of the "lieutenant colonel's company," personally commanded by his company's lieutenant. The standard regiment/battalion had ten companies, eight of which were "battalion companies." The other two were "flank companies," one of grenadiers and one of light infantry. Flank companies were often brigaded together to form grenadier and light infantry corps or battalions.

Americans modeled their regiments on the British, though that modeling was not precise. They never formed grenadier companies, for example, and colonels were the regiments' tactical commanders until after January 1778, when Congress created the rank of "Lieutenant Colonel, Commandant" to facilitate grade-for-grade exchange of captured regimental commanders. The Americans did organize light infantry companies and, like the Europeans, they sometimes merged them to form elite corps for special missions. Morgan's Rifle Regiment was technically light infantry. The number of companies and the strength of American regiments varied from state to state and from time to time.

A cherished tradition, one fostered by admiring biographers and some generals, represented general officers as personally leading their armies into battle in the heroic mode of Alexander the Great and Henry V.<sup>14</sup> Although general officers did continue to personally command on the battle line when a crisis required them to show themselves, as the Duke of Marlborough did at Blenheim in 1704, they normally exercised command from positions from which they could receive intelligence and issue orders through aides and couriers.

The advent of firearms and field artillery wrought a tactical revolution that changed the way officers, especially generals, functioned. The diminished dependence upon the shock effect of massed formations caused a gradual reduction in the number of ranks, from eight or ten at the beginning of the seventeenth century to two or three by the end of the eighteenth. That thinning and attendant extension of the front rendered impossible the personal control of large units.

Under the pressure of a crisis that required his physical presence, a general might inspire his troops or retrieve a deteriorating situation by taking over direct command. He always did so, however, at the expense of being able to provide overall direction. In addition to placing his person at risk, he limited himself to experiencing the battle from the common soldier's perspective, became inaccessible to subordinates, and ceased to be able to influence events occurring outside his severely limited field of view. Killing was the soldier's business; the officer's was to lead and exercise immediate command; the general's obligation was to direct. It should go without saying that such precise compartmentalizing did not always obtain in combat, but violating it was so risky as to limit doing so to moments when extreme conditions demanded extreme measures.<sup>15</sup>

### Application to the Engagement at Freeman's Farm

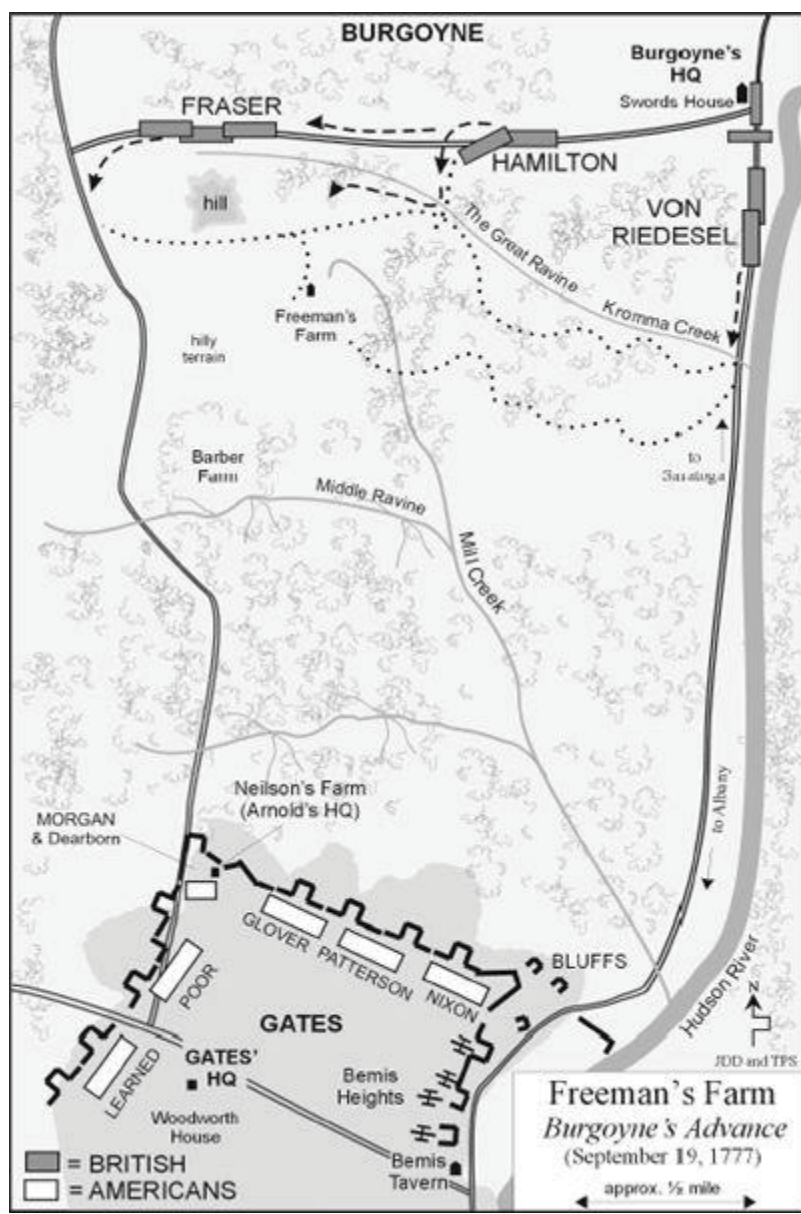
Most early accounts by participants in the fighting of September 19 agree that the American generals followed prevailing command practice. "It is worthy to remark, that not a single general

officer was on the field of battle the 19th Sept until the evening when General Learned was ordered out,” explained James Wilkinson. “General Gates and Arnold were in front of the center of the camp, listening to the peal of small arms...” Two enlisted men, John Neilson and Ezra Buel, told Jared Sparks that “there were no general officers in the action. At one time Buel said he saw Genl. Poor, with two or three other officers, quite in the rear of the American Army, and taking no part in the action. The fighting was chiefly under the eyes of [Colonels] Morgan, Scamil and Cilley.”<sup>16</sup>

General Gates, in his fortified camp on Bemis Heights, enjoyed advantages not available to his opponent. He occupied a defined, relatively compact position, one that dominated all probable combat arenas. He could, from the crest of the heights, direct the response to Burgoyne’s initiative without subjecting himself to the limitations that direct physical involvement on the battlefield imposed. In contrast, the dominating vantage point nearest to where Burgoyne camped is Fraser Hill, two and one-half miles west of Swords House and almost three and one-half miles by road. For much of that distance, the road lay between the steep banks of the Kromma Kill. Thus, there was no point from which the British commander could oversee and direct the battle.

Burgoyne labored under other disadvantages. His reconnaissance parties were unable to obtain accurate intelligence about the configuration and strength of Gates’ left wing. His transport tied him to the river and the road that paralleled it, and their security required posting the 47th Regiment’s six available battalion companies to guard bateaux and supplies. Because his real objective was reopening the route southward, he had to divide his army by leaving a force on the road strong enough to exploit any weakening of Gates’ interdictive posture.

The British commander tried to mitigate his problems by adopting the solution employed by Ferdinand of Braunschweig during the Battle of Krefeld in 1758.<sup>17</sup> He followed his critical wing, the one moving against Horatio Gates’ left flank, relinquishing effective control over his own reserve and the left wing posted along the river, hoping that sufficient coordination between his two wings would be maintained. The competence of General Freiherr von Riedesel, who commanded the left wing, reduced, but did not eliminate, the risk Burgoyne took.



The 3,011-man left wing was the tactical key to Burgoyne's advance, the base upon which Fraser's Corps right wing and Hamilton's central column deployed. Because its role was initially passive, the von Riedesel column's importance is easy to underestimate. Its core was the four German regiments: von Riedesel, von Rhetz, and Specht under General Specht, and the Hesse-Hanau Erbprinz, commanded by General von Gall; 100 Jägers, and eighty dismounted dragoons. Captain Pausch's sixty artillerymen and their four 6-pounders and Lieutenant Dufais' two 6-pounders completed the German column. In addition to the six companies of the 47th Regiment guarding the stores, the force proceeding down the river valley included the bulk of the British artillery train: two 24-pounders, four 12-pounders, four 6-pounders, two 8-inch howitzers, and three 5 ½-inch howitzers.<sup>18</sup>

Marching about 9:00 a.m. along a road running westward from Swords house for three miles from the river to a junction with the road from Bemis Heights to Quaker Springs, Fraser's Corps formed the right column. It contained ten companies each of grenadiers and light infantry, Fraser's rangers, four companies each of German grenadiers and light infantry, an under-strength Jäger company, the British 24th Regiment's eight battalion companies, two Canadian companies, and Provincials [Loyalists]. Captain Walker's 140 men serving six 6-pounders and two 5 ½-inch howitzers accompanied them. Fraser's strength totaled 2,547 men. His mission was to engage Gates' left wing and, if possible, turn it.

The smallest column, the center of Burgoyne's army, numbered 1,598 men under Brigadier James Hamilton. It consisted of the battalion companies of the British 9th, 20th, 21st, and 62nd regiments supported by Captain Jones' four 6-pounders. Burgoyne and his headquarters accompanied Hamilton's Division, which followed Fraser's route until it reached a junction with the first southbound road, then followed it across the Kromma Kill's ravine southward across a plateau until reaching a rough track running westward from the river. Burgoyne and Hamilton turned right onto that trail, which led them up a steep draw to a wooded tableland between the Great Ravine and the stream later called the North Fork. The column halted about one-half mile west of the draw, and faced left (southward) in line. A picket occupied an abandoned house on a knoll south of the road. There it waited for the two flank columns [Fraser's and von Riedesel's] to get into parallel positions.<sup>19</sup>

## Gates' Choices

Horatio Gates had scouts out on both sides of the river. The patrols on the east side were especially useful, observing the enemy from the vantage point of the height later called Mount Willard. From these reports Gates acquired three important pieces of intelligence: (1) Burgoyne had resorted to the risky tactic of dividing his army into three elements, widely separated by ravines, woods, and small clearings; (2) the British general intended to engage the American left; and (3) working parties were repairing bridges on the river road, and a large infantry force, supported by artillery, was advancing toward the Bemis Tavern. Gates knew where his enemy was, how he was deployed, and from this information correctly divined his purpose. He now had to devise a tactic to frustrate that design.

His first decision was to intensify the concentration of forces facing the enemy. To that end, he immediately dispatched an order to General Benjamin Lincoln at Pawlet to march the troops not already committed to "distressing the enemy" in the Lake George-Ticonderoga sector to join the main force on the Hudson, where he should post 500 or 600 men on the hills across from



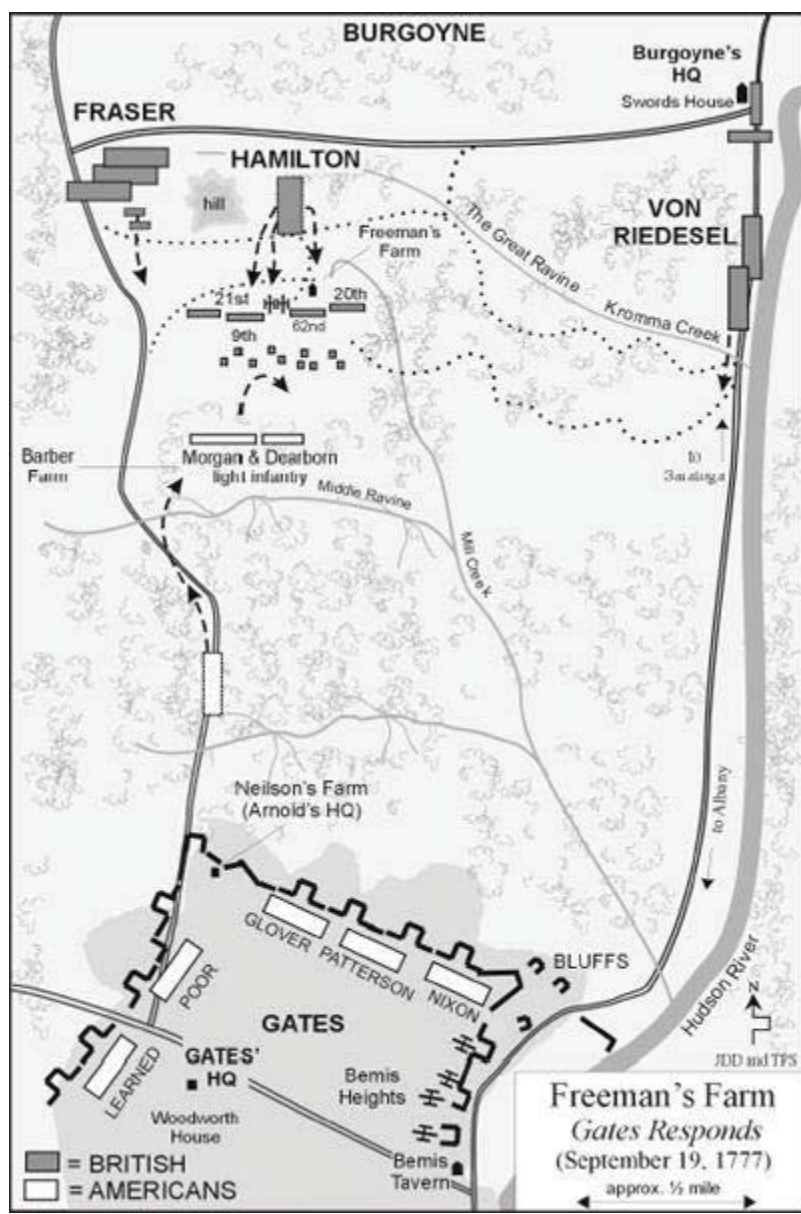
Bemis Tavern. The rest of Lincoln's men were to occupy the former camp at Stillwater Village.<sup>20</sup> Gates knew Lincoln could not arrive before September 22, and so did not intend to employ him in defending Bemis Heights against Burgoyne's immediate threat. What he did intend was to have him in position to be available for two eventualities: if the Americans on Bemis Heights failed to repel the British decisively and Burgoyne persevered in moving along the shelf of land between the river and the right flank of the American fortifications, the troops on the hills above the east bank and in the Stillwater camp would reinforce the road's interdiction. If, on the other hand, the enemy were repulsed and forced to retreat, being on the Hudson would position Lincoln to cooperate in pressing the American advantage.

More immediately pressing was the problem of how to counter the enemy's three-column advance. Should the Americans remain in their fortifications waiting for the enemy to attack? There was much to recommend that course of action. The natural advantages enjoyed by men defending themselves behind cover were multiplied in this instance by a numerical superiority. The Americans' performance when employing linear tactics in the open against disciplined, determined professionals whose better fire discipline and skill with the bayonet was proverbial had not been impressive; whereas, their record while fighting from cover was more than respectable. Defense was also more economical in manpower. Standing on the defensive in their works might postpone the decision at arms—a postponement that could only benefit the defenders. The Americans operated on interior lines, with access to reinforcements and resupply, while their enemy could be neither reinforced nor resupplied. In addition, troops deployed by Lincoln along his lines of communication jeopardized Burgoyne's contact with Ticonderoga and Canada. Orthodox military doctrine, reinforced by history, argued for remaining in the fortified camp and forcing the British commander to resort to the attack, a costly option with prospects for success that diminished hourly. These factors explain why remaining on the defensive had been Gates' original intention.

There was, however, another, more aggressive alternative, and one that Benedict Arnold strongly favored.<sup>21</sup> That option called for attacking the British before they came within range of the American camp. Engaging them in the woods and the small, stump-studded farm clearings north of Bemis Heights could reduce the effectiveness of superior European skill in linear, close-order tactics and prevent their bringing artillery into play against American fortifications. Morgan's riflemen would be especially effective in the woods, exploiting the broken ground cover to break up cohesive enemy formations. If the Americans failed to completely repel their enemy, they could withdraw and re-form behind their works, where they stood a strong chance of frustrating and defeating Burgoyne.<sup>22</sup>

But invoking that proactive tactic involved risks that made Gates hesitate to employ it, in spite of the cogency of arguments in its favor. A fundamental reason for caution was the difference in the quality of soldiers. Although the Americans outnumbered their enemy in terms of raw numbers, they were inferior in training, discipline, and experience. Most of Gates' men were Continentals, but not all were battle-hardened veterans. The militia could not be depended upon to stand firm against well-led veterans, especially if asked to fight outside the works. The broken terrain that made well-ordered European formations difficult to maintain made their maintenance by less-experienced Americans even more so. Using riflemen armed with their slow-loading pieces in the open invited disaster. Finally, Gates was a product of European doctrine and practice. He was more economical of manpower than was Arnold, whose faith in American ability to field larger numbers of men made him more aggressive and less prudent.

Contrary to what his detractors alleged, Gates was determined to fight Burgoyne, but he meant to do it on his own terms. He intended to force his opponent to attack the fortified camp, which he was certain the British could not capture. That failure would doom Burgoyne's expedition and defeat British plans to have a northern army on the Hudson for Sir William Howe to employ in prosecuting a future campaign. If the Americans did not permit themselves to be lured from their stronghold and kept their nerve, they must win. Gates did not intend to be lured, and he did not expect his men to lose their nerve. And so the Americans prepared for battle, striking their tents and loading the wagons. These acts were not preludes to withdrawal, but normal practices when an army readied itself for trying the fortunes of war.<sup>23</sup>



Although determined to defend his position from behind the cover of his fortifications, Gates did not commit himself to a passive defense. He was all for harassing the enemy's offensive deployment. To that end, he directed Arnold to dispatch Morgan to observe and harry the advancing columns, an intelligent exploitation of resources and an indication of his intent to give battle.<sup>24</sup>

### The First Phase: Morgan Probes

Morgan's corps of riflemen and light infantry marched in column along the road to Quaker Springs until they reached the woods north of the field of fire in front of Arnold's Division. There they deployed in open-order lines, with Morgan in his customary place slightly to the rear of the center. In that formation they obliques toward the British center column until, shortly before noon, some riflemen came within range of John Freeman's house-lot, occupied by Major Gordon Forbes of the British 9th Regiment and his pickets.<sup>25</sup> The riflemen opened a fire so effective that, according to Lieutenant Digby, Forbes was wounded and every other officer killed or wounded.<sup>26</sup> The riflemen, not known for their caution and their discipline, rushed into the cleared field—and ran head long into a formidable fire that caught them in the open, converting their weapons from an asset into a liability.

Hamilton deployed his column, with the 9th, 21st, 62nd, and 20th regiments on line from right to left respectively, while Fraser detached two light infantry companies toward the sound of the firing.

A crisis of command and discipline among Morgan's men arose that threatened to confirm Gates' fears about committing them in open combat. Gates and members of his staff were inspecting a newly-positioned battery when they heard firing from the direction of Freeman's farm. Colonel James Wilkinson rode toward the sound to find out what was happening.<sup>27</sup> After entering the woods he found Major Dear born, who was "forming about thirty or forty file" to intercept the light infantry companies Fraser had dispatched. He also met Major Morris, who reported the details of the initial engagement with Forbes' pickets and accompanied Wilkinson to Freeman's house, which "was almost encircled with dead." After leaving the house, he found Lieutenant Colonel Butler with three men, "all treed," who told him that they had "caught a Scotch prize [meaning, no prize at all],"

that having forced the picket, they had closed with the British line, and been instantly routed, and from the suddenness of the shock and the nature of the ground, were broken and scattered in all directions.... We changed our position and the Colonel inquired what were Morgan's orders, and informed me that he had seen a heavy column moving towards our left. I then turned about to regain the camp and report to the General [Gates], when my ears were saluted by an uncommon noise, which I approached, and perceived Colonel Morgan attended by two men only, who with a turkey call was collecting his dispersed troops. The moment I came up to him, he burst into tears, and exclaimed, "I am ruined, by G – d! Major Morris ran on so rapidly with the front, that they were beaten before I could get up with the rear, and my men scattered God knows where. I remarked to the Colonel that he had a long day before him where I had seen his field officers, which appeared to cheer him, and we parted."<sup>28</sup>

Morgan's riflemen rallied in the woods bordering the farm, while Dearborn's light infantry covered their left, facing lead elements of Fraser's Corps.

While Morgan's riflemen in this instance exhibited the indiscipline that often marred American combat effectiveness, some of Brigadier Hamilton's men also conducted themselves with less than the cool-headed self-control battle-wise British veterans were expected to display. They reacted to the unaccustomed experience of being shot at by almost invisible, highly accurate marksmen by shooting back individually without orders. With the contagion that can attend lapses in discipline, the confusion spread among the British units closest to the Freeman farm, killing several of Forbes' own pickets as they withdrew into the line. Deputy Adjutant Robert Kingston ordered Lieutenant James Hadden to fire a signal gun, which quickly restored fire discipline.<sup>29</sup>

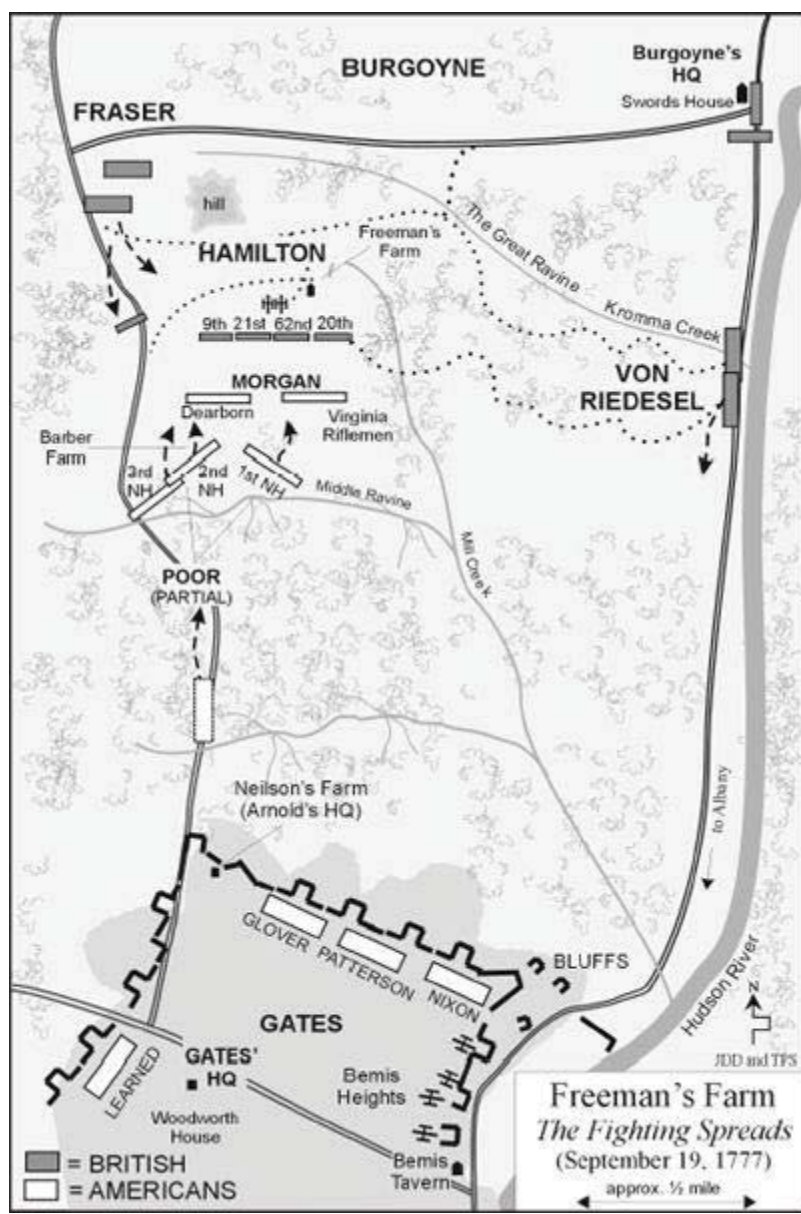
No match for restored volley firepower, Morgan's command retreated to rising ground about 275 yards south of Freeman's house. Wilkinson returned to camp and reported to General Gates, who ordered Arnold to commit reinforcements.<sup>30</sup> Colonel Joseph Cilley's 1st New Hampshire engaged "a Body of the Enemy [sic] with a great Deal of Spirit."<sup>31</sup> Dearborn's light infantry moved to the right, in line with the reinforcement, but the British forced Cilley back until Lieutenant Colonel Winborn Adams and Colonel Alexander Scammell brought their regiments, the 2nd and 3rd New Hampshire, forward into line on Morgan's left.<sup>32</sup>

By 2:00 p.m., Burgoyne's three columns had responded to their signal and begun to advance simultaneously. Gates had little choice but to alter his tactics. He could have adhered to his original design by covering Morgan's withdrawal into the camp, and then defended that position with the advantages accruing to holding fortifications against numerically weaker assailants. By his decision to support Morgan with the New Hampshire regiments, he adopted Arnold's more aggressive tactical option. But he continued to be determined not to be lured into diluting the strength of the interdicting right wing blocking the route to Albany. He did, however, anticipate rather than await an attack on his left. He thus converted Morgan's harassing action into the prelude to a pitched battle—one that would be fought according to conventional, linear, field practices. The fighting that followed exposed the dangers attendant to that conversion.

Morgan's Corps and the three New Hampshire regiments, more than 1,700 men, deployed into a crescent-shaped front around the southern and southwestern fringes of Freeman's fields. The riflemen's right lay between a field and a ravine. To their left, the 3rd, 2nd, and 1st New Hampshire regiments linked up with Dearborn's light infantry, which continued to skirmish with the point of Fraser's column. Opposing the Americans were five regiments numbering about 1,600 men. The British line included, left to right, the 20th, 62nd, and 21st regiments from Hamilton's Division. The 9th formed to the rear in reserve, with two companies occupying buildings between the Freeman and McBride houses. General Fraser detailed the battalion companies of his own 24th Regiment under Major William Agnew toward Hamilton's right, deploying *en potence* (that is, drawn back at an angle) to his column. The British light infantry and German Jägers occupied high ground 260 yards northwest of the British 9th Regiment.<sup>33</sup>

The American efforts to turn Hamilton's right flank met with transitory success, pushing his line northward across the weed-covered fields. They briefly captured one 6-pounder cannon, but because they lacked limbstocks and ammunition, the piece was useless to them and was soon retaken by its original British crew. Hamilton's men quickly recovered from their initial disciplinary breakdown and behaved with the courage and steadiness for which British

infantrymen were deservedly praised. With a series of bayonet charges they repeatedly drove their American enemy back into the woods. But there their own charges lost cohesiveness and effect over time, giving the Americans a precious window to reform.



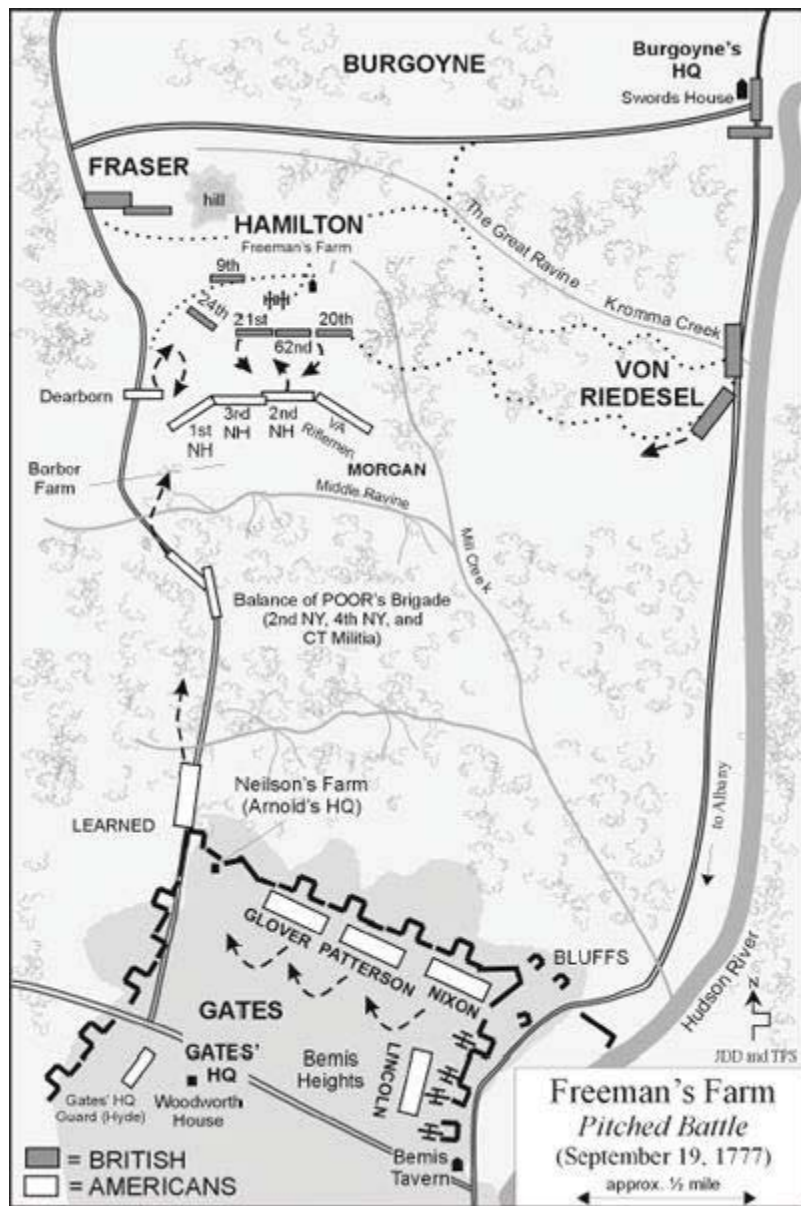
For what happened during this period of the early afternoon, useful and detailed first-person narratives from three British combatants are available.

*Sergeant Roger Lamb*: The Americans being unable from the nature of the country, of perceiving the different combinations of march (as the country is thickly covered with woods, movements may be effected without a possibility of being discovered) advanced a strong column, with a view of turning the British right, here they met the grenadiers and light infantry, who gave them a tremendous fire. Finding it was impossible to penetrate the line at this point, they immediately counter-marched and directed their principal effort to the centre.<sup>34</sup>

*Joshua Pell (volunteer)*: About two o'clock the 9th, 21st and 62nd regiments were engaged by the Rebels near Freeman's Farm, they were strongly posted in a wood with a deep Ravine to their front, the fire was so hot upon the 20th, 21st, and 62nd, that they broke, but by the spirited behavior of their Officers were immediately rallied, and drove them from there. Major Agnew with the 24th Regt. advanced into the woods in order to flank them; on the first onset the Rebels retired in confusion, but the fire from the [Hamilton's] line having abated considerably at this time, and the Rebels finding their Left Flank in danger, poured a strong force upon this Regt. Which caused them to retire about one hundred yards behind an inclosure in a grass field [McBride's]; the rebels fought bravely in the woods but darst not advance one inch toward the open field.<sup>35</sup>

*Royal Artillery Lieutenant James Hadden*: The Enemy being in possession of the wood almost immediately attacked the Corps which took post behind two log huts on Freeman's Farm. Capt. [Thomas] Jones' Brigade [company] was hasten'd to their support, I was advanced with two Guns to the left of the 62nd Regt. And ye two left companies being formed en potence I took post in the Angle. Lieut [George] Reid remain'd with Capt Jones and the other two [guns] was posted between the 9th and 21st Rgts.<sup>36</sup>





Hadden added to Pell's narrative of the 24th's involvement: "Five companies of the 24th Regt. were advanced into the wood in their front, and being repulsed a second attempt was made by the whole Regiment, in which they succeeded with the loss of about fifty men."

Because the 21st wheeled back to face westward to counter the American enveloping movement, the 62nd found itself converted into a salient in the line, exposed to fire on both flanks and suffering heavy casualties. Hadden's two guns, posted in the angle, lost nineteen of their twenty-two men. While requesting infantry support from General Hamilton, who was present on the line, a shot passed through Hadden's hat. The brigadier had no infantry to spare, so the lieutenant moved off to plead his case with General Phillips, who joined Burgoyne near the Freeman buildings. Phillips ordered Captain Jones to accompany Hadden with one of Lieutenant Reid's crews.<sup>37</sup>

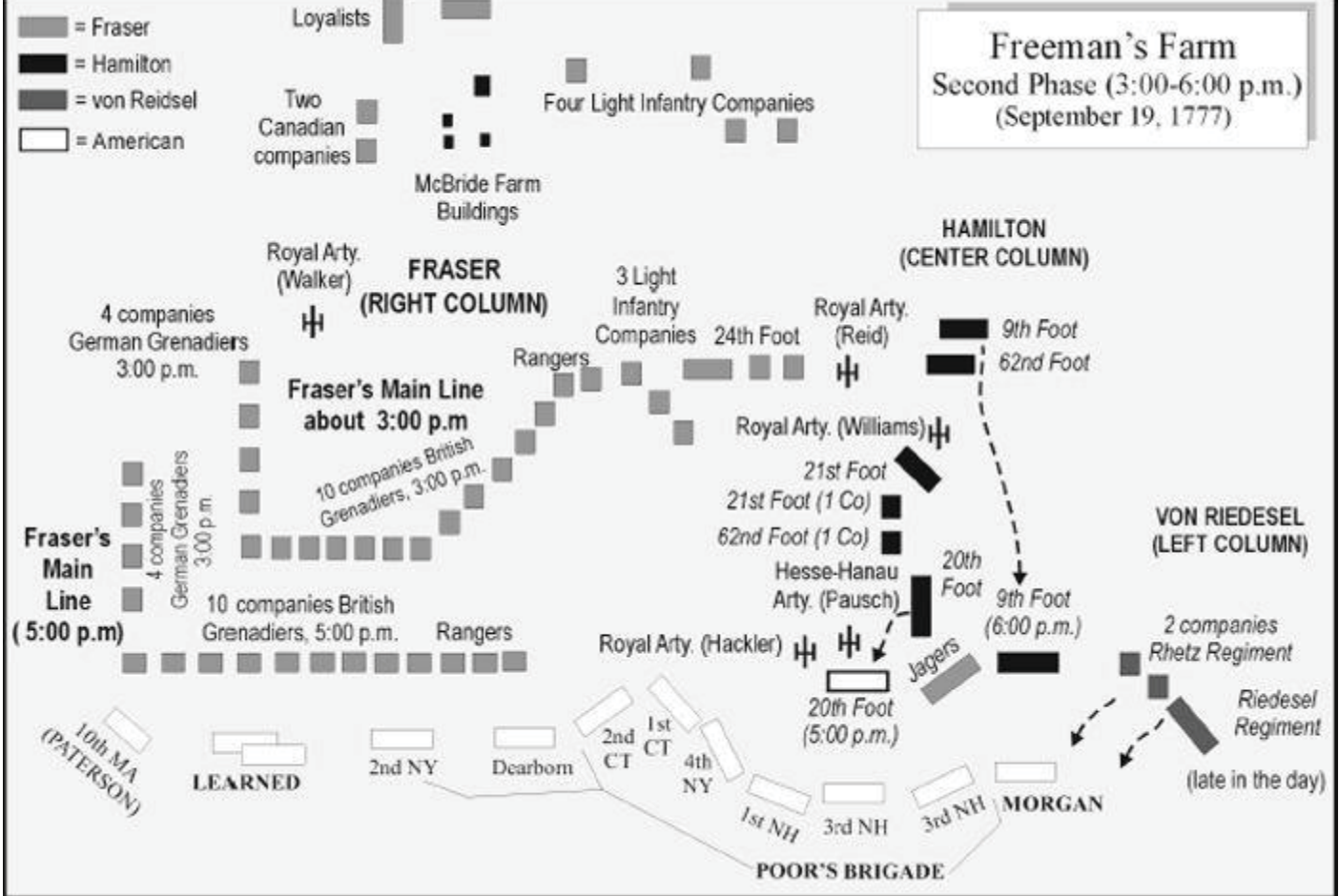
### A General Action Ensues

The fight in the center had become much more than a British probing action and an American ambush. The two armies had engaged in heavy, though indecisive, combat interrupted by lulls during which their units reformed to deliver renewed attacks and counterattacks. For all its intensity, there remained a certain tentativeness about the action until mid-afternoon, when Arnold directed General Enoch Poor to order out the rest of his brigade: Van Cortlandt's 2nd New York, H. B. Livingston's 4th New York, and the Connecticut Militia.<sup>38</sup> Americans on the firing line now numbered more than 2,200 men, substantially more than the number of British troops engaged.<sup>39</sup>

The effect on the fighting of the increased American numbers was to wear down the British 62nd Regiment to the point where it fell into confusion. Almost half its officers and men had been killed or wounded. When forced to abandon the hill on which it had been fighting, Lieutenant Hadden's two guns moved off with it. The Americans pressed the retreating British troops, following at a distance of a mere 100 yards. Only General Phillips' throwing of the 20th Regiment into the woods on the British left saved the remainder of the 62nd from probable destruction.<sup>40</sup>

**Freeman's Farm**  
 Second Phase (3:00-6:00 p.m.)  
 (September 19, 1777)

- = Fraser
- = Hamilton
- = von Reidsel
- = American



The Americans, buoyed by their numerical superiority, aggressively pressed Hamilton's Brigade and Fraser's Corps, but the latter's entry into the fight had frustrated the early attempts to turn Hamilton's right. Relying upon their increased manpower but without the direction of a general officer who could impose a more sophisticated tactic, the regimental commanders limited themselves to simple frontal attacks, augmented by the riflemen's harassing marksmanship.

Later, between 4:00 and 5:00 p.m., the American right, consisting of Morgan's riflemen, the three New Hampshire regiments, the 4th New York, and the Connecticut militia, would continue to contest the possession of Freeman's farm with a reorganized British left. Opposing the riflemen were the men best suited for coping with their unorthodox practices—the German Jägers from Fraser's Corps—while the 21st and 62nd faced the rest of the American right wing. The American left, including Latimore's and Cook's militia, Dearborn's light infantry, the 2nd New York, and Learned's Brigade, fought the British 24th Regiment, the rangers, and British and German grenadiers.<sup>41</sup>

But by mid-afternoon, the battle was already reaching its crisis. “About three o'clock the action began by a very vigorous attack on the British line, and continued with great obstinacy till after sunset,” reported General Burgoyne. “The enemy being continuously supplied with fresh troops, the stress lay upon the 20th, 21st, and 62nd regiments, most parts of which were engaged near four hours without intermission; the 9th had been ordered early in the day to form in reserve.”

Burgoyne supported these central regiments with occasional spirited charges by his grenadiers, the 24th regiment, and the light infantry. He also used the Jägers and other parts of Breyman's corps but, not wanting to endanger Fraser's control of the heights on which he was posted, these too constituted mere partial engagements.<sup>42</sup>

Cumulatively speaking, Burgoyne's forces were suffering severely under the combined weight of three American strengths: superior numbers; surprising (to some) courage; and telling marksmanship. “Few actions have been characterized by more obstinacy in attack and defence,” Burgoyne later wrote. He continued with his assessment of how the action unfolded:

The British bayonet was repeatedly tried ineffectually. Eleven hundred British foiled in these trials, bore incessant fire from fresh troops in superior numbers, for above four hours; and after a loss of above a third of their numbers (and in one of the regiments above two thirds).... Of a detachment of a captain and forty-eight men, the captain and thirty-six were killed or wounded....The tribute of praise due to such troops will not be wanting in this generous nation; and it will as certainly be accompanied with a just portion of shame to those who have dared to deprecate or sully valour so conspicuous—who have their ears open only to the prejudice of American cowardice, and having been always loud upon that courtly topic, stifle the glory of their countrymen to maintain a base consistency.<sup>43</sup>

Other British veterans agreed in describing the heaviness of the fighting. Lord Balcarres testified that the “enemy behaves with great obstinacy and courage.” Deputy Quarter Master Money was impressed by the gunfire's intensity, as were Lord Harrington, Major Forbes, and Lieutenant Colonel Kingston, confirming American accounts.<sup>44</sup>

Burgoyne attributed the disproportionately large number of officer casualties to the “great

number of marksmen, armed with rifle-barrel pieces: these, during an engagement, hovered upon the flanks in small detachments, and were very expert in securing themselves, and in shifting their ground. In this action,” continued Burgoyne, “many placed themselves in high trees in the rear of their own line, and there was seldom a minute’s interval of smoke, in any part of our line without officers being taken off by [a] single shot.”<sup>45</sup>

“Here the conflict was dreadfull [sic] for four hours a constant blaze of fire was kept up, and both armies seemed to be determined on death or victory,” wrote Sergeant Roger Lamb of the 9th Regiment, providing a corroborating narrative from the enlisted man’s perspective. “Men, and particularly officers, dropped every moment on each side. Several of the Americans placed themselves in high trees, and as often as [they] could distinguish a British officer’s uniform, took him off by deliberately aiming at his person. Reinforcements successively arrived and strengthened the American line.”<sup>46</sup>

Burgoyne and the British found great difficulty in countering this latter American advantage. The Indians and Canadians, whom Burgoyne had hoped “would be of great use against this mode of fighting,” disappointed him. Of the former, “those that remained after the great desertion...not a man of them was to be brought within sound of a rifle shot.” And after the best Canadian officer fell, his men soon lost their morale. In fact, not the Indians nor the Canadians but the German Jägers were “the best men to oppose as marksmen... though their number was so small, as not to be one to twenty to the enemy.”<sup>47</sup>

By late afternoon the battle was turning in the Americans’ favor. They had savaged Hamilton’s Brigade so thoroughly that it was in danger of ceasing to be an effective unit. Fraser’s Corps retained its defensive capability and continued to be dangerous, but it could not have survived a collapse by Hamilton and the growing American numerical superiority. Only the injection of a new body of troops could save the day for the hard-pressed, exhausted Europeans as they faced ever stronger and more aggressive Americans on the firing line. Salvation arrived in the form of Burgoyne’s left column.<sup>48</sup>

## The Germans Rescue the British

While Fraser and Hamilton made their approach march and engaged Morgan’s Corps and Learned’s and Poor’s regiments, General von Riedesel’s work parties built and repaired bridges preparatory to launching the basic strategic strike: an advance against the American right wing. It is important to emphasize that Burgoyne’s purpose was to reopen the road past Bemis’ Tavern, the road interdicted by the fortifications athwart and above that route. Reopening the road required that the Americans be enticed or driven from their interdicting fortifications. The German column’s mission was to exploit any success that Fraser and Hamilton had in dislodging the Americans from Bemis Heights. Remember also that von Riedesel’s force was larger than either of the other two European commands, totaling slightly more than 3,000 men (excluding 300 sailors, engineers, and Canadian wagoneers).<sup>49</sup> The artillery train consisted of fourteen cannon, including two light 24-pounders, four medium 12-pounders, four light 6-pounders, two 8-inch howitzers, four 5 ½-inch mortars, and “several Coehorn Mortars” mounted on bateaux.<sup>50</sup> Thus, von Riedesel’s was the best-armed column, the one best equipped to deal with the kind of strong, fortified position against which Burgoyne anticipated employing his unusually powerful artillery train.

As soon as the artificers had completed the bridge over a small stream 510 yards south of the Taylor house, von Riedesel signaled his regimental commanders to start down the road, with his own regiment in the lead, followed by the Rhetz, Specht, Erbprinz, and 47th regiments. Their advance got under way while work continued on a bridge over the Kromma Kill, which drains the Great Ravine.

About 2:00 p.m., Captain Thomas Blomefield of the Royal Artillery, who had accompanied General Phillips, reported to von Riedesel that the Braunschweiger [Brunswick] Jägers were heavily engaged and that a general battle was developing on the Freeman farm. The German general ordered the captain to return to the line with “weniger grosse Kannon aus dem Artilleriensatz [a few heavy cannon from the artillery train].”<sup>51</sup> Soon after Blomefield left with an unrecorded number of 12-pounders, von Riedesel sent his English aide, Captain Samuel Willoe, to obtain more information from General Burgoyne. Ignorant of American deployment and intentions, von Riedesel made preparations against a surprise attack. He was especially concerned about the area between the two bridges.

Drawn up along a 500-yard line were the supply wagons and most of the artillery. Von Riedesel placed his own regiment in line about 400 yards west of the road. Two companies of Regiment von Rhetz formed on the right, and two of Captain Georg Pausch’s 6-pounders covered an open field to the line’s left and front. The remaining three companies of the von Rhetz regiment faced southward between Pausch’s battery and the road; dragoons and Jägers formed a picket line to the left of the battery. Lieutenant F. Carl Reinking sent out patrols, which were to withdraw if they made solid contact with the enemy. Already, American patrols were active enough to be annoying—they shot one dragoon’s horse out from under him.<sup>52</sup>

Captain Willoe soon returned with orders from Burgoyne directing von Riedesel to provide for the security of the artillery and baggage and then bring as many regiments as was feasible and attack the right flank of the American firing line. The baron immediately started his regiment, two von Rhetz companies, and Pausch’s two-gun battery on the road to Freeman’s farm, leaving General Specht with his regiment, the British 47th, the six remaining companies of the von Rhetz regiment, the Jäger company, dragoons, and the bulk of the artillery train in position along the Albany road.<sup>53</sup>

Intending to bring his men into battle fresh, von Riedesel halted them for two brief rests. By 5:00 p.m., they had completed their mile-long approach march and deployed to fall upon the exposed American right flank. The surprise blow struck Morgan’s riflemen and the New Hampshire regiments, turning and bending them back behind the main line of resistance. As Hamilton’s men on the British right rallied, the 10th Massachusetts from Paterson’s Brigade arrived and formed on the American left, too late to stiffen the resistance of the embattled American line. Hit hard but holding their order remarkably well, the Americans conducted a fighting withdrawal across the Freeman, Coulter, and Barber farms to the Middle Fork, where they found safety from pursuit by their exhausted enemy. After catching their breath there, the men retreated within their prepared lines.<sup>54</sup>

Although no one knew it yet, the battle of Freeman’s Farm was over. The fighting ended a little more than one hour after von Riedesel arrived on the field in dramatic fashion to fall against the exposed American flank. The British possessed the field, one of the telltale signs of the tactical winner of any engagement. However, the route to Albany remained closed, for Paterson’s and Nixon’s brigades were still in place on Bemis Heights overlooking that key road.

Burgoyne might claim a tactical victory, but Horatio Gates and his men had won the more important strategic success.

