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ORISKANY BATTLEFIELD

NEW YORK



The Tryon County Militia was a brigade of men between the ages of 16 and 60 commanded by General Nicholas Herkimer. The force was a part of the backbone of the New York State's defenses and could be assembled to meet any threat. Militiamen had to have their own muskets and equipment and had to train at least once a month.

In August 1777, 800 militiamen from the brigade went with General Herkimer to relieve the siege of Fort Stanwix. Nearly 500 were killed or wounded at the Battle of Oriskany. The loss of so many able-bodied men was a catastrophic blow to the settlements of the Mohawk Valley. The battle, fought on August 6, 1777, has been described as the bloodiest battle of the American Revolution.

Supported by 60 allied Oneida warriors, Herkimer began the 40-mile march to Fort Stanwix on August 4th. Upcoming sites and markers on this road trip parallel Herkimer's fatal march.



40-mile route taken by General Herkimer, August 3-6, 1777 for the relief of Fort Stanwix. The Battle of Oriskany, August 6, between Herkimer's men and St. Leger with his Indians was the turning point of the Revolution.

[Route]: Herkimer Homestead, Little Falls, Herkimer's Birthplace, Fort Herkimer, Fort Dayton (Herkimer), Camp - First Night, Turning Point to Great Ford, Ford - Turning Point to Fort Stanwix, Old Fort Schuyler (Utica), Whitestown, Camp - Night Before Battle, Oriska (Indian Village), Oriskany Battlefield, Fort Stanwix (Rome).

(40-Mile Route Marker)

Upon hearing of the march, St. Leger at the siege of Fort Stanwix sent Tory leaders Sir John Johnson and Col. John Butler to ambush Herkimer and his troops. Indians led by Mohawk chief Joseph Brant accompanied the loyalist supporters. They chose a boggy ravine two miles west of the Oriskany Creek as their point of ambush.

Herkimer had sent three scouts forward through the British lines at Fort Stanwix in an attempt to coordinate attacks with the fort. On the morning of the 6th, Herkimer's officers and men grew impatient and even mutinous while they waited for an attack signal from the fort. Herkimer pleaded with them but found restraint was useless. He ordered his troops to return to the march.

Unsuspecting, the inexperienced and impatient militiamen marched blindly into the trap. As they crossed the swampy bottom and marched up the ravine side, the enemy closed in. Muskets fired from behind trees and Indian tomahawks flew.



The Military Road and the Ravine

On August 6, 1777, the Tryon County militia marched down a wilderness road that entered this ravine. A “corduroy” road, made of logs, was the only means by which General Herkimer and his men could reach Fort Stanwix other than by boat.

The Military Road dipped more than fifty feet into this marshy ravine. A small stream, barely three-feet wide, meandered along the bottom. It was a splendid spot for an ambush. While 50 of Sir John Johnson’s Royal Greens waited behind a rise, 400 Iroquois, led by the Mohawk chief Joseph Brant, concealed themselves on both sides of the ravine. It was into this trap that General Herkimer’s militiamen advanced, with Herkimer at the head of the column.

Military Road, the path of the old military road.

Joseph Brant, portrait of Joseph Brant, by William Bercy. Reproduced courtesy of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

(Oriskany Marker)

In the first murderous volley, General Herkimer's horse was shot from beneath him and his leg shattered by a musketball. Sitting beneath a beech tree, propped against his saddle and smoking an old black pipe, Herkimer continued to direct the battle. In spite of heavy losses, the patriots fought bravely. Their stubborn resistance dismayed Johnson's troops and the battle was so brutal that Brant's warriors abandoned the fight, forcing the British and Tories to withdraw as well.

The retreating British returned to Stanwix to find their nearby camp raided by the detachment of soldiers under Lt. Colonel Marinus Willett. The assault against Fort Stanwix continued indecisively. Disgusted, Brant's warriors withdrew, forcing St. Leger to abandon the siege and

return to Canada.

The battered patriots returned to their valley homes. Herkimer was taken by raft down the Mohawk River to his home where several days later, after an unskillful amputation of his leg, he died.



Near this spot stood the Beech Tree, which during the Battle of Oriskany sheltered the wounded General Herkimer while he gave orders that made Saratoga possible and decided the fate of a nation.

Placed by Oriskany Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution of Oriskany, and the Sons of Oriskany of New York City, June 14, 1912.

(40-Mile Route Marker)

For the first time in many generations, peace with the Indian nations allied under the Iroquois Confederacy was broken at the Battle of Oriskany.

Today, the battlefield is dominated by the 1884 Oriskany Monument. The 85-foot high monument was dedicated August 6, 1884. Its bronze plaques depict the battle and list the names of some of the men who fought at Oriskany.

Also, on the grounds are several smaller monuments and markers. The Unknown Soldier monument east of the ravine was dedicated by the Daughters of the American Revolution in 1928. Two "40-Mile Route" markers, which appear along the route taken by General Herkimer, are on the battlefield.

During its 150th anniversary in 1927, five acres of the battlefield, including the monument, were made a New York State historic site to serve as a memorial to those who fought so bravely and tenaciously to preserve their land and freedom. Additional acreage has been acquired through the years, and in 1963 the United States Department of the Interior, in recognition of the site's exceptional value in commemorating and illustrating the history of the United States, designated Oriskany Battlefield a National Historic Landmark.

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