

Loyalists at the Battle of Bennington

By *Lion G. Miles*

The American Revolution was a civil war, every bit as bitter a fight between friends and neighbors as the conflict of 1861-65. Perhaps the Battle of Bennington reflects that tragedy better than any military engagement of the war, coming as it did at a time of political turmoil in an area of divided loyalties among new settlers. Rivalries between New York and New Hampshire grantees in the territory of Vermont, disputes over local jurisdiction in the border towns of New York and Massachusetts, the presence of many French and Indian War veterans loyal to Great Britain, and recent uncommitted settlers from Ireland and Scotland all contributed to the volatile mix of population that General John Burgoyne encountered on his march toward Albany.

In June 1777 the British commander in Canada, Sir Guy Carleton, issued verbal orders for John Peters to accompany Burgoyne on the expedition and raise a battalion of Loyalists (Tories) from the local inhabitants. Ebenezer Jessup of Albany had raised another Loyalist corps the year before, joined the Burgoyne expedition, but was not involved in the Battle of Bennington. That left Lt. Col. Peters as the most important Tory commander before the battle, soon to be joined by a third corps under Francis Pfister of Hoosick, N.Y.

John Peters of Connecticut was a Yale graduate and lawyer who had moved to the New Hampshire Grants (Vermont) in 1770. He began recruiting Tories at Skenesborough (Whitehall), N.Y., in late July 1777 for his proposed battalion of 600 men, known as the Queens Loyal Rangers. Shortly before the Bennington expedition he had collected about 150 recruits from towns in eastern Vermont, New Hampshire, and the area around Skenesborough, assisted in that business by the wealthy Philip Skene, Lieutenant Governor of Ticonderoga and commissioner for administering oaths of allegiance to Great Britain.

As Burgoyne's army rapidly advanced southward, a number of men with Loyalist sympathies joined the ranks of Peters' corps. One man from Albany County had observed that "every district ... is crowded with disaffected persons, the woods are full of them, and notwithstanding every effort that has been made by our militia and the rangers to apprehend them, they still have eluded our search." Jeremiah French of Dutchess County, N.Y., brought in men from Manchester, Vt. Justus Sherwood of New Haven, Vt., did the same. Breed Batcheller brought men from New Hampshire and Andrew Palmatier of Livingston Manor, N.Y., enlisted 40 of his neighbors and took them to the British.

When General Burgoyne dispatched his Germans under Col. Baum toward Bennington in August, his orders included the stipulation that one of the objects of the expedition was "to compleat Peters's corps." With that in mind, Peters enlisted an entire company on August 13 as he reached Cambridge, N.Y. That company numbered 56 men, former members of the Cambridge militia and commanded by Simeon Covell, the district supervisor and a man who had been jailed twice for his Loyalist sympathies.

Col. Baum reached Sancoick (North Hoosick) on August 14 and reported back to Burgoyne that “people are flocking in hourly, but want to be armed.” Most of those men were local inhabitants of Pownal, Hoosick, Mapleton, and Pittstown, recruited by Francis Pfister and John Macomb of Hoosick.

Francis Pfister had come from Germany in 1759 and served as an engineer in the Royal American Regiment during the French and Indian War. He became wealthy by acquiring the carrying rights at Niagara, settled in Hoosick about 1770, and married the daughter of Judge John Macomb. Together Pfister and Macomb had recruited nearly 100 men to join Burgoyne’s army at Fort Edward. As Baum’s detachment approached, they collected others and joined the British expedition, many of their men without arms.

Among those coming to Pfister shortly before the battle were 64 men enlisted by Capt. Samuel Anderson, who had escaped from jail in Connecticut on July 28 and made his way through the woods to Pownal. Henry Ruiter of Pittstown, N.Y., had been hiding in the woods for three months before the battle, while the rebels “abused his wife greatly,” and finally joined Pfister’s corps on August 1 with 40 men. His brother, John Ruiter of Hoosick, joined Baum’s force at Walloomsac with about 60 more.

Precise numbers are difficult to ascertain but it appears that Baum had approximately 500 Tories with him in the entrenchments on the evening of August 15, most of them probably unarmed. Of those, about 320 belonged to Peters’ corps and 180 to Pfister’s, both units very much “in embryo” and poorly organized.

The Battle of Bennington on August 16 was disastrous for the Loyalists. Several hundred in the “Tory Redoubt” on Baum’s right flank became engaged in bitter hand-to-hand fighting and Peters himself later described how he had killed his wife’s cousin after being pinned by the man’s bayonet. The Tory colonel reported 200 men from his corps were “Lost, Killed, Taken, & missing.” Peters managed to escape but Pfister was mortally wounded and died on August 18. His corps lost 120 “Killed, Taken, and missing.”

Hancock, Massachusetts, produced one of the more tragic events of the battle. Capt. David Vaughn of the town’s militia had been removed from his command for supporting the British cause and, when the Hancock men were ordered to march, 20 of them deserted to Burgoyne’s army. The rest of the company found their townsmen in the entrenchments at Walloomsac, killed 14 and captured the others — to the applause of the American press: “Heaven grant this may be the fate of every other traitor to the glorious cause of American freedom.”

By every account, the Americans captured 150 Tories in the battle. As a general rule, the victors turned them over to the states from which they came and each jurisdiction disposed of them according to its own rules. Those who were found bearing arms at the battle usually were treated more severely than the others. New York State sent them to prison ships in the Hudson River but, in the confusion of the times, neglected to procure sufficient evidence against them and released many. The Albany County commissioner in Cambridge complained “that they have been sent

home to the great dissatisfaction of the friends of liberty. Some of whom are the worst of villains, others not quite so bad; others again, as soon as the battle went against them, ran off to their homes.”

Vermont was generally more lenient with her Tories. Those captured at the battle were confined at first, the hardest cases sent to the Hudson River prison ships. Those who took the oath of allegiance to the United States were fined and sent home on their good behavior. Others were permitted to visit their families on parole for short periods of time.

Massachusetts dealt the harshest punishments to her Loyalists. Solomon Bunnel of Lanesborough had killed his neighbor, Lt. Isaac Nash, at the battle. He was sent in irons to the Northampton jail and indicted for high treason. Ignored in prison for two years, “which has brought me so low I do not expect my constitution will bear confinement much longer,” he finally escaped in 1780 and made his way to the British lines at New York. The Hancock men captured at Bennington also went to the Northampton jail as “close prisoners.” In 1778 they petitioned for their release on the grounds that they had not used arms at the battle. Finally acquitted, they returned home to find their property confiscated. When they protested, they were mobbed and had to call on the sheriff for protection.

After the Battle of Bennington, General Burgoyne divided his Loyalists into four different corps and allowed each man to join the unit of his choice. He gave command of the late Pfister’s corps to Capt. Samuel Mackay, a retired British officer who had escaped from the battlefield. Disputes soon arose between the various commanders who, in attempts to obtain compensation for their losses, claimed to have enlisted particular companies. For example, both Peters and Mackay claimed Andrew Palmatier’s company. It is due largely to these disagreements and conflicting muster rolls that the exact number of Loyalists at Bennington may never be known.

Those Tories who escaped capture suffered the consequences of their loyalties to Britain for the rest of their lives. Most made their way through the woods to Canada before Burgoyne’s surrender at Saratoga and served out the war in various provincial regiments. Their property was destroyed or confiscated and their families constantly harassed. Francis Pfister’s wife and children were permitted to go to Canada; other families were banished from their homes.

Article 5 of the 1783 peace treaty recommended that the states “provide for the restitution of all estates, rights and properties which have been confiscated” and allowed the Loyalists “free liberty” to go anywhere in the United States to seek such restitution. However, very little property was ever returned and many Tories spent years seeking compensation from the British government. In 1788 some of the property of Pfister and Macomb was restored to their families but in such damaged condition that it was useless. In 1785 one Tory who had returned to Vermont summed up the situation: “the people in the State of Vermont appear very civil to me as well as the other Loyalists but make no provision for the restitution of their estates, neither do they think themselves holden by the 5th article of the treaty; but say if the Tories can get their own livelihood among them, they are welcome.”

As in any civil war, the victors claimed the spoils. Those Loyalists who fought on the wrong side at Bennington lost everything, their country, their homes, and their estates, a heavy price to pay for their allegiance to the King of England.