

New York's Part in the Battle of Bennington

By Joe Parks

My interest in the part played by residents of eastern New York in the battle called Bennington, was first piqued by a series of letters from a Hoosick Falls resident published in a Troy newspaper in 1891. These letters were from Sylvanus Dyer Locke, a mid-Westerner employed at the Walter A. Wood plant. He was angry over the celebrations in Bennington surrounding the dedication of the battle monument there, attended by much hoopla and the U.S. President.

Sylvanus Locke raised three questions which he thought would show Bennington in a bad light. Had not an anti-N.Y. conspiracy caused the battle to be called Bennington when it should have been called Walloomsac? Why was the monument located in Bennington when it could only be properly erected where the battle took place? With so many New York militia units and individuals having fought in the battle, why did New England cheat New York of its rightful share of glory in the victory?

The first answers coming back to Locke through the Troy newspaper were written by fellow New Yorkers with historical credentials, who were critical of Locke's facts and assumptions, but that seemed not to bother him. He was a man who loved a fight.

No one group or individual decided on the name of the battle. In the first days and months after the battle, it was written in different ways, including Bennington (a fact Locke denied), plus Hoosick, Sancoick, and White Creek, but apparently not including Walloomsac, which doesn't appear to have been a place name at that time. Over a few decades after 1777 the battle took the name Bennington by public usage, as battles are usually— if not always – named. For Locke, Bennington was the wrong name substituted under-handedly for the right name, which he insisted for some reason should be Walloomsac. He might better have looked at the situation as a problem of competing names for the same event from which one will be selected over time by public usage, while the others fade away.

For example, New York's famous battle now known as Saratoga has been called Bemis Heights, Freeman's Farm, and Stillwater. Like Bennington, it came to be called by the name of a little settlement not located where the battle took place.

About the placement of battle monuments, the rule that the principal monument can only be placed at the battle site is Locke's idea, customary but not always observed by history. In our case, the enemy did not come to Bennington looking for battle, but hoped to avoid one while seizing the supplies stored there and guarded by a few locals (or so they thought). They would rush the supplies back to the enemy camp so the army could feed and press on to capture Albany. Locke insisted from the start that the battle never had anything to do with Bennington, but when he was advised by New Yorkers that the original written orders were superceded by oral orders to raid Bennington, Locke stubbornly refused to hear.

Locke's assumption, underlying his third question, that there were many New York units and individual militiamen is without much foundation. The records show no New York units, and not many individuals from New York, can be shown to have taken part in the battle on the Revolutionary side. The reason for that is basically that the New York militia regiments were where they should have been, holding a position in front of Burgoyne's half-English, half-German army, to block its advance further towards Albany.

Parts of New York regiments were in Burgoyne's front, but his left flank was open, so that the English commander could strike toward the east without hindrance. New York's General Schuyler knew he could not stop a raid in that direction. Burgoyne, needing food and hearing there were supplies at Bennington, gambled on a quick raid. By the time Schuyler knew of the enemy raid, he had assembled only one-fourth of the personnel of those regiments, being the men thought to be most free of Loyalist sentiments. When he heard that the enemy had reached Cambridge, it was too late for him to send New York troops, yet he found comfort in knowing what Burgoyne did not know, that three regiments of New Hampshire militia were at Bennington and that their commander was calling on Massachusetts and Vermont militias for help.

We know that residents of eastern New York near Burgoyne's army at that time were engaged in a bitter civil war between Loyalists and Revolutionaries. Burgoyne was offering to extend the King's protection to those who would show allegiance, and many took his offer, signing an oath. It was thought risky to call up some of the militia regiments because the majority of the members might take the regiment to join Burgoyne, so two or three of approximately fifteen regiments were not called.

Small groups of Revolutionary militiamen moving north to join Schuyler would clash with armed Loyalist groups being formed in the area to join Burgoyne, such as the one recruited by "Colonel" Francis Pfister of Hoosick. There were ambushes and attacks upon homes. No person in that area was safe.

Many resident families had obeyed orders from Schuyler to evacuate the area, and had become refugees. Schuyler's orders were to take along or destroy any portable objects the enemy might use, such as cattle, horses, wagons, and foodstuffs. These orders were obeyed, probably better by Revolutionary families than by Loyalists. As it was, the land of New York west of Bennington witnessed refugees moving away, vacant and burned houses, cattle roaming the woods, larcenous individuals and groups helping themselves to whatever they could take, and groups of armed men of differing loyalties, sometimes ambushing and attacking one another.

Also present was the very remarkable Col. John Williams, an English-born revolutionary and physician of Salem, whose regiment was not called up because of its heavy Loyalist personnel. Loyal himself, Williams went about trying to enforce Schuyler's order to quit the area. Claims have been made that Williams and his regiment participated in the battle on the American side, but there's conflicting evidence of that.

The raiding troops who left Burgoyne's camp on the Hudson, headed for Bennington, reached Cambridge without their enemies' knowledge. From there, word was carried to the small army from New Hampshire located in Bennington, the existence of which Burgoyne did not know. By the next day, however, the raiding party, almost entirely "Hessians," knew the supplies were guarded by a substantial force. The German commander, Lt. Col. Friedrich Baum, sent a call for reinforcements, which were soon on the road following him, trying to catch up, but not fast enough.

The residents of the N.Y. towns in this region have long believed that many units and large numbers of individual soldiers and non-soldier volunteers participated. The reason for that begins with a series of newspaper articles called *The Annals of Hoosick*. They were written by a resident of Hoosick named Levi Chandler Ball. Sometime in the mid-1800s, Ball began to collect bits and pieces of legend and history about the Town of Hoosick. He meant well, but from a historical point of view, he was not skeptical enough of oral recollections handed down verbally through several generations. Believing as he did, L.C. Ball took family legends at face value, and wrote that large numbers of ancestors left their oxen and plows in the field, rushed towards the sound of cannons with their hunting pieces, to help turn back the enemy. He called on descendants to relate to him their family stories for his book before they would be lost forever.

One need not disparage the place of family legends in genealogical history. L.C. Ball, however, started his collections a generation after the last survivors of the battle died in the 1830s, so his legends were about three generations old before he got them. Legends don't improve with age and retelling. People gave him what he asked for, good, bad or indifferent. After the publication of his work in the newspapers in the 1870s, the area's old families have tended to believe that large numbers of their ancestors took part in the battle. However, comparing his writings to such official written records as exist, one finds little support for what he reported, especially his claims that so many civilians joined in the battle on short notice. Civilians rarely do that.

After Ball's death, there were "vanity" histories of Rensselaer and Washington Counties published, picking up Ball's legends as fact, spreading bad history with good. In 1904, an honest merchant of Hoosick Falls, Nelson Gillespie, who believed Levi Ball's claims, called on the area's citizens to research what Ball and the vanity histories had written, to find corroboration. He never doubted their truth, but it seems he had already tried to find proof himself, and failing, tried to turn the task over to the public. To encourage them, he proposed a list of 44 individuals and ten militia regiments whom he considered prime research topics to support the facts which he considered unquestionable -- that the battle in White Creek was fought by large numbers of New York units and individuals. But no proof was brought forward. I myself searched Gillespie's 44 names plus 20 more furnished by the White Creek historian in 1928, and many more from the Williams regiment of Salem and vicinity, and found little proof of participation.

The rosters of the many New York militia regiments are available, but they will not tell who was in the battle of August 16th or even the two great battles of September and October, 1777, now called Saratoga, which resulted in the defeat of Burgoyne's army and the resultant entry of France into the war on the American side. As the years went by after 1800, and the veterans of 1775-1781 aged, the United States passed legislation to aid survivors. Sworn statements are attached to their petitions.

Among those I found only five New York men who swore they were in the battle. Might there have been more? Yes, and I suppose there were.

One historian working in this area has searched more widely. He is Lion G. Miles, who says he has found more New Yorkers in the battle than I have. We can accept that pending publication of his book.

Sylvanus Locke of Hoosick Falls had a valid criticism when he implied that New York was slighted by not being approached concerning the monument to be built in Bennington. I think it was poor treatment of a sister State. To be practical, however, intervention by New York would not have been likely to influence Vermont, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and the federal government (who had regiments in the battle) to pay for an ambitious monument at the battlefield. Bennington had proposed the monument to be located at the site of the storehouse back in 1875, of which the New York government surely was aware, but New York as a whole was more interested in the great victory at Saratoga than in the preliminary victories at Fort Stanwix, Oriskany and Bennington. In fact, the New York government was preoccupied with building its big monument at Saratoga, with Federal help, when the Bennington monument was being built.

The reason for limited sympathy with Sylvanus Locke is the fact that there was in Bennington a good man, former Gov. Hiland Hall, who had great practical power over the location of the monument. Hall was eighty years old in 1875, former head of the Vermont Historical Society and at the time of the decision about location, head of the Bennington Historical Society, which proposed the monument. Hiland Hall could get things done in Montpelier, and the legislative charter of the historical society provided that the monument would be built in Bennington by the society on the site of the Continental storehouse.

Hall was a good man, but he had one failing - a lifetime bias against New York. He saw the New York government of late colonial times as aristocratic, pro-British and congenial to the patroon system of monopolistic land ownership, and favorable to New York land speculators allied with high officials, qualities which the puritan settlers of New England with their small farm ownership ideals were sure to find offensive. Hall had acquired that viewpoint as a boy, when the struggle between New Hampshire and New York over the validity of N.H. Gov. Benning Wentworth's grants of land in what became Vermont was still fresh in the minds of adults in Vermont. Nearly everyone in early Vermont was pro-Wentworth and anti-New York. Hall became a strong advocate of the New Hampshire position, his eyes closed tight shut against the fact that New York was right concerning title to the lands in question, and Benning Wentworth was just an opportunistic renegade governor lining his pockets.

Hiland Hall viewed the monument not solely as dedicated to the victory but to the sterling qualities of the flinty-tough men of Vermont, Massachusetts and New Hampshire who fought the battle. To Hall, there were no New Yorkers in the battle. Calling the battle by any other name, placing the monument outside Vermont, or consulting New York, would have found Hall in opposition. One can see his power at work past age ninety, when he personally vetoed the plans of designers for a low, wide monument with statuary like Saratoga's, in favor of the 306-foot granite obelisk we see today, which he insisted was the only design for conveying the true qualities of New England

pioneers. Governor Hall didn't live to attend the 1891 dedication ceremonies which upset Sylvanus Locke, but the monument he envisioned remains today.