

## Symposium on the Battle of Bennington

*By Alex Brooks*

The consensus that emerged from the Hoosick Township Historical Society's Symposium on the Battle of Bennington, among all three of the presenters, is that at least in this region, the conflict we call the Revolutionary War had more of the character of a civil war than of a revolutionary war. The conflict that took place in this region in the summer of 1777 bore little resemblance to the customary notion of Americans soldiers facing off against British soldiers. At Bennington, there were only about 50 British soldiers involved, while there were ten times that many loyalists who fought on the British side in the battle. Furthermore, it appears that of soldiers from New York participating in the Battle of Bennington, loyalists outnumbered revolutionaries by about 10 to 1.

What emerges from the presentations is that the period was rife with conflicts of Americans against Americans. The question of loyalty vs. revolution was the central one, but it was greatly complicated by other conflicts. The greatest of these other conflicts was the ongoing skirmishing between Vermonters and New York authorities, amounting almost to civil war, over land titles given by the former Governor of New Hampshire to land that was really in New York. The eastern New York towns in which the Battle of Bennington took place had also become embroiled in this controversy, so much so that a decade later they would briefly secede from New York State and indeed from the United States, to join with the independent Republic of Vermont.

Another conflict developing in eastern New York at that time was between an aristocratic land-holding elite, and their tenant farmers. Resentments arising out of the patroon system, which several decades later would boil over in the rent wars, were already in play (perhaps aided by the example of the free and independent farmers in the neighboring New Hampshire Grants), and Tom Barker suggests that they were contributing to the loyalist sentiment in the area.

The question of why so much loyalist sentiment arose in this area is an intriguing one. Various answers were suggested by all three of our scholars in their talks. Some of these are:

- This area was extremely exposed to Burgoyne's invasion, and therefore it may have seemed prudent to accept his offer of protection, as a practical matter. After the Battle of Bennington, when The British seemed much less likely to be able to hang on to the colonies, it became much more dangerous to be a loyalist, and persecution of loyalists became commonplace.
- In Vermont, where the Green Mountain Boys held sway, it was a bit dangerous to be a Loyalist, since loyalty to the Crown suggested loyalty to the hated New York authorities; in Whig Albany also, the powerful elite didn't tolerate loyalism; but in eastern New York one was a bit out of reach of either, and therefore more free to express such sentiments.
- Many of those from this area who held revolutionary sentiments had left. Some of the local militia had gone to join Schuyler's force in Stillwater to stop Burgoyne from entering Albany, and many local families had evacuated the area as ordered by General Schuyler.

As Joe Parks points out, the ones that left were most likely to be the Revolutionary families.

- Simple prudence may have convinced some militiamen to fight on the British side. Lion Miles points out that many of the 56 militiamen who signed up to fight in Simeon Covell's loyalist Cambridge regiment did so on the same afternoon that Baum's little army pulled into town. These men (who may have been members of the Cambridge militia) probably had no idea that a force of 2500 or so soldiers would be assembled to fight Baum only a few days later.
- The presence of Loyalist leaders in the area, such as Pastor Schwerdtfeger, Francis Pfister, and others, may have encouraged loyalists to gather in the area, and won over some who would otherwise have gone with the revolutionary flow.

One thing that emerges from a close acquaintance with the milieu surrounding the battle is the menacing, lawless character of life in this area as war approached. Tales were heard of Indian attacks aided and abetted by the approaching British forces; as Joe Parks describes, everyone was subject to pressure, intimidation, or even attacks from either side in their recruiting efforts; and many had to leave their homes and go to Williamstown, Bennington, or Albany because it was not safe to stay (and because Schuyler had ordered it). A document shown by Lion Miles was poignant, in which families from Salem, refugees in Williamstown two weeks after the Battle, request permission to return home to Salem.

One area of disagreement and continuing uncertainty is the question of how many New Yorkers participated on the American side. Joe Parks counts only five, but Lion Miles' best guess is 60. Mr. Parks says earlier historians from eastern NY have claimed even larger numbers. The documentary evidence is very poor, and we may never have a satisfying answer to this question, but new documents are still being discovered, and more light may yet be shed on it.

One of the issues discussed most in the plenary session was the question of whether John Williams' regiment from Salem was involved in the battle. Lion Miles presented several documents that he believed demonstrated that Williams and a number of his regiment were at the battle, and it is primarily on this circumstantial evidence that Miles bases his estimate of 60 New York men at the battle. He said there are nine boxes of papers on John Williams in the New York State archives, which are currently inaccessible because of building renovations going on there, but he hopes at some point to go through them and learn more about Williams' activities around the time of the battle.