

Ball-Town — the Fort and the raid that time forgot

The fortified meetinghouse to protect from local Tories and the little-known British raid

By Amy Shannon

In April 1775, the thirteen colonies united in their struggle to break free from the British Crown. The Declaration of Independence, signed in 1776, marked the symbolic birth of a new nation, though true recognition of American independence would not come until the Treaty of Paris in 1783. While these events unfolded on the national stage, the small settlement that would become Ballston was already shaping its own place in Revolutionary history.

In 1770, Reverend Eliphalet Ball left Connecticut with his family and half his congregation, seeking new land and opportunity. They settled among mineral springs and open wilderness, a place soon known as Balls, Town. Ball could not have known that his children would become entwined with the Revolution as it swept through New York. His daughter Mary married Lieutenant Colonel James Gordon, a rising figure in the local militia. His son, Colonel John Ball served in Colonel Wynkoop's Regiment, marching toward Fort Stanwix and contributing to the defeat of British General John Burgoyne, one of the turning points of the war.

Reverend Ball quickly became a builder of both community and infrastructure. He established a church and the Old Red Meeting House, which became the heart of the settlement.

But as the war moved north, not all settlers supported independence. The discovery of local Loyalists, known as Tories, alarmed the community. Acting on the advice of General Philip Schuyler, Ball oversaw the construction of Ballston Fort, a sturdy defensive structure built around the meetinghouse. With its heavy stakes, pikes, and mus-

ket openings, the fort's purpose for safety was to protect both soldiers and civilians should danger reach their doors.

Tension in the region did not come solely from the British. The displacement of Native Americans, especially the Iroquois, created deep resentment. While the Mohawks near Schenectady often traded peacefully with settlers, other groups saw the encroaching settlements as a threat to their land and way of life. Conflict grew as alliances shifted and the war's violence spread across the frontier.

To safeguard the settlement, local men formed a Committee of Public Safety composed of prominent residents of the Balls-Town District. A militia soon followed. James Gordon received a commission as a lieutenant colonel, and Mr. Mitchell became a major. Captain Samuel Van Vechten

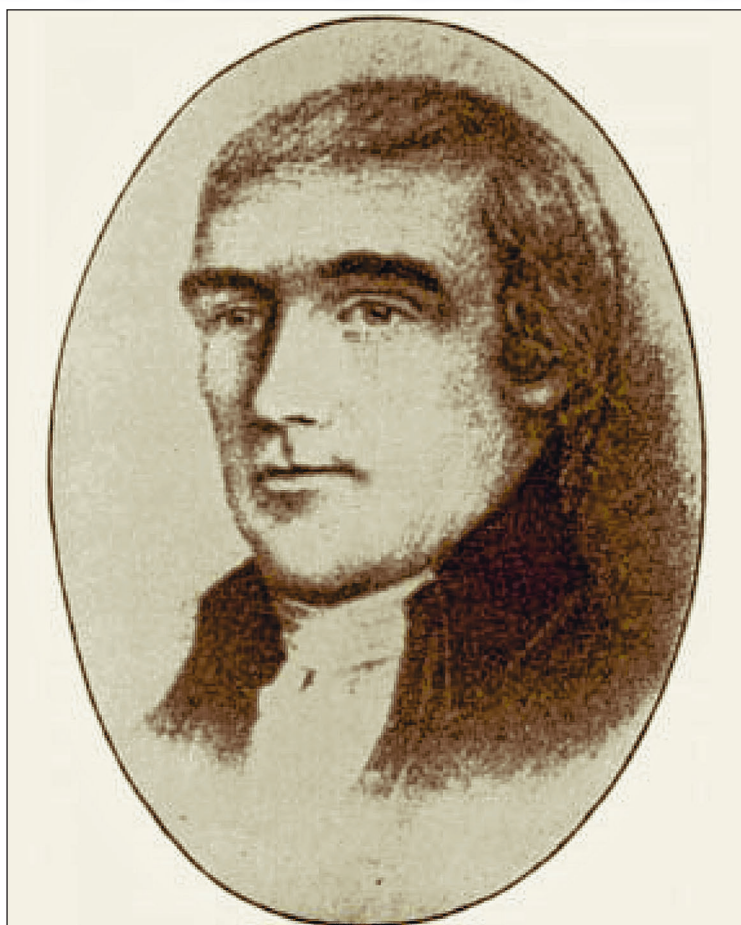
organized a company of local men, which later joined Colonel Wynkoop's regiment. By the spring of 1777, Tories were well known throughout Balls-Town and neighboring districts, adding another layer of uncertainty to daily life.

As tensions rose, James Gordon urged his wife, Mary, to take their daughter, Melinda, and several enslaved people to the safety of her father's fort. Mary refused. Her place, she insisted, was beside her husband.

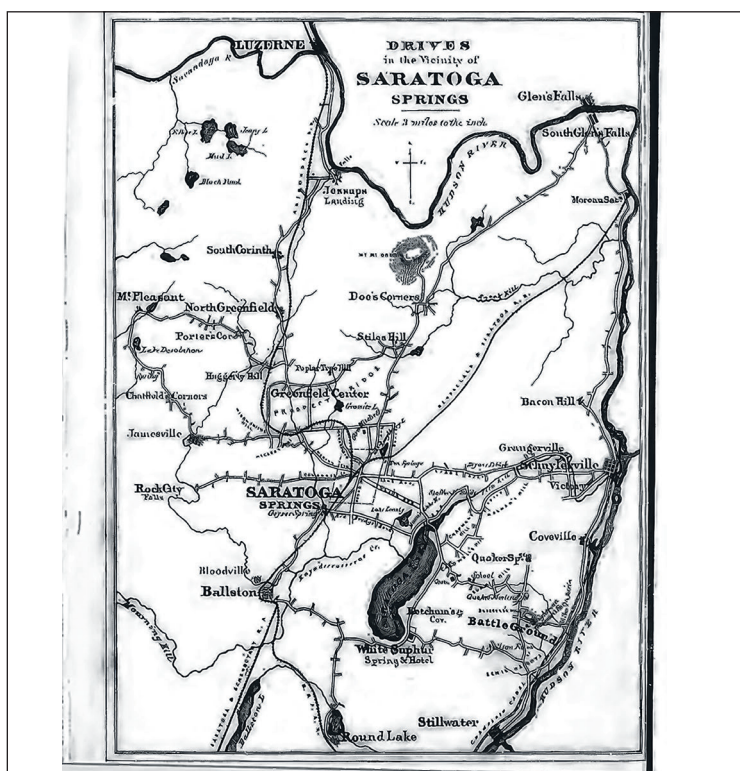
Captain John Munro, a British officer, led a coordinated attack on Balls-Town in 1780. Munro divided his forces, targeting the settlement's militia leaders and prominent families. The British, now allied with Iroquois warriors, approached with different motivations: the British sought strategic advantage, while the Iroquois sought revenge for the loss of their lands.

The Gordon home was among the first attacked. When James and Mary were pulled from their

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This image of James Gordon is from historian Nathaniel Bartlett Sylvester's 1878 history of Saratoga County.



This historic map of the Saratoga area was made during the American Revolution.



This historic image depicts a scene from the British raid on Ball-Town in 1780.

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beds, Mary never faltered; she just prayed for the safety of her

family and faithfully stood beside him as a native warrior raised a hatchet. Munro intervened, stopping the blow. Other families were not as fortunate. Isaac Stow, who attempted to warn Gordon, was struck first by a spear, then

by a tomahawk. Gordon's group included prominent male settlers who were captured; some of the captives were their enslaved servants. The captives were marched north to Canada, where Gordon remained until the war's

end.

The terror of that night lived long in memory. Gordon's daughter Melinda later recalled, "He stood shivering in the cold, and Langdon took out of his knapsack a blanket coat and gave it to him. I recollect being in my father's arms outside the door in the moonlight, when he stood under the charge of Langdon. I recollected awakening sometimes afterward by the side of a log in a heap ... with my mother and Liz, who had hidden themselves."

These stories of courage, fear, loyalty, and survival show the strength and commitment to gaining independence as a step toward the future.. As the nation marks 250 years of independence, the struggle for freedom was not fought only on battlefields. It was lived in homes, churches, and small settlements like Balls-Town, where ordinary families faced extraordinary choices. Their resilience helped shape both a community and a country.

Amy Shannon is an independent historian who lives in Malta.

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