

## DANBURY AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

by Mary A. Reynolds

(With grateful acknowledgment to the Historical Room of the Danbury Public Library)

In 1776, the Continental Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence, declaring to the world the causes that decided the colonists to separate themselves from the English rule of George III. These causes, the unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, played no small part in inspiring the colonists and pushing them on against overwhelming odds to win the American Revolution. This declaration of independence has inspired oppressed peoples all over the world for over two hundred years, and in 1976 we celebrated the two hundredth birthday of the American Revolution.

Although the invasion of Western Connecticut may not hold a place among the nation's great battles, it is one of the finest exhibitions of the heroism that has characterized the inhabitants of New England in rallying to her defense whenever her land has been invaded or her liberties menaced. So brief have been the historians' records of the contributions of towns like Danbury and its surrounding communities, that today comparatively few are aware of either the important events that took place here during the American Revolution or the importance those events played in winning the war.

In the latter part of 1776, Danbury was chosen by the Commissioners of the American Army as a place of deposit for military stores. It was selected because of its strategic position transportation-wise, as good roads in those days ran to the Hudson River and to the Sound, as

well as to the North and East. In three cattle teams, quartermaster, ordnance, medical, and commissary supplies had been gathered here from all over the "Provision State" where they could easily be distributed to the continental troops and militia fighting up and down the Hudson River Valley.

The choice of Danbury as a military deposit precipitated several historical events such as the British raid on Danbury, the burning of Danbury, the battle of Ridgefield and the retreat of the British.

On the night of April 24, 1777, General Tryon, Commander of the British forces in New York, sailed from New York with his troops on an expedition to Danbury for the sole purpose of destroying its military stores. The expedition landed at Compo Point and marched directly to Danbury. Upon their arrival Tryon at once gave orders for the destruction of the military stores. Most of the stores had been placed in the edifice of the Church of England which stood where the southwest corner of Main and South Streets is now. The supplies were taken from the church and burned in the street.

It was nearly 1:00 a.m. when General Tryon received word of a gathering of militia in Bethel under the great General David Wooster. (Wooster later gave his life for his country.) Wooster had earlier been alerted to Tryon's landing at Compo Point and had immediately responded to the call along with General Benedict Arnold (who was home on furlough at the time) and General Silliman (who was in command of the Department of Connecticut.) The Connecticut militia which gathered in Bethel that night under Generals Wooster, Arnold and Silliman was variously estimated at seven hundred.

The plan was to attack the British troops upon their return march from Danbury.

Tryon, being apprised of the militia in Bethel, changed his plans and returned through Ridgebury. Before doing so, however, the British General gave orders to burn the village of Danbury. Nineteen dwelling houses, the meeting house of the New Danbury Society, and twenty-two stores and barns with all their contents were consumed by the fire. More buildings would have been destroyed had Tryon not been in such a hurry. It was not quite daylight of Sunday morning, April 27, 1777 when General Tryon's expedition left the blazing Danbury through Wooster Street taking the Miry Brook Road.

When General Wooster was informed about the British returning a different way from the way they came, he joined Generals Arnold and Silliman in dividing the one large force into two troops. Arnold and Silliman were sent to Ridgefield with five hundred men. Wooster took two hundred men on a northerly route intending to harass the enemy from the rear and do all the damage possible until the main force under Arnold and Silliman attacked from the front in Ridgefield. Wooster caught up with the British rear guard sooner than he expected in an area amid scrub pines and rocks about three miles north of the present Ridgefield Post Office. So sudden was his attack that he captured forty men before the British command was aware of his presence. He withdrew and shortly thereafter made a second attack once the enemy was in motion. The British responded with three pieces of heavy fire and Wooster's small force wavered in the face of this heavy fire. It was then that Wooster was mortally wounded. While turning



in his saddle to rally his men he was struck by a musket ball which entered his back cutting the spinal cord. The great sash he wore was unwound and used to carry him from the field. There was no hope for his recovery and he died shortly after. This courageous and patriotic Major-General - he gave his life for what he believed in. Back in 1775 when trouble brewed between Great Britain and the colonies he took up the cause of the latter and was one of those who conspired to capture Fort Ticonderoga. General David Wooster was buried with military honors in the old graveyard on Wooster Street, the street named in his honor. In April of 1852 his remains were taken from the Wooster Street burial ground and placed in Wooster Cemetery beneath a monument in his memory. Today his sash and sword may be viewed at Yale University.

Note: The old cemetery on Wooster Street still remains and is located behind the Danbury Senior Citizens Center. Wooster's grave and monument is located in Wooster Cemetery on Ellsworth Avenue across from Danbury Hospital.

Following Wooster's attack from the rear, the other forces attempted to block the progress of the British through Ridgefield. Upon his arrival in Ridgefield, Arnold constructed a barricade across a village street. Here the forces under Arnold and Silliman awaited the British forces with undaunted courage. The American troops inflicted greater losses on the enemy than they sustained themselves during this battle of Ridgefield. Arnold and Silliman relentlessly followed the British on their retreat and at Saugatuck gave the enemy a good fight before they embarked for New York. During this last encounter,

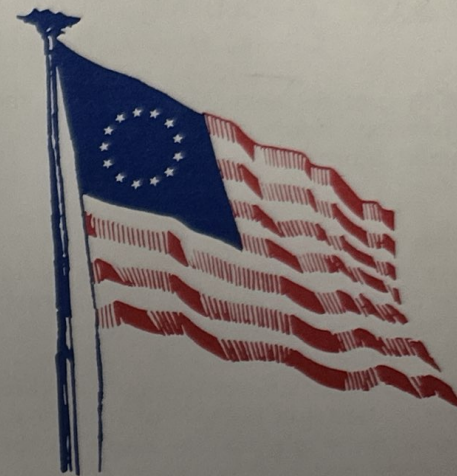
General Silliman was taken prisoner and carried to New York. The Americans' loss is said to have been less than half the loss suffered by the British.

It is no small thing to remember that the forces gathered to repel Tryon's expedition under Generals Wooster, Arnold and Silliman were made of both organized and unorganized militia. A large part of these troops had little or no military training. They were farmers from the towns through which the expeditionary force passed; they were old and young, married men with large families to support and boys too young to enlist in the Continental line. It was brave men like these from Danbury, Bethel, Redding, and Ridgefield and adjoining towns who fought fearlessly and risked their lives in defense of freedom. They belonged to the great legion of Revolutionary fighters, the famed Minute Men.

Supplies for the Continental Army continued to be stored at Danbury, and after Tryon's first raid were safe. There was never a second foray, as the British did not relish another expedition to Danbury.

In ending, it is well to note a fact long overlooked by historians. The Minute Men's successful harassment of Tryon's retreating columns discouraged any British plans to send reinforcements from New York through the countryside up the Hudson.

Thus, Tryon's failure to hold this portion of the State prevented the cooperation of the enemy's armies later in the year. This contributed materially to the capture of the British Lieutenant General John Burgoyne - the first great victory for the armies of the nation -- an American victory generally regarded as the turning point of the revolution.



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