

CHAPTER XII.

THE BRITISH IN DANBURY.

WHAT military force was here to defend Danbury was under the command of Joseph P. Cooke, a resident, who held the rank of colonel. Another prominent citizen was Dr. John Wood. He had in his employ a young man named Lambert Lockwood. He sent him out as a scout to learn where the enemy were, something of their number, and about the time they might be expected to reach the village.

Some four miles below here is an eminence called Hoyt's Hill.* It is not on the turnpike, but is located by the road to Lonetown, southeast of the turnpike. It was along this road the British approached Bethel.

An incident occurred here that has been confused by two or three versions. Hollister, in his history of Connecticut, says that Tryon was confronted on Hoyt's Hill by a presumably insane horseman, who appeared on the crest, waving a sword, and conducting himself very much as if he was in command of a considerable army in the act of climbing the opposite side of the hill. The British commander halted his force and sent out skirmishers to reconnoitre, when it was discovered that the stranger was alone, and instead of leading on an enthusiastic army to almost certain victory, was making the best of his way back to Danbury.

This account is apparently a distortion of an incident that really did occur, although it has the sanction of local tradition, and is repeated (in honest belief) by several aged residents who had it from their parents who were living here at the time.

* Dr. Adelaide Holten, a lineal descendant of Thomas Taylor, one of the first settlers, has heard her grandmother tell of seeing the approach of the British as she was returning on horseback over Hoyt's Hill from a visit to a neighbor. She described the gleam of the scarlet uniforms, and the flash of arms, and said that she dashed on toward Bethel, shouting, "The British are coming! The British are coming!"

Young Lambert reached the summit of Hoyt's Hill, when he suddenly and rather unexpectedly came upon the foe. He must have been riding at a smart speed, or he would not have become so helplessly entangled as he turned out to be. When he discovered the enemy he was too close upon them to get away, and in attempting it he was wounded and captured.

He learned a great deal of the British and their designs, but the value of it was considerably impaired by this incident.

Young Lockwood was brought to Danbury with his captors, and was left here. It is said that he was once a resident of Norwalk. When there he did a favor for General Tryon, on the occasion of an accident to that officer's carriage when he was driving through Norwalk. General Tryon recognized him, and in return for the favor ordered his discharge, and was writing a parole for him, to secure him against further molestation by the British, when the news of the approach of Wooster caused him to turn his attention to getting out of town.

After leaving Bethel the ranks were deployed, and Danbury was approached in open order, some of the advance being so far deployed as to take in Shelter Rock Ridge on the right and Thomas Mountain on the left.

On reaching the south end of our village General Tryon took up his headquarters in the house of Nehemiah Dibble, on South Street. The same building was known as the Wooster place (from the fact of General Wooster dying there a few days later) until its destruction some years ago.

It was between two and three o'clock in the afternoon when the British arrived. The leader having selected his headquarters, the quartering of the force for the protection of themselves was next attended to. Tryon's assistants, Generals Erskine and Agnew, accompanied by a body of mounted infantry, proceeded up Main Street to the junction of the Barren Plain Road (now White Street), where Benjamin Knapp lived. His house stood where is now the Nichols brick block, long known as Military Hall, the corner of which is now occupied as a drug store.

The two generals quartered themselves upon Mr. Knapp, taking complete possession of the house, with the exception of one room, where Mrs. Knapp was lying ill.

On this dash up Main Street the party met with two incidents. Silas Hamilton had a piece of cloth at a fuller's on South Street.

It is said that Major Taylor was the fuller. When Hamilton heard of the approach of the enemy, he mounted his horse and rode off at full speed for his goods. He was rather late, however, and when he came out to remount his horse, a squad of the force was upon him. He flew up Main Street with a half dozen troopers in full pursuit, and on reaching West Street he turned into it, with the hair on his head very erect.

The pursuers followed him, and one in advance and close upon him swung his sword to cut him down, when a singular but most fortunate accident occurred. Hamilton lost a part of his hold upon the roll, to which he had until this time tenaciously clung, and the cloth flew out like a giant ribbon, frightening the pursuing animals, and rendering them unmanageable, so Mr. Hamilton escaped with his cloth.*

The column that came up Main Street were fired upon from the house of Captain Ezra Starr, which stood where now is the residence of Mrs. D. P. Nichols, corner of Main and Boughton streets. The shots, it has been claimed, were fired by four young men. It was an act of reckless daring, and the actors must have been very young, as the shots could have had no other effect than to exasperate the invaders.

Dr. Robbins, in his account of the battle, says that one valuable house with four persons in it was burned, but does not say who the persons were. The men who fired on the enemy, from Captain Starr's house, were killed, and their bodies were burned in the building; but there were not four of them, there were three. One of these was a negro, named Adams. The two white men were Joshua Porter and Eleazer Starr. The former was a member of Noble Benedict's company, organized in 1775. He was great-grandfather of Colonel Samuel Gregory of this town, and lived in that part of the town that is called Westville District. He was in the village after a gallon of molasses when the enemy came.

Starr lived where now stands the *News* building. He and

* The first ancestor of the Hamilton family in this country was William, a son of Gallatin Hamilton, of Glasgow, Scotland. William was born in Glasgow in 1643; came early to New England; settled in Cape Cod, and was persecuted as one who dealt with evil spirits, for having killed the first whale on the New England Coast. He afterward went to South Kingston, R. I., and then came to Danbury, where he died in 1746, aged 103 years. This is a matter of family record, and also of anti-quarian history.

Porter went into Captain Starr's house to observe the coming of the British. Colonel Gregory understands that the negro was in the employ of Captain Starr. Depositions before the General Assembly, made in 1778, show that this Adams was a slave and belonged to Samuel Smith, in Redding. His service may have been leased to Captain Starr; at any rate, he died with Porter and Starr. A British officer, who was present at the time, subsequently spoke of the incident to a neighbor. He killed the negro himself.

As the British troops reached the present location of the court house their artillery was discharged, and the heavy balls, six and twelve-pounders, flew screaming up the street, carrying terror to the hearts of the women and children, and dismay to the heads of the homes thus endangered.

Immediately upon Generals Agnew and Erskine taking up their quarters in Mr. Knapp's house, a picket was located. One squad of twenty men occupied the rising ground where is now the junction of Park Avenue and Prospect Street. A second took position on the hill near Jarvis Hull's house. The third was located on what is now called Franklin Street. We have no information of other picket squads, but it is likely that every approach to the village was guarded.

It is related of a brother of Joshua Porter that, coming into the village to see what the British were doing, he came upon three of the picket stationed on Park Avenue. They commanded him to halt.

"What for?" he inquired, still continuing toward them.

"You are our prisoner," said they.

"Guess not," he laconically replied, moving steadily upon them.

"We'll stick you through and through, if you don't stop," one of them threatened, advancing close to him.

Porter was a man of very powerful build, with muscles like steel, and a movement that was a very good substitute for lightning. They were close upon him. There was a gulch back of them. In a flash he had the foremost trooper in his grasp. In the next instant he had hurled him against the other two, and the three went into the gulch in a demoralized heap. The rest of the squad, seeing the disaster, immediately surrounded and subdued Porter. This little affair, it is

said, gave the name of Squabble Hill to that neighborhood.

Porter and a man named Barnum are believed to be the only prisoners the enemy carried away from Danbury. They were taken to New York City and confined in the infamous Sugar House prison. Porter was subsequently released and returned home, but Barnum died there from starvation. When found he had a piece of brick in his hand, holding it to his mouth, as if to draw moisture from it to cool his feverish throat.

The main body of the troops remained in the village and shortly engaged in the destruction of the military stores.

Those in the Episcopal Church were rolled out into the street and there fired, as the edifice was of the Church of England, and so revered by the English invader.

Two other buildings contained stores. One of these was a barn belonging to Nehemiah Dibble. The goods were taken out and burned to save the building, as Dibble was a Tory. The other was a building situated on Main Street, near where is now Samuel C. Wildman's place. It was full of grain. It was burned with its contents. It is said that the fat from the burning meat ran ankle-deep in the street. No less free ran the rum and wine, although not in the same direction. The soldiers who were directed to destroy these tested them first, and the result was as certain as death. Before night had fairly set in the greater part of the force were in a riotous state of drunkenness. Discipline was set at naught. King George stood no chance whatever in the presence of King Alcohol, and went down before him at once. The riot continued far into the night. Danbury was never before nor since so shaken.

The drunken men went up and down the Main Street in squads, singing army songs, shouting coarse speeches, lugging each other, swearing, yelling, and otherwise conducting themselves as becomes an invader when he is very, very drunk.

The people who had not fled remained close in their homes, sleepless, full of fear, and utterly wretched, with the ghastly tragedy at Captain Starr's house hanging like a pall over them. The night was dark, with dashes of rain. The carousers tumbled down here and there as they advanced in the stages of drunkenness. Some few of the troops remained sober, and these performed the duties of the hour. One of these was the marking

of a cross upon the buildings which belonged to the Tories. This was done with pieces of lime. There was considerable of this property. Sympathizers with the government of the mother country abounded hereabouts. They were men who honestly believed that colonies had no right to secede from the crown, and they defended their belief when they could, and cherished it at all times. They were jubilant now. The proper authorities were in possession, the rebel element was overcome, and the Tories believed that Danbury was forever redeemed from the pernicious sway of the rebellion.

It is said that two of these people piloted Tryon to Danbury. The names given are Stephen Jarvis and Eli Benedict. It is further said that they fled from Danbury. Some time after Benedict came back, but being threatened with violence he left for good. Jarvis went to Nova Scotia, where he made his home. Once he returned on a visit to his sister. He came privately, but the neighbors, getting word of his presence, went to the house in search of him. His sister hid him in her brick oven, and when the danger was over he secretly left Danbury for Nova Scotia, never again to return. This statement was made in an appendix to an edition of Robbins's address brought out in 1851. In its issue of April 2d of that year the Danbury *Times* prints the following :

“ We refer to this statement in order to make a correction in point of fact, as well as of time. The brother of one of the alleged guides, a venerable resident of this town, proves an *alibi* in the case of Stephen. He says that at the time the British entered the town Stephen was confined at Stamford with the small-pox, and did not join the British until some time afterward. He assigns a very tender reason for Stephen's Toryism. At that time our neighboring village of Newtown was, according to his statement, largely given to the Tory faith, and Stephen's sweetheart was of that stock.”