

Fort George 1777: Evacuation and Occupation

By Russell Bellico, Board of Trustees Member



Lieutenant General John Burgoyne. Painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds. (Library of Congress)

After the suspension of the British invasion of the American colonies through Lake Champlain in the fall of 1776, a new plan was formulated in England during the winter of 1777 to sever the rebel colonies along the Hudson River. The strategy called for a convergence of three British armies at Albany – the main division, under Lieutenant General John Burgoyne, would advance south on Lake Champlain and the Hudson River, the second from southern New York would move north on the Hudson, and a smaller diversionary force would push east through the Mohawk Valley to Albany.

Anticipating a renewed British invasion, Major General Philip Schuyler, the American commander of the Northern Department, issued orders in early 1777 to strengthen the defenses at Fort Ticonderoga and Mount Independence, as well as Fort George. Unfortunately, the American forts remained drastically undermanned in 1777. Schuyler had written to

George Washington, the commander in chief of the American army, on January 30, requesting 10,000 troops to check the expected British invasion, but Washington and Congress mistakenly believed that the British troops in Canada were destined for an attack on Philadelphia and farther south.

On February 13, 1777, Schuyler informed Colonel Jeduthan Baldwin, the chief engineer at the Lake Champlain forts, that the Continental Congress had resolved to bolster the defenses in the northern theater. Plans included sinking “Ca[i]ssons [piers] from Island to Island in the Narrows” of Lake George in an effort to obstruct the passage of British vessels.¹ On February 24 Baldwin examined a site in the Narrows where the channel measured 280 yards wide between two islands, and he sounded the depth of the water.² The Lake George project never materialized, but Baldwin later supervised the construction of caissons and the Great Bridge, which connected Fort Ticonderoga to Mount Independence.

In March, Sabbath Day Point was the site of a bloody ambush of American troops. On their way to Fort George, a party of American troops bivouacked overnight at Sabbath Day Point, but were attacked at three o'clock in the morning by a detachment of Native Americans led by a Canadian loyalist (a former British lieutenant) and a lieutenant in the Quebec Indian Department. Four Americans were killed and 19-20 captured; the prisoners were later taken to Montreal. A party of American rangers were subsequently sent to bury the dead at Sabbath Day Point.³

Expecting that the British invasion route would involve Lake George, as well as Lake Champlain, Schuyler wrote to John Hancock, president of the

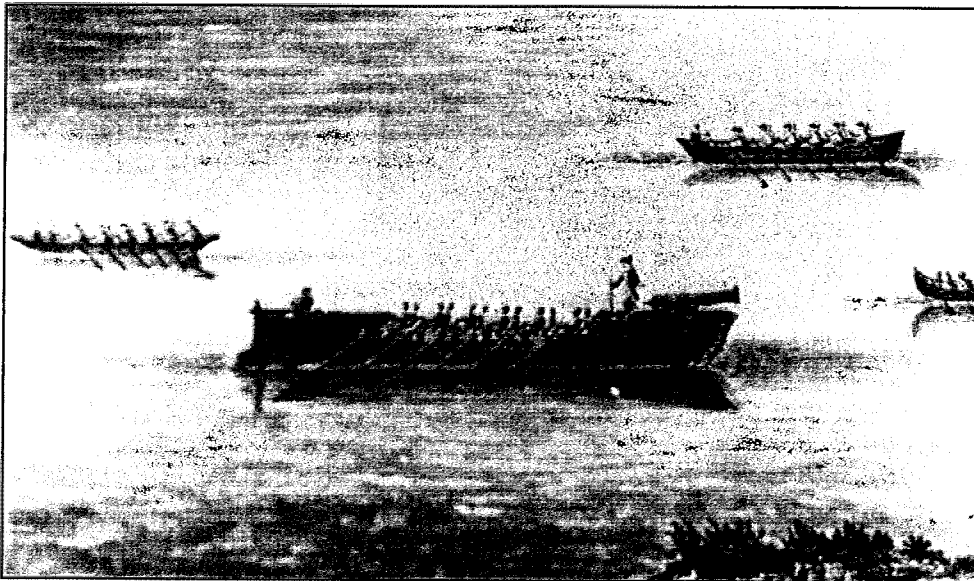
Continental Congress, on December 30, 1776, recommending that five or six “Vessels of considerable Force on Lake George” be built.⁴ On March 17, 1777, Schuyler issued an order that the existing “S[c]hooner ... be overhauled on Lake George.”⁵ A week later, Schuyler ordered Captain Jacobus Wynkoop to Fort George to supervise the construction of a new naval fleet. Winkoop was directed to build “two strong schooners of sixty feet keel and twenty feet beam ... three other vessels [row galleys] are to be built without decks ... to carry a cannon of twelve pound shot in the bow, and as many on each side as possible.”⁶

Preparations for the 1777 campaign also included a hospital at Fort George. In January, Dr. Jonathan Potts, who had directed the Fort George hospital the year earlier, was commissioned the Director-General of General Hospitals in the Northern Department. On April 3, Potts was ordered by Schuyler to “establish the General Hospital at Fort George” to accommodate the troops who “choose to be Inoculated” against

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Detail of a watercolor by James Hunter (1777), depicting one of the 26 British gunboats carried into Lake George. (National Archives of Canada)

smallpox and for those suffering from smallpox, as well as “other putrid or infectious disease.”⁷ Potts also located hospitals at Mount Independence and Albany. The hospital at Fort George never reached capacity due to the withdrawal of American troops in July, but as late as the third week of June, Schuyler continued to order infectious troops at Ticonderoga “be conveyed to Fort George in covered boats, which are made for the purpose.”⁸

Fort George functioned as a key transshipment hub for the transportation of provisions, artillery, and supplies north to Fort Ticonderoga and Mount Independence during the spring of 1777. About the same time, British intelligence sources reported “a large storehouse” on the beach at Fort George that held “flour, pork, and beef in abundance.”⁹ In June, Schuyler sent “between three and four hundred barrels of beef and pork” from Fort George to Ticonderoga and expected 1,500 more barrels to reach Fort George by the end of June.¹⁰ By early July, Lieutenant General John Burgoyne’s army, amounting to more than three times the size of the American forces, approached the American positions at Ticonderoga and Mount Independence. On July 5,

after Burgoyne’s army succeeded in establishing a battery on the summit of Mount Defiance overlooking Fort Ticonderoga, the undermanned garrison evacuated the fort, as well as Mount Independence.

After the retreat of the Americans, Burgoyne chose a route south through Wood Creek for his main army, rather than the traditional passage through Lake George. However, he decided to use Lake George to carry provisions, ammunition, and other military supplies. One of the reasons that Burgoyne suggested for his choice of routes was the presence of Fort George, which he maintained would “oblige me to open trenches [for a siege], and consequently delay” his army’s progress.¹¹ Burgoyne also had intelligence that the Americans were building “six strong vessels” on Lake George, which were described as “2 armed schooners and 4 cannon boats [that were] on the lake” in subsequent scouting reports.¹² The descriptions given by Major General Schuyler, however, suggest a less formidable American fleet on Lake George. Although he mentioned a “large schooner” used for provisions in a letter dated June 24, two weeks later Schuyler wrote that he had insufficient cannons “for the

two small schooners on Lake George.”¹³ He described the fleet on Lake George as one vessel afloat and “tolerably fit[t]ed ... the other still upon the Stocks, but if the two had been upon the Water they would have been of little Use, without Rigging or Guns,” and the existing schooner on the lake would easily have been captured.¹⁴

Faced with the loss of Ticonderoga and overwhelming odds, Schuyler ordered the evacuation and destruction of Fort George in early July. On July 9 Captain John Calfe wrote from Fort Edward that “Teams [of horses had been] Sent to Fort George to bring offstores with ye utmost D[i]spatch.”¹⁵ Schuyler reported that he “brought away about twenty pieces of artillery” from Fort George and “nearly all the powder, amounting to about thirteen tons.”¹⁶ Caravans, consisting of 40 to 50 wagons, had moved the artillery and supplies southward from Fort George. Major Christopher Yates, the commander of Fort George, departed with 700 troops on July 16 after blowing up the magazine and burning the fort.

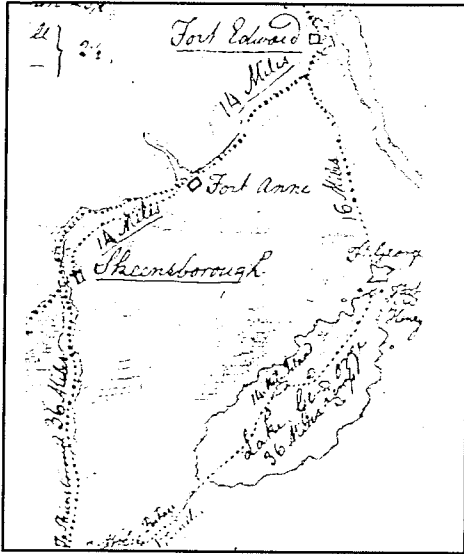
After the withdrawal, George Washington indirectly questioned Schuyler’s judgement by commenting that others had apprised him “that a spirited, brave, judicious officer, with two of three hundred good men, together with the armed vessels you have built, would retard Burgoyne’s passage across the Lake for a considerable time.”¹⁷ General Schuyler defended his strategy of abandoning Fort George by denigrating its strength, suggesting that the fort was only one Bastion of “an intended fortification,” holding only 100-150 troops with barracks for 30-50 men, lacking a cistern for water, or a “picket [palisade of log stakes] to prevent the enemy from running over the wall.”¹⁸ (See also Lynda Karig Hohmann, “Fort George: As described, 1777,” *Fort George Post* (Winter 2021): 3,5.)

By the last week of July, the majority of British gunboats on Lake Champlain had been transferred to Lake George. James Murray Hadden, a lieutenant in the Royal Artillery Regiment, arrived at Fort George on July 28 in one of the

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Map drawn by Lieutenant James Murray Hadden in 1777, showing Lake George, Fort George, and the surrounding region. (Hadden's Journal and Orderly Books, Horatio Rogers, editor)

gunboats and described the fort as "a small square Fort faced with Masonry and contains Barracks for about a hundred Men secured from Cannon Shot ... The Rebels ... blew up the Magazine on the side next [to] the Water which demolished that Face" and earlier in his journal reported that the Americans had "destroyed their Vessels (5 in number) including two on the Stocks."¹⁹

Fort George now became a crucial transshipment point for the British army. The road to Fort Edward was improved in order that provisions, supplies, and artillery, and other material could be moved southward as quickly as possible. Thereafter, two companies of soldiers were assigned to Fort George and two more to a supply depot on Diamond Island, the latter protected by six cannons behind a breastwork and two gunboats.

On September 14 Major General Benjamin Lincoln of the Continental Army wrote to Major General Horatio Gates, the new commander of the Northern Army replacing Schuyler, that he would send three 500-man detachments to Lake Champlain "to

divide and distract the enemy ... to release prisoners & destroy the stores there."²⁰ A detachment led by Colonel John Brown succeeded in freeing American prisoners at Ticonderoga and taking possession of the fort's outer defenses, but a demand by Brown for the surrender of Fort Ticonderoga was rebuffed by the fort's commander.

Brown subsequently focused on a new target. On September 24 Brown attacked the British supply depot on Diamond Island, manned by two companies of the 47th Regiment, along with a contingent of German troops. The garrison on the island was besieged by 420 American militiamen aboard 17 bateaux, two gunboats, and a three-gun sloop, vessels captured by Brown's troops at the northern end of the lake. For more than an hour, the armed vessels and shore batteries engaged in a heavy cannonade. Brown's damaged sloop had to be towed away, and one gunboat was "so damaged" it was abandoned.²¹ The Americans ran the flotilla into Van Wormer Bay on the eastern shore and burned most of the vessels. However, one gunboat with a 12-pound cannon was later retaken by the British. A shipwreck, first discovered in the early 1950s and examined by Bateaux Below, Inc., in 2002-2003, was not positively identified until a few years ago as one of Brown's vessels, based on a large collection of Revolutionary War artifacts that had been donated to the Lake George Historical Association.

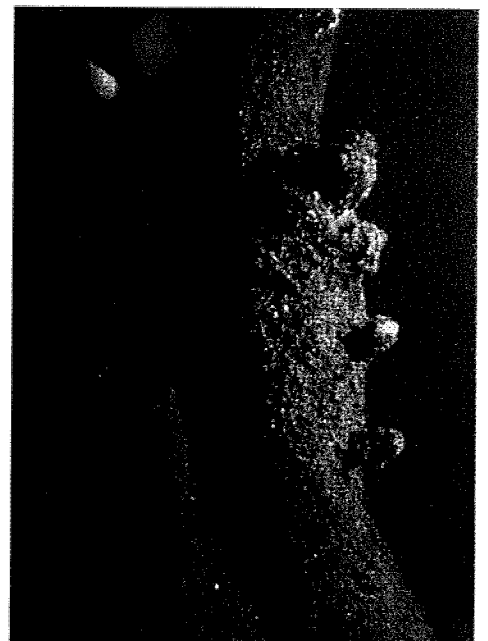
After the British defeat at Saratoga, the posts at Lake George and Lake Champlain were not evacuated immediately. For several weeks, Fort George continued to function as a way station. Canadian bateau men, laborers, drivers, and other noncombatants were not held prisoner by the Americans following the surrender at Saratoga, but allowed to return home – a journey that first involved a stop at Fort George.²² In early November, Fort George was "abandoned and burned," and the breastwork on Diamond Island was also burned.²³ Before daybreak on November 8, according to a German officer, the signal

was given to start the fires [at Fort Ticonderoga and Mount Independence] ... All at once we saw all the log houses, the store houses, the hospital ... everything ... the floating bridge was also cut down and burned."²⁴ Fifty barrels of powder were detonated at Fort Ticonderoga, which "blew up high into the air," as British and German troops departed in their vessels for the melancholy voyage back to Canada.²⁵ In the following years, Fort George was garrisoned by American troops as its northernmost fort in the lake valleys. ■

NOTES:

1. William James Morgan, ed., *Naval Documents of the American Revolution* (Washington, D.C.: Naval History Division, Department of the Navy, 1976), Volume 7, 1190.
2. Jeduthan Baldwin, *The Revolutionary Journal of Col Jeduthan Baldwin 1775-1778*, ed. Thomas Williams Baldwin (Bangor, ME: DeBurians, 1906), 93.
3. *Ibid.*, 95; John Calfe, "Capt. John Calfe's Book" in *A Memorial of the Town of Hampstead, New Hampshire*, comp. by Harriette Elliza Noyes (Boston: George B. Reed, 1899), 289; Gavin K. Watt, "Action at Sabbath Day Point, March 20, 1777," *The Journal of the American Revolution*, June 5, 2017, online.
4. Morgan, NDAR 7: 627.
5. William James Morgan, ed., *Naval Documents of the American Revolution* (Washington, D.C.: Naval History Division, Department of the Navy, 1980), Volume 8, 135.
6. *Ibid.*, 187-88; "The Trial of Major General Schuyler, October 1778," *Collections of the New-York Historical Society* 12 (1879): 78-79.

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Bow section of a wreck identified as one of Colonel John Brown's abandoned vessels. (Photo by Russell Bellico)

100th Year Rededication of the Indian Fountain September 18, 2021

Designed by Alexander Phimister Proctor, donated as a generous gift by George Dupont Pratt and dedicated in the park on October 4th, 1921, the Indian Fountain continues to attract visitors to its powerful but peaceful presence. Its purpose is to honor American Indians who inhabited the region in the 18th century. The beloved statue is now 100 years old and the Alliance will be celebrating this 100th Anniversary on September 18th, during the French and Indian War Encampment. Please watch your Inbox/Mail box for your invitation with additional information. ■

I Love My Park Day

We had an energetic group of volunteers for I Love My Park Day on May 1, 2021. We cleaned the Indian Fountain enclosure including great work by Joanne Morrison who mucked out the pool and recovered \$4.98 in coins! Several of the group planted the flowers at the Unknown Soldier Memorial. This year we tried petunias after our marigolds didn't make it in the last few years. They are still beautiful! Thank you all who participated.



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7. Mrs. Thomas Potts James, *Memorial of Thomas Potts, Junior* (Cambridge, MA: Privately Printed, 1874), 193,195,197.
8. "Trial of Schuyler," 115.
9. B. F. DeCosta, *Notes on the History of Fort George During the Colonial and Revolutionary Periods* (New York: J. Sabin & Sons, 1871), "Additions," 3.
10. "Trial of Schuyler," 114-15.
11. John Burgoyne, *A State of the Expedition from Canada* (1780; reprint ed., New York: The New York Times & Arno Press, 1969), 17.12. William L. Stone, trans., *Memoirs, Letters, and Journals of Major General Riedesel* (1868; reprint ed., New York: The New York Times & Arno Press, 1969), Volume 1, 295-96; Helga Doblin, trans. and Mary C. Lynn, ed., *American Revolution, Garrison Life in French Canada and New York: Journal of an Officer in the Prinz Friedrich Regiment, 1776-1883* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993), 76.
13. "Trial of Schuyler," 113, 158; Schuyler's letters are somewhat confusing given that on June 25 he described one of the schooners launched "to carry fourteen guns," which would not be "small." *Ibid.*, 116.
14. Jared Sparks, *Writings of George Washington* (Boston: Russell, Odiorne, and Metcalf, 1834), Volume 4, 494.
15. Calfe, "Capt. Calfe's Book," 291.
16. "Trial of Schuyler," 162-63; Others reported "forty odd pieces of cannon," and "medicines, military chests, etc." being saved. *Boston Gazette*, 28 July 1777.
17. Sparks, *Writings of Washington*, 494; In a subsequent letter, Washington withdrew his questioning of Schuyler's orders to evacuate Fort George. John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington* (Washington, D. C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1933), Volume 8, 449.
18. Sparks, *Writings of Washington*, 494.
19. Horatio Rogers, ed., *Hadden's Journal and Orderly Books: A Journal Kept in Canada and Upon Burgoyne's Campaign in 1776 and 1777*, by Lieut. James M. Hadden, Roy. Art. (Albany: Joel Munsell's Sons, 1884), 103, 107.
20. "Brown's Attack of September 1777," *The Bulletin of the Fort Ticonderoga Museum* 11 (July 1964): 212.
21. William James Morgan, ed., *Naval Documents of the American Revolution* (Washington, D. C.: Naval History Division, Department of the Navy, 1986), Volume 9, 968.
22. Helga Doblin, trans. and Mary C. Lynn, ed., *An Eyewitness Account of the American Revolution and New England Life: The Journal of J. F. Wasmus, German Company Surgeon, 1776-1783* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1990), 91.
23. Charlotte S. J. Epping, trans., *Journal of Du Roi the Elder* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1911), 110.
24. *Ibid.*
25. Doblin and Lynn, *American Revolution, Garrison Life*, 86.