



Pulitzer winner Rick Atkinson, in LG this Friday; talks Gen. Knox, Washington & U.S. Revolution with Chronicle

By Cathy DeDe

Chronicle Managing Editor

Rick Atkinson comes to Lake George this Friday, Dec. 12 for three local events in the 250th year celebration of Gen. Henry Knox's Noble Train of Artillery. (Details in sidebar box.)

Winner of Pulitzer Prizes both as an historian (and New York Times best-selling author) and as a journalist (then with the *Washington Post*), Mr. Atkinson is prominent in Ken Burns's new PBS documentary, *The American Revolution*.

Speaking with *The Chronicle* by phone Saturday, **Mr. Atkinson said of Henry Knox, "He proved his worth,** obviously, and you all will be celebrating it up there."

He provides context around Knox's heroic feat of transporting 60 tons of cannons from Fort Ticonderoga to Boston.

"George Washington, coming in to lead the new American Continental Army, **has a number of defects** as a military commander," Mr. Atkinson says.

"He's not a particularly good tactician. There's a lot that he doesn't know when he takes command at Cambridge (Mass.) in July of 1775 — but he's got a lot of assets, and one of the traits for which he's most conspicuously gifted is **an eye for subordinate talent.** So...he sees **this 25-year-old, overweight Boston bookseller named Henry Knox, and somehow intuits** that this guy's going to be the father of American artillery.

"After the war, he's going to rely on Knox to be the first Secretary of War. That enduring relationship between the two of them is something that begins, really, in the first days of the Revolution."

Informally paraphrasing, Mr. Atkinson says Washington told Knox, "I know there are some cannons up there at Fort Ticonderoga. It's a long way, and it's the middle of the winter, but I really need them because I don't have the firepower to force the British out of occupied Boston. Go see if you can find a few and bring them back." Mr. Atkinson says, "Of course, Knox does, and he does it with extraordi-

nary ingenuity and diligence. He arrives back in Cambridge, and says, 'Boss, I brought you back 50-some guns. They're parked outside town.' Washington says, 'You are my man.'

"They're going to have that kind of relationship for the rest of their lives. **Knox is going to be critical**" to Washington during and after war, Mr. Atkinson says.

A couple of Mr. Atkinson's favorite Revolutionary moments?

"I love the arrival of **Benjamin Franklin in Paris** in December of 1776. He's in his 70s. He has been sent to persuade the Roman Catholic Absolute Monarch of France, Louis the 16th, that it's in Louis's best interest to align himself with Protestant wannabe-Republicans intent on armed rebellion against their lawful monarch — a very heavy lift diplomatically — and he's gonna do it brilliantly. He's our first and greatest diplomat."

"I'm a military historian," Mr. Atkinson says, "so my head always swivels to the battlefield. There are any number of moments where **things look very grim for the home team, and yet** their hopes are revived. They're saved from catastrophe."

"They escape after the bad drubbing at the Battle of Long Island in August of 1776. Washington retreats with his army into the defenses at Brooklyn. Things look pretty grim, then he slips across the East River at night through a providential fog to escape to Manhattan. You cannot make it up. It's so wonderfully dramatic."

Asked about Joseph Warren, our county's namesake, doctor and Founding Father who perished in 1777 at Bunker Hill, "actually Breed's Hill," Mr. Atkinson says: "He's the first martyr."

"He never really has the opportunity to deliver on what I suspect he could have, providing high intelligence, good political sense, organizational abilities, an astute physician at a time when there was not a surplus of them around giving advice on how to keep your army healthy. It doesn't do him much good because he's dead — but the fact that his body was mistreated by the British, allegedly — that actually enhances his stature posthumously."

"As we swing into the semiquincennial (America's 250th year) full bore, it's an opportunity not only for celebration, but also for reflection about some of the basic questions of who we are, and where we came from," says Mr. Atkinson.

"No matter how grim things seem in 2025, when national unity is elusive and partisan rancor seems ever more venomous, we've endured much worse before in our history — existential crises starting with the Revolution and including a Civil War, two World Wars, Great Depression. That should be reassuring."

Of the **Ken Burns documentary The American Revolution**, Mr. Atkinson says, "I've been involved for almost four years, reading scripts and appearing on camera, reviewing the rough cut of the

film, and since last spring, helping to promote it....It's an extraordinary film. It's good history. It's vivid."

Also citing co-directors Sarah Botstein and David Schmidt "and the rest of the team," he says, "What they have done is to remind us of **what a grand narrative the American Revolution was and remains**, and how it's vital to understand, quoting myself 'who we are, where we came from, what our forebears believed, and what they were willing to die for' which is the most profound question any people can ask themselves."

"It shows the extraordinary miracle of winning the American Revolution, winning independence. But beyond that, it shows what an extraordinary path we've taken...how far we've come.

"Of two and a half million people in America in 1775, 500,000 of them are enslaved blacks — one of every five souls living in the 13 colonies. Two hundred fifty years later, we've come a long way, not to say we're all the way, but in terms of those for whom the glorious words 'All men are created equal' didn't apply, we have been applying those words — to women, blacks, Native Americans, indigents — pretty relentlessly since 1776. The film sets up that story, too."

Mr. Atkinson says he grew up an "Army brat" on military posts and understands the life and lingo, "so I was often given military assignments" in his two decades as a journalist.

"I spent time in Somalia and Bosnia, Iraq and Afghanistan and all that. That has actually helped me in being a military historian."

"An infantryman is an infantryman," he says he's learned.

"I was with the 101st Airborne with Dave Petraeus for two months in Iraq in 2003. There are things about those soldiers that would be entirely familiar to Thucydides (the ancient Greek general) or to Washington's soldiers in the Revolution.

"Watching senior commanders grapple with all the tasks, the burden of command, the loneliness, the need to get enough sleep — fundamentals like that — is useful to me in writing about commanders at all levels."

Asked if he thinks war is an inevitable part of the human experience, Mr. Atkinson says, "It'd be hard to argue against it, looking at 5,000 years of history, or more.

"One of the reasons I spent my entire professional life writing about war is precisely to illuminate how awful it is. In no way do I glorify or revel in it or think that it's anything but fundamentally dead sol-

diers and sobbing mothers.

"Particularly in a democracy, when you should be involved in the most profound of decisions that a people can make, which is whether they go to war or not, it's easier to do it if you have any illusions that it is anything, at heart, other than that."

Rick Atkinson events

Pulitzer Prize-winning American Revolution historian Rick Atkinson is in Lake George **Friday, Dec. 12**. The author of bestsellers *The British Are Coming* and *The Fate of the Day* is featured in Ken Burns' new *The American Revolution* documentary on PBS.

• **Free public conversation & Q&A, 7 p.m.** at Lake George High School. Mr. Atkinson will be interviewed on stage by WMHT's Matt Rogowicz. Book sale & signing. Period music by members of the Glens Falls Symphony at 6:30 p.m. Free, but reservations are suggested: lakegeorgebattlefield.org/henry-knox/.

• Rick Atkinson will meet with **Lake George students** in the morning, an event closed to the public.

• There's a **sold-out VIP reception** at Lake George Holiday Inn Resort.

Atkinson, about Gen. Burgoyne, Benedict Arnold

British "**General John Burgoyne** has the misfortune of being General Burgoyne, and losing his entire army," Rick Atkinson says of the American Revolution. "He comes out of Canada. **He's quite capable, though he's probably more capable as a playwright than he is as a general**, as it turns out, and is going to be better remembered as a playwright subsequently."

"His plan is to cleave New England from the Middle Atlantic by splitting the colonies down the Hudson River Valley. That doesn't work out for various reasons, including that General (William) Howe, who's with the main army in New York, thinks he's got a better idea, to go 180 degrees the other direction, to Philadelphia."

"Then the second Battle of Saratoga in October '77 is an abject defeat. It's going to lead to the (British) army being

surrounded and ultimately having to surrender...a huge victory for the home team"

It helps Franklin persuade the French to join the effort. "So Burgoyne is instrumental, in a bad way, for him."

• **As for Benedict Arnold**, Mr. Atkinson calls him "**one of the great puzzlements** in American military history."

"He's the **best tactical commander** on either side in the first couple years.

"**He's a man born to lead other men in the dark of night, and that's a rare and valuable trait.**"

"Washington recognizes early that this guy can fight" which he proves capturing Ticonderoga with Ethan Allen, trekking in difficult circumstances to Canada and in retreat, building a "cockleshell" navy at Valcour Island on Lake Champlain.

But Arnold goes awry convalescing after he's wounded a second time in the same leg at Saratoga. "**He's a brooder, he's got grievances,**" says Mr. Atkinson, "and it's all going to lead, of course, to him ultimately becoming a synonym for treason."
— **Cathy DeDe**