

American Revolution Mini-Q

Determining the Facts: The Battles of Saratoga

Burdened by his supply train, General Burgoyne's army could not hope to make a run past the American river fortifications. He was sure neither of the size nor the location of the American lines. On September 19, 1777, the British army advanced in three columns, two heading through the heavy forests on the bluffs west of the Hudson, the third, composed of German troops, following the river road. Around mid-day, Col. Daniel Morgan's corps of Virginia riflemen met the center column at Freeman's Farm. A classical European-style contest followed as British lines advanced on the two brigades of Continental soldiers and militia. As American numbers and marksmanship began to weaken the British assault, the German column arrived. In the face of these reinforcements, the Americans withdrew. The British held the field at the end of the day but had suffered 600 casualties. The Americans had half the number of casualties and still blocked the route to Albany.

Now both armies dug in, building new fortifications and waiting. Time was against Burgoyne. Clinton was supposedly preparing to move north toward Albany from New York City, but ultimately he was not able to assist Burgoyne. While Burgoyne waited for help from Clinton, his supplies were dwindling, the morale of his men was shrinking, and winter was fast approaching. At the same time, General Gates' army grew as militia units continued to arrive. On October 6, 1777, Burgoyne and his top officers met in a council of war. Burgoyne wanted to commit more than 6,000 soldiers (all except 800 of his troops) on the next day to an attack on the American left flank. All of Burgoyne's subordinates opposed his proposal since the British lacked full knowledge of the American's fortifications and feared that an American counterattack on the weakly defended camp would leave the army without supplies or a route to retreat north. Some of Burgoyne's staff suggested that they fall back nearer to Lake Champlain while others suggested reconnoitering the American line. Burgoyne compromised and they agreed to send out 1,700 men to probe the American lines, forage for food and supplies, and decide if the hills to the west of the line could be used to mount the British cannons to bombard the Americans.

The reconnaissance force moved out around noon on October 7. Gates was informed of the movement and dispatched Col. Daniel Morgan's corps, Gen. Enoch Poor's brigade, and Brig. Gen. Ebenezer Learned's brigade to attack the right, left, and center of the British line, respectively. The Americans engaged Burgoyne's soldiers at Barber's Wheatfield and in a little over an hour inflicted more than 400 casualties, pushing the British troops back to their fortified lines. Although Poor's men failed to capture the Balcarres Redoubt (a log-and-earthen work on the Freeman Farm that was about 500 yards long and 12-14 feet high) fresh reinforcements joined Learned's brigade, and urged on by Gen. Benedict Arnold, they captured Breymann's Redoubt (a single line of breastworks about 200 yards long and 7-8 feet high). As night fell, Burgoyne's battered army retreated to the safety of the Great Redoubt (a system of fortifications designed to protect their hospital, artillery park, and supplies on the river flat).

After a day's rest, Burgoyne decided to retreat north to Ticonderoga. However, American forces had continued to swell with each passing day. Gates' army now numbered more than 12,000 and had sustained only 500 casualties in the three weeks of fighting compared to Burgoyne's 1,200 casualties. Militia from New Hampshire and Vermont cut off escape to the east side of the Hudson. Newly arrived Massachusetts militiamen who had begun to dig trenches at Saratoga (now Schuylerville) blocked the final escape route to the north. Only 9 miles into their retreat, the British army was effectively surrounded. Burgoyne and his officers concluded that they had no option left except to surrender. After negotiating over the terms, Burgoyne and his nearly

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6,000 soldiers laid down their arms on October 17, 1777. According to the articles of surrender, they were free to return to England provided they promised never to fight again in America. The British troops were escorted to Cambridge, Massachusetts to await transport ships to England. However, the Continental Congress declared them full prisoners of war, so most remained as prisoners in America until the end of the war.

The Battle of Saratoga is often called the turning point of the American Revolution because the defeat of the British encouraged France to enter into a military alliance with the newly formed United States. Although the French were already supplying the Continental Army with weapons, and had been impressed by Washington's resourcefulness and favorable reports by German Johann de Kalb, they were concerned by the capture of Philadelphia. Saratoga convinced the French government that the Americans could fight against disciplined military units and win. On February 6, 1778, the French government signed accords with Benjamin Franklin and the other American envoys in Paris that recognized America's Declaration of Independence and pledged full military and financial support. Had the Americans not won at Saratoga, the French would not have supplied the troops or the French Navy that made victory at Yorktown possible. In bringing France into the war against Britain, Saratoga also brought France's allies, Spain and Holland, into the conflict. The American victory at Saratoga turned the American Revolution into a global war that Britain could not win.

Questions for Reading 1

1. How many battles were fought at Saratoga? How long a period of time passed between the battles?
2. What was General Burgoyne waiting for after the first Battle of Saratoga? How did time work against him?
3. What was the effect of the American victory at Saratoga on the course of the American Revolution?

Reading 1 was compiled from the National Park Service's visitor's guide for Saratoga National Historical Park; John Elting, The Battles of Saratoga (Monmouth Beach, New Jersey: Phillip Freneau Press, 1977); Rupert Furneaux, The Battle of Saratoga (New York: Stein and Day, 1971); and Don Higginbotham, The War of American Independence: Military Attitudes, Policies and Practice, 1763-1789 (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1983).

Source: <http://www.nps.gov/nr/twhp/wwwlps/lessons/93saratoga/93facts1.htm>