John Stark

"***Let it be virtue to be obstinate*.**"
Wm Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*
Brian Mumford, Past President

FORWARD: Three days prior to the Battle of Bunker Hill, the Second Continental Congress, a body of elected delegates from the Thirteen Colonies, convened in Philadelphia to assume the role of a *de facto* national government. In addition to its diplomatic and administrative functions, Congress undertook to raise an army over which the delegates had control, including the exclusive authority to grant officer promotions.

In the eighteenth century, a gentleman officer would be conscious of his position in the chain of command since his military commission was a reflection of his good character and reputation. As a matter of honor, a gentleman could not serve under men who had been his subordinate or who lacked recognized military accomplishment. In such a culture of honor, tendering his resignation from the army was an officer's only option if there was an insult to his character.

During John Stark's lengthy military career, he had many opportunities to make critical decisions, not only about military strategies but also regarding his rank and recognition. At first glance many have judged Stark as being obstinate and have questioned how he could be comfortable with many of his career altering judgments. However, looking at the range of decisions he made during the course of the battles in which he fought, Stark emerges as not only a brilliant military strategist but also a heroic man of great honor.

EARLY YEARS: John Stark's ancestors were Presbyterians who were driven from Scotland during the reign of King James II and settled for a short time in Northern Ireland before emigrating to New Hampshire in 1720. John, one of five children, was born in 1728 and was brought up on the family farm located in the wilderness on the New England and Canadian border.

This was a highly dangerous area under constant threat of attacks by the indigenous Algonquian-speaking Abenaki, who persistently raided British settlements in what formerly had been their homeland. The hostilities by the Abenaki were supported and urged by French traders who were attempting to halt the British colonists from expanding farther into their hunting territory.

Stark became a trained woodsman able to survive long journeys in severe weather while living off the land. During his early years, Stark became instilled with deep confidence and bold self-reliance that guided him throughout his life.

In the spring of 1752, while hunting, Stark was captured by an Abenaki raiding party and brought to their village. It was a common practice for the Abenaki to capture settlers and sell them as slaves to the French. When forced as a prisoner to run the gauntlet, Stark grabbed a pole and began hitting those waiting to strike him. Stark's defiance earned him the favor of the tribe's chief who consented to Stark's being adopted into the tribe. During his confinement he learned the tribe's language and customs and was treated fairly. After eight months, Stark was ransomed for 103 Spanish dollars by an agent for the Province of Massachusetts Bay, and he returned to his home.

ROGERS' RANGERS: In 1754 Stark was commissioned by New Hampshire Colonial Governor Benning Wentworth as a second lieutenant in the British Army to serve in the newly formed Rogers' Rangers in the French and Indian War.

The rangers were trained and experienced in wilderness warfare and were particularly adept at reconnaissance and intelligence gathering. During his service, Stark was engaged in numerous battles with the French forces in the Lake Champlain-Lake George area and was promoted to captain. In 1758 Stark returned home briefly following the death of his father during which time he married Elizabeth Page, whom he called Molly.

In 1759, British General Jeffery Amherst ordered Stark's company of rangers to attack an Abenaki village. As a matter of honor out of respect for the kindness of his earlier Native American captors, Stark refused the order and ultimately resigned his commission. Stark returned to his family farm and lumber mill. It would be sixteen years until he resumed his military career.

Stark later learned that during the raid, the rangers had killed thirty members of the village, including women and children. He also became aware that Amherst had engaged in a form of biological warfare by giving blankets that had been laced with smallpox bacteria to Abenaki villages.

BUNKER HILL: Following the battles at Lexington and Concord in April 1775, the British forces retreated back to Boston. The local militia followed and surrounded Boston to effectively contain the British troops within Boston, while more than 100 British ships armed with cannons remained anchored in the harbor.

In June, the colonists learned that the British were planning an attack to occupy Bunker Hill and Breed's Hill at Charlestown, each a strategic artillery location. When a call for support went out to the New England militia, Stark traveled to Cambridge where he was granted a colonel's commission in the Massachusetts militia with authority to enlist recruits until New Hampshire granted him a commission.

After recruiting 700 men, Stark appeared before the New Hampshire Provisional Congress where he was told, despite prior assurances, he would not be commanding the 1st New Hampshire Regiment since that command was to go to someone with little military experience. Offended to be passed over, Stark reminded the Congress that he already had a commission from Massachusetts and he walked out of the meeting to returned to his troops. The Provisional Congress reversed itself, assigning Stark to command of the 1st New Hampshire Regiment.

When he reported at Charlestown with his regiment, Stark immediately went into action displaying his leadership and strategy skills. Detecting a weakness in the defense, he ordered breastwork be built along the Mystic River shore to prevent being flanked by the British infantry. During the heavy fighting, as Stark moved among the troops giving orders and encouragement, his regiment decimated line after line of 350 light infantrymen attackers.

When the Americans defending Breed's Hill ran out of powder and were about to be overrun, Stark led them in retreat off the Charlestown peninsula, putting up a running fight and was last to leave the battlefield. His heroic blocking defense saved the lives of hundreds of Americans.

The British casualties were staggering with 92 officers and 1,100 troops killed or wounded out of a total of 2,500 engaged in the battle. The colonial's casualties were 400 out of a force of 1,600. The battle at Bunker Hill eliminated virtually any chance for reconciliation with the British. When King George III received news of the battle, he issued a proclamation declaring the colonies to be in a state of "open and avowed rebellion."

BOSTON SEIGE: After leaving the Charlestown peninsula, all the American troops amassed around Boston to continue the siege. To organize an army, the Continental Congress had recently ordered that all colonist troops at Boston, including Stark's New Hampshire militia regiment, were now members of the new

Continental Army. General George Washington, recently appointed Commander in Chief of the Continental Army, arrived at Cambridge to take command.

British General William Howe, not wanting to lose any more troops, ruled out further ground attacks against Boston. He also ruled out cannonading the city since there were British troops and loyalists remaining there. On the other hand, the Americans had no defense against the British cannons and thus ruled out an attack against Boston. Under these circumstances the siege became a standoff that would continue for months.

BOSTON VICTORY: In November 1775, Washington ordered Colonel Henry Knox to undertake a 600-mile round trip to Fort Ticonderoga to bring back to Boston the cannons that the Green Mountain Boys had captured earlier that year. On January 24th, Knox returned to Boston with 55 cannons. Overnight 2,000 continental soldiers maneuvered 24 of the cannons to the top of Dorchester Heights and positioned them within range of the British ships. Caught off guard by the swift placement of the cannons, Howe realized that the British had no choice but to evacuate Boston. On March 17th, 120 ships with 20,000 troops and loyalists aboard sailed from Boston Harbor. Howe agreed not to destroy Boston while leaving in exchange for Washington's assurance not to cannonade the exiting fleet. With Howe's evacuation of Boston, the newly formed Continental Army had gained its first victory.

TRENTON AND PRINCETON: After Boston, Stark and his regiment moved south to join Washington in winning victories at Trenton on December 26th and Princeton a week later. After the recent loss at the Battle of Long Island, these wins were a boost to the morale of the patriot cause, leading many recruits to join the Continental Army. At the conclusion of the battles, Washington moved his army into winter quarters at Morristown. Before Stark departed for New Hampshire for the winter, Washington asked him to recruit additional forces in New Hampshire to bring back in the spring.

RESIGNATION: While back in New Hampshire and enlisting troops, Stark received word that the Continental Congress had issued a list of promotions to the rank of brigadier general. Despite his successful service during the Siege of Boston and victories at Trenton and Princeton, the members of Congress had passed over Stark to promote officers with far less experience. As a matter of honor, Stark resigned from the Continental Army. Continental Brigadier Generals John Sullivan

and Enoch Poor each made personal pleas to Stark to withdraw his resignation and return to the Continental Army. Stark refused.

PRE -BENNINGTON: Notwithstanding his resignation from the military, Stark remained a staunch supporter of the revolution. He followed closely reports of Burgoyne's advance south from Canada. As an experienced military strategist, Stark saw the potential for Burgoyne to attack to the east and move through New England. Stark's thinking was well founded since it tracked a plan Burgoyne himself had suggested to King George. Unbeknownst to Stark, Burgoyne originally had suggested that he be given the discretion to attack through what is now Vermont into New Hampshire and then Connecticut in order to isolate and take control of New England. However, the King rejected the proposal and order Burgoyne to march directly south to Albany. Upon receiving his order, Burgoyne was troubled and wrote to the king's minister:

> [*it would be my wish] that a latitude had been left me for a* ***diversion towards Connecticut****, but that such an idea being out of question, by my orders being precise to force the junction at Albany*. (emphasis added)

Stark watched carefully to judge whether Burgoyne's plan was to move south along the Hudson River or to move east into New England. Stark was concerned when, after taking Fort Ticonderoga, the British marched east to pursue Vermont Colonel Seth Waren to Hubbardton and, after the fierce fighting there, continued eastward towards Manchester.

Stark was justifiably concerned when Burgoyne, rather than moving south on Lake George, moved east to stay for two weeks with Philip Skene at his 34,000-acre estate centered at Skenesborough, now Whitehall. Skene was a fifty-two-year-old retired British career officer who the King had appointed Colonial Governor of the Lake Champlain region. During a recent trip to London, Skene had enlisted in Burgoyne's campaign as a colonel and was instructed to return to North America to assist in the operation.

Vermont's location rendered it the likely area to be initially attacked by Burgoyne if he decided to march against New England. Consigned to serving as buffer, and recently at Hubbardton having had its troop strength depleted to 150 men, the Vermont Council of Safety reached out to neighboring New Hampshire with an appeal for support. New Hampshire, at this time, was concerned as to whether the

Continental generals were going to provide New England with sufficient defense. To strengthen its militia, the president of the New Hampshire Court, John Langdon, offered "$3,000 in hard money" to fund the New Hampshire militia on the condition that John Stark assumed command.

Stark agreed to accept a commission as brigadier general in the New Hampshire militia on the condition that his commission be from the New Hampshire Congress and not from the Continental Congress. Being independent of the Continental Army would free Stark to make his own command decisions and would prevent Continental officers from deploying his troops to locations away from New England. Upon being commissioned and recruiting 1,500 men, one of Stark's first decisions was to send 700 fresh troops to Manchester to aid Warner's ranks.

Learning that Stark had assembled a large force, Continental Major General Benjamin Lincoln, who had been ordered by General Philip Schuyler to coordinate the activities of the New England militia, on August 6th traveled to Manchester where he ordered Stark's troops to join the main American army along the Hudson River at Stillwater. Reminding Lincoln that he was not under Continental command, Stark refused the order and the troops remained in Manchester. Lincoln wrote to Schuyler, "Stark seems to be exceedingly soured & thinks he hath not had justice done him by Congress. He is determined not to join the Continental army until the Congress gives him his rank therein."

BENNINGTON: In July Burgoyne had marched south along the Hudson River where he paused his forces at the Duer House in Fort Miller for a month to gather sufficient supplies to carry him to Albany. On July 30th Burgoyne learned that at Bennington, forty miles to the east, the Americans had stored food, ammunition, wagons, and horses all of which he needed. Burgoyne ordered Lieutenant Colonel Friedrich van Baum to proceed to Bennington with a force of 800 men including 200 German infantry, 175 unmounted German Dragoons, 425 loyalists, Canadians, and Native Americans, together with German artillerymen with two light 3-pounder cannons. Burgoyne instructed Baum that Colonel Philip Skene was to accompany him, "… in order to assist you with his advice … and to procure you the best intelligence of the Enemy."

In early August, while Stark had his brigade in Bennington, he learned that a large number of the enemy were moving east from Cambridge. Stark rallied his troops and sent word to Seth Warner in Manchester to bring his Continental regiment.

Four miles from Bennington, Baum took a position on a hill where he constructed two breastworks and set his artillery. He also sent a request for reinforcements. Burgoyne ordered Colonel Heinrich von Breymann with 550 German troops and two 6-pounders to march to Bennington.

Stark, an experienced military strategist and at the pinnacle of his career at age forty-nine, realized that Baum had erred in positioning his men over too wide a defense. Working with this weakness, he developed a brilliant pincer strategy including a double envelopment of Baum's entire position. Stark sent 250 men along each side of the British defense to join and attack from the rear. He also sent 200 men to the right flank and 100 men in the front to draw away attention. On August 16th at about three o'clock, the troops in the rear began the attack while Stark, mounted on his mare, led a frontal attack to overrun the defense position.

For two hours the British and German regulars focused on defending their flanks. As the royal's ammunition ran out, they fled their positions, and the Americans swept over them capturing nearly the entire command. The battle lasted two hours and in Stark's words, " It lasted 2 Hours, the hotest [sic] I ever saw in my life, it represented one Continual Clap of thunder."

With the fighting over, while organizing his troops and prisoners, Stark received intelligence that the reinforcement under Breymann was within two miles. While he was forming his troops to renew the battle, Warner's regiment arrived to give support. After fierce fighting, during which Warner's continentals turned captured cannons on Breymann's troops, the British were overrun and fleeing, with most being captured. Skene who was engaged in the battle, escaped unscathed.

Two days after the battle Stark sent a lengthy report to the New Hampshire Council with details of the action. The greeting Stark used to address the Council reflects the 18th century protocol requiring a victorious commander to compliment his superiors. Stark wrote, "I congratulate you on the late success of your troops under my command."

The British losses exceeded 1,000, including Baum and 13 other officers killed, as well as 300 soldiers dead or missing and 700 taken prisoner. The Americans losses were far less, with 30 dead and 40 injured. The Bennington victory had devastating consequences for Burgoyne that doomed his march to Albany and set the stage for the Surrender at Saratoga two months later. A major cause of the British surrender at Saratoga was their being grossly outnumbered. The loss of 1,000 men at Bennington was critical to the strength of Burgoyne's force, particularly in view of

his previously having to leave 1,000 men to garrison Fort Ticonderoga. In addition, the American force was increasing each day as thousands of New England militias, inspired by the Bennington victory, marched to Stillwater.

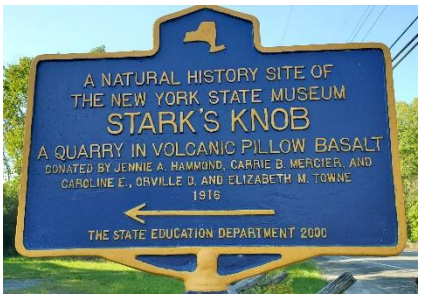
The day after the battle, General Lincoln arrived in Bennington. It had been two weeks since he had attempted to order Stark's militia brigade to march from Manchester to join the main army at Stillwater. Had Stark not rejected Lincoln's order, Stark would not have been in Bennington with his troops to achieved one of the great victories of the War. Lincoln sent a report to Schuyler detailing the Bennington battle and giving great praise to Stark. His report was forwarded to both Washington and the Continental Congress and then appeared in a Philadelphia broadside.

Three days after the victory, General Horatio Gates, who had been appointed to command the Northern Department, wrote to Stark that he was sending artillerymen to collect the four captured cannons. Stark responded that the cannons were plunder won in the battle and therefore belonged to the New Hampshire militia, and the cannons would not be relinquished to the Continentals unless they paid a fair price for them. No payment was forthcoming, and the cannons remained with the militia. Today, one of the 3-pounders is on display at the Bennington Museum and the other at the Vermont State House in Montpelier.

The victory was a source of great joy and celebration among the population as well as the military. Members of the Continental Army put aside their negative reactions regarding Stark's firm refusal to place his militia under their control. General Washington congratulated and praised Stark. John Hancock, president of the Continental Congress, wrote a letter of thanks from Congress and enclosed a commission promoting Stark to brigadier general in the Continental Army. Success had validated Stark's seeming obstinance to maintain his command independent of the Continental Army.

STARK'S KNOB: For a month after the victory, Stark remained in Bennington managing treatment for hundreds of wounded, burials for hundreds of dead, as well as feeding and guarding 700 non-English speaking prisoners. In addition, half of his regiment was ill with measles, as was he. When he returned to New Hampshire, Stark and the New Hampshire Council began recruiting since the militia term for many of his men was about to expire.

By October, Stark was prepared to join the battle underway at Saratoga (now Schuylerville) with his second New Hampshire militia regiment of 1,500 troops. He moved west to the Hudson River and after capturing the lightly garrisoned Fort Edward, which his troops renamed Fort Stark, he moved south along the Hudson. Just north of Schuylerville his troops established a blockade to halt any attempt of the British army to retreat north back to Canada. The regiment took positions to close off any attempt to pass the route at the location currently known as Stark's Knob, with "Knob" referring to the high lava elevation overlooking the route that was blocked.



With the placement of Stark's troops, the blockage of the British was complete. They were blocked from marching to the west by the placement of Colonel Daniel Morgan's troops and blocked from heading east by General John Fellows who led the recently arrived New England militia. General Gates was in the rear pursuing the British from the south. Stark's strategy to block the north led historians to refer it as "the corking of the bottle." Realizing there was no escape, Burgoyne, who also was outnumbered and low on supplies, made the decision to surrender.

***SARATOGA SURRENDER*:** On October 14th the British sought to negotiate the terms of the Convention of surrender and on October 17th at the current Saratoga Surrender Site, General Burgoyne surrendered 5,728 men, 5,000 muskets, and 37 cannons, which was the largest capture of artillery during the War until Yorktown. Philip Skene, wh0 was captured and made a prisoner, was paroled in 1779 and returned to England, having lost his entire Skenesborough estate.

Stark appears in John Trumbull's 1826 historic painting *Surrender of General Burgoyne;* although inexplicably he is placed in the background hidden behind a horse. Placing him in such an inconspicuous location is ironic considering it was generally accepted that the Saratoga victory was made possible in large measure by Stark's over whelming victory at Bennington. Trumbull, who served as aide-de-camp to Washington at Bunker Hill and as deputy adjutant general to Gates in 1777, surely was aware of Stark's military accomplishments leading to Burgoyne's surrender.

Trumbull's Surrender of General Burgoyne used with permission of the Architect of the Capital

At the meal that Gates hosted after the surrender in the near-by tent, Burgoyne congratulated Stark for his leadership at Bennington. Gates, to express his appreciation for Bennington, presented Stark with an exact copy of the Convention signed by Burgoyne.

LATER YEARS: After the Saratoga surrender, when Washington moved most Continental troops south, he assigned Stark to command the Northern Department, a position he held until 1781. In 1780, Stark sat as a judge for the court martial trial of Major John André who was found guilty and hanged for spying and aiding in Benedict Arnold's West Point conspiracy.

Stark remained active throughout the remainder of the Revolutionary War during which Congress granted him a promotion to major general. In 1783, he resigned from duty and retired to his farm in New Hampshire which he had renamed Manchester.

Major General John Stark, who loyally served his country as an honorable officer, died in 1822 at the age of 94, the last of the Revolutionary War generals.

Footnotes

[1] The French and Indian War was the fourth of four wars fought in Europe and America between 1689 and 1763 to determine the conflicting claims of France, Spain, and England over control of the vast colonial territory in North America. All four of the wars together are referred to as the French and Indian Wars (plural). The first three are named for the then current British monarch, however, since the name George was used for the previous war, the fourth was named for the French and Indian participants. As a result of the French and Indian War the British gained Canada from France and Florida from Spain.
[1]After years of dispute with the Province of New York over ownership of the territory known as the New Hampshire Grants, in 1777 the Grant owners formed the self-declared independent republic of Vermont which was not officially recognized until after the War.
[1] Burgoyne, John. *A State of the Expedition…* Narrative 6 Correspondence.
[1] Ketchum p 285.
[1] Lincoln to Schuyler, Official Correspondence.
[1] Duling , p 120.
[1] Stark to Gates, Official Correspondence.
[1] Stark to Council of New Hampshire, Official Correspondence.

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