

Siege of Fort Ticonderoga (1777)

The **1777 Siege of Fort Ticonderoga** occurred between 2 and 6 July 1777 at Fort Ticonderoga, near the southern end of Lake Champlain in the state of New York. Lieutenant General John Burgoyne's 8,000-man army occupied high ground above the fort, and nearly surrounded the defenses. These movements precipitated the occupying Continental Army, an under-strength force of 3,000 under the command of General Arthur St. Clair, to withdraw from Ticonderoga and the surrounding defenses. Some gunfire was exchanged, and there were some casualties, but there was no formal siege and no pitched battle. Burgoyne's army occupied Fort Ticonderoga and Mount Independence, the extensive fortifications on the Vermont side of the lake, without opposition on 6 July. Advance units pursued the retreating Americans.


The uncontested surrender of Ticonderoga caused an uproar in the American public and in its military circles, as Ticonderoga was widely believed to be virtually impregnable, and a vital point of defense. General St. Clair and his superior, General Philip Schuyler, were vilified by Congress. Both were eventually exonerated in courts martial, but their careers were adversely affected. Schuyler had already lost his command to Horatio Gates by the time of the court martial, and St. Clair held no more field commands for the remainder of the war.

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Siege of Fort Ticonderoga (1777)

Part of the American Revolutionary War



Fort Ticonderoga as seen from Mount Defiance

Date	2–6 July 1777
Location	Fort Ticonderoga, New York, United States
	43°50′29″N 73°23′17″W﻿ / ﻿
Result	British victory

Belligerents

 United States



-  Quebec
-  Loyalists
-  Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel
-  Hesse-Hanau

 Iroquois

Commanders and leaders

 Arthur St. Clair

 John Burgoyne

 William Phillips

Strength

about 3,000 regulars and militia^[1]

about 7,000 regulars^[2]
about 800 Indians and Canadians^[3]

Casualties and losses

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Fort_Ticonderoga_(1777)

1/8
/2

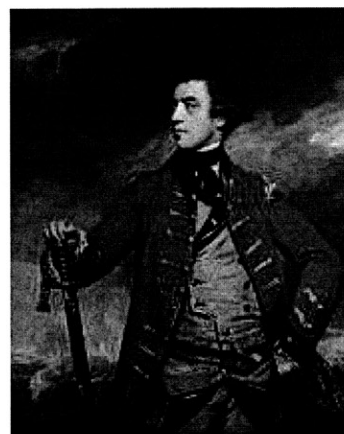
External links7 killed, 11
wounded^[4]^[5]5 killed^[5]^[6]

Background

In September 1775, early in the American Revolutionary War, the American Continental Army embarked on an invasion of Quebec. The invasion ended in disaster in July 1776, with the army chased back to Fort Ticonderoga by a large British army that arrived in Quebec in May 1776. A small Continental Navy fleet on Lake Champlain was defeated in the October 1776 Battle of Valcour Island. The delay required by the British to build their fleet on Lake Champlain caused General Guy Carleton to hold off on attempting an assault on Ticonderoga in 1776. Although his advance forces came within three miles of Ticonderoga, the lateness of the season and the difficulty of maintaining supply lines along the lake in winter caused him to withdraw his forces back into Quebec.^[7]

British forces

General John Burgoyne arrived in Quebec in May 1777 and prepared to lead the British forces assembled there south with the aim of gaining control of Ticonderoga and the Hudson River valley, dividing the rebellious provinces.^[8] His British Army troops consisted of the 9th, 20th, 21st, 24th, 47th, 53rd and 62nd regiments, along with the flank companies of other regiments left as a garrison in Quebec. The light infantry and flank companies formed the army's advance force, and were commanded by Brigadier General Simon Fraser. The remaining regulars, under the leadership of Major General William Phillips, formed the right wing of the army, while the left was composed of German Allies under the command of Baron Riedesel. His forces consisted of the Rhetz, Riedesel, Specht, Barner regiments, along with one regiment of grenadiers and another of horseless dragoons from the Brunswick Army, and Regiment Erbprinz and Creuzbourg's Jäger Corps from the Hesse-Hanau Army.^[9] Most of these forces had arrived in 1776, and many participated in the campaign that drove the American army out of Quebec.^[10]



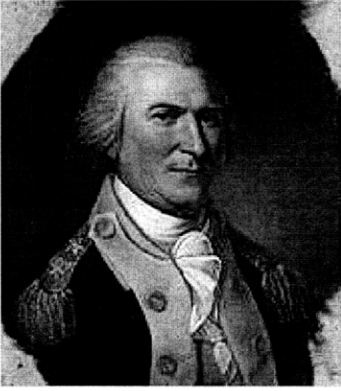
General John Burgoyne, portrait by Joshua Reynolds

The total size of Burgoyne's regular army was about 7,000.^[2] In addition to the regulars, there were about 800 Indians, and a relatively small number of Canadiens and Loyalists, who acted primarily as scouts and screening reconnaissance.^[3] The army was also accompanied by more than 1,000 civilians, including a pregnant woman, and Baroness Riedesel with her three small children. Including these non-military personnel, the total number of people in Burgoyne's army was more than 10,000.^[11]

Burgoyne and General Carlton re-sited the troops at Fort Saint-Jean, near the northern end of Lake Champlain, on 14 June. By 21 June, the armada carrying the army was on the lake, and they had arrived at the unoccupied Fort Crown Point by 30 June.^[12] The Indians and other elements of the advance force laid down such an effective screen that the American defenders at Ticonderoga were unaware of either the exact location or strength of the force moving along the lake.^[13] While en route, Burgoyne authored a proclamation to the Americans, written in the turgid, pompous style for which he was well-known, and frequently criticized and parodied.^[14]

American defences

American forces had occupied the forts at Ticonderoga and Crown Point since they captured them in May 1775 from a small garrison. In 1776 and 1777, they undertook significant efforts to improve the defenses surrounding Ticonderoga. A peninsula on the east side of the lake, renamed Mount Independence, was heavily fortified. To the north of old Fort



General Arthur St. Clair,
portrait by Charles Willson
Peale

Ticonderoga, the Americans built numerous redoubts, a large fort at the site earlier French fortifications, and a fort on Mount Hope. A quarter-mile long floating bridge was constructed across the lake to facilitate communication between Ticonderoga and Mount Independence.^[15]

Command at Ticonderoga went through a variety of changes early in 1777. Until 1777, General Philip Schuyler had headed the Continental Army's Northern Department, with General Horatio Gates in charge of Ticonderoga. In March 1777 the Continental Congress gave command of the whole department to Gates. Schuyler protested this action, which Congress reversed in May, at which point Gates, no longer willing to serve under Schuyler, left for Philadelphia. Command of the fort was then given to General Arthur St. Clair, who arrived only three weeks before Burgoyne's army.^[16]

The entire complex was manned by several under-strength regiments of the Continental Army and militia units from New York and nearby states. A war council held by Generals St. Clair and Schuyler on 20 June concluded that "the number of troops now at this post, which are under 2,500 effectives, rank and file, are greatly inadequate to the defense", and that "it is prudent to provide for a retreat".^[17] Consequently, plans were made for retreat along two routes. The first was by water to Skenesboro, the southernmost navigable point on the lake. The second was overland by a rough road leading east toward Hubbardton in the New Hampshire Grants (present-day Vermont).^[18]

Sugar Loaf

A height called Sugar Loaf (now known as Mount Defiance) overlooked both Ticonderoga and Independence, and large cannons on that height would make the fort impossible to defend. This tactical problem had been pointed out by John Trumbull when Gates was in command.^[19] It was believed to be impossible for the British to place cannons on the heights, even though Trumbull, Anthony Wayne, and an injured Benedict Arnold climbed to the top and noted that gun carriages could probably be dragged up.^[20]

The defence, or lack thereof, of Sugar Loaf was complicated by the widespread perception that Fort Ticonderoga, with a reputation as the "Gibraltar of the North", *had* to be held.^[16] Neither abandoning the fort nor garrisoning it with a small force (sufficient to respond to a feint but not to an attack in strength) was viewed as a politically viable option. Defending the fort and the associated outer works would require all the troops currently there, leaving none to defend Sugar Loaf.^[21] Furthermore, George Washington and the Congress were of the opinion that Burgoyne, who was known to be in Quebec, was more likely to strike from the south, moving his troops by sea to New York City.^[22]

Following the war council of 20 June, Schuyler ordered St. Clair to hold out as long as he could, and to avoid having his avenues of retreat cut off. Schuyler took command of a reserve force of 700 at Albany, and Washington ordered four regiments to be held in readiness at Peekskill, further down the Hudson River.^[23]

Battle

British advance

On 1 July, General St. Clair was still unaware of the full strength of Burgoyne's army, which lay just 4 miles (6.4 km) away. Burgoyne had deployed Fraser's advance force and right column on the west side of the lake, hoping to cut off the defences at Mount Hope. Riedesel and the German column were deployed on the east side of the lake, where their objective was

All possible armaments, as well as invalids, camp followers, and supplies were loaded onto a fleet of more than 200 boats that began to move up the lake toward Skenesboro, accompanied by Colonel Pierse Long's regiment.^[30] Owing to a shortage of boats, four invalids were left behind, as were the very largest cannons and a variety of supplies—everything from tents to cattle.^[31] The rest of the army crossed to Mount Independence and headed down the Hubbardton road, which Riedesel's forces had not yet reached. A handful of men were left at the pontoon bridge with loaded cannons to fire on British attempts to cross it, but they were drunk when the British arrived the next morning.^[32]

The British occupied the forts without firing a single shot, and detachments from Fraser's and Riedesel's troops set out in pursuit of the retreating Americans on the Hubbardton road, while Burgoyne hurried some of his troops up the lake toward Skenesboro.^[33]

Aftermath

At least seven Americans were killed and 11 wounded in skirmishing prior to the American retreat.^[4] British casualties were not tallied, but at least five were killed in skirmishes.^[6]

The Americans made good time on the Hubbardton road. Most of the force reached Castleton—a march of 30 miles (50 km)—on the evening of 6 July.^[34] The British pursuit resulted in the Battle of Hubbardton when they caught up with the rear guard on the morning of 7 July, but this enabled the main American body to escape, eventually joining forces with Schuyler at Fort Edward.^[35] The smaller American force that had fled by boat to Skenesboro fought off Burgoyne's advance force in the Battle of Fort Anne, but was forced to abandon equipment and many sick and wounded in skirmishing at Skenesboro.^[36]

The confrontation at Ticonderoga did not substantially slow Burgoyne's advance, but he was forced to leave a garrison of more than 900 men in the Ticonderoga area, and wait until 11 July for the dispersed elements of his army to regroup at Skenesboro.^[37] He then encountered delays in traveling the heavily wooded road between Skenesboro and Fort Edward, which General Schuyler's forces had effectively ruined by felling trees across it and destroying all its bridges in the swampy terrain.^[38] Burgoyne's campaign ultimately failed and he was forced to surrender after the Battles of Saratoga.^[39] General Gates reported to Governor George Clinton on 20 November that Ticonderoga and Independence had been abandoned and burned by the retreating British.^[40]

Political and public outcry

The political and public outcry after the withdrawal was significant. The Congress was appalled, and criticized both Schuyler and St. Clair for the loss. John Adams wrote, "I think we shall never be able to defend a post until we shoot a general", and George Washington said it was "an event of chagrin and surprise, not apprehended nor within the compass of my reasoning".^[35] Rumors circulated that St. Clair and Schuyler were traitors who had taken bribes in exchange for the retreat.^[41]

Schuyler was eventually removed as commander of the Northern Department, replaced by General Gates; the fall of Ticonderoga was among the reasons cited.^[42] St. Clair was removed from his command and sent to headquarters for an inquiry. He maintained that his conduct had been honorable, and demanded a review by court martial.^[43] The court martial was not held until September 1778 due to political intrigues against Washington; St. Clair was completely exonerated,^[44] although he was never given another field command.^[45] Schuyler was also cleared of any wrongdoing by a court martial.^[44]

The news made headlines in Europe. King George is reported to have burst into the chambers of the scantily clad Queen, exclaiming, "I have beat them! I have beat all the Americans!"^[41] The French and Spanish courts were less happy with the news, as they had been supporting the Americans, allowing them to use their ports, and engaging in trade with them. The action emboldened the British to demand that Spain and France close their ports to the Americans; this demand was rejected, heightening tensions between the European powers.^[46]



King George III, detail of portrait by Allan Ramsay

See also

- List of American Revolutionary War battles

Notes

- Ketchum (1997), p. 172
- Ketchum (1997), p. 137
- Pancake (1977), p. 116
- Ketchum (1997), p. 166
- Sources generally do not tally casualties for this action. As in most actions, combatants were killed or wounded in minor skirmishes, and deserters and captives taken. The numbers given here are necessarily approximations.
- Ketchum (1997), p. 170
- Pancake (1977), pp. 34–37
- Nickerson (1967), pp. 91–92, 102
- Pancake (1977), pp. 114–115
- Pancake (1977), p. 36
- Pancake (1977), p. 118
- Pancake (1977), p. 119
- Nickerson (1967), pp. 119–120
- Nickerson (1967), p. 122
- Nickerson (1967), pp. 130–131
- Nickerson (1967), p. 136
- Pancake (1977), pp. 120–121
- Pancake (1977), p. 121
- Nickerson (1967), p. 131
- Nickerson (1967), p. 132
- Nickerson (1967), pp. 136–137
- Nickerson (1967), p. 138