

The Scalp of Miss Jane McCrea: The Saratoga Campaign and American Independence: Creasy on British Strategy; Prelude to the Battles; The Scalp of Miss Jane McCrea; the Battle of Freeman's Farm: Deployments

# THE SCALP OF MISS JANE MCCREA

## The Saratoga Campaign and American Independence

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### I. BRITISH STRATEGY:

"Sir Edward Shepherd Creasy (1812–1878) was an English historian, educated at Eton and King's College, Cambridge. In 1840 he was appointed professor of modern and ancient history in the university of London. Creasy's most popular work is his *Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World*, first published in 1851."<sup>1</sup> In his chapter 13, "The Victory of the Americans over Burgoyne at Saratoga, A.D. 1777," Creasy outlines the British strategy to defeat the colonials:

The five northern colonies of Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, and Vermont, usually classed together as the New England colonies, were the strongholds of the insurrection against the mother country. The feeling of resistance was less vehement and general in the central settlement of New York, and still less so in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and other colonies of the South, although everywhere it was formidably strong. But it was among the descendants of the stern Puritans that the spirit of [Oliver] Cromwell ... breathed in all its fervor; it was from the New Englanders that the first armed opposition to the British crown had been offered; and it was by them that the most stubborn determination to fight to the last, rather than waive a single right or privilege, had been displayed. In 1775 they had succeeded in forcing the British troops to evacuate Boston; and the events of 1776 had made New York (which the Royalists captured that year) the principle basis of operations for the armies of the mother country. (p. 331)

<sup>1</sup> *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 13th ed. (New York: The Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1926), 7:388.

A glance at the map will show that the Hudson River, which falls into the Atlantic at New York, runs down from the north at the back of the New England States, forming an angle of about forty-five degrees with the line of the coast of the Atlantic, along which the New England States are situate. Northward of the Hudson we see a small chain of lakes communicating with the Canadian frontier. It is necessary to attend closely to these geographical points, in order to understand the plan of the operations which the English attempted in 1777, and which the battle of Saratoga defeated. (pp. 331–32)

The English had a considerable force in Canada, and in 1776 had completely repulsed an attack which the Americans had made upon that province. The British ministry resolved to avail themselves, in the next year, of the advantage which the occupation of Canada gave them, not merely for the purpose of defense, but for the purpose of striking a vigorous and crushing blow against the revolted colonies. With this view the army in Canada was largely re-enforced. Seven thousand veteran troops were sent out from England, with a corps of artillery abundantly supplied and led by select and experienced officers. Large quantities of military stores were also furnished for the equipment of the Canadian volunteers, who were expected to join the expedition. It was intended that the force thus collected should march southward by the line of the lakes, and thence along the banks of the Hudson River. The British army from New York (or a large detachment of it) was to make a simultaneous movement northward, up the line of the Hudson, and the two expeditions were to unite at Albany, a town on that river. By these operations, all communication between the northern colonies and those of the center and south would be cut off. An irresistible force would be concentrated, so as to crush all further operation in New England; and when this was done, it was believed that the other colonies would speedily submit. The Americans had no troops in the field that seemed able to baffle these movements. Their principle army, under Washington, was occupied in watching over Pennsylvania and the South. At any rate, it was believed that, in order to oppose the plan intended for the new campaign, the insurgents must risk a pitched battle, in which the superiority of the Royalists, in numbers, in discipline, and in equipment, seemed to promise to the latter a crowning victory. Without question, the plan was ably formed; and had the success of the execution been equal to the ingenuity of the design, the reconquest or submission of the thirteen United States must in all human probability have followed, and the independence which they proclaimed in 1776 would have been extinguished before it existed a second year. No European power had as yet come forward to aid America.<sup>2</sup> (332–33)

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<sup>2</sup> E. S. Creasy, *The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World: Marathon to Waterloo* (New York: A. L. Burt, Publisher, 1851), 331–33.

## II. THE SARATOGA CAMPAIGN: PRELUDE TO THE BATTLES:

The commander of the British army in Canada was Major General John Burgoyne, a veteran of the Seven Years' War that raged from 1756–63. The theater of war was the European continent but for England it was a continuation of the French and Indian War in America that had resulted in Britain controlling colonization of North American continent.

Burgoyne was charged with executing the plan to separate New England from the Southern colonies by controlling the dividing line marked by the Hudson River. The strategy to secure colonial positions at Crown Point and Ticonderoga and the area around Lake Champlain in the Northern Hudson River Valley had been accomplished.

The next operation required moving south along the Hudson to take Albany, however the terrain was treacherous for moving matériel; roads were mere trails haphazardly hacked through dense forests and invaded by thick undergrowth and fallen trees and limbs. Often hampering advance were around forty deep ravines which could only be crossed after bridges were built plus occasional bogs, swamps, and marshes.

These delays bought time for General Philip Schuyler \skī'-ler\, commander of the Northern Department of the Continental army, to add to Burgoyne's traveling woes. He sent out a thousand axmen to fell trees across the route. Some rolled boulders down hills into creeks to make them impassable, others destroyed bridges, and several dug ditches. Grain fields were burned so that livestock would not have feed. It took Burgoyne 21 days to traverse 23 miles.

The delays caused by these actions enabled Schuyler to build up his army: General Arthur St. Clair's main force, Colonel Pierce Long's detachment from Skenesboro, and Brigadier General John Nixon's 600 Continentals strengthened Schuyler's forces to 4,500, of which 2,900 were Continentals and 1,600 were militia.

Dissatisfied with his position at Fort Edward, Schuyler retreated and established his camp at Stillwater some twelve miles south.

In the meantime, Burgoyne expected to meet up with Major General William Howe's main British army as it advanced from New York. Complications set in when he received word that Howe had changed his plans and by deciding to deploy against General George Washington's Continental army at Philadelphia.

Burgoyne, whose disposition was habitually inflexible, decided to press on with his original plan to take Albany and then keep moving all the way to New York. On September 13, Burgoyne and his 6,000 British troops crossed the Hudson River and encamped at Saratoga.

His first in a series of setbacks occurred when he learned that most of his Indian scouts had deserted leaving him without intelligence on the location and intentions of enemy forces. In addition his logistical supply line became more and more inefficient as he continued moving south.

On September 18 Burgoyne arrived near the American encampment at Bemis Heights with Freeman's Farm situated between the two forces. Sans intelligence, he had no idea his army was outnumbered.

The American situation was strengthened in the summer of 1777 when Washington deployed forces commanded by Major General Benjamin Lincoln and Colonel Daniel Morgan to assist Major General Philip Schuyler at Stillwater, located a few miles south of Saratoga. Due to political infighting and friction among Schuyler and other officers, Washington appointed Major General Horatio Gates as commander of the Northern Department replacing Schuyler.

Apprised of Burgoyne's advance to Saratoga, Gates organized his army to take a strategic position at Bemis Heights. The stage was set for the campaign that in retrospective analysis would determine the outcome of the War for Independence.

Leading up to this point, three critical events occurred that would have great impact on the coming conflict: (1) The arrival of Major General Benedict Arnold on 24 July, (2) the deployment of Arnold with 950 volunteers to relieve Fort Stanwix which he accomplished without firing a shot by use of a halfwit to propagandize British Brigadier General Barry St. Leger into thinking Arnold was advancing with thousands of troops and inspiring him to retreat back to Canada, and (3) the murder and scalping of Miss Jane McCrea.

### III. THE SCALP OF MISS JANE MCCREA:

Jane McCrea was the daughter of The Reverend John McCrea of New Jersey who, following her father's death, lived with her brother, John, near Saratoga, New York. When war broke out between the colonies and Great Britain, Jane's brothers sided with the American forces while Jane's fiancé, David Jones, became a Loyalist, a colonial who remained loyal to the British government.

As the wedding day approached, Jane made preparations to leave Saratoga and travel to Ticonderoga where David was serving with a Loyalist militia unit under the command of Burgoyne. En route to Ticonderoga, Jane and her party stopped at Fort Edward for the night where she stayed at the home of Sara McNeil.

The next day, before leaving for Ticonderoga, the McNeil house fell under assault by an Indian raiding party who captured the two women. The truth of what followed is still a mystery. Some accounts claim that the Indians were actually sent by Burgoyne to escort Miss McCrea to Ticonderoga. Before leaving Fort Edward with McCrea, the Indians got in an argument at which point one of them suddenly took his tomahawk and scalped Jane McCrea. Another account asserts that Americans pursuing the Indians after the alleged raid accidentally shot McCrea in a firefight.

What actually happened was not as important and what was perceived as having happened. The latter played a great part in the Colonial's victory in the Saratoga Campaign and served as motivation for those wary of challenging the crown to join with the Patriots in pursuit of independence.

A summary of how the death of Jane McCrea was a key incident in the War for Independence is important to note before we engage the battles at Saratoga:

**Tales of the gruesome activities of some of Burgoyne's Indian allies led more and more American volunteers to join Gate's army.**

The most famous of the Indian atrocities was the murder of young Jane McCrea, the fiancée of a loyalist officer in Burgoyne's army. Apparently several of Burgoyne's Indian scouts argued over who would have the honor of escorting the woman into camp, and in the heat of the argument one of the Indians shot and scalped her and then carried his grisly trophy into camp where, as the story goes, it was recognized by her distraught lover. Though it was one incident among many in the history of frontier violence, this tale in particular touched the popular imagination. Gates referred to it in a letter of protest to Burgoyne—a letter which was re-printed throughout New England. The result was a spectacular increase in the number of American volunteers. With these new recruits, and the return of Arnold's men from Fort Stanwix, Gates soon commanded an army of 7,000 while Burgoyne's forces, after losses at [the Battle of] Bennington, shrunk to fewer than 6,000.

In mid-August Burgoyne got more bad news. He learned that Howe's army at New York had sailed for the Delaware Bay on July 23. Burgoyne was on his own.<sup>3</sup>

A second account of the scalping of Jane McCrea amplifies the impact the news of the incident led to a significant increase in volunteers to assist Gates at Saratoga:

The murder and scalping of Jane McCrea on July 27 had fed fuel to the fires of rebel passion that were flaming throughout the countryside. That one event did more to arouse the Patriots and raise volunteers for Gates's army than all of the depredations of Tories and Indians in New York could possibly have caused. Volunteers were on the march in the form of newly raised militia, who continued to swarm into the camps on Bemis Heights and those of General Lincoln in Vermont. They came in their civilian clothes, each with the family musket or fowling piece—some in odd groups, some in companies, but all armed, and many with their own ammunition. By the end of September Lincoln had joined Gates at Bemis Heights, bringing his militia strength up to 4,300. At the end of the first week of October Gates's strength reached 11,000, of which, 2,700 were Continentals, the rest militia.<sup>4</sup>

An account of the impact of Jane's death and her burial at Fort Edward, New York, is the subject of this article from Ancestry.com:

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<sup>3</sup> Craig L. Symonds, "Freeman's Farm," in *A Battlefield Atlas of the American Revolution* (Mount Pleasant, SC: The Nautical & Aviation Publishing Company of America, 1986), 47.

<sup>4</sup> W. J. Wood, *Battles of the Revolutionary War, 1775–1781*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2003), 162.



In 1777, Jane McCrea was 26 years old and living at the farm of her older brother, Col. John McCrea at Fort Edward, NY to be close to her fiancé, Lt. David Jones, a loyalist serving with General Burgoyne's army. On July 27th of that year, while she was visiting the home of Mrs. McNeil, the two women were captured by Indians allied to the British. Since both women were under the protection of General Burgoyne, they were reasonably sure nothing would happen to them. Their captors separated into two bands, each with one of the women. When Mrs. McNeil, a cousin of General Simon Fraser's, arrived with her captors at the British camp, she wondered where Jane was, since she had departed ahead of Mrs. McNeil. Shortly thereafter, the first party of Indians returned to the camp with a fresh scalp lock. It seems an argument had ensued over Jane McCrea, and to settle the argument, she had been killed.

General Burgoyne could not punish the guilty party for fear of breaking his alliance with them. This enraged the countryside and Jane became an instant martyr to the Revolutionary cause.

Men took up arms to revenge this wrongdoing and were formed into many companies, some from as far away as the green mountains of Vermont. This greatly aided the rebel cause, and helped, several months later, in the defeat of the Burgoyne's British army at Saratoga--a major turning point in the Revolutionary war.

Jane was first buried a few miles north of Fort Edward, and later re-buried at Union Cemetery in Fort Edward. But this was not the end of her tale. Nearly 50 years later, when he wrote the book "The Last of the Mohicans", James Fenimore Cooper immortalized Jane's story when he created the character of Cora.<sup>5</sup>

#### IV. THE SARATOGA CAMPAIGN: BATTLE OF FREEMAN'S FARM:

The reinforcement that arrived for Horatio Gates put the Americans at a numerical advantage over John Burgoyne's army that had suffered losses by means of casualties as well as defections. By September 9, Gates's forces exceeded 7,000 with the addition of Colonel Morgan's corps of Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Maryland riflemen. Gates added to these by putting under Morgan's command Major Henry Dearborn's 250 hand-picked infantrymen armed with muskets and bayonets.

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<sup>5</sup> Jim Fina, "Jane McCrea," <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nwa/jane.html>.

Gates also utilized the strength of his army's personnel; they were primarily militiamen who were better suited to fighting in rough terrain and excelled in forest warfare. On September 12 he established his headquarters at Bemis Heights, an area situated for efficient defense. The Heights was a plateau rising some 200 to 300 feet above the Hudson which flowed southward to its right. The wooded shores along the river would slow any subsequent movement of the Loyalists toward Albany.

The forest was broken only by the fields cleared for agriculture by the Sword, Freeman, McBride, Coulter, and Nielson farms. These open areas were also broken by ravines and streams the largest of each was the ravine to the north of Freeman's farm and Mill Creek that flowed between Gate's headquarters and Freeman's farm.

The American encampment was fortified with a system of fieldworks, trenches, and breastworks of logs and earth plus three artillery redoubts. The only area of concern was the high ground to the west of Bemis Heights which was not defended. General Burgoyne and General Simon Fraser's strategy was to take that hill and rain artillery down on Gates's headquarters.

By September 17, Burgoyne has moved into the area and established his headquarters at Sword's farm. He was not apprised of Gates's dispositions although he was only four miles north of Bemis Heights. The loss of all but fifty of his Indian scouts had resulted in an almost total loss of dependable reconnaissance.

On the morning of September 19, General Gates's forces were deployed with a center commanded by Brigadier General Ebenezer Learned. The right wing was composed of artillery under Brigadier Generals Glover and Patterson but remained under Gates's command. The left wing was under the command of Major General Benedict Arnold and it included Col. Morgan's corps of light infantry.



With his troops deployed and excellent reconnaissance, Gates allowed Burgoyne to make the first move. The British general had also decided on a three-pronged offensive. His left wing was commanded by Baron Friedrich von Riedesel and consisted of three infantry regiments and artillery. Their task was to attack the American's right flank.

The British center was commanded by Brigadier General James Hamilton. It had 1,100 men made up of battalion companies of the 9th, 20th, 21st, and 62d British regiments plus artillery. Burgoyne accompanied this group.

Burgoyne's right wing was commanded by General Simon Fraser whose mission was to envelope the American left, seize the high ground to the west of Bemis Heights, and unleash artillery on the American encampment. If successful he would then charge the position and drive the Patriots into the Hudson.

Fraser had at his disposal a brigade of artillery, the light infantry of ten British companies of then regiments, plus these ten's grenadier companies. In addition, Fraser had the battalion companies of the British 24th and Lieutenant Colonel Heinrich von Breymann's Brunswick riflemen. His wing also included 50 Indians, 150 Tories, 80 Canadians, and 50 British marksmen.

By 10 o'clock, Riedesel's columns had advanced to a point almost due east of Freeman's farm. Fraser had advanced to the T-junction of the road leading southward to Bemis Heights, a half-mile west of Freeman's farm. Hamilton had assumed his position directly in front of Freeman's farm. Burgoyne's deployments were all in place by 12:30. All these movements were reported to Gates by his scouts.

Gates had assumed a position that he knew complemented the fighting skills of his troops dominated by militia, citizen soldiers whose expertise with weaponry was superior but who did not have the training of regular soldiers.

Freeman's farm consisted of gently rolling open fields surrounded by forests. Bemis Heights one mile to the south is a natural plateau east of the Hudson River and south of Mill Creek. Militarily this was key terrain that served as a gateway south to Albany, New York. The dense forest surrounding Bemis Heights provided the combatants with stealthy maneuver room as well as cover and concealment. At Bemis Heights, high ground extended north, west, and east, while the south remained flat and open. In the northwestern corner of Bemis Heights was Nielson's farm, a piece of land owned by a Patriot supporter. The fields of fire inherent in the open farmlands were excellent for both small arms and artillery.<sup>6</sup>

The stage was set. Both armies had achieved their desired positions on the battlefield. All that was left was for someone to pull the first round.

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<sup>6</sup> Theodore P. Savas and J. David Dameron, "The Battle of Freeman's Farm," in *A Guide to the Battles of the American Revolution* (El Dorado Hills, CA: Savas Beatie, 2010), 127.