

The Scalp of Miss Jane McCrea: The Saratoga Campaign and American Independence: Battle of Freeman's Farm: the Engagement; The Interim; Battle of Bemis Heights; Summary and Conclusions; Doctrinal Application; Bibliography

At 12:45 p.m., the Americans opened fire from the trees on Burgoyne's advance guard. Morgan's men were expert marksmen. They trained their muskets on the British officers and knocked many out of the fighting early, demoralizing the foot soldiers. Caught in the open, the British were unable to effectively fight back and broke for the rear.

Morgan's men gave chase but stopped when they met Hamilton's main force, fell apart, and then regrouped. By 1:00 p.m. Burgoyne had moved his command into the Freeman clearing with the 20th, 62d, and 21st regiments in line from left to right, and the 9th regiment behind in reserve.

The battle opened anew with a thunderous exchange that lasted for several hours, with neither side able to gain a decided advantage. More American regiments gave the rebels a decided numerical advantage and forced the British to spread their line thin to avoid being outflanked. Repeated British bayonet charges were thrown back with heavy loss; the 62d Regiment was especially exposed and suffered terribly. Riedesel, who was leading Burgoyne's left wing near the Hudson River, heard the fighting and learned of the circumstance from a courier. Burgoyne ordered the German to leave men to hold the road and move west to strike the Americans in the flank. Riedesel moved out, reconnoitered the enemy position, and attacked with two companies. Burgoyne renewed his attack as Riedesel struck. Darkness was falling and by this time Arnold was with Gates in the rear. The Americans held for a time before withdrawing to Bemis Heights.

There are differing accounts of Arnold's role in the fighting. Almost certainly he was present and directing the tactical issues for much of the early action. According to some, he sent a messenger back to Gates requesting reinforcements, but Gates refused and insisted Arnold and Morgan return their men to their assigned defensive positions. Gates's role during the entire affair was defensive-minded. A strong attack from the defenders on the heights in the rear might have caught and easily overwhelmed Burgoyne's dispersed columns. General Learned's brigade had moved out to support the Americans late in the action, but drifted northwest into Fraser's wing, where a brief skirmish erupted that did not contribute to the main combat on the Freeman Farm.

Burgoyne occupied the battlefield and could claim a tactical victory. However, the fight eroded British morale and chipped away at his dwindling resources. Because of the wooded terrain and his woeful lack of intelligence, Burgoyne did not yet realize that Gates outnumbered him, and his tactical “victory” that afternoon convinced him to continue moving against his enemy. On the other side of the line, the sharp punch the Americans delivered against Burgoyne’s advancing column further emboldened the warrior spirit in the defenders of Bemis Heights. From within their strong positions the rebels awaited the next move of their foe.

Casualties: British: 600 killed, wounded, and captured; American: 65 killed, 218 wounded, and 36 missing.<sup>1</sup>

## V. THE SARATOGA CAMPAIGN: THE INTERIM:

It would be eighteen days between the Battle of Freeman’s Farm and the Battle of Bemis Heights. During that time both camps made preparation for the inevitable second round of the Saratoga Campaign.

Eighteen days is a long time for a group of generals to get along and so there were differences of opinion brewing on both sides. For the Patriots, Benedict Arnold had ginned up some righteous anger toward Horatio Gates for refusing to back him up at Freeman’s farm and voiced his misgiving to the commander.

Gates, who was very self-centered, retorted that he wasn’t even sure Arnold actually held a commission in the Continental army. To add insult to injury, on 25 September, Gates reassigned General Lincoln to command the right wing while he personally took command of the left wing previously held by Arnold. Isaac N. Arnold in his book *The Life of Benedict Arnold* wrote, “Gates was irritating, arrogant and vulgar; Arnold indiscreet, haughty and passionate.”

While Gates was reorganizing and arguing with Arnold, Burgoyne was busy preparing to orchestrate a second attack. He ordered the digging of entrenchments that spanned from east to west from the Hudson to the northwest of Freeman’s farm, a two and one-half-mile front.

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<sup>1</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.

In addition there were built three redoubts, a battlefield fortification designed to hold a position or protect the flanks of entrenchments. The one at the extreme east end of the line was called the Great redoubt; the second, the Balcarres redoubt, was positioned on the south side of Freeman's farm; and northwest of the Balcarres was the Breymann redoubt.

Burgoyne called a war council on October 4th to discuss strategy for the assault. He was faced with a depletion of forces from 8,000 down to 5,000. Morale was low. Sharpshooters nightly harassed the British pickets with sniper fire. In addition all supplies were running low.

Burgoyne's plan was similar to that of the first battle but with fewer men and to concentrate on the American left flank. When he proposed it to Generals Phillips, Riedesel, and Fraser they all concurred it was too risky; because of the tight security maintained by the Patriots they had no definite intelligence of their deployments. Riedesel proposed a retreat to Fort Miller. This would provide them better terrain, enable them to reestablish communications with Canada, and be better positioned to coordinate with General Henry Clinton who was allegedly making his way north from New York. But retreat was not in the cards with the inflexible Burgoyne.

Not to be outdone, Burgoyne decided to concentrate an all-out attack on the American left. He ordered a reconnaissance in force of the high ground that if taken would enable him to fire artillery on the headquarters of the enemy. His poor intelligence had not learned that the Gates had used the interim to occupy and fortify the area.

If the action determined the high ground could be taken then he would press the attack toward that objective; if not then he agreed to retreat northeastward to Batten Kill.

## VI. THE SARATOGA CAMPAIGN: BATTLE OF BEMIS HEIGHTS:

On October 7th at 10 o'clock A.M., three columns exited the Balcarres redoubt and advanced three-quarters of a mile to the southwest. The right column was led by Major Earl Balcarres, made up of light infantry companies.

The center column was commanded by General Riedesel and included detachments of Brunswickers, Breymann's jägers, and the British 24th Regiment.

The third column was made up of Major John Acland's grenadiers. This contingent was followed by ten artillery pieces: six six-pounders, two twelve pounders, and two howitzers.

When the columns reached the edge of Barber's wheat field, they deployed into line on the sloping ground north of the main branch of Mill Creek. The infantry was allowed to sit down in ranks, resting their muskets between their knees.

The line was about a thousand yards long, with excellent fields of fire to the front and both flanks resting on thick woods—ideal flank coverage according to European battle conditions, but also ideal for the approach and open-order fighting so favorable to the Americans.

Senior officers were watching through field glasses to detect American field positions. The trees and distance prevented them from seeing anything. Consequently, the entire deployment waited and rested.

Gate's aide-de-camp, Major James Wilkinson, observed the situation and hurried to report the situation to Gates. Captain Morgan recommended to Gates that he take his riflemen and light infantry and attack the British west flank. Gates saw the opportunity to catch Burgoyne's two flanks. He ordered General Enoch Poor to prepare to attack the Brit's left flank and then instructed Morgan to "begin the game."

Showing more initiative than usual, Gates ordered Colonels Morgan and Dearborn to advance through the woods and attack Burgoyne's right or western flank (Balcarres's light infantry) while General Poor's brigade did the same and assailed the British left or eastern flank (Acland's grenadiers). General Learned's men would hold the center (opposite von Riedesel's Hessians and Brunswickers<sup>2</sup>).

The battle began when Acland's artillery and grenadiers on the British left spotted Poor's 800 men in the woods below them and opened fire. Poor's men (New York Continental regiments under Nathan Hale, Joseph Cilley, and Alexander Scammell, plus New York and Connecticut militia) had formed at the base of a slight elevation. Firing downhill is always difficult, and the British lead sailed above American heads. Acland ordered a bayonet charge, but before it could be delivered Poor's men raked his line with a deadly fire and launched their own attack. Acland and his men were cut to pieces, with Acland himself shot through both legs and captured.

Morgan and Dearborn had similar success on the other side of the line against the British right flank, where the American riflemen attacked Balcarres's flank and rear. At one point the British were caught changing front when a volley ripped into them. Balcarres's command collapsed and fled toward the rear.

Fraser's center column under von Riedesel was now flanked on both sides. A courier from Burgoyne carrying an order to retreat was killed and the German general never received word to fall back. General Learned's column pressed forward against the British center. General Benedict Arnold, who had been dismissed by Gates after an argument following the first fight at Freeman's Farm, had remained with the army without a formal command. About this time the aggressive Arnold rode up on his own hook to assist Learned in the attack. (p. 149)

Arnold was instrumental in directing the combat as he rode through the American column urging the men forward. General Fraser tried valiantly to rally his men, to little avail. While he was working with the 24th Regiment to establish a foundation for order, a marksman named Timothy Murphy was ordered to shoot the mounted officer. His third shot mortally struck Fraser.

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<sup>2</sup> "Brunschweig \braun'-shfik\ was a German duchy divided into sub-districts, one of which was ruled by George III. In 1775, Charles William Ferdinand ("Prince Karl") told King George III that Braunschweig had soldiers who could be used to help put down the rebellion in the Americas. Braunschweig was the first German state to sign a treaty supporting Great Britain, on 9 January 1776. It agreed to send 4,000 soldiers: four infantry regiments, one grenadier battalion, one dragoon regiment and one light infantry battalion, all commanded by General Friedrich von Riedesel. These soldiers were the majority of the German regulars under General John Burgoyne in the Saratoga Campaign of 1777, and were generally referred to as "Brunswickers" ("Germans in the American Revolution," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Germans\\_in\\_the\\_American\\_Revolution](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Germans_in_the_American_Revolution)).

The British and Hessians were well-disciplined veterans, but the pressure from both sides and the front forced them back. They finally reorganized well to the rear at Freeman's Farm around two entrenchments known as Balcarres's Redoubt and Breymann's Redoubt, and two fortified cabins in between. The fight near Mill Creek had lasted about an hour. Arnold realized the opportunity now existed to follow up the British defeat with a decisive battlefield victory. Ignoring Gate's order to return to camp—unlike Gates, Arnold possessed a killer's instinct—he urged the generals to press their advantage. (pp. 149–50)

The second part of the battle began with an American assault on Balcarres's Redoubt on Freeman's Farm. Although the Americans pierced the line of abatis,<sup>3</sup> they were unable to overwhelm the defenders. When the initial assault failed and settled into a longer range musketry duel, Arnold used Learned's arriving brigade to clear the reinforced cabins between the redoubts, which exposed the southern (left) flank of Breymann's Redoubt.

The Hessians inside held out as long as they could, but the redoubt, though well constructed, was not designed to withstand repeated and overpowering assaults from several directions. Arnold was shot down in the struggle, his leg broken by a musket ball. Heinrich Breymann stood his ground but was mortally wounded doing so. (According to some sources he killed some of his own men who tried to fall back, but his soldiers turned on him for his brutality.)

The survivors inside the fortification surrendered. Darkness was falling, Arnold was down, and the battle sputtered to a close. Although Gates is recognized as the winning general of this stunning victory, he was not on the battlefield during the fighting. Arnold deserves the lion's share of the credit for the decisive success.

Casualties: British: 600 killed, wounded, and captured; American: 150 killed and wounded.<sup>4</sup> (p. 150)

## VII. THE SARATOGA CAMPAIGN: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS:

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<sup>3</sup> “A defensive obstacle formed by felled trees with sharpened branches facing the enemy” (*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed., s.v.: “abates”).

<sup>4</sup> Savas and Dameron, “The Battle of Bemis Heights,” in *Battles of the American Revolution*, 149–50.

Several factors contributed to the victory at Saratoga: (1) the inspiration generated by the murder of Jane McCrea resulted in a tremendous conscription of militia to come to the aid of Gates which swelled his forces to over 11,000 at the start of the Battle of Bemis Heights, (2) the inflexibility of John Burgoyne who insisted on fighting in an environment in which his troops were not trained to excel, and (3) the heroic battlefield exploits of Benedict Arnold who pressed the attack against the British when Gates was satisfied with the status quo.

The McCrea tragedy resulted in the eventual depletion of Burgoyne's Indian scouts and therefore a loss of reconnaissance. Insistence in fighting a critical battle on the enemy's terrain led to the loss at Bemis Heights. Benedict Arnold, who was instrumental in winning the battle that secured the ultimate victory over the British at Yorktown, is the man who two years later betrayed his country by joining the British army as a brigadier general.

The veracity of the conclusion that Saratoga was the key battle in the War for Independence is borne out by Creasy's conclusion to his essay on the Saratoga Campaign:

Gates, after the victory, immediately dispatched Colonel Wilkinson to carry the happy tidings to Congress. On being introduced into the hall, he said, "The whole British army has laid down its arms at Saratoga; our own, full of vigor and courage, expect your orders. It is for your wisdom to decide where the country may still have need of their service."

Honors and rewards were liberally voted by the Congress to their conquering general and his men; and it would be difficult (says an Italian historian) to describe the transports of joy which the news of this event excited among the Americans.

They began to flatter themselves with a still more happy future. No one any longer felt any doubt about their achieving their independence. All hoped, and with good reason, that a success of this importance would at length determine France, and the other European powers that waited for her example, to declare themselves in favor of America.

The truth of this was soon displayed in the conduct of France. When the news arrived in Paris of the capture of Ticonderoga, and of the victorious march of Burgoyne toward Albany, events which seemed decisive in favor of the English, instructions had been immediately dispatched to Nantz, and the other ports of the kingdom, that no American privateers should be suffered to enter them, except from indispensable necessity; as to repair their vessels, to obtain provisions, or to escape the perils of the sea. The American commissioners at Paris, in their disgust and despair, had almost broken off all negotiations with the French government; and they even endeavored to open communications with the British ministry. But the British government, elated with the first successes of Burgoyne, refused to listen to any overtures for accommodation. But when the news of Saratoga reached Paris the whole scene was changed. Franklin and his brother commissioners found all their difficulties with the French government vanish. The time seemed to have arrived for the house of Bourbon \Bür'-bo<sup>n</sup>\<sup>5</sup> to take full revenge for all its humiliations and losses in previous wars. In December a treaty was arranged, and formally signed in the February following, by which France acknowledged *the Independent United States of America*. This was, of course, tantamount to a declaration of war with England. Spain soon followed France; and before long, Holland took the same course. Largely aided by French fleets and troops, the Americans vigorously maintained the war against the armies which England, in spite of her European foes, continued to send across the Atlantic. But the struggle was too unequal to be maintained by this country [i.e., England] for many years; and when the treaties of 1783 restored peace to the world, the independence of the United States was reluctantly recognized by their ancient parent and recent enemy, England.<sup>6</sup>

## VIII. THE SCALP OF MISS JANE MCCREA: BIBLIOGRAPHY:

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<sup>5</sup> “French royal family, named from a castle in central France, whose descendants formed ruling dynasties in France, Spain, and Naples” (*Merriam-Webster’s Biographical Dictionary*, s.v.: “Bourbon”).

<sup>6</sup> E. S. Creasy, *The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World: Marathon to Waterloo* (New York: A. L. Burt, Publisher, 1851), 345–46.

