

The Border War in Schaghticoke

As I have written in the last few columns, Schaghticoke was in the thick of the action during the American Revolution, especially in the summer and fall of 1777, as General John Burgoyne advanced south to defeat at Saratoga. I hope that all of you have toured the Saratoga Battlefield, General Schuyler's home and the Battle Monument in Schuylerville, and the newly opened Victory Woods, site of the last encampment of the British before their surrender and accessible from the Battle Monument parking lot. We are so fortunate to live so close to the scenes of such vital episodes in the history of our country.

Schaghticoke was also in the thick of the controversy over the land that would become the state of Vermont in 1791. As of 1750, three colonies claimed Vermont: Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and New York. In 1764, King George proclaimed that the area that would later be Vermont belonged to Albany County, New York. New York surveyors began to set up counties in areas which had already been surveyed by New Hampshire. Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys formed to fight for an independent Vermont, either as a state or its own country. They claimed the territory of New York west to the Hudson River and between Canada and Massachusetts. This, of course, would include Schaghticoke. Settlement of the controversy was delayed by the Revolutionary War, and the Green Mountain Boys not only fought the British, but raided as far as Schaghticoke, trying to establish the western boundary of Vermont as the Hudson River.

In May 1781, a Convention was held in Cambridge which repeated Vermont's land claims. Representatives were from many supposedly New York communities, including Hoosick, Saratoga, Fort Edward, and...Schaghticoke. But once the threat of the British was gone, with the surrender at Yorktown, many at the convention renounced their support of Vermont. They had been afraid that the Green Mountain Boys would destroy their forts, leaving them defenseless before the British.

The events of the following summer were chaotic. According to Kloppott's "History of Schaghticoke," Colonel Peter Yates and the 14th Albany County Militia- the Schaghticoke militia unit- garrisoned the old fort at Schaghticoke. They were to be ready to put down any rebellion or unrest against New York by the Vermonters. According to John Kaminski in his biography, George Clinton, Governor of New York was very concerned that the Vermonters and the British would join together to attack frontier sites, such as Schaghticoke. About sixty residents of Schaghticoke met that summer to elect representatives to the assembly of Vermont! Two local men even acted as justices of the peace for Vermont. And both local residents and people from uncontested Vermont even tried to **force** others to support Vermont. A notice was sent to Schaghticoke residents warning them to "Cease from all seditious..conduct."

In August, the governor of Vermont, Thomas Chittenden, wrote to Colonel Yates, berating him for "drafting and forcibly compelling sundry Inhabitants on the East side of the Hudson into the service of the State of New York...creating disregard for the Jurisdiction of this State" (Vermont). In other words, Chittenden felt Yates had no right to call out his 14th Albany County militiamen in Schaghticoke and Hoosick, as they were living in what he claimed was Vermont. Colonel Yates responded that he had taken an oath to serve New York State, and needed to obey his orders- which were to assemble his militia men to protect the area from raids by Vermonters.

In the next column, I will finish the startling story of the mini-civil war in Schaghticoke in December of 1781.

The Border War in Schaghticoke, part 2

In the last column, I began the story of the controversy in Schaghticoke over whether or not it should be part of the gestating state of Vermont. The story is vividly told in the Public Papers of George Clinton, published in 1904, in letters written by the participants. In August of 1781, there was agitation by some residents of Schaghticoke to become part of Vermont, extending its borders to the Hudson River. The New York militia was called out, but many men did not respond., either supporting Vermont or not wanting to get involved.

Matters reached a head in December of 1781. Lt. Colonel John Van Rensselaer, Colonel Bratt, and others of the 14th Albany were taken prisoner by “tirannical Ruffians who have disavowed allegiance to the state of New York”. This was a mutiny within their regiment. Some of the men who had served together throughout the Revolution were now changing allegiance from New York to Vermont. They went so far as to kidnap their officers. They were taken to Bennington, where they “were treated in a most scandalous manner” before being released. It is unclear why the any of these people were kidnapped. Maybe the mutineers had some thought of forcing them to swear allegiance to Vermont.

General Gansevoort ordered Colonels Yates and Henry VanRensselaer to march the loyal men in their regiments to the aid of Lt. Col. John VanRensselaer at his dwelling in St. Croix or SanCoick- near present day Hoosick Falls., and “to take such measures for quelling the Insurrection as shall appear necessary and expedient.” The General added, “I must recommend to you the greatest precaution and Circumspection in the Matter.” That seems a tall order- quell an insurrection, but be careful. General Stark added his opinion, telling Yates that the insurrection “must be the result of folly and madness. You will be very cautious not to begin hostilities with them but stand your Ground and act defensively until reinforced.” The whole thing was very upsetting: the Revolutionary War not even over, yet fighting was beginning within the new States. And no one wanted to begin shooting at former comrades.

Colonel Yates reported to General Gansevoort from St. Coick on December 12. He said he only had 80 men, and the insurrectors 146. The “rioters” were in a block house, which Yates could not hope to take as he had no artillery. He did not want to back down until the matter was resolved as “we shall all be taken immediately by the other party and be obliged to comply to their will.” Yates asked for artillery and reinforcements, and concluded “the men is (sic) very uneasy wanting either to fight them or go home.”

General Gansevoort came out in person from his headquarters at Saratoga to lead the militia, arriving at the house (inn) of Charles Toll of Schaghticoke at the same time as the sheriff of Albany. The sheriff arrived with a warrant to arrest some of the insurgents. Toll’s house was at a bridge over the Hoosick River, perhaps where the bridge at Valley Falls is today. Before this group could head for Hoosick Falls, the retreating militia arrived. They were being pursued by “the militia of the pretended State of Vermont, consisting of at least 500 men with a field piece (a cannon)”. General Gansevoort led a further retreat, “to the town of Schaghticoke, where the Men might be housed from the inclemency of the cold weather,” and in a more defensive position. The General does not say so, but perhaps this was in the old fort at Schaghticoke, near the current Knickerbocker Mansion. Discretion being the better part of valor, the General dismissed the militia, as reinforcements were not arriving, and with 80 men he couldn’t hope to prevail against 500. He stated that the residents of Schaghticoke, “especially those who have taken an active part against the insurgents, are in a very precarious Situation.” They were afraid they would have to either swear allegiance to Vermont or abandon their homes.

In any event, everyone settled down, unwilling to have war between new Americans. The majority of people in Schaghticoke remained loyal to Albany County and the state of New York. Vermonters decided to take their case to the Congress of the new United States and seek a legal settlement. This didn’t happen until 1790, when New York paid Vermont for part of the disputed land. Obviously, Schaghticoke remained in New York, but if the militia on either side began shooting, who knows what would have happened?!

Bibliography: Kloppott, Beth, History of Schaghticoke, 1980.
Kaminski, John, George Clinton, Madison House Publishers, 1993.
Public Papers of George Clinton, Vol 7; NYS, 1904.