

Schaghticoke in the Revolution Part I

When the American Revolution began in 1775, Schaghticoke was a sparsely populated region. It had been on Albany's frontier with Canada for many years. The citizens remembered Indian raids in the past, and some of the men had been in the colonial militia during the French and Indian Wars. Some had gone as far as Canada as part of English offensives against the French. There was a small fort in the Albany Corporation Lands, near where the Knickerbocker Mansion is now, but it was made of logs and was in poor condition. The last time it had been garrisoned was probably around 1750. So while the residents had lived a peaceful life since the end of the French Wars in 1763, they remembered the danger there had been before, and knew that the fort they had would not protect them.

One of the first tasks of each district of the colony of New York when the Revolution began was to set up a civilian Committee of Safety, whose task was to root out Tory or Loyalist activity. John Knickerbocker, probably the most prominent local citizen, was chairman of the local committee. There was a concern throughout all of the colonies that some if not many people did not support the rebellion against Great Britain. There was special concern about Loyalists in a frontier area like Schaghticoke, where there could be easy infiltration of the British and their allies. It was necessary to prevent the British from getting support from local residents. In some areas, for example in what is now Washington County, there were many Tories.

The major accusation of loyalism in Schaghticoke was in June 1779 when locals Colonel Peter Yates and Major Groesbeck told the Committee of Safety that several strangers had moved into town who collected cattle for Burgoyne's Army at the time of the battle of Saratoga, and that "those persons daily obstruct the execution of the orders of the militia officers."

In the end, only fourteen men were arrested on suspicion of Loyalist actions in the Schaghticoke district (which included today's Pittstown), and none were convicted. Schaghticoke's strong Dutch heritage may have kept Loyalist activity to a minimum. The Dutch in Albany remembered the British as conquerors in the past and viewed them as economic competitors in the present, so had no great loyalty to Great Britain. Schaghticoke's government came from Albany, thanks to the dominance in the town of the Albany Corporation Lands. The accused Tories were arrested between 1778 and 1781. Most were released on bail or upon doing service in lieu of bail. Many remained in town after the Revolution, and one, George Wetsel, of the Melrose area, became a prominent citizen.

The next task of the district of Schaghticoke, was to assemble its militia companies. That will be the topic of the next column.

Bibliography: Kloppott, Beth, History of Schaghticoke, 1980.
Sylvester, Nathaniel, History of Rensselaer County, 1880.

Schaghticoke in the American Revolution: Part 2

In the last column, I spoke of the first task of each district in the new state of New York when the Revolution began: to establish a Committee of Safety and root out possible Tories in the community. The next task of each new state was to assemble the militia. There were experienced soldiers among the residents of Schaghticoke, thanks to service in the militia in the French and Indian Wars. The laws of New York required that every male between the ages of about 18 and 45 be members of the militia, subject to being called to duty as required. (Indeed, a similar law is still in place in the US.) The 14th Albany County Militia was the unit that encompassed the Schaghticoke and Hoosick districts. The Schaghticoke District included modern day Pittstown. On October 20, 1775, John Knickerbocker was appointed the Colonel of the Regiment, which included forty-six officers and 684 men, about 140 of whom were from Schaghticoke. They were divided into seven companies and a company of "Minute Men," who presumably would be called on first in an emergency. We know the names of many of the men who served in the 14th Albany Militia, thanks to published compilations of records of the New State of New York.

We also know about the service of the militia during the war because some of the members of the local militia lived long enough to be able to apply for Revolutionary War pensions. Indigent veterans were first eligible to apply in 1818, and many more applied under a law in 1832. In order to receive a pension, the men had to prove and detail their service in the war. I have read the pension applications of at least a dozen members of the 14th, and while the details differ, depending on what company the man was in, they all record having been called out to serve once or twice a year from 1775 to 1782, for two to six weeks at a time. We have to remember that these men were writing at least thirty years after the events occurred, and as old, poor men, probably with imperfect memories. On the other hand, being in a war would certainly be a memorable experience. They served in Saratoga, Ft. Edward, Sandy Hill (Hudson Falls), Ft. George, Skenesborough, and other places in this general area. They mostly garrisoned and built forts and breastworks. Several participated in the battle of Bennington, in August of 1777. Of course, they had to walk everywhere they went, a fact that I think we must think about in imagining their service.

It must have been very disruptive to these men, mostly farmers, to be called out unexpectedly over such a number of years. Apparently the commander would call for volunteers among his militia company. If enough men responded, fine, if not, more would be required to serve- or be drafted. I was surprised to read that after the battle of Saratoga, even after the battle of Yorktown in 1781, citizens in Schaghticoke, and indeed all of the northern colonies, continued to worry about invasion from Canada and raids by Tories.

In the next column, I will report on the specific experiences of local soldiers during the war, and continue the story of Schaghticoke in the Revolution.

- Bibliography: Fitch, Dr. Asa, [Their Own Voices](#), reprinted 1983.
Kloppott, Beth, [History of the Town of Schaghticoke](#), 1980
Roberts, James, [NY in the Revolution as Colony and State](#), 1898.
Various pension papers in Heritagequest.com

Schaghticoke in the American Revolution: Part 3

In last week's column, I talked about the formation of the 14th Albany County Militia, Schaghticoke's regiment in the Revolutionary War. Like soldiers in today's National Guard, the soldiers lived at home and were called out to serve as needed. I have found that from 1775 to 1782 or 1783 some soldiers in Schaghticoke served at least one or two months every year.

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Local men had differing experiences in the 14th Albany, depending on when they volunteered or were drafted and which company they were in. One example is Jacob Yates. Yates was born in 1754. He married Elizabeth Vandenberg in 1776 at the Dutch Reformed Church in Schaghticoke. He entered the militia the same year. John Knickerbocker was his Colonel. Yates rose through the ranks to be a Captain by 1780. He served to the end of the war, travelling many times to Fort Edward, Ballstown, Ticonderoga, and Crown Point, and twice to Montreal. His children applied for his pension after his death at age 77 in 1831 in Schaghticoke.

Solomon Acker left a more detailed account. Acker was born in Dutchess County in 1753. He entered militia service in May 1775 in Captain Hicks Company of the 14th in Schaghticoke. During that year he was "employed in watching .. hostiles and Tories at Schaghticoke." This confirms the account of Beth Kloppott in her History of Schaghticoke, that at the start of the war, the 14th Albany County militia men were called out to guard the district from loyalist activity.

Early in 1776, Acker was ordered to Albany, and served there and in Johnstown, but he returned to Schaghticoke and a new company in the 14th in June. At the time of the battle of Saratoga in 1777, Acker states he and his company guarded provisions on the east side of the Hudson at Stillwater. Another soldier, Cornelius Francisco of Pittstown, reported the same. On the other hand, Wynant Vandenberg, in the Company of Captain Jacob Yates (mentioned above), worked all the summer of 1777 moving artillery of the army from Fort Edward to Stillwater, and then to Half Moon, ahead of the advancing British General Burgoyne and his army. That must have been very difficult work indeed. Vandenberg was home briefly, but then in early October was in the "first battle and the capture of Burgoyne." His timing is a bit off, as the first battle was in August. Apparently, Colonel Knickerbocker was wounded or injured at this time, with Colonel Peter Yates, also of Schaghticoke, taking his place.

In the next column, I will report on the experiences of several other local soldiers, and continue the story of Solomon Acker, who played a major role in a dramatic episode in Schaghticoke at the time of the battle of Saratoga.

- Bibliography: Fitch, Dr. Asa, Their Own Voices, reprinted 1983.
Kloppott, Beth, History of the Town of Schaghticoke, 1980
Roberts, James, NY in the Revolution as Colony and State, 1898.
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Schaghticoke in the American Revolution, part 4

In the last column, I wrote about the formation of the 14th Albany County Militia, our local regiment in the Revolution. Several men left fascinating reports on their service in their pension papers. I talked of a couple last week, and will continue with more now, plus go on to discuss more about our local experience in the Revolutionary War.

Returning to Solomon Acker, of whom I wrote last week, in 1778 he joined the company of Jacob Yates and went with a scouting party to Fort Edward. Acker doesn't report any other service in the war, but Cornelius Francisco of Pittsdown does. He volunteered in both 1778 and 1779, travelling to Fort Edward, guarding the frontier. In June of 1780 he marched to Fort George with Colonel Yate's regiment. Governor George Clinton was there, ready to lead an expedition in pursuit of Tory leader Sir John Johnson. Francisco volunteered to go, and the expedition crossed Lake George in bateaux. He was "out on this tour one month." Another 14th Albany veteran, John Palmer of Hoosick, reported ending up in the "life guard of Governor Clinton" at the time, serving for six weeks. He gave the year as 1782. Cornelius Francisco also volunteered for a couple of weeks in 1781 and 1782, going to Ft. Edward, Ft. Miller, Saratoga, Sandy Hill, and Skenesborough. Another soldier, John Palmer of Hoosick, participated in the battle of Bennington, then went on to guard the provisions at the time of the battle of Saratoga. The long Revolutionary War period was certainly one of danger and upset for many local families.

I found the idea of the Governor of New York, George Clinton, leading expeditions against the Tories astounding. Imagine Andrew Cuomo putting on a uniform and leading the National Guard on an expedition against an enemy. John K. Lee, in [George Clinton](#), reports that Sir John Johnson commanded a force of Tories and Indians on raiding expeditions from Montreal to the Mohawk River just west of Schenectady in 1780 and on Lake Ontario to Oswego to Schoharie in 1781. Governor Clinton, who began his public career as a commander of militia units south of Albany on the Hudson River in 1775, personally commanded the militia which pursued Johnson both times. The reports of the veterans of the 14th Albany are probably true, even if their timing may be a bit off.

The militia men also had to support the Continental Army, "the regulars." In my archives, I have a list from August 6, 1779 of about twenty men from the Schaghticoke area who were required to provide either a pair of stockings or shoes to the Army. Though the list is a rare survival, this was a common method used to outfit the troops. Another rare survival is a "class list" of 26 local militia men. The whole US militia was divided into classes, which would be required to outfit one of their own to go into the regular army. The men in this Schaghticoke list from 1782 were required by their Colonel, Peter Yates, to provide an "ablebodied man equipt for the field...to be delivered at Saratoga where he will be mustered without delay." The 26 men would provide money and/or equipment for the one among them who would go to serve.

In the next column, I will describe the effects of the events of summer 1777 on the home front of Schaghticoke.

- Bibliography: Fitch, Dr. Asa, [Their Own Voices](#), reprinted 1983.
Kloppott, Beth, [History of the Town of Schaghticoke](#), 1980
Lee, John K., [George Clinton](#), Syracuse U. Press, 2010.
1779 list of shoes and stockings, Town of Schaghticoke archives
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various pension papers, on [Heritagequest.com](#)
Roberts, James, [NY in the Revolution as Colony and State](#), 1898.

Schaghticoke in the Revolution: Part 5

In the last column, I talked a lot about the military service of local men during the Revolutionary War. Throughout the war, Schaghticoke was near the northern border of the new United States, with the residents afraid of raids by British, Tories, and Indians from British Canada. But the war really came home to Schaghticoke in the summer of 1777. As General Burgoyne and the British army advanced south from Canada, residents of Schaghticoke became more and more worried. In July they would have heard of the murders of the whole Allen family of Argyle and of the murder and scalping of Jane McCrea of Ft. Edward by the Indian allies of Burgoyne's Army. The American General Gates sent a letter to Burgoyne in August accusing him of hiring Indians specifically to murder Europeans, paying them a bounty for each scalp. Of course the murder of Jane McCrea became a rallying cry for the American troops leading up to the battle of Saratoga.

Many families from Schaghticoke and all around evacuated to Albany. Lansingburgh was a small village at the time, and there was no Troy, so Albany was the first large settlement. It would have taken some time to reach Albany, either by water, having to get around the falls at Troy, or by trail- no Routes 40 and 787! General Gates made a special offer to the men of the evacuated families to join the Continental Army, to be provided with the usual rations "for themselves and their families," in part because the number of refugees was proving too large for Albany to accommodate.

As you may recall, I wrote earlier about our local Gothic author, Ann Eliza Bleeker who was among the evacuees, suffering the tremendous trauma which fueled her later writing. She and her family evacuated, but continued on down the Hudson to Red Hook, where they had relatives. It was certainly terrifying and wrenching for all of the evacuees, leaving their homes, animals, and crops to who knew what fate. Finding housing would have been difficult. Did they take their cows with them? Did they try to take their most precious possessions? Sylvester's History of Rensselaer County reports that the Viele family, living on the Tomhannock Creek in the Albany Corporation area, buried some of their belongings in a ravine.

In August and September of 1777, some of the more enterprising local farmers arranged to sell their crops and flour to the Continental Army, based at Saratoga, taking advantage of a market that was sure. Some of the American troops were camped in the Schaghticoke area, and after the war some residents petitioned the state for compensation for the fences destroyed for firewood and crops taken by the soldiers. One document in the NYS Archives records the claim of Daniel Shaw, who claimed loss of bushels of corn to the troops of Colonel Yates in 1777.

Other crops were evidently destroyed by marauding bands of Tories and Indians, and one source says that one of the few grist mills in town was burned by the Tories. In The History of the Seventeen Towns of Rensselaer County, the author quotes a "patriotic member of the Knickerbacker family" as stating in 1876 that at the time of the battle of Saratoga "the ancient fort or block-house..was taken possession of by a troop of Hessian soldiery, in the service of the British," who raided the homes of the neighbors. I truly doubt that as there were so many American soldiers in the area. One source says that troops of the American General Lincoln were camped at Schaghticoke before the battle, meaning the Hessians certainly wouldn't have been in the fort.

In the next column, I will relate the most famous local incident related to the battle of Saratoga.

Bibliography: Fitch, Asa, Their Own Voices, reprint 1983.
Kloppott, Beth, History of the Town of Schaghticoke, 1980.
Sylvester, Nathan, History of Rensselaer County, 1880.
Becker, John P. Sexagenary, Albany, Munsell, 1866.

Schaghticoke in the American Revolution part 6

In the last column, I related a Knickerbocker family legend that the fort near the Mansion was occupied by Hessian soldiers at the time of the battle of Saratoga. Though I doubt very much that that was true, there is no doubt that there were bands of Tories, Indians, and perhaps Hessians and British roaming through the area during the summer of 1777 before the battle of Saratoga. Major Dirck VanVeghten of the local militia unit, the 14th Albany County, was killed by one band when he came from Saratoga just before the battle to check on his home in Schaghticoke. One source states that VanVeghten came home on “an intelligence gathering mission.” In either event, he was accompanied only by Solomon Acker, one of the soldiers in his company of the 14th Albany County Militia.

The story of Major VanVeghten really illustrates the great variety that can exist in the supposedly factual reporting of an incident. Solomon Acker was the only source for this story, and his account must have varied widely as he told that story many times over the years. In his Revolutionary War pension papers, Mr. Acker states he was with Major VanVeghten at Schaghticoke in July 1777 when VanVeghten was “shot by the Indians,” and that Mr. Acker killed one of the Indians himself. He states, “Immediately I raised a guard and warned the inhabitants, and assisted them in removing to Albany.” Sylvester, in his History of Rensselaer County sets the event in August, and describes the area as deserted, as everyone had already evacuated to Albany. He states the men were on the land of Jacob Yates, when “they were fired upon by Indians or perhaps Tories.” He adds that VanVeghten was shot through the tobacco box, which was handed down in his family, and that the Major, realizing that he was mortally wounded, yelled, “Solomon, take care of yourself; you cannot save me.” Acker fled reluctantly, “with the bullets pattering around him,” reaching the Army safely. Mr. Acker told this story, apparently much embroidered from the version in the pension papers, to two local men, who told it to Sylvester. They even pointed out the spot on the farm of W.V.V. Reynolds where the murder occurred. This was probably near the intersection of Farm to Market Road and Howland Avenue Extension.

A memoir written in 1866 by John P. Becker, Sexagenary, Reminiscences of the American Revolution, really takes the story to fiction, describing the circumstances of each shot taken by VanVeghten, Acker, and the enemies, going on to describe Acker’s flight step by step, and stating that when the Americans went to retrieve VanVeghten’s body, they found “him hacked to pieces and scalped, and...three Indians dead in an adjacent field.” It also places the event as occurring after the battle of Saratoga. Who knows if Mr. Acker told the story this way or if some source of Becker added to it? The memoir states that VanVeghten was buried in Albany, but “his unfortunate wife was not permitted to see the corpse, it was so savagely mutilated.” Whatever the truth of this particular incident, it confirms the danger in the area during that summer of 1777. It makes the most sense that it happened before the battle, as presumably enemies in the area would have either been captured or have retreated after the battle.

As I reported earlier columns, the 14th Albany County Militia was certainly called to duty during the summer before and through the time of the battles of Saratoga. This means that many families were evacuated from home and had to survive without their husbands and fathers, though they may have had help from some militia men during their evacuation. In addition, most people were away from home at harvest time. After the battle was over, about 6000 British and Hessian prisoners of war were evacuated to Boston, probably crossing the Hudson in boats or over a bridge of boats at Stillwater, and passing through the town of Schaghticoke. This probably resulted in more damage to fences and farms.

I find it difficult to look around our town now and imagine it on the edge of the battle that was the turning point of the Revolution, to imagine how I would feel if I were forced to evacuate my home, how I would feel to return home and find my property in ruins.

During and just after the Revolution, Schaghticoke was not only on the border of American and British territory, but also on a second controversial border. I will discuss that in the next column.

- Bibliography: Fitch, Asa, Their Own Voices, reprint 1983.
Kloppott, Beth, History of the Town of Schaghticoke, 1980.
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