

THE BURNING OF DANBURY (1777)

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This summer Danbury, Connecticut will be involved with the Bicentennial celebration of our nation. The agenda will include visits to the few remaining colonial homes, speeches, parades, and a re-enactment of the burning of Danbury by the British. Chances are that most people will watch the festivities and buy souvenirs completely missing the purpose of commemorating the Bicentennial. These celebrations should make Danburians cognizant of their local history and learn what part their town played in the Revolutionary War. People should ask themselves exactly what was the importance of Danbury that would necessitate a British invasion. Or for that matter, was Danbury as important as local historians lead us to believe? What were the circumstances behind the invasion and who were involved? This short article can serve as an introduction.

During the 1770's Danbury was a small rural town with a population of about 2,500 people. In 1776, Danbury had been designated as a military supply depot due to its inland strategic location and accessibility to both the Hudson River and Long Island Sound. A sizeable store of provisions, ammunition, clothing, medicine, and articles necessary for Army life were stored here.¹

Danbury was important--but its importance should not be exaggerated. Philadelphia, the capital of the colonies, and the Hudson Highlands were considered prime necessities to hold for the revolutionary forces. General Washington felt that their loss would have resulted in complete disaster for his armies. Any loss would be a setback--but with the limited forces Washington had available in 1777, priorities had to be set and Danbury was considered expendable. Washington therefore ordered all remaining militia units in Massachusetts and Connecticut sent to him in New Jersey to bolster his main force.² He realized that by doing this he was draining Connecticut of her manpower and leaving the southwestern part of the state open for attack.

The British on the other hand, had accidentally learned about the supply depot in Danbury. During the winter cessation, the British were located in New York City under the command of General William Howe. Unlike the American forces, the British were well disciplined professional soldiers, but they were suffering from a major disadvantage--a lack of supplies. Soldiers were forced to forage for food and supplies.

Learning through scouts about the military stores in scantily protected Danbury, Howe speculated that it would be an easy catch. Another factor influencing his decision was the advice given to him by William Tryon. Tryon expressed the view that an invasion would not be hampered by local resistance since there were many Loyalists in Connecticut.³ (Fairfield County had a notoriously Tory reputation.) Tryon, an ex-governor of both North Carolina and New York, was later chosen leader of that invasion.

The plans for the invasion of Connecticut involved a feint with two fleets sailing simultaneously from Manhattan. One fleet of twelve transports sailed up the North River (Hudson River), the other sailed towards Connecticut. This diversion succeeded in confusing the Rebels and led them to believe that the Hudson Highlands were the British main objective.⁴

According to most sources the British expeditionary forces contained from 1,850 to 2,000 men. There were approximately 250 men from the 4th, 15th, 23rd (the Royal Welch Fusiliers), 27th (the Enniskillens, an Irish Battalion), the 14th and the 64th Regiment of Foot.⁵ The last two regiments were Grenadier troops (shock troops) whose uniforms were similar to those of the Hessian mercenaries, giving rise to the legend that Hessians fought in Danbury.⁶ A handful of men from the 17th Dragoons (cavalry) were used as scouts.

Loyalist troops were incorporated into the British Army under the command of Montford Brown, an ex-Royal Governor of the Bahamas. This corps was known as the Prince of Wales Loyal American Volunteers and was based in Flushing, Long Island. The Volunteers contained 300 men, many of whom were from Fairfield County. Their familiarity with the locality made them indispensable during the raid.⁷

The British Navy controlled the waters of the Atlantic and the fleet did not meet with any resistance while sailing to Connecticut. The only problem the fleet faced was finding a port suitable for disembarkation. Most of coastal Connecticut was protected by small batteries of guns. However, there was one sandy beach area, Compo Beach at Westport, which was not protected. It was here on Friday, April 25, 1777, the British landed.

Simultaneously the H.M.S. Halifax left the fleet and sailed to Bridgeport to blockade the movement of ships at Black Rock Harbor. What is interesting to note is that the shots from the guns on shore were not able to reach the British, forcing the Americans to remain at anchor.⁸

Messengers soon spread the news of the invasion throughout the towns. The Americans remained uncertain as to what the British intended to do. Consequently, General Gold Selleck Silliman, the commander of the state militia, began to organize men from Fairfield County. Generals David Wooster and Benedict Arnold, both of whom were in New Haven, were notified and also began recruiting men.⁹

As the British commenced marching up Compo Beach and moving towards Weston, the Rebels were quick to realize that Danbury was the target. Riders were sent warning the people of the British advance.

On the morning of April 26, 1777, the British began their trek unimpeded. They soon met the small Redding Militia. The Redding patriots were so few in numbers that they did not pose a serious

threat. They scattered after a brief exchange of fire. The British continued marching through Weston until they reached Redding.

In Redding the British Generals dined at the home of Squire William Heron, an influential townsman. An interesting fact was discovered in 1880 when the papers of Sir Henry Clinton were released. Squire Heron, it seems, was a double agent for both American and British intelligence.¹⁰

Continuing their march, the British arrived at Bethel but did not stop until their entrance into Danbury on April 26, via Coal Pit Hill. By this time Danbury was practically deserted. Civilians and militia had moved on in fear of the expected attack.

Upon arriving, Tryon sought shelter in the home of Nehemiah Dibble on South Street. Generals James Agnew and William Erskine proceeded to White Street via Town Street (Main Street) to lodge in the house of Benjamin Knapp. Suddenly a number of rebels opened fire from a house owned by Major Daniel Starr, located on the corner of Main and Boughton Streets (now the site of the Danbury Police Department). The skirmish continued until the handful of Rebels was killed. The dead were then burned along with the house. This was the only battle that took place in Danbury.

Meanwhile the Americans were in pursuit of the British. General Silliman and his men arrived at Redding from Fairfield on the 26th of April, and were joined by Generals Wooster and Arnold. Wooster assumed supreme command and continued the march into Bethel where the troops bivouacked for the night.

British scouts reported these new developments and General Tryon realized that prompt action was required. It would now be impossible for the British to remove some of the needed equipment as had been planned. The remaining objective was the destruction of the military depot in Danbury.

Most of the stores were kept in an Anglican Church which was located on South Street. Out of respect, these stores were removed from the church and were burned on the street. Barns which held grain and military supplies were burned and often caught nearby homes on fire. The Dibble house also had stores, but since Mr. Dibble was a Tory his house was spared.

There were at least 400 homes within the Danbury area, yet only 20 homes and barns were burned. The majority of them were legal military targets. Damage to private property did occur, but not nearly to the extent that legend would lead us to believe.¹² In many cases those who did take advantage of the situation appear to have been the Loyalist Corps under Browne or the local townspeople themselves.¹³

Among the items destroyed by the British were barrels of pork, beef, flour, saltpetre, wheat, corn, oats, rice, and biscuits, rum, brandy, wines, medicine, tents, beddings, tools, sugar, molasses,

coffee, tea, and shoes and stockings. The British did succeed in destroying the military supplies located in Danbury.

Using common sense, Tryon decided to take a different route back to the ships anchored at Compo. His route involved a detour through Miry Brook and Ridgeburry and then through Ridgefield to Wilton. The British marched out of Danbury by way of Wooster Street on the morning of April 27th.

The Americans were at first confused by the withdrawal, because they assumed Tryon was bound for New York. It was decided that the small militia group of about 600 men would be divided into two groups; the smallest group would harass the British from the rear, and the larger group, led by Benedict Arnold, would attempt to intercept the British at Ridgefield. The following three engagements have come to be known as the Battle of Ridgefield.

The first encounter occurred while the British were about three miles from the village of Ridgefield. This action caught the enemy completely off guard. The second, a counter-attack occurred a mile south of the first attack. This time the British were prepared. It was during this engagement that General Wooster received his fatal wound. He was removed to Danbury and died on May 2, 1777 in the Dibble House. Meanwhile Captain Stephen Rowe Bradley assumed command, and reorganized the scattered troops and moved forward to join Arnold.¹⁴

Wooster's diversionary attacks from the rear allowed Arnold to make a stand on the main road (now Route 7) leading to the village of Ridgefield. A crude barricade consisting of logs, carts and stones was hastily erected across the rising ground by Arnold and his 500 men. A house owned by Benjamin Stebbins stood on the right flank; the left flank was a rocky ledge. The British, unable to advance from the front, directed their strength on the left flank and succeeded in breaking through. Lacking sufficient weapons, proper training and any fighting experience, the Americans were forced to retreat. This engagement lasted a total of only one hour.

The Americans failed in a linear battle yet they persistently continued to harass the British with what artillery they had available. A cannon ball from one of these skirmishes can be seen today embedded in a wall of the Keeler Tavern in Ridgefield.

On the following day, April 28th, the British resumed the last 18 miles of their march. Two final sites where the Rebel forces would be able to check the British advance remained enroute.

The first was the bridge over the Saugatuck River. Arnold and his men waited for the British at the bridge, but enemy scouts had warned Tryon, and he forded the river at a shallow spot.

The second was made at Compo Hill in Westport. By this time the British were exhausted and running out of ammunition. With the

Americans in hot pursuit the British were pushed into a defensive line behind several stone walls. As a final thrust the British initiated a bayonet charge that frightened the Rebels more than hurting them. Most of the Americans abandoned their posts in the face of the onslaught, enabling the British to board their ships and disembark.

The invasion of Connecticut and the destruction of the military stores amounted to a British victory. The loss of military supplies was a problem, but it did not have serious consequences upon the outcome of the war. Even after the raid, Danbury continued to be used as a military depot with military protection. Other military stores in Connecticut were moved farther inland for more protection. The British, never attempted another inland invasion, but rather concentrated their efforts on small coastal attacks.

Danbury was not a major battle in the Revolutionary War and is not even mentioned in most history books. However, the conflict is important in the sense that it affected the lives and history of the people living in Danbury.

As with any other historical event, hindsight has created many heroes. A plethora of colorful legends have arisen concerning the raid. These legends and also some eyewitness accounts are available in the History of Danbury, Connecticut by James Bailey.

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Footnotes

¹George C. Rockwell, The History of Ridgefield, Connecticut (Ridgefield, Ct.: The Author, 1927), p. 103.

²Robert McDevitt, Connecticut Attacked: A British Viewpoint, Tryon's Raid on Danbury, Connecticut Bicentennial Series, X(Chester, Ct: Pequot Press, 1974), p. 10-11.

³Ibid., p. 15.

⁴Ibid., pp. 23-24.

⁵James R. Case, An Account of Tryon's Raid on Danbury (Danbury, Ct.: Danbury Publishing Company, 1927), p.8.

⁶Ibid., p. 13.

⁷McDevitt, op. cit., pp. 20-21.

⁸Ibid., quoted from Admiralty Records, London, 52/1775. p/667/8.

⁹A few pieces of artillery and some Continental soldiers were available. The major strength of this militia would be made up of raw levies, old men and young boys. Case, op. cit., pp. 29-30.

¹⁰McDevitt, op. cit., p. 33.

¹¹There were supposedly four men and one black. Ibid., pp. 37-38.

¹²Ibid., p. 43. Many writers, such as James M. Bailey, G.H. Hollister, and Silvio A. Bedini, portray the British as being worse than the Huns. Most of their information was not documented.

¹³Ibid., p. 45.

¹⁴Silvio A. Bedini, Ridgefield in Review (New Haven: Walker-Rockliff, 1958), p. 67.

¹⁵McDevitt, op. cit., p. 62.