

This Day in History... September 19, 1777

First Battle of Saratoga

On September 19, 1777, the first Battle of Saratoga was fought at Freeman's Farm.

Over the summer of 1777, the British had planned an elaborate "triple invasion" of New York. Coming from different directions, three separate armies would move in on the upper Hudson Valley and join forces at Albany. Together, they would take control of the state in one grand effort.

General John Burgoyne's forces were to converge on Albany from the north, conquering Fort Ticonderoga and Saratoga along the way. To the west, Lieutenant Colonel Barry St. Leger was to subdue Fort Stanwix, and then move down the Mohawk Valley to join up with Burgoyne. Meanwhile, Sir William Howe, who had recently defeated George Washington at New York City, would move the main army up the Hudson River to reinforce the smaller armies at Albany. Burgoyne was confident that the Saratoga Campaign would prove successful. But the plan was fatally flawed.



Herkimer at Oriskany 1777 by Yohn
US Bicentennial 13cents

The Battle of Oriskany was a major setback for the British, that prevented them from being at full force at Saratoga.

homes in Albany and Saratoga. Following the loss of Fort Ticonderoga, Schuyler instructed soldiers and civilians between there and Saratoga to destroy or hide their food and livestock so the British could not make use of them. He also reportedly told his wife Catherine to burn the family's Saratoga wheat field. In addition to removing potential food sources from the route, Schuyler had bridges destroyed, roads blocked by cut-down trees, and flooded paths in swamps. All these measures helped slow Burgoyne's travel time to about one mile per day.



This stamp utilized the original essay for an unused 1869 stamp design.

A second battle was fought at Saratoga 18 days later. This time, it was the British who were forced to retreat, and after a week of negotiations, Burgoyne surrendered to Gates on October 17. When Burgoyne surrendered, he presented his sword to Gates, saying "The fortune of war, General Gates, has made me your prisoner." But Gates returned the sword and replied, "I shall always be ready to testify that it has not been through any fault of Your Excellency."

The surrender was a tremendous victory for America, often considered the turning point of the war. It proved that American troops could battle a European army on their own terms and win. The battle also convinced France, Spain, and the Dutch Republic to fully support the American cause and declare war against England.



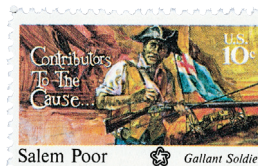
Surrender at Saratoga 1777 by Trumbull
US Bicentennial 13cents

Stamp picturing the surrender at Saratoga on October 17, 1777.

Most of upstate New York was forested and had very primitive roadways, if any. Long marching distances through enemy lands meant slow travel faced with constant obstacles, danger, and nowhere to fall back. Each of the armies risked being dependent on reinforcements, and communication across the state was limited. They were too spread out; calls for assistance would be answered slowly at best. Unless they all made it to Albany, their cause was doomed.

To further complicate matters, General Howe had gone off toward Philadelphia and hadn't left himself enough time to make it up the Hudson. Unaware, Burgoyne marched on. He easily took Fort Ticonderoga, but his troubles were increasing. Supplies ran low and his Native American soldiers deserted the effort. St. Leger successfully laid siege to Fort Stanwix, but he too was suffering considerable losses to his already small force. A rumor that Burgoyne was defeated and an American army was fast approaching was all it took for St. Leger and his men to retreat.

Meanwhile, Continental Army general Philip Schuyler helped plan the American defense during the Saratoga Campaign. A New York native, Schuyler had



Salem Poor Gallant Soldier

Salem Poor served with the 13th Massachusetts Regiment at Saratoga.

In the wake of the British military disorganization, the Second Continental Congress sent a large force commanded by General Horatio Gates to confront Burgoyne before he reached Albany. With the American Army ahead and the militia closing in from the rear, the British were soon trapped. To retreat would be almost as dangerous as staying to fight. So, Burgoyne fought on, but it was not enough. General Gates had all but closed the gates on the British advance in New York.

Around noon on September 19, Burgoyne's center column encountered Colonel Daniel Morgan's American light infantry at John Freeman's Farm. The fighting broke out immediately and throughout the course of the afternoon, each side lost and took the field several times. When Burgoyne ordered a detachment of 500 German troops to his aid, the Americans abandoned the field, leaving it in British control. However, the British had suffered 600 casualties, including three-quarters of their artillerymen, while the Americans had 300 killed or seriously wounded.



Stamp image based on John Trumbull's painting, Surrender of General Burgoyne.

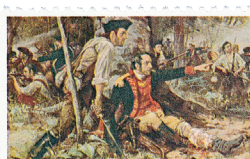
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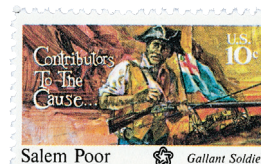
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