INCIDENT AT THE BENNINGTON MEETING HOUSE, AUGUST 17, 1777

Michael P. Gabriel, Ph.D.

As night fell on August 16, 1777, American militia led by General John Stark had won a resounding victory near Bennington, Vermont. In two separate engagements against a combined force of Braunschweigers, British marksmen, Canadians, Loyalists, and Native Americans, they had inflicted nearly one thousand casualties. Among these were approximately 750 prisoners. As the American troops escorted them to Bennington, the question quickly arose: what to do with so many captured enemy soldiers? Ultimately, they were placed in different parts of the village, but the largest contingent of over 400 Germans and Canadians were held in the Bennington Meetinghouse. Not designed to hold a large number of people for any length of time, the building became the scene of an alleged break out the evening of August 17 that left several Braunschweigers dead and others wounded. Although often forgotten, a number of American soldiers along with a German prisoner of war recorded this incident at the meetinghouse. The event tells us something about war and the colonists' fear of the German auxiliary troops.

Located in southwestern Vermont, Bennington was a thriving village in the summer of 1777. A key stop on the route of New England troops marching towards Fort Edward and the upper Hudson, Bennington contained a warehouse and a number of barns filled with stores for the Continental Army. The Americans had also accumulated herds of cattle and horses near the town to support the army's effort. Indeed, these provisions are what prompted British General John Burgoyne to dispatch the troops that Stark handily defeated. The village had a population of just under 600, but it had swelled in the days and months immediately before and after the battle.[1] Many civilians fled to and through the town as Burgoyne's army advanced ever-farther south toward Albany. Furthermore, Stark's New Hampshire brigade, which numbered around eleven hundred, began arriving on August 8. Hundreds of Massachusetts, Vermont, and New York militia soon followed, and they continued to arrive even after the engagement.[2] As the battle raged, a steady stream of wounded Americans made their way back to the town. The prisoners, some of whom were also wounded, added to this population, which now stood over 3,000.

Faced with this situation, prisoners were separated into various groups and scattered around the town. Who actually made these decisions is not recorded. Perhaps Stark and local militia officers discussed these arrangements before they departed for battle, although they did not know how many prisoners they would need to house, if any. The Vermont Council of Safety, which sat at Bennington, might have also made the decisions. Regardless, the Americans placed the captured officers in a room on the upper floor of the famed Catamount Tavern. Stephen Fay ran this two-story wooden structure that had served as Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys's headquarters during their disputes with New York over land claims before the war. Among the prisoners held in the tavern was Julius Wasmus, a Braunschweiger company surgeon, who recorded the only German account of the meetinghouse incident.[3] The village also established a temporary hospital to treat the several hundred wounded soldiers from both sides. Probably located somewhere south of the Catamount Tavern, it was soon replaced by a more permanent structure across from Ethan Allen's house.[4]

The biggest problem, however, was what to do with the hundreds of unwounded rank and file prisoners who outnumbered Bennington's permanent residents. Ultimately, these men were held in the meetinghouse, Bennington's largest building. Built between 1763 and 1764, the two-story structure measured fifty by forty feet, and was located about five hundred feet south of the Catamount Tavern. Designed as a Congregationalist house of worship, the plain unpainted building was the logical place to house the prisoners until other arrangements could be made.[5]

How many prisoners jammed the meetinghouse is uncertain. General Benjamin Lincoln, the Continental officer organizing militia in the region, wrote that Stark had captured 37 British soldiers, 398 Germans, 38 Canadians, and 155 Loyalists, not including officers and wounded.[6] Presumably not all these prisoners were confined in the meetinghouse, but many of the Germans and Canadians were, and probably the others too, at least temporarily. Wasmus claimed that 480 prisoners packed the church. Whatever the exact number, it exceeded the building's capacity. To accommodate them all, the Americans placed some prisoners in the second floor galleries,
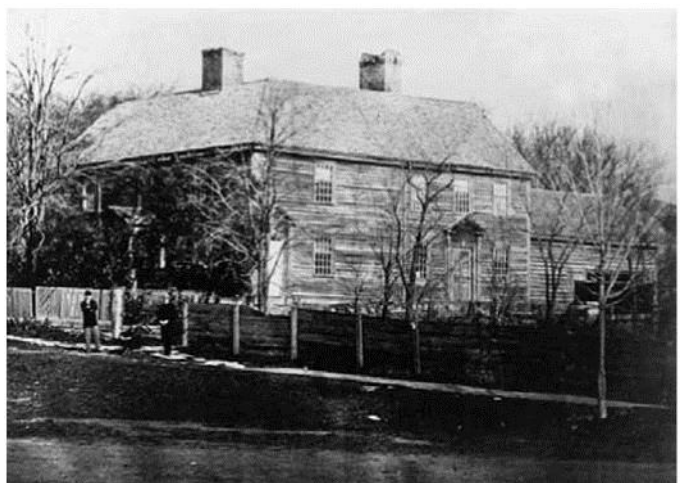
The Catamount Tavern

and laid boards over pews or the pulpit, to provide additional space for the Canadians.[7]

Both the captives and the captors experienced a wide range of emotions at the meetinghouse. The prisoners had to come to grips with the emotional and psychological shock of defeat and capture. What had started as an elaborate foraging expedition had gone disastrously wrong. Many of them undoubtedly knew that their commander, Lieutenant Colonel Friedrich Baum, had suffered a grievous stomach wound that would take his life the following day. The same could be said for countless numbers of their brothers in arms whom they had seen killed or wounded. The Loyalists also had to wonder how their neighbors and countrymen would treat people whom they considered traitors. Not unexpectedly, the early indications suggested harsh retribution. As the battle ended, the Americans tied the Loyalists together by their necks, "like cattle," bound their hands, and sent them back to Bennington led by a Black man.[8] The German, Canadian, and even the British prisoners found themselves surrounded by a strange and hostile population. Surgeon Wasmus recalled, "[t]he inhabitants of this province were said to be the worst Rebels; they made disagreeable faces and perhaps did not wish to express themselves in overly refined terms toward us; but to our comfort, we could not understand any of them."[9] It was good that the prisoners found consolation in not being able to understand their captives, because little comfort existed inside the tightly packed meetinghouse. In addition to being hot, crowded, and foul smelling, the prisoners presumably had trouble communicating with each other as they spoke three different languages – German, French, and English.

The American guards outside the building also had to deal with exhaustion and heightened emotions, just like the men inside. Although exhilarated by their victory, many of the Americans knew that some of their friends and fellow soldiers had been killed in the fighting. Levi Green, a nineteen-year old militiaman from Lanesborough, Massachusetts recalled that, "He was employed after the battle in picking up the wounded and dying." Another guard was sixteen-year old Benjamin Pierce, a private in Captain Kimball Carleton's New Hampshire company. Pierce's experiences obviously affected him profoundly. Many years later a friend wrote, "he saw and engaged in the latter part of the affair [battle] and assisted to take care of the wounded and to bury the dead. He told me how they buried them; the different manner of the appearances of their wounds."[10] Furthermore, the guards had the heavy responsibility of maintaining security over a large number of prisoners. They also had to consider that Burgoyne might send troops to rescue them. If the prisoners successfully escaped or if British troops reappeared, all that Stark's men had achieved might be quickly undone.

Another factor that influenced the Americans' thoughts was their intense distrust of the German troops, whom they considered ruthless mercenaries. The thought of facing the "Hessians" had played on American minds ever since Fall 1775 when news arrived that Britain was recruiting them. By the following spring, the colonists knew that thousands of auxiliary soldiers from several German principalities were sailing toward America.[11]

Indeed, one of the twenty-seven indictments leveled at King George III in the Declaration of Independence was that, "He is, at this time, transporting large armies of foreign mercenaries to complete the works of death, desolation, and tyranny...."[12] These fears were realized when 8,000 German troops arrived at Staten Island with General William Howe's army in August 1776. These soldiers then played a pivotal role in the ensuing New York campaign and the march across New Jersey, where they quickly gained a reputation for ferocity, brutality, and plundering.[13]

Reports of German depredations filled American newspapers for months to come, which further blackened their reputation. The October 30, 1776, edition of *The Massachusetts Spy* wrote "The Hessians plundered all indiscriminately, Tories as well as Whigs; if they see any thing they want, they seize it, and say, 'Rebel, good for Hesseman.' A Tory complained to General Howe that he was plundered by the Hessians; the General said he could not help it, it was their way of making war." Three months later, *The Freeman's Journal* reported, "The Country from Princeton to the Delaware . . . has been thought the happiest Retreat of Peace and Safety, instead of which it is now the Scene of Blood shed and Rapine, Humanity force a Sigh for the suffering Women and Children. The Hessians are Robbers, and the English Troops Brutes." Equally ominously, other reports noted the Germans' propensity for not granting quarter to their foes. *The Norwich Packet* published a number of stories that developed this theme. On January 27, 1777 it reported that upon arriving in Halifax, Nova Scotia the Germans, "took an oath to spare neither man, woman, nor child." Two months later the newspaper carried an account of "Hessians" slaughtering 2,000 American prisoners on Long Island and then seemingly confirmed the report in its May 12th edition. "Extract of a letter from an Officer in General Frazer's battalion, Dated Sept. 3, 1776" boasted of the German and Highland troops' performance, as they "gave no quarters; and it was a fine sight, to see with what alacrity, they dispatched the rebels with their bayonets, after we had surrounded them, so that they could not resist."[14]

Admittedly many of these reports amounted to little more than exaggerated propaganda designed to strengthen the American resolve to fight. They also applied to the German troops serving with Howe, not necessarily those who had arrived in Canada with Burgoyne. Still, none this particularly mattered and did nothing to diminish the stories' effect. American civilians greatly feared the German troops and frequently fled when they approached. While marching south on the upper Hudson earlier in the summer, Surgeon Wasmus reported passing abandoned houses and fields of ripe grain. "Their [the civilians] enmity against the King of England and the fear of the Germans had driven them away." One can question the reliability of Wasmus's observations because he could not definitely know why the civilians had fled, but other evidence suggests that he was correct. As Burgoyne's army marched south, hundred or thousands of men, women, and children, whether they were Whig, Loyalists, or neutral, packed up their most valuable possessions and fled to safer areas. Burgoyne's Indians and Loyalists prompted some of this, but so did the Germans

and their fearsome reputation. Sarah Rudd, the widow of a Bennington militia officer, later wrote, "I can never forget, while any thing of memory lives, my flight on horse-back, and in feeble health, with my babe and two other small children and my eldest daughter running on foot by the side of me from Bennington to Williamstown under circumstances of great alarm and fear from Hessians, tory-enemies, and Indians."[15]

The incident at the Bennington Meetinghouse occurred against this background. Sometime after dark on August 17, the prisoners crammed inside the building heard the sound of breaking wood. Wasmus later speculated that one of the boards holding the Canadians broke. Many of the other prisoners, however, thought that the overcrowded galleries were collapsing. Wasmus's explanation seems more reasonable because the building did not sustain any major damage and remained in use until 1806.[16] Still, the fear that the meetinghouse was caving in quickly spread, and the confined men panicked. Shouting in terror, they surged towards the doors, trying to escape. Some of them actually made it outside, while hundreds of others pressed on them from behind.

This "breakout" caught the American guards by surprise. Suddenly they heard shouts and cries from the meetinghouse, and then prisoners began to burst through the doors into the darkness. The fact that the sentries could not understand German and French exacerbated the situation.[17] Many years later in their pension depositions, two American soldiers stated that the prisoners were indeed trying to escape while another remembered that a "disturbance" had occurred among them. Only one soldier mentioned the panic caused by the breaking boards, and another merely stated that some of the prisoners made it outside.[18]

Regardless of why the Germans had pushed their way out of the meetinghouse, the guards responded with deadly force. Pompey Woodward, a fifteen-year old Black youth serving with the Massachusetts militia, recalled, "they were fired upon by the sentries, while [still] in the meeting house." This volley into the building itself slowed the captives' momentum. Meanwhile, other American soldiers confronted those who had made it outside. Rushing forward with bayonets, the guards drove the prisoners back into the building, pushing and clubbing them as they went. After a short noisy scuffle in the darkness, the sentries restored order and secured the area, but it came at a cost. Two Germans lay dead and five others were injured. In the confusion, however, five other prisoners reportedly escaped. In light of this breakout, the Americans searched all the prisoners in the church and confiscated any knives that they found, even butter knives. They then increased the number of guards around the meetinghouse.[19]

Although he was not present when the incident at the meetinghouse occurred, Wasmus heard the tumult and inadvertently became involved in it. Earlier that evening an American physician invited Wasmus and another captured surgeon named Sandhagen to dine at the house of a local militia captain, probably Elijah Dewey, who lived just down the road from the Catamount Tavern. When the uproar occurred at the meetinghouse, all the Americans rushed out, leaving Wasmus and Sandhagen alone. Fearing for their safety (or perhaps also trying to

escape), the two German surgeons decided to return to the tavern. As soon as they left the Dewey residence, however, they ran into Reverend Thomas Allen and a squad of militia hurrying to the church. Allen, a resident of Pittsfield, Massachusetts and an ardent Whig, reputedly had told Stark several days earlier that he wanted to fight or would never turn out for an alarm again. Allen received his wish by participating in the Battle of Bennington and later wrote an account of his experiences that appeared in the *Connecticut Courant*. He was now about to get another chance to fight. Seeing the two Germans in the road, "the barbaric pastor" furiously rushed towards them and began to flog Sandhagen with the flat of his sword, striking him forty to fifty times. Meanwhile, Allen's men cocked their muskets and prepared to fire. At that moment an American major who had spoken with Wasmus the previous night fortuitously passed by. Seeing the commotion and recognizing the surgeon, he grabbed Wasmus from behind and separated Allen from the hapless Sandhagen. He then explained that the two Germans were physicians and took control of them, probably saving their lives. The major then led Wasmus and Sandhagen to the meetinghouse, where they treated the newly wounded German soldiers. Wasmus later recalled, "If the major had not recognized me in the dark, we would have been out of luck. I have never seen a man so enraged as this noble pastor." Later that night, the American doctor with whom Wasmus was having dinner visited him at the church and brought him food.[20] This innocuous note ended the incident at the meetinghouse, which had been partly caused by the colonists' mistrust of the German soldiers and their inability to understand them.

Over the next several weeks, the Americans transferred the prisoners from Bennington. Many of the Loyalists were sent to their states for punishment, while the Germans marched for Boston. Some militia units returned home, but Stark and much of his command went on to fight at Saratoga. Slowly, life returned to some degree of normalcy in the town, following the tumultuous days of the battle and its aftermath. Today, a large monument in the cemetery of the First Congregational Church of Old Bennington marks the burial site of twenty-nine soldiers

Gravestone in the cemetery of the First Congregational Church of Old Bennington (AuTHoR's coLLEcTioN)
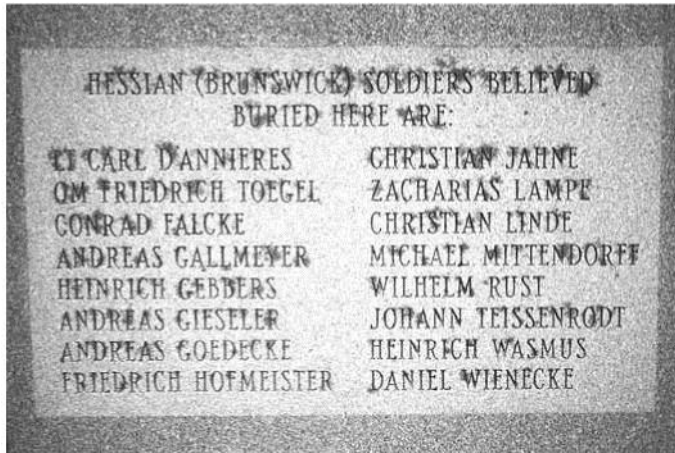
Name of Sixteen German Soldiers on the Gravestone
(Author's Collection)

who died in the local hospital from their wounds. This included sixteen Germans.[21] While none of these men passed away on August 17, one cannot help but wonder if two of them were victims of a supposed prison break at the meetinghouse.

Notes

1 Michael A. Bellesiles's *Revolutionary Outlaws: Ethan Allen and the Struggle for Independence on the Early American Frontier* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 281 estimates Bennington's population at 585 in 1775.

2 The total number of Whig soldiers at Bennington remains conjectural and somewhat disputed. Stark's three regiments listed approximately 1,460 names on their muster rolls, but he left one company at Fort Number 4 in New Hampshire and sent two others to Cavendish, Vermont, totaling 157 men. Illness and other duties further reduced the brigade's strength, leaving Stark with around eleven hundred soldiers. The Vermonters included Samuel Herrick's Rangers and local militia units, numbering around 350. Seth Warner's Green Mountain Boys, plus an attached unit, added another 150 soldiers, and there seemingly were an equal number of New Yorkers. Massachusetts militia from Berkshire and Worcester Counties fought at the battle, but many of their muster rolls are nearly illegible. Furthermore, some companies arrived the day after the battle, thereby making it extremely difficult to determine an exact number. Still, 850 seems to be a reasonable estimate. Isaac W. Hammond, ed., *State of New Hampshire, Rolls of the Soldiers in the Revolutionary War, May, 1777 to 1780: with an Appendix Embracing Names of New Hampshire Men in Massachusetts Regiments* (1886. Reprint. New York: AMS Press, Inc, 1973), 139-229; John E. Goodrich, comp., *Rolls of the Soldiers in the Revolutionary War, 1775 to 1783* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle Co., 1904), 13, 26-27, 44-45, 47-51, 107-109; John Spargo, *The Bennington Battle Monument: Its Story and Its Meaning* (Rutland, VT: The Tuttle Company, 1925), 68-75 (hereafter cited as Spargo); Howard Parker Moore, *A Life of General John Stark of New Hampshire* (New York: Howard Parker Moore, 1949), 305-306, 342-344; Michael P. Gabriel, "New Yorkers at the Battle of Bennington," presented at Conference on New York State History, Plattsburgh, NY, June 6, 2009.

3 Helga Doblin, trans., Mary C. Lynn, ed., *An Eyewitness Account of the American Revolution and New England Life: The Journal of J. F. Wasmus, German Company Surgeon, 1776-1783* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 74 (hereafter cited as Doblin, *Wasmus*); National Archives, *Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty Land Warrant Application Files* (2670 reels; hereafter cited as *Pension*

Records), John Raymond R8618; Richard B. Smith, *The Revolutionary War in Bennington County: A History & Guide* (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2008), 103-104. Five of Stephen Fay's sons fought at Bennington, and one was killed. Spargo, 79.

4 Spargo, 85-86.

5 Spargo, 79-80; Smith, 106-107.

6 Benjamin Lincoln to the Massachusetts Council, August 18, 1777, in Caleb Stark, ed., *Memoir and Official Correspondence of Gen. John Stark, also a Biography of Capt. Phineas Stevens and of Col. Robert Rogers* (Reprint, 1877; Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, Inc., 1999), 132-133.

7 Doblin, *Wasmus*, 74; *Pension Records*, Benjamin Pierce R8240.

8 Spargo, 78-79; Doblin, *Wasmus*, 73 (quote).

9 Doblin, *Wasmus*, 74.

10 *Pension Records*, Levi Green S29183, Benjamin Pierce R8240.

11 Rodney Atwood, *The Hessians: Mercenaries from Hessen-Kassel in the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 58-61; "Extract of a Letter from Portsmouth, Jan. 6," *Providence Gazette*, April 27, 1776, [page 2]; *New-England Chronicle* (Boston), May 16, 1777, 3.

12 "Declaration of Independence," in Richard D. Brown, ed., *Major Problems in the Era of the American Revolution, 1760-1791* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1992), 171.

13 Henry P. Johnston, *The Campaign of 1776 around New York and Brooklyn* (Brooklyn, NY: Long Island Historical Society, 1878), 133; David Hackett Fischer, *Washington's Crossing* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), 64, 81-137, 173-177.

14 "Extract of a letter from a Gentleman at Harlem, New York, to his friend here, dated Octo. 8," *The Massachusetts Spy: Or, American Oracle of Liberty* (Worcester), October 30, 1777, 2; *Freeman's Journal* (Portsmouth, NH), January 21, 1777, 4; *The Norwich Packet and the Connecticut, Massachusetts, New-Hampshire, and Rhode-Island Weekly Advertiser* January 27, 1777, 3; "From the Craftsman, or Say's (British) Journal," March 17, 1777, 2; "Extract of a letter from an Officer in General Frazer's battalion, Dated Sept. 3, 1776," May 12, 1777, 2.

15 Doblin, *Wasmus*, 67-69 (quote); Winston Adler, ed., *Their Own Voices: Oral Accounts of Early Settlers in Washington County, New York* (Interlaken, NY: Heart of the Lakes Publishing, 1983), 60-76; *Pension Records*, Joseph Rudd W17582.

16 Doblin, *Wasmus*, 74; *Pension Records*, Benjamin Pierce R8240; Smith, 25.

17 During the Battle of Bennington, a number of episodes occurred where Americans soldiers could not understand German troops. Thomas Mellen, who served in Stark's brigade, recounted that in some cases Braunschweig soldiers attempted to surrender but the Americans did not know what they were saying. See John Hayward, *A Gazetteer of Vermont, Containing Descriptions of all the Counties, Towns, and Districts in the State* (Boston, MA: Tappan, Whittemore, and Mason, 1849), 214.

18 For escape, see *Pension Records*, Levi Green S29183, John Wallace W27852; panic, Benjamin Pierce R8240; outside, Nahum Parker S11200.

19 *Pension Records*, Pompey Woodward W4867, Benjamin Pierce R8240, John Wallace W27852. The casualty figures vary but those listed here come from Surgeon Wasmus, who treated the wounded, Doblin, *Wasmus*, 74-75.

20 Doblin, *Wasmus*, 74-75; Smith, 108; Stark, 58, 494; Gail M. Potter, "Pittsfield's Fighting Parson: Thomas Allen," *The New-England Galaxy* 18 (1976): 33-38; "The following particulars of the action between the militia &c. and part of the British Army,"

Connecticut Courant (Hartford), August 25, 1777, [3]. At the Battle of Bennington, Allen supposedly tried to induce the Loyalists into surrendering until one of them shot at him. His reaction on the night of August 17 to the sight of the two German surgeons provides an insight into the American state of mind upon hearing about the "prison break." On a humorous note, Sandhagen was angry that Reverend Allen had only attacked him and not Wasmus. This prompted the latter to write, "another proof that a man likes to have company in his misfortune!"

21 Robert M. Webler, "Records of Massachusetts Bay Concerning Brunswick Army Prisoners from the Battle of Bennington," *The Hessians: Journal of the Johannes Schwalm Historical Association* 8 (2005): 51-57; Joseph Parks and Lion G. Miles, "Old Enemies Sleep Together," *The Hessians: Journal of the Johannes Schwalm Historical Association* 2 (1982): 33-35. The monument actually contains thirty names, but one is of a Loyalist who was executed a year later.
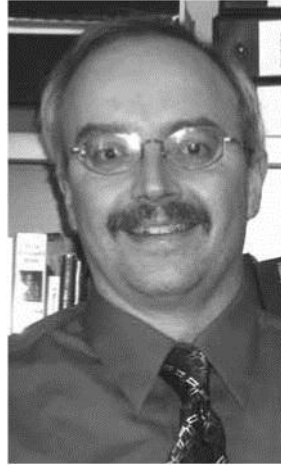
Michael P. Gabriel, Professor of History at Kutztown University, earned his B.S. at Clarion University, his M.A. at St. Bonaventure, and his Ph.D. at Penn State. He is the author of *Major General Richard Montgomery: The Making of an American Hero* (2002) and co-editor of *Quebec During the American Invasion, 1775- 1776: The Journal of François Baby, Gabriel Taschereau, and Jenkin Williams* (2005). He is currently working on his third book, a comprehensive study of the Battle of Bennington.