

The Road to Saratoga: A Turning Point

Two months before the notorious winter spent by George Washington and his troops at Valley Forge, an unlikely victory for the Continental Army forever changed the course of the Revolution. It all began with a British military offensive in New York intended to isolate the New England patriots from the other colonies. Prime Minister Frederick North had attempted this at the beginning of the war, when General William Howe was sent to capture New York City (Henretta 172). Although Howe had succeeded in this task, he had stopped short of military action that would have decimated the young Continental Army. Howe mistakenly believed that this humiliation would be enough to persuade the Continental Congress to give up and seek a diplomatic compromise.

Dissatisfied with these half-measures, Lord North launched a more ambitious campaign to subdue and isolate the colonies. The plan involved a three-sided attack on New York. General Howe was to lead his troops northward from New York City. British and Iroquois forces were to move in from the west. And General John Burgoyne and his contingent were to move south from Quebec.

Despite their carefully crafted strategy, the British ultimately failed in their execution. At the last minute and with little communication, Howe decided to attack Philadelphia in an attempt to immediately crush the revolution by taking advantage of Loyalist support there (Tindall 223). Although General Howe succeeded in his short-term goal, he took his eye off the larger prize, neglecting his crucial and time-sensitive role in Lord North's larger plan. He left the other British generals without his support which ultimately proved disastrous for Britain's cause.

While Howe was fighting in Pennsylvania, General Burgoyne was advancing into New York from Quebec according to plan. Yet "Gentleman Johnny," as he was sometimes called thanks to his penchant for extravagance even while on duty, was heavily encumbered by a baggage train that included dozens of wardrobe carts, abundant champagne, and a good thousand "camp followers" (McClay 55). So while his forces were able to overpower the American troops at Fort Ticonderoga, they were moving too slowly to accomplish the larger goal. They never met up with Howe, whose fatal detour to Philadelphia had allowed the Continental Army valuable time to regroup under American General Horatio Gates. Eventually those additional forces overwhelmed Burgoyne's bogged-down train, and also managed to cut off Howe from returning to the battlefield in New York.

Thus the tide of the campaign began to turn. General Gates's troops felled trees in the path of the advancing British army and cut off their supply lines from Canada (Henretta 175). Burgoyne's increasingly desperate forces withdrew to the village of Saratoga, where they were surrounded by the Americans. By September, the reinforced American troops executed a successful attack, with British casualties numbering twice those of the Americans. Finally, on October 7, 1777, the American forces achieved a decisive victory, and General Burgoyne surrendered just ten days later.

The American victory at Saratoga was key for the negotiation of the Treaty of Alliance with France in 1778, which in turn changed the course of the entire war. The young colonies were on their way to gaining independence and establishing the most revolutionary form of government the world had ever seen.

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