

PRIMARY SOURCE EXCEPTS FROM THE BATTLE OF BENNINGTON

Explanation of excerpt 1: *New Hampshire farmers were among the first to rally to the call to arms when hostilities between the British and the colonists erupted at Concord and Lexington. In 1775, Ethan Allen and his Green Mountain Boys joined Benedict Arnold and Patriots from Massachusetts in a successful attack on the British at Fort Ticonderoga. By June 1777, the new state of Vermont was preparing to select delegates to the Continental Congress. When Burgoyne re-captured Ticonderoga, Vermont appealed to New Hampshire for assistance in stopping the British invasion. John Langdon, presiding officer of the legislature offered help:*

Source 1: "I have \$3000 in hard money; my plate I will pledge for as much more. I have seventy hogsheads of Tobago rum, which shall be sold for the most they will bring. These are at the service of the State. If we succeed, I shall be remunerated; if not, they will be of no use to me. We can raise a brigade; and our friend Stark who so nobly sustained the honor of our arms at Bunker's hill may safely be entrusted with the command, and we will check Burgoyne."

Explanation of excerpt 2: *Lt. Gen. John Stark fought with the Continental Army at Bunker Hill, Quebec, and Trenton, but resigned when he was passed over for promotion. He agreed to take command of the New Hampshire militia on condition that he operate outside the authority of the Continental Congress. At Bennington, Stark commanded approximately 2,200 militiamen who assembled to oppose Burgoyne's advance. The volunteers were mostly farmers and townspeople. There was no time for lengthy training and no money for uniforms or expensive weapons. A British soldier captured at Bennington described the appearance of the colonial militia:*

Source 2: "Each had a wooden flask of rum hung on his neck. They were all in bare shirts, had nothing on their bodies but a shirt, vest, long linen trousers which extended to the shoe, no stockings--powder horn, bullet bag, rum flask, and musket."

Explanation of excerpt 3: *Lt. Col. Friedrich Baum set out on August 11th. The heavily loaded Hessian (German) troops, slow moving under the best of circumstances, plodded towards Bennington. On August 14th, Baum encountered an American scouting party about eight miles west of Bennington. His report early that day to Gen. Burgoyne was confident:*

Source 3: "Sir: I have the honor to inform your Excellency that I arrived here at eight in the morning, having had intelligence of a party of the enemy being in possession of a mill, which they abandoned at our approach, but in their usual way fired from the bushes, and took the road to Bennington. . . . They left in the mill about seventy-eight barrels of very fine flour, one thousand bushels of wheat, twenty barrels of salt, and about one thousand pounds' worth of pearl and potashes. . . . By five prisoners here they agree that fifteen to eighteen hundred men are in Bennington, but are supposed to leave it on our approach. I will proceed so far today as to fall on the enemy tomorrow early, and make such disposition as I think necessary from the intelligence I may receive. People are flocking in hourly and want to be armed. The savages cannot be controlled; they ruin and take everything they please."

Explanation of Excerpt 4: *The scouts headed back with news of Baum's approach. Stark immediately advanced to meet the Germans as they moved towards Bennington. Although Baum had little respect for the fighting ability of Stark's poorly trained and poorly equipped backwoodsmen, he realized he was outnumbered and sent for reinforcements. By the close of the day on August 14, the American and British forces were at a standoff. Stark's advantage of superior numbers was offset by Baum's strong position on a high elevation with professional troops supported by cannons and protected by earthen fortifications. Baum spent the day improving and expanding his position on "Hessian Hill," and posting a small force of Loyalists on a lower hill across the river. At dawn Burgoyne had sent about 500 German troops under to reinforce Baum, but the heavily burdened army made little progress over the rain-sodden roads. On the 16th, the weather cleared. Stark set in motion an elaborate plan to dislodge the British:*

Source 4 (Gen. Stark): I divided my army into three Divisions, and sent Col. Nichols with 250 men on their rear of their left wing; Col. Hendrick in the Rear of their right, with 300 men, order'd when join'd to attack the same. In the mean time I sent 300 men to oppose the Enemy's front, to draw their attention that way; Soon after I detach'd the Colonels Hubbert & Stickney on their right wing with 200 men to attack that part, all which plans had their desired effect.”

Explanation of excerpt 5: At three o'clock in the afternoon, the colonial militias that had gradually surrounded the British position attacked from all sides. By five o'clock, the British were routed. A German observer described the fight on Hessian Hill:

Source 5: “Our Dragoons fired at the enemy with cool deliberation and much courage but it did not last long. They loaded their carbines behind the breastworks but, as soon as they raised up to aim their weapons, a bullet went through their heads, they fell backwards and no longer moved a finger. Thus in a short time our largest and best Dragoons were sent to eternity.”

Explanation of excerpt 6: Their ammunition exhausted, the remaining Germans were overrun, and the fleeing survivors were pursued down the wooded slopes to be captured or killed. Baum himself was mortally wounded. The Indians escaped early in the fighting and slipped away to the west to rejoin Burgoyne's main force. The Patriots also drove the Loyalists from their hill. Col. Peters described the fierce action there:

Source 6: “The Rebels pushed with a Strong party on the Front of the Loyalists where I commanded. As they were coming up, I observed A Man fire at me, and I returned, he loaded again as he came up & discharged again at me, and crying out Peters you Damned Tory I have at you, he rushed on me with his Bayonet, which entered just below my left Breast, but was turned by the Bone. By this time I was loaded, and I saw that it was a Rebel Captain, an Old School fellow & Playmate, and a Couzin of my wife's: Tho his Bayonet was in my Body, I felt regret at being obliged to destroy him.

Explanation of excerpt 7: The colonial troops had suffered few losses, but were widely dispersed--looting, guarding prisoners, and pursuing the retreating survivors. At this point, Breymann's reinforcements, ignorant of Baum's disaster, finally arrived. Col. Stark described the contest that saved his victory from reversal:

Source 6: “Luckily for us Col. Warner's Regiment [of Green Mountain Rangers] came up, which put a stop to their career. We soon rallied, & in a few minutes the action became very warm & desperate, which lasted till night; we used their own cannon against them, which prov'd of great service to us. At Sunset we obliged them to retreat a second time; we pursued them till dark, when I was obliged to halt for fear of killing my own men.”



Figure 1: Used in the Battle of Bennington, August 16, 1777, by Vermont militia. This flag is the first to lead American armed forces on land. The original is preserved in the museum at Bennington, Vermont.