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950 Soldiers Drive
Carlisle Barracks, PA 17013-5021
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Revolutionary War-Battles/Places

BURGOYNE'S NEW YORK INVASION & THE BATTLE OF SARATOGA, 1777

A Working Bibliography of MHI Sources

CONTENTS

General Sources.....p.1
Ticonderoga....p.2
Ft. Stanwix....p.
Oriskany.....p.3
Bennington.....p.4
Battle of Saratoga.....p.5
-American Perspective.....p.5
-British/German/Loyalist Perspective.....p.6
-Specialized Aspects.....p.6
-Site Guides/Commemorations.....p.7
-Note on Murphy's Sharpshooting....p.8

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-Note: Verifying Murphy's Sharpshooting at Saratoga

Documentation is scarce on American rifleman Timothy Murphy's quarter-mile shot that mortally wounded British General Simon Fraser at Saratoga, 7 Oct 1777. We do not hold official unpublished records of either American or British forces. Nonetheless, it is significant that, of the many secondary accounts of the Murphy exploit found here, none, other than Higginbotham (see below), cites a primary source, such as a report or letter written shortly after the battle by a witness, participant or commander. One of the earliest accounts specifically addressing the circumstances surrounding Fraser's death is a letter from Daniel Morgan to Joseph Graham, dated 28 November 1781, reprinted in Virginia Historical Register, 1853, Vol. 6 (not available in MHI). A quick reading of the synopsis of this Morgan letter in Daniel Morgan by Don Higginbotham (Chapel Hill: U NC, 1961; E207.M8.H5), pp. 170-71, suggests that Morgan had mentioned Murphy by name, but closer examination reveals Morgan telling Graham that he sent up a tree "one of my best shots." Higginbotham, interestingly, inserts Murphy's name in brackets after that quote, but provides no substantiation for his assumption. Evidently, he believed his earlier discussion of the Murphy exploit (pp. 73-75) provided sufficient documentation, but the sources cited on those pages include only one first-person account which happens to be the Morgan letter to Graham. Of course, without the letter in hand, one cannot be absolutely certain that Morgan failed to mention Murphy specifically.

The description of Fraser's death on pp. 162-63 of James Graham, Life of General Daniel Morgan (NY: Derby & Jackson, 1856; E207.M8.G7) is based upon an unspecified recollection by Morgan. According to Graham, Morgan selected 12 of his best marksmen, led them to a suitable position, and when Fraser appeared, "saw them all raise their rifles and, taking deliberate aim, fire." The absence here of a reference to Murphy raises the suspicion that Morgan never acknowledged Murphy as the lone hero.

If no contemporaneous source credited a specific rifleman, any of Morgan's men, as the years passed and memory shifted, were free to assign to themselves the crucial shot.

Another relatively early account is Roger Lamb's Original and Authentic Journal of Occurrences during the Late American War... (NY: Arno, 1968 reprint of 1809 edition; E208.L212). Lamb supposedly had personal knowledge of many of the events described and was present when the stricken Fraser gave his death-bed description of the incident. At that time, according to Lamb, Fraser stated that "he saw the man who shot him; he was a rifle man, and aimed from a tree." (p. 178).

In the 10 Nov 1835 issue of Saratoga Sentinel appeared a letter of 7 Oct 1835 from Ebenezer Mattoon of Amherst, MA, (reprinted, pp. 239-55 of William L. Stone's Visits to the Saratoga Battle-Grounds... (E241.S2.S88). Mattoon, who fought at Saratoga, recalls events of 7 Oct 1777, 58 years earlier. Wishing to correct the account of a Major Buel (a Saratoga guide), he credits the shot to "an elderly man, with a long hunting gun." Significantly, Buel's own account of the event, as repeated by Prof Silliman in Stone, Visits, pp. 112-13, does not mention Murphy by name. Instead, he credits "a few of his (Morgan's) best riflemen." So, as of 1835, one still finds no specific credit.

Apparently, Murphy gets first mentioned as Fraser's assailant in Jephtha R. Simm's History of Schoharie County and Border Wars of New York... (Albany, NY: Munsell & Tanner, 1845; F127.S3.S59RareBook), pp. 259-60. Simms says the story was related to him by Murphy's son. Simms also states in another book, Frontiersmen of New York (not in MHI), that Murphy's two daughters corroborated the story (see footnote in Stone, p. 246).

According to North Callahan's Daniel Morgan (NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961; E207.M8.C3), pp. 144-45 & 317, support for Simms's assertion was given by a "Myron Vroman, Curator of the Old Stone Fort at Schoharie, near where Murphy lived and is buried." This, credit to Murphy seems to have grown out of local accounts, a school of history often based upon oral tradition, which is difficult to document.

The books cited below also discuss the incident, but add little to the information above. Most of these sources lend strength to the Murphy story merely by repeating it. If historical assertions gain veracity through repetition, Murphy's role would be unquestioned by scholars. Instead, Murphy has passed over into legend via the accretive process of myth-making. Someone shot Fraser. To call him "Murphy" is more precise and personal than to refer to him as the "Unknown Sniper."

This particular historical problem is part of a larger concern of whether we should view history as theater or science, something that moves people or is moved by them? Historians can divorce themselves from legend merely by declaring: "I don't know and I remain skeptical." However, often objectivity robs history of one of its functions -- to entertain and stir people.

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