William Boutelle’s Diary of the Bennington Expedition

Michael P. Gabriel, Ph.D.

Originally published in the December 24, 1890, edition of the Leominster [Massachusetts] Enterprise, this soldier’s diary contains a virtually unknown account of the Battle of Bennington, August 16, 1777, that has not appeared in print since. The diary’s author, William Boutelle, was a twenty-two-year-old Leominster native who served as a private in Captain John Joslin’s company of Colonel Job Cushing’s Sixth Worcester County militia regiment. From the newspaper’s introduction, it appears that Boutelle recorded a brief day-to-day account of his service on loose paper that he kept folded in his pocket, and later he used these notes to write the longer, more detailed account. Collectively the two documents cover events in the days prior to the battle, the fight with Lieutenant Colonel Heinrich Breymann’s relief column, and Boutelle’s service during the following two weeks.

The Boutelle diary is valuable for several reasons besides not having been published for more than one hundred twenty-five years. It offers a perspective of the Worcester County, Massachusetts, soldiers who fought at Bennington. The participation of Massachusetts in the battle is sometimes overshadowed by Vermonters and John Stark’s New Hampshire regiments. When writers do mention Bay State troops, they usually focus on Parson Thomas Allen and the Berkshire County contingent.

Boutelle’s diary reminds readers of Worcester County’s role in the engagement. He traces the route that the Worcester men took to the battle, where they stayed on the march, and how long it took. It also shows us again how quickly soldiers of all ages want to return to their homes and families, no matter how devoted they are to a particular cause. Boutelle’s company took ten days to march 117 miles to Bennington, yet he covered 106 miles in half that time after receiving his discharge.

Boutelle offers both new and familiar perspectives of the battle, especially the second phase, which began around 4:15 p.m. when Breymann’s 664-man relief force reached the area. Unlike other sources, the diary reveals that Stark did not commit his entire force into the elaborate plan he used to overwhelm Lieutenant Colonel Friedrich Baum’s soldiers earlier in the day. Instead, Stark left some troops in reserve, such as Boutelle’s company, which had arrived at Bennington on August 11. When Boutelle finally arrived on the field, the survivors of Baum’s shattered...
command were in full retreat. The diary reveals the Americans’ surprise at finding that Breymann’s force had arrived and deployed for battle. The Massachusetts militiaman believed that he was pursuing a defeated foe, little expecting to come upon “a formidable enemy” supported by two six-pounder artillery pieces.

Other first-hand accounts, such as Thomas Mellen’s, cover this sharp two-hour contest, which most veterans of the battle – including Boutelle – remembered as the longest and fiercest action of the day. Boutelle vividly describes the “grape shot and leaden balls as thick as hail whizzing about our ears.” Like “Reminiscences of Colonel Seth Warner” and fellow Massachusetts militiaman David Holbrook’s pension deposition, he recounts how the German barrage wounded Major John Rand’s horse and forced his company to retreat, leaving one of his friends dead. Breymann nearly succeeded in undoing much of what Stark had achieved earlier that day, but the American general rallied his troops, as Boutelle relates, and eventually forced the Germans to retreat into the falling darkness.

The Boutelle diary also reveals what occurred near Bennington in the days following the engagement. Stark suspected that the British might again attempt to capture the provisions at Bennington and liberate the prisoners. Therefore he ordered Boutelle’s detachment to serve as a forward outpost at the mill at Sancoick, where the Americans first encountered Baum on August 14. The Major Rensselaer whom Boutelle discusses is probably not the mill owner, Stephen Van Rensselaer, but instead his kinsman, Lieutenant Colonel John Van Rensselaer, who led some of the New Yorkers at the battle. Only thirteen years old in 1777, Stephen was far too young to hold the rank of major and command troops.

Finally, Boutelle’s journal offers insights into the day-to-day life of a Revolutionary-era soldier. Readers can imagine his sorrow at seeing one of his closest friends, Thomas Joslin, being killed, and then helping to carry him back to camp, build his coffin, and attend his funeral. Boutelle also records the mundane details of soldiering, such as indifferent food, battling “fleas . . . thick enough to eat us up alive,” and an accidental shooting. Still, this routine activity was sharply punctuated by combat and the fear of a nighttime alarm. Overall, the diary offers a penetrating portrait of a young soldier during the Bennington operation.

Following his discharge, Boutelle served one more tour of duty during the Revolutionary War. He re-enlisted in October 1777 in Lieutenant Samuel Stickney’s company of Colonel Abijah Stearns’s Worcester County militia regiment. He then marched to General Horatio Gates’s army near Saratoga, taking part in the final phase of the turning point of the American War for Independence. On October 28, 1779, he married Rachel Wood.
another Leominster resident, and the couple was blessed with ten children, most of whom survived to adulthood. In 1788, William and Rachel moved to Hancock, New Hampshire, and they established the farm where his descendant O. L. Boutelle discovered his diary nearly a century later. A deacon in the local Congregational Church, William Boutelle was also a supporter of the Federalist Party, and spent the rest of his life in Hancock, dying on July 1, 1835, at the age of eighty.7

Charles Filkins, the director of the Louis Miller Museum in Hoosick Falls, New York, generously brought this rare diary to the attention of Tyler Resch, the co-editor of this journal, in the form of the newspaper article. Thanks go to Charles for expanding our knowledge of the American Revolutionary War and the Battle of Bennington by allowing the Walloomsack Review to publish this unknown treasure.

A Note of the Editing of the Diary

Because the copy of the Leominster Enterprise story and diary that Charles provided were typed transcriptions, not the original documents, it was impossible to determine original spellings. The author of this article corrected all typographical errors and standardized punctuation and capitalization to make the diary easier to read. He only left town names in original spelling to give the readers a flavor of the variations of them. Similarly, the current names of towns are provided in brackets, if they have changed since 1777.

One final note involves the spelling of Boutelle. Although the diary and William’s descendant, the Congressman, spelled the name “Boutelle,” other sources use “Boutell.” The latter is the way that William’s name appears in Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors. Similarly, The History of Hancock, New Hampshire contains a section titled “Boutelle” yet includes a copy of William’s signature, which lacks the “e” at the end of his name. The author of this article selected to use “Boutelle” because it is most common.

A REVOLUTIONARY RELIC

Quoting from the Leominster Enterprise December 24, 1890: “Congressman [Charles A.] Boutelle8 recently received from his kinsman, Mr. O. L. Boutelle of Hancock, who is now residing upon the homestead farm of his grandfather, William Boutelle, the great-grandfather of the Representative of the Fourth Maine District, a very interesting relic in the form of a diary written by their ancestor at the time of his service under General John Stark at the Battle of Bennington, Vermont, which took
place August 16, 1777, when the British troops under Colonels Baum and Breymann were defeated by the patriot forces under General Stark and Colonel [Seth] Warner. William Boutelle, a young man residing at Leominster, Massachusetts, promptly enlisted, and the diary which is yellow with age, and from which some portions have been lost, furnishes an interesting record of the experiences of a soldier of the American Revolution.”

**BATTLE OF BENNINGTON**

**War Diary of William Boutelle of Leominster, 1777.**

The enemy had taken a very advantageous situation, having a wood in their rear, and on their left, and a very smooth and level field in their front with two field pieces.

Our party not having been in any engagement this day we were fresh and very zealous to overtake the retreating foe, little thinking of meeting a formidable enemy all ready to engage in battle; we with hasty steps advanced on rising ground and were on a sudden in plain view of the enemy: our officers, however being very zealous, not thinking a formidable enemy so near, marched on within about eighteen rods of their field pieces, when they poured in upon us cannon ball, grape shot and leaden balls as thick as hail whizzing about our ears; it was a critical moment with us – our major [John Rand] had his horse shot through the head and cut off the head stall of its bridle and a cannon ball cut a lane though his horse’s mane.

We were soon ordered to retreat, leaving one of our company dead on the field. We retreated about thirty or forty rods into the valley where we were [sheltered] from the fire of the enemy and then waited for reinforcements.

General Stark soon came up with considerable reinforcements and field pieces (which they had taken in the first engagement.) When General Stark arrived at the edge of the field he cried out “Fire on, my brave men, we shall soon have them,” and fired off the field pieces, and our men huzzaed and rushed forward; and the enemy fled in confusion and disorder, leaving their field pieces with their horses dead in their harness; as our fire was aimed chiefly where the field pieces were, the ground was almost covered with the dead bodies of the enemy. This was a warm contest, the most so of any that day – the enemy were made to fall or flee before us.

Praised be the name of God for his blessing upon us and goodness to us in so remarkable a manner preserving our lives and giving us the victory.

Night came on and [we] were forbidden to pursue the enemy. We
continued to our quarters bringing with us the body of Thomas Joslin who was killed in the first onset; he was tied up in a sheet and swung on a pole, and two of us had to carry him at a time and changed often.

It was four or five miles to our quarters. We arrived almost exhausted [it] having been a very hot day and we not having but little refreshments.

17th. Sabbath. Helped make a coffin for Joslin and went to his funeral. The deceased was conveyed in a wagon to Bennington and decently buried in their burying ground, the minister of the town attended and went to pray at the grave; the whole company followed the corpse to the grave as mourners. I felt peculiarly interested as the deceased had been one of my intimate friend and possessed a very amiable disposition.

O that I might have grace suitably to notice this and all the dispensations of God’s providences whether merciful or afflictive and O that they might work together for my good as God has said they shall do for all those that love him.

18th. Monday. This day I wrote a long letter to my friends at home giving an account of the events of the late battle; while I was at the barn writing my letter an accident happened. A part of our company was called on to go and scout the battle ground, to pick up and bury the dead, and to search for the wounded and any of the enemy that might be strolling the wood. While this party had loaded their pieces and were just faced round in order to move, one of the soldier’s gun accidentally went off. The ball went through the side of the house into the chamber where one of our soldiers lay on a bed. The ball entered his belly but did not pierce his innards but skirted along near the skin 15 or 16 inches and lodged against the skin and was very easily extracted. The ball was flattened considerably by passing through the wood.

19th and 20th. Stayed where we had been stationed, about three miles west of Bennington meeting house. Nothing remarkable happened.

21th. Thursday. Set out to go to guard the mills at St. Cook [Sancoick] and went one mile and stayed there that day and next day and night waiting for reinforcements and provisions. The fleas were thick enough to eat us up alive. One of these nights I was on guard, and the other I was obliged to defend myself against the encroachments of the fleas which I thought was rather worse than to stand sentry.

23rd. Being reinforced with men and provisions we marched about six miles to Major Ranclur’s [Van Rensselaer’s] mills: here was a large mansion house. The lower story was cheaply furnished, chamber floors laid, several barns and an excellent set of mills for grinding and bolting wheat.

The major was [a] very agreeable, pleasant man. He had several fields
of corn near his building, just fit to roast. He said we might make us of all the corn near the building, only requiring us not to injure his corn fields down the intervale near the river.

He we had a pleasant situation and nothing to do only to guard ourselves and the public. We were several miles advanced of any of our army, there was nothing to hinder the enemy from coming right upon our outposts; we used to double our sentries on the right. Here was nothing very disagreeable only we had no milk or sarce, the cattle we all drove off before the enemy. Our provisions were fresh beef and bread.

The first night after we arrived at Major R’s we were ordered to have our arms placed in such a situation as we might be able to seize them in a moment in the dark if we should be alarmed – about ten o’clock when we were all sound asleep we were alarmed. We sprang up and put on our accoutrements and seizing our guns, were on the parade in an instant; they had got some story flying but did not know what was the matter.

[Van Rensselaer] said if ten men would volunteer themselves he would go with them up the road and see what they could discover – we were all kept under arms on the parade till they came back. It was cold and chilly standing out doors in the dark and nothing to do – we were not allowed to make any noise and speaking a loud word was against rules. Some of the soldiers began to be cross – after a while M. R. [Major Rensselaer] and his men came back without discovering any signs of enemy – the story was fabricated by some evil minded person.

(The following records were made in a little diary formed of sheets of folded paper, which had evidently been carried in the pocket.)

William Boutell’s Journal, 1777

August 2, 1777 – Then I began my march from Leominster to Bennington and went 4 miles to Kendall Boutell’s of Fitchburg.
3rd day went 14 miles to Templeton.
4th day went 17 miles to New Salem.
5th day went 5 miles to Shutesbury.
6th day went 19 miles to North Hampton.
7th day went 15 miles to Witherington [Worthington].
8th day went 9 miles to Gageborough [Windsor].
9th day went 14 miles to East Hoosac [Adams].
10th day went 15 miles to Pownalborough [Pownal].
11th day went to 5 miles to Bennington.
12th day stayed there.
13th day. Set out to join the army at Stillwater and marched about 2 miles and then had orders to return back and so spent the day.
14th day. Went to meet the enemy and marched about 4 miles and came to breastwork when it began to rain; we were ordered to march forward about one mile for an advance picket and kept a patrol of 12 men upon the move down to the river about one mile and back again likewise a number of sentinels.
15th day. About noon our picket advanced toward the enemy near the bridge, we left about half and the rest advanced over the bridge to the enemy’s breastwork – the enemy fired their field pieces and some small arms; we likewise fired the number of small arms. We received no hurts; we retreated back to the main body bringing off all the plunder we could.
16th day. We marched down near the bridge and halted, two parties marched off one to the right and the other to the left. A little after noon they began to fire on both sides. Our party stayed this side of the bridge till after the middle of the afternoon and then marched over the bridge and through the woods and came round to the other bridge by the enemy’s breastwork. They were retreated from their ground and we followed them till we came up with them, and we had a smart engagement, till after sunset, and then we came off, taking their field pieces. We brought off Thomas Joslin who was killed in the engagement. We came off victoriously – our enemies were made to flee before us. Praised be the name of God for his blessing upon us and goodness to us in preserving our lives and giving us the victory.
17th – Sabbath Day. I went and helped to make a coffin for Thomas Joslin, Dec’s’d, and went to the funeral – O that I might have grace to take notice of all God’s providences whether merciful or afflictive, and O that they might work together for my good, as God has said they shall do for the good of those that love him.
18th, 19th, and 20th days. Stayed where we had been
stationed about 3 miles beyond the meeting house.
21st. Day. Set out to go and guard the mills at St. Cook [Sancoick] and went one mile and stayed that night and the next day.
23rd. Day. Went 6 miles to the mills at St. Cook [Sancoick].
24th. Day, 25th, 26th, 27th, 28th, 29th and 30th stayed there.
31st. Set out to go home and went 13 miles.
Sept. 1st. Went 25 miles to Merryfield.
2nd Day. Went 18 miles to Samuel Pools of Shelburn [Shelburne].
3d. Day. Went 23 miles to Cook's of Shutesbury.
4th day Went 27 miles to Jackson’s of Westminster.

The names of the towns that we marched through and taverns.
   Fitchburg, Kendall Boutell
   Westminster, Holden
   Templeton, Wright
   Petersham, Winslow
   New Salem, Cook
   Shutesbury, Caday
   Amherst, Rues
   Hadley, Goomans
   North Hampton, Edwards
   Chesterfield, Pierce Merrick
   Witherington, Eager
   Partridgefield [Peru], Trusdal
   Gageborough, Clarke
   New Providence [Cheshire], Stafford
   East Hoosac, Jewel
   Williamstown, Colton
   Pownalborough, Wheeler
   Bennington, Billings
   St. Cook, Ranclurse [Van Rensselaer]
Private Boutelle used some of the archaic names for the Berkshire County towns he traveled through on his way home. This map, from the pictorial history Berkshire: The First Three Hundred Years, depicts those towns as they existed in the late 1700s.


5 Thomas Joslin was a private in Boutelle's company, who had served at least one previous tour of duty at Dorchester Heights, Massachusetts, in 1776. If he was related to the company commander, John Joslin, remains uncertain, but it seems likely. *Massachusetts Soldiers*, 8: 1003.


9 One rod equals 16.5 feet.