



BENNINGTON

HISTORICAL SOCIETY

November 2024 Newsletter

President's Message



As we head into the winter season, with its gaiety and gatherings, we want to wish you all warm and wonderful holidays.

photos, you can peruse the collection according to theme, or investigate a specific topic that fascinates. For more, including the

And for another wonderful time, consider dropping in to the Museum's Regional History Room to explore items from its collection, and perhaps find a facet of our region's history that resonates with you.

The Regional History Room is more than a rich trove of regional heritage—it can lead to startling discoveries. Recently, some young RHR visitors found themselves holding a sword from the Museum's collection, a weapon once owned by the very ancestor they were researching.

The RHR is managed by Bob Tegart, with the help of volunteers from the Historical Society, who are happy to help you with your research. Within the RHR you'll find an outstanding collection of documents, books, and artifacts from Bennington's past, many of which can only be found there. Recently, an RHR researcher found himself holding a sword from the Museum's collection that was once owned by the ancestor he had come to learn about—more on that story in our next issue.

room's hours of operation, go to benningtonmuseum.org/visit/regional-history-room/.

Our Historical Society is always looking for information about our region's history. If you know

of a resource that the Regional History Room should have, please let us know at library@benningtonmuseum.org.

And if you have something you'd like to see in this newsletter, or something you'd like to write, please drop our editor, Ray, a line at raymond_rodriguez@msn.com.

— Robert Ebert

If you're looking for information on your home's original owners, you may well find it here. Whether it's old town records, scholarly articles, or something in particular like covered bridge



Veterans Day Program

Military veterans in your family? Learn their whole story at the RHR

Saturday November 9, 2024 @ 1 - 4pm, Regional History Room

The research team at the Bennington Historical Society is offering an opportunity to discover more about any veterans in your family. We will show you how to uncover the story of your relative or relatives who served in the armed forces, in any era, using internet sources, books, and local print records. Find details of their service – where they enlisted, the name of their unit, where they were stationed, and what they did upon return.

Whether they served in the Revolutionary War or on a more recent deployment, their story can be traced. Bring what documents, photos, or other information you have on your veteran and we will fill in the blanks.

To get a jump on your research, complete the form found here: <https://benningtonmuseum.org/event/researching-veterans/>

"BY HEROIC OR MERITORIOUS ACHIEVEMENT"

George Tegart, our own Bob Tegart's uncle, receiving the Bronze Star for his service on D Day



Photo courtesy of Bob Tegart

Edith Roosevelt Comes to Bennington

A Vermont tourist in the Gilded Age

Sunday November 17 @ 2 - 3pm

In 1894 Edith Roosevelt, wife of Theodore, then a US Civil Service Commissioner, visited Bennington. She was accompanied by her sister-in-law, Bami Roosevelt, five children, aged six months to ten years old, and a maid. They rented three rooms at the exclusive Walloomsac Inn and stayed for three weeks, quickly becoming a part of the social scene in Old Bennington. Bob Tegart will share some of the details of their stay in town.

Recently moved to Vermont from Central New York, Bob is past president of the Bennington Historical Society and administrator of the Bennington Museum Regional History Room.



Photo courtesy of Harvard Library

Bennington's "Other" Monuments

Calvin Coolidge speech marker

by Bill Morgan

Just to the south of the old Bennington train station on Depot Street stands a marker that commemorates what is perhaps Calvin Coolidge's most famous speech. The marker is placed here because this is the spot on which Coolidge addressed his audience the day he delivered it.

Our nation's 30th President, Calvin Coolidge, was born in Plymouth Notch, Vermont, on the Fourth of July, 1872. When President Warren Harding died unexpectedly in 1923, Coolidge, then the Vice-President, was sworn in. The following year he ran for the presidency, winning by a wide margin, but in 1928 he decided not stand for re-election. He retired to his home in Northampton, Massachusetts, and died there in 1933 at the age of 60.

Until Tropical Storm Irene struck Vermont in August of 2011, the most devastating flood in the state's history was probably the storm of

November 2nd through 4th, 1927. An unusually heavy rainfall dumped between 7 and 10 inches of rain across the state. Bennington itself received 7 1/2 inches of rain during that two-day period. The downpour immediately caused the state's streams and rivers to overflow their banks and swept away dams, bridges, and roadways. The towns deep in the Vermont valleys suffered severe damage when some rivers rose to more than 13 feet above flood stage. In Bennington the rising waters of the Walloomsac reached as far as Main Street. Across the state, 84 people lost their lives, including Vermont's Lieutenant Governor S. Hollister Jackson, who was drowned while trying to escape from his flooded car in



Photograph by Bill Morgan

AGREED

When this marker was unveiled in 2008, 75 years after the event, over 100 people turned out for the ceremony.

Barre. Nine thousand people were left homeless, 1,258 bridges were destroyed or badly damaged, and 23 mills were put out of business.

In the days after the flood, President Coolidge remained in Washington, but praised the

PAST AS PROLOGUE

With one recent exception—Tropical Storm Irene—the flood of 1927 was likely the most destructive in Vermont's history. Bennington alone received over seven inches of rain in two days, and eighty-four Vermonters lost their lives, including the state's lieutenant governor. In Bennington, some motorists braved the town's washed-out roads.



Courtesy of Bennington Museum

Bennington's "Other" Monuments

Calvin Coolidge speech marker

(continued)

citizens of his home state for their strength during the recovery efforts. He didn't visit Vermont for nearly a year after the floods because he didn't want to get in the way of reconstruction. When he did come, he traveled by special train up the eastern side of the state along the Connecticut, White, and Winooski Rivers, stopping overnight at his family's homestead in Plymouth Notch, and then returned down the western side examining the damage and viewing the recovery efforts. The Presidential party made its final stop in Bennington on his way back to Washington.

During his trip he had made no speeches until he stepped onto the rear platform of the train which was stopped at the Bennington station, the same station that still stands a few feet north of the marker today.

At 6:50 in the early evening of Sept. 21st, 1928, 5,000 people crowded into the area around the train station. The previous day, the Bennington Banner had announced the presidential visit and suggested that people bring small American flags to wave. When the train pulled into the station, Miss Marion White, representing the Girl Scouts, gave Mrs. Coolidge



Courtesy of Library of Congress

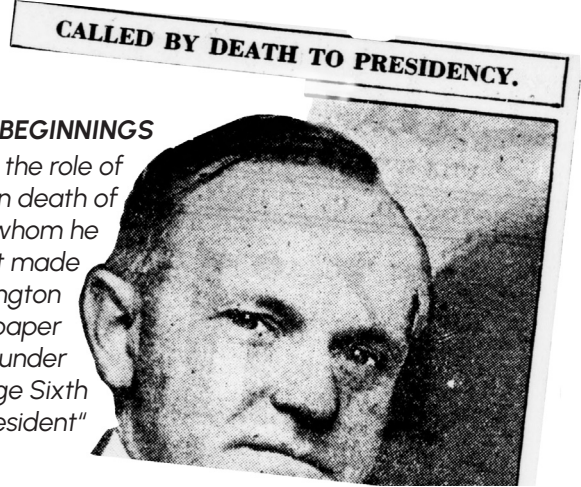
THE STRONG, SILENT TYPE

Coolidge earned the nickname "Silent Cal" through characteristic reticence—a reputation that prompted the Bennington Banner to opine that "Oratory is an art of which Coolidge is not a master." But in the wake of 1927's deadly flood, Coolidge rose to the moment and spoke movingly to his fellow Vermonters who had survived the deluge.

a large bouquet of gladiolas while the Bennington Municipal Band and the American Legion drum corps played patriotic songs. Judge Barber and Hall Park McCullough had planned to give some opening remarks, but they were late in arriving and the President began his address without any introduction. The Banner reported that "Oratory is an art of which Coolidge is not a master," but the comments he made that day proved them wrong. It was the most heart-felt and emotional speech that the President would ever make and one of

the shortest.

Coolidge began: "Fellow Vermonters, for two days we have been traveling through this state. We have been up the East side, across and down the West side. We have seen Brattleboro, Bellows Falls, Windsor, White River Junction, and Bethel. We



Courtesy of Library of Congress

have seen Rutland. I have had an opportunity of visiting again the scenes of my childhood. I want to express to you, and through the press to the other cities of Vermont, my sincere appreciation for the general hospitality bestowed upon me and my associates on the occasion of this journey. It is gratifying to note the splendid recovery from the great catastrophe which overtook the state nearly a year ago. Transportation has been restored. The railroads are in a better condition than before. The highways are open to traffic for those who wish to travel by automobile.

"Vermont is a state I love. I could not look upon the peaks of Ascutney, Killington, Mansfield and Equinox without being moved in a way that no other scene could move me.

"It was here that I first saw the light of day; here I received my bride; here my dead lie pillowed on the loving breast of our everlasting hills.

"I love Vermont because of her hills and valleys, her scenery and invigorating climate, but most of all, because of her indomitable people. They are a race of pioneers who have almost beggared themselves to serve others. If the spirit of liberty should vanish in other parts of the union and support of our institutions should languish, it could all be replenished from the generous store held by the people of this brave little state of Vermont."

The train stayed for only 10 or 15 minutes, then the whistle blew, and he was gone. With this short speech Coolidge "rose to the heights of eloquence never before reached by him," said the editors of the Banner.

On September 21st, 2003, seventy-five years after Coolidge gave his speech, the state of



Courtesy of Bennington Museum

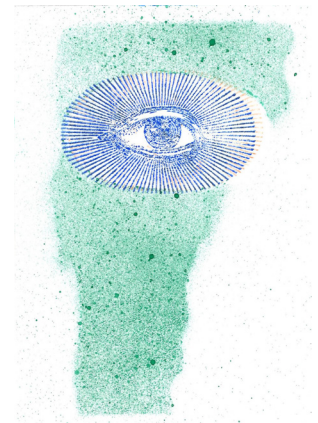
ALL BROUGHT LOW

The downpours that hit Bennington on November 3rd and 4th, 1927, literally tore roofs off of buildings. Here, two men reckon with the destruction on Branch Street, just east of downtown.

Vermont's Division for Historic Preservation

unveiled this marker. The marker quoted excerpts from the speech on both sides of the bronze underneath the great seal of the state. During the day-long ceremonies, the Coolidge Foundation joined with the Vermont Council on the Humanities to offer a variety of programs. Actor and Coolidge interpreter Jim Cooke began the day at 2pm with an appearance at the Bennington Battle Monument. Cooke, acting in the role of Coolidge, offered comments and answered questions. Then at 4pm he arrived at the Bennington railroad station where he recreated the speech and children waved small flags, as they had done in 1928. A local band played patriotic music, and people who had actually met President Coolidge were introduced.

Then the marker was unveiled before an audience of about a hundred that included the governor, James Douglas. That evening a dinner was given at the Park McCullough House, where local poet, Stephen Sandy, spoke in praise of Coolidge. He called the President's speech a "brief, perhaps spontaneous, expression of gratitude for and praise of one's native place."



Down the Rabbit Hole in the RHR

The search for a Hessian soldier

by Bob Tegart

We received an intriguing inquiry the other day at the Regional History Room, asking if a certain Hessian soldier fought in the Battle of Bennington.

The patron wrote (all punctuation as in original): "This information is relatively "certain" if anything can be....! I know this man and his history, background, etc.....what I would like to "prove".....is his time in Bennington..... was he captured? Did he desert?.....where was he held? How was he released? Can we confirm that he fought with Burgoyne?.....or Baum?"

Well, I went down a rabbit hole on this one, and I'm afraid I haven't quite made my way out of it yet. First, I had to learn more of the background on Hessians troops in Burgoyne's campaign, then dig for details.

In 1776, there were about 18,000 troops serving with the British army in North America who were not British at all. These professional soldiers, hired by the British crown to fight in the colonies, were called Hessians. The name "Hessians" comes from the regions of northern Europe that these mercenaries hailed from (the principality of Hessen-Kassel, for example), city-states that later

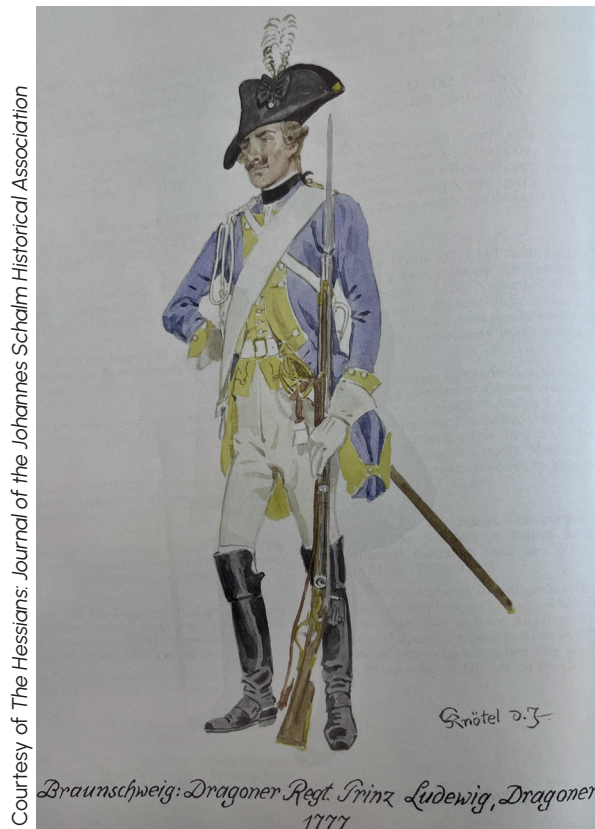
coalesced into what we now know as Germany. Britain's reliance on Hessian soldiers was so widespread that, by the 1780s, one-third of their fighting forces were from this German-speaking region.

The soldier we were tracing was Johann Christopher Dieffenbach, who went by his middle name, and was born in Griesheim, Darmstadt-Dieburg, Hesse on March 3rd, 1754. He joined the Brunswick Dragoons, fought at the Battle of Bennington, and was captured and held as prisoner of war here in Bennington.

Then Dieffenbach melted into American society, married an American woman, and built a life in Vermont. He was "Warned" out of Bennington and moved to Cambridge, Vermont, but that was all the historical record seemed to reveal.

But my research brought out much more of his story.

Dieffenbach was just 23 when his unit landed in North America, in the summer of 1776, serving under Lieutenant Colonel Friederich Baum and Major General Friedrich Riedesel. The two commanders and the soldiers serving under them then joined General Burgoyne's forces in Quebec, and began the long journey south.



Courtesy of The Hessians: Journal of the Johannes Schalm Historical Association

FIGHTING 'FIT

The Hessians came to slay in more ways than one.

The newly-arrived mercenaries were given cumbersome uniforms in which they had to travel and fight—large cocked and pointed hats, blue coats, and thigh-high boots. The Brunswick Dragoons also lacked horses, but hoped that good horses could be found in Bennington, where the patriots were collecting military stores. Indeed, capturing the town was Burgoyne's original objective. That objective was thwarted, of course, when the patriots soundly defeated Baum and Riedesel that August.

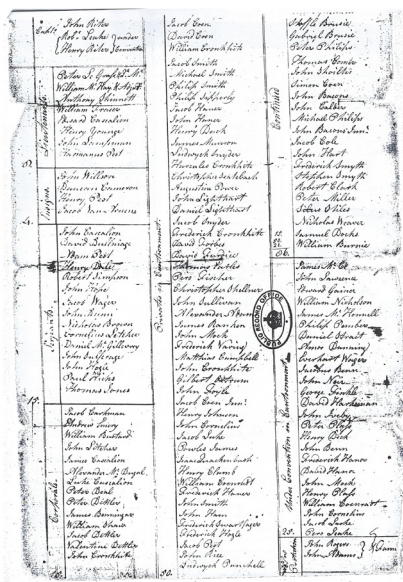
In the aftermath of the Battle of Bennington, about 400 soldiers were taken prisoner; Dieffenbach's name appears in an after-action report filed by the British. The Hessian prisoners were taken back to Bennington and crowded into the town's Meetinghouse.

The American commanders wanted to get the prisoners away from the scene of action as soon as possible, and on August 18th they began to march them across New England to Boston. They passed through Pownal on the way to Williamstown and on to Lanesboro, Massachusetts, and then across the state. Labor was scarce at this time, and along the route some prisoners were lent out to local farmers and tradesmen. Other, less fortunate prisoners were sent to work in tin mines in Simsbury Connecticut.

After marching about 150 miles in just a few days, they reached Boston, its teeming harbor stretching toward the open Atlantic. The weary Hessians were nearing their destination, which loomed out in the water – prison ships, anchored among the merchant vessels. The

prisoners would spend many, many weeks in those floating dungeons, under miserable conditions. After eight months, it was decided to move some of the Hessians to a prisoner-of-war camp recently built in Rutland, Massachusetts.

But the Hessians were not well-guarded during their trek from Bennington to Boston, and many of them, without land to their name and meager prospects awaiting them at home, simply fell out from the march and slipped away into the general population. One captive, Johann Hinterass, left the ranks, settled in Williamstown, built a cabin, and became a well-respected member of his Massachusetts community.



Courtesy of Bennington Museum

... AND TAKING NAMES

Dieffenbach's name appears in this, Burgoyne's post-battle report, from the Museum's collection, listing the names of his troops that were captured by the Patriots. "A role of officers, Non-commissioned officers and privates of Royalists who have served under General Burgoyne and came in for protection and those who were taken prisoner at Bennington and various places and killed under my command. 20 December 1777"

It was not until the war ended in 1783 that the prisoners would be released to return to their homes and families in Germany. We are not certain what happened to Christopher Dieffenbach in the years between the Battle of Bennington and the end of the war in 1783. He may have endured captivity on a prison ship, or he could have been loaned out for hire, to labor in the fields or a workshop. Then again, if he was lucky, he may have been able to escape into

Down the Rabbit Hole in the RHR

The search for a Hessian soldier

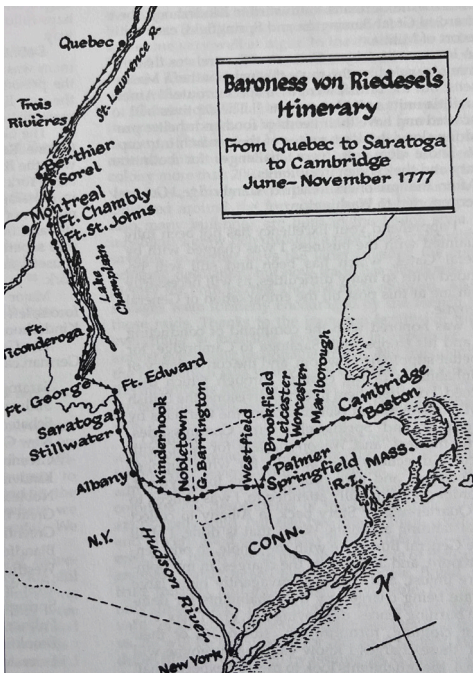
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society. If he was working in Massachusetts, that's most likely where he met his future wife, who lived in that area.

At some point he returned to Bennington, and to disguise his ethnicity, changed his name to Tiffany. Then, on March 23rd, 1784, he married Rebeckah Ellis in Bennington. The ceremony was performed by Nathan Clark, justice of the Peace. Rebeckah was a Mayflower descendant and the daughter of a Revolutionary War soldier who passed away in 1778. Imagine if he was alive to witness his daughter marrying a Hessian.

On April 21st, 1784, a month after their marriage, Christopher and Rebeckah, who was pregnant, were ordered to leave Bennington. It was not unusual for the town to issue a Warning Out order to individuals deemed financial burdens to the community, or possessed of poor character. Perhaps they were viewed as transients who could not support themselves. It is also quite possible that Christopher's Hessian lineage was discovered, and his neighbors, their struggle for independence still fresh in their minds, suspected him of having Royalist loyalties, and couldn't abide his presence.

And so the Dieffenbachs, now known as Tiffany, moved to Cambridge, Vermont. In September



Courtesy of The Hessians: Journal of the Johannes Schalm Historical Association

A TALE OF TWO JOURNEYS

The route the Hessians forces marched down—first as soldiers, then as captives—from Quebec all the way to Massachusetts. This map's title reflects that Major General von Riedesel's wife

1785, Christopher was sworn in as one of the town's first freemen. In both the 1790 and 1800 Federal Census, the Tiffanys are listed in the as one male and five females; Christopher, Rebeckah and four daughters. Betsy born in 1784, Louisa in 1786, Susan at an uncertain date, and Sarah in 1790.

Between 1787 and 1800, four more daughters, and two sons, were born to Christopher and Rebecka in Cambridge, making eight children in all.

After Rebeckah died, in 1805, Christopher married Abigale (last name unknown) and had

two sons with her; Hyrum on May 19th, 1807, and Christopher on May 21st, 1809. Christopher died on March 21st, 1809 at age 55—two months before the birth of his second son.

In some aspects, Christopher Dieffenbach's story follows that of many American immigrants. This young foreigner, having arrived on this new continent likely speaking not a word of English, survived the war, started a family, and created a new life in a new nation.

I still have unanswered questions, and more rabbit holes to go down. We may never be able to tell his entire story—but stay tuned!



A Massachusetts Militiaman in Vermont

A view of Bennington and her people, from a passing soldier

by Phil Holland

On October 5th, 1777, Alpheus Woods, a newly enlisted 51-year-old private in Captain William Morse's 52-man company of volunteers under Colonel Jonathan Read, marched from Marlborough, Massachusetts (northeast of Worcester) to support the Northern Army on the Hudson under General Gates. The Battle of Freeman's Farm had been fought two weeks before, but Saratoga and Burgoyne's surrender still lay ahead. Woods was part of the militia force (boosted by the Patriot triumph, largely by militia, at the Battle of Bennington in August) that Washington was depending on to help stop the British invasion from Canada. Woods kept a modest diary during his brief service (which extended to November 8th, 1777, according to Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors). The entries are brief and mostly matter-of-fact, with mention of the places where Woods ate, drank, and lodged (not for him the tenting life, it seems), but they also record his frank opinions about local people and register news of Burgoyne's faltering campaign.

Here is my transcription of the entries for October 13th-15th, 1777, when Woods passed through

Bennington, Shaftsbury, and "the place called Bennington fight" on his way to witnessing Burgoyne's men lay down their arms at Saratoga on the 17th.

13th [October, 1777]

Set out [from Williamstown] in the Morning Cloudy but I believe it will clear off. Called at Mr. Gage's in

Pownal there eat dinner. The land not so good as what we travelled through [in the Hoosac valley]. Shaved several of the Malitia, all well. Rum 2 shillings a Jill. News that Burgoine is well hemmed in – very credible called at several Places. Went up

to Bennington and got up to the Meeting house about sun-set. Put to it to get into houses. The

inhabitants the worst I ever see, Cross Morose, Ill natured – See Mssrs Luke Eager John Harrington and Robert Eams. Eams a Baker. Drawed bread the first night at Bennington.

Heard of WHW's [?] D. [death?] by L.E. First Lodged with Mr John Harrington, eat Breakfast and went to get my Gun mended by Mr. Jon. Morrison give him 7 shillings.

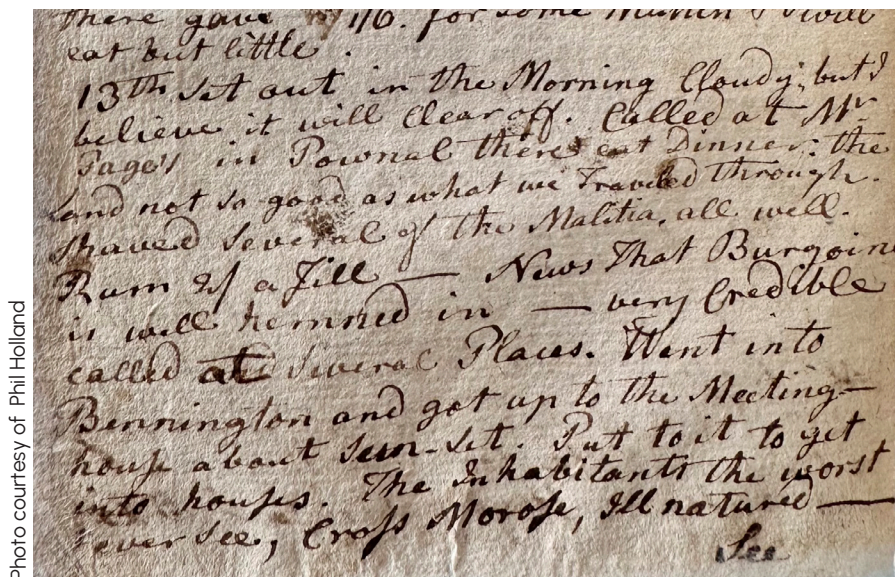


Photo courtesy of Phil Holland

"CROSS MOROSE, ILL NATURED"

Likely one of the older members of his company of volunteer fighters, the descriptions Woods offers are terse but definite. He reserved his most pungent descriptions for the people of Bennington, who housed the weary fighters — "the worst I ever see"

A Massachusetts Militiaman in Vermont

A view of Bennington and her people, from a passing soldier

(continued)

14th

Set out about 4 o'Clock Traveled about 4 miles to Mr. David Matthews in Shaftsbury, there lodged. Mr Mathews is in Albany Gaol for selling liquor in the army for 2 shillings a Jill, the Common price his wife a virtuous good woman I hope, none in the House but herself. Mr Bass and David Hunter came up and joined us in Shaftsbury.

15th

Set out a little after sun rise and came to the place called Bennington fight

but the right

name is Melooms-coik.

I hear there is 20 Tories come home to their habitations in this place and Mapleton and are put under Guard. News constantly that Burgoine is hemmed in etc. Travelled through a Town called St. Coit some pine and some oak land not very good clayey land. Dined by a house and Lodged at a place called New Cambridge at an [illegible] house very clever People

There are various points of interest. A seasoned partisan, Woods is confident in his opinions. He

had been a zealous member of the Marlborough Committee of Correspondence from 1772 through the outbreak of the Revolution. He was of the 4th generation on his father's side to live (and lead) in Marlborough. Woods had also served as a soldier in the French and Indian War twenty years before, but apparently not since. Perhaps his gun dated from that time, which is why it needed attention from a Bennington fixer.

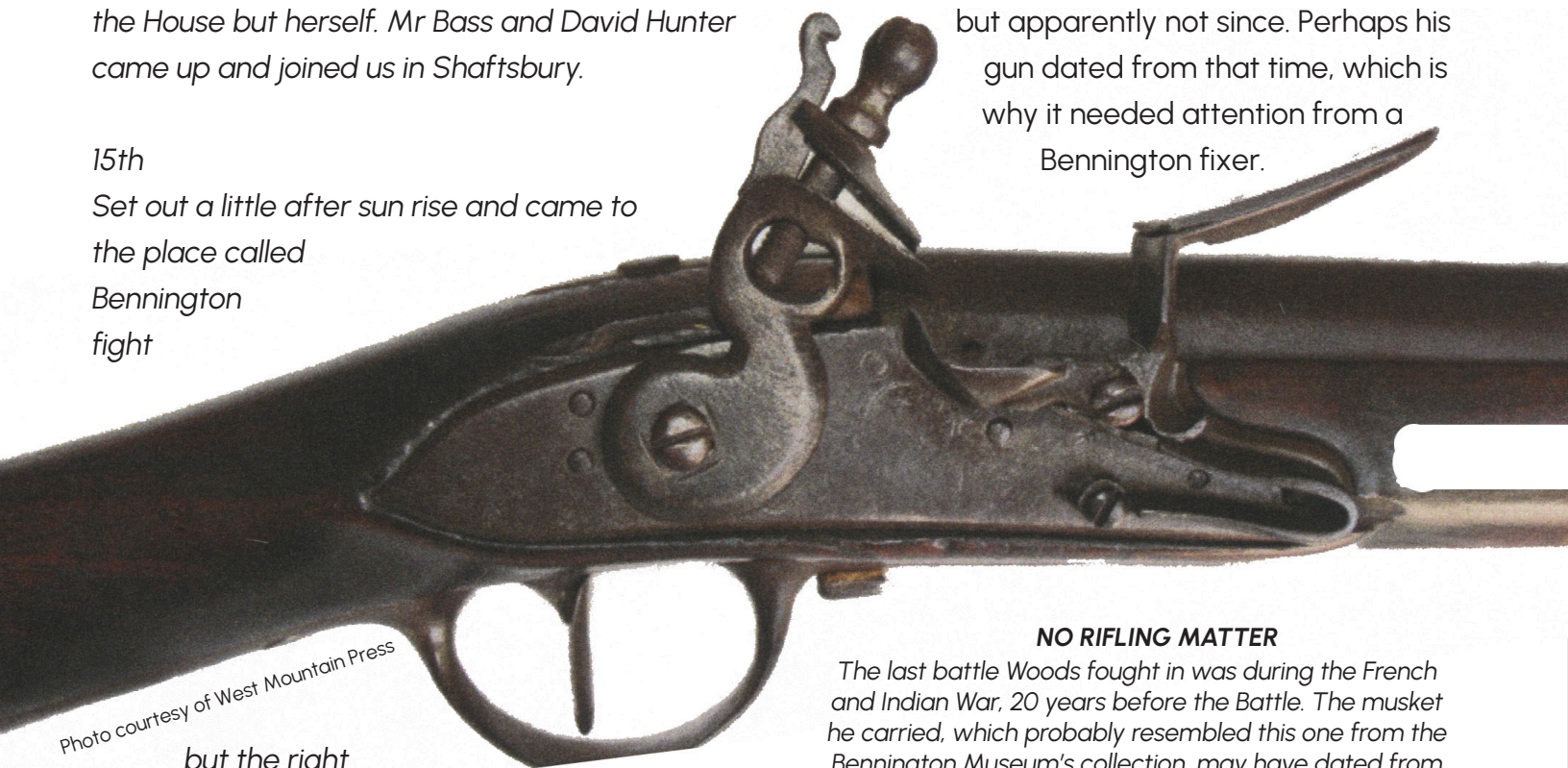


Photo courtesy of West Mountain Press

NO RIFLING MATTER

The last battle Woods fought in was during the French and Indian War, 20 years before the Battle. The musket he carried, which probably resembled this one from the Bennington Museum's collection, may have dated from that time, and it needed fixing. Fortunately, Woods found the man to do it in Bennington. Characteristically terse, Woods reports only "went to get my Gun mended by Mr. Jon. Morrison give him 7 shillings."

Woods's enlistment is an indication of the all-out effort the Americans were making to defeat Burgoyne. Woods mentions the "Capitulation" of the British army in his entry for the 16th, where he also says he heard it "yesterday," when he was at or on the way to "New Cambridge" from San Coick (North Hoosick – he calls it St. Coit and calls it a town, a reminder that there were other buildings there besides the mill which figures in all accounts of the Battle).

On his way, Woods slung some nasty epithets at the people of Bennington: "Cross Morose, ill natured." There's no doubt that the town had been under strain all summer long, and especially in the aftermath of the Battle, so perhaps the residents were out of sorts. Woods is "put to it to get into houses" – perhaps because there is no room. He did have better luck with the "very clever" set in Cambridge, however.

The Battle of Bennington was often referred to as "Bennington battle" by those who fought in it, but I have never seen "Bennington fight." Woods may be the first writer to touch on the question of what name to associate with the Battle. His rendition of "Walloomsac" appears elsewhere (with many variations) in 18th-century use, but Woods uses it to refer to the site of the Battle, not the fighting itself.

I have no further information on the unfortunate Mr. Matthews and his wife, but it seems that the Americans were clamping down on sales of liquor

to the troops, even at the "common price."

I learned of this diary through a posthumous tip from historian Franklin Wickwire, who was Lion Miles's teacher and collaborator at UMass. Wickwire didn't find anything of great interest in the diary for his purposes, but any impressions of that fraught time – the time when the Americans had Burgoyne "hemmed in," as Woods puts it, are valuable. The daily jottings have an immediacy that later recollections may lack. We learn that Woods gave a shave to fellow volunteers, and that there was a baker in Bennington by the name of Eams, and a gunsmith named Morrison. And, in a later entry (November 5th), that Woods saw Burgoyne pass by his own front door in Marlborough on the latter's route as a prisoner to Boston; Woods's company was one of the escorts. The diary itself is in the collection of the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester.



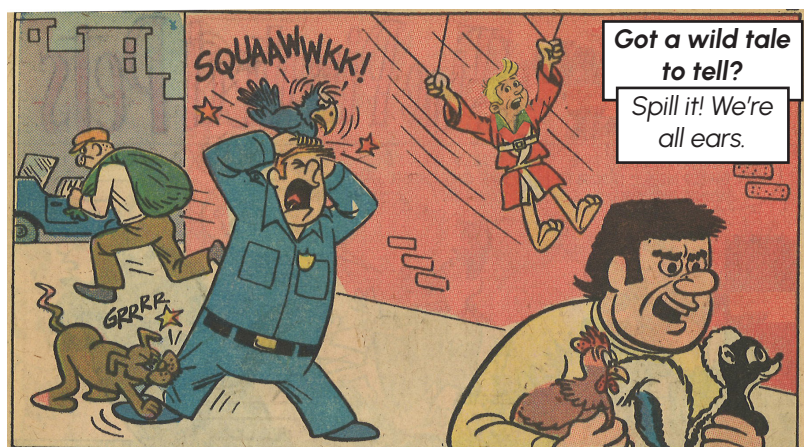
...And How About You?

Share your story with us

At the Historical Society, we're always looking for new items for this newsletter. A piece doesn't have to be long—a paragraph will do. But we'll look at longer submissions, too.

Have you done research into local history that you'd like to share? Maybe you know stories about your home's history, or about an artifact that's been passed down in your family? Or notable relatives from Bennington?

Send your item to: raymond_rodriques@msn.com. And thank you.



About the BHS

The Bennington Historical Society is volunteer-operated program of Bennington Museum, based in the Regional History Room. Meetings take place on the first Monday of every month from 4 to 5pm, but we encourage you to stop by the Regional History Room during our open hours to say hello and talk about projects that you might like to be involved in.

The Regional History Room is open Monday, Thursday, and Friday afternoons, 1-4pm (by appointment when the Museum is closed January-March: library@benningtonmuseum.org)

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