

December 31, 1775:

Defeat of the Americans and death of General Montgomery at the walls of Quebec.

ARNOLD'S MARCH TO QUEBEC IN 1775

by

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*From an address given to the United Empire Loyalists. Grand River Branch.
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When Lexington and Concord brought a military confrontation to a rapidly growing division between Americans and British, George Washington, the "young commander-in-chief, determined on an invasion to Quebec via the Kennebec River, which flows virtually northwest from the Atlantic and thence into the St. Lawrence watershed via the portage to Dead River, the Height of Land as it is called, and the headwaters of the Chaudiere River at Lake Megantic which would then convey the party to the St. Lawrence's shores almost opposite the very ramparts of Quebec's citadel. This then was no easy approach, one which would cost the Patriots dearly in their attempt to conquer the fourteenth colony and make it the fourteenth state.

Washington planned to send this right wing of the invading army in order that it would coincide with a left wing assault by way of the easier, and accordingly, more frequently tried invasion approach via Lake Champlain.

The force of 1,200 men - Virginia, Pennsylvania and New England volunteers all- were first assembled in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in early September. They were a rough, fearless group of men, hateful of strict military discipline but firmly believing that in God and in Liberty they possessed a dual mission sufficient to overcome any second thoughts they might have possessed about a retreat to their comfortable hearths. Their leader was 34-year-old Benedict Arnold, a short, stout, florid-of-complexion individual who initially inspired respect because of his energy more than his organizational abilities. A Connecticut Yankee and veteran of the Seven Years' War, he had earlier won Patriot acclaim by his success at Fort Ticonderoga on the western frontier.

Perhaps Washington knew that in Arnold's strength of character, bravery and determination could be found the leadership necessary to conquer the overland, backdoor route to Quebec. If on account of audacity alone, Arnold had proven to be a skilled guerrilla fighter and perhaps Quebec, if it fell to the Americans, would bring him power, glory and, not least, advancement as a professional soldier. Here was a task for a man of ambition: the spoils and dividends might well outweigh the costs and hazards.

On September 25 Arnold and his men, divided into four divisions, began the ascent of the Kennebec in large flat-bottomed bateaux. This river is no broad, meandering stream, but a river whose momentum is steady and whose speed is not swift to the eye at least but is similarly steady and unrelenting. It lacks a flood plain, trees and rocks approach right the water's edge leaving few places for an easy portage or place of rest. In these conditions the means of water transport would have to be of the best quality and the men of the sternest stuff; as it was, however, the bateaux had been built of green wood and built quickly and often with skilled hands. Arnold was displeased with the vessels not only for their poor quality but because of their small size. Each bateau was poled upstream by a sweating crew, assisted by lines from soldiers tugging from the difficult banks. Scouts made their way in advance, sending back reports for the bateaux crews. The labours continued while the weather kept fair. One soldier murdered another and was sent home but otherwise the first leg was uneventful.

At Norridgewook, where the falls forced a portage, Arnold had a good look at his men and equipment. Here, where the vast mountain wilderness really began, he saw that the bateaux were in poor condition only ten days into the journey. Moreover, codfish casks and bread dough casks had broached. Peas had to be condemned as bad and so too beef and other supplies. Though carpenters could make some repairs to the bateaux the losses in food could not be repaired, and this indication of coming hardship must have made Arnold more impatient still.

Never tolerant of delay, Arnold now pressed forward to the Great Carrying Place, a vast swampy ground which led to the appropriately named Dead River. A diet of salt pork and the yellow, stagnant water, drunk in large quantities by the hard working men, was a potent combination leading to diarrhoea in some cases and vomiting in others. A log cabin, "Arnold's Hospital", was built for the security of the sick who were left behind.

Arnold here took time to write and send letters to Washington. He told his commander-in-Chief that the greatest difficulty had passed and that he would reach the Chaudiere in eight or ten days. He also wrote to his military superior, General Philip Schuyler, asking for intelligence and advice. And, not least, he wrote to John Dyer Mercier, a rebel collaborator within Quebec's very walls, to the effect that he would soon arrive with 2,000 men (an exaggeration), a force "designed to cooperate with General Schuyler to frustrate the unjust and arbitrary measures (sic) of the Ministry and restore Liberty to our Brethren of Canada, to whom we made no doubt that our exertions in their favour will be acceptable." He asked Mercier to send news about what he might be expected to find - what the disposition of merchants and Canadians was, how many ships and troops were there, and so forth. This missive, sent by Indian courier, was never delivered to its intended receiver; instead it ended up in British hands, an advance warning that Arnold's surprise attack could be thwarted.

Now the vast, rugged mountain wilderness began to take its toll; from the Dead River to the Height of Land, the men everywhere faced the trials of a landscape made hazardous by inclement conditions. High winds, freezing temperatures and incessant rains made the passage difficult and rest nearly impossible. During the early hours of October 22nd Arnold's camp was swamped by a wall of water from the river which had risen eight feet in nine hours. Before they could retreat before this liquid advance, their possessions got soaked. The refuge offered by a nearby hill gave them the sad view of a flooded river valley where the main channel was difficult to discern.

In these circumstances morale quickly fell, and on October 25th at a council of war, with Colonel Roger Enos, the second in command, presiding, Dr. Isaac Senter recorded in his journal that the "melancholy aspects who had been preaching to their men the doctrine of impenetrability and non-perseverance" proposed to abandon the project; Others, led Arnold, argued for continuing in spite of the shortage of food and the imminence of snow. In the end, the decision was made that the fit would proceed and the unfit return. But even then Arnold faced a mutiny which he could not crush. Enos' men of the rear guard would not advance to a man, whether able or not. They complained of doing more than their share of the labours and feared for their lives in the deep snow ahead. Arnold was obliged to let them return, taking Enos with them.

Picking their way through the cedar swamps, small lakes, woods and rocks up to the Height of Land, Arnold's army, now numbering 800, pressed on. Bateaux upset and men drowned; hunger, exhaustion and faint hearts all took their toll. Dearborn's dog had to be shot for food while moosehide moccasins next became the bill of fare. "For forty days I waded, " one of them later recalled, "in freezing weather. . . an allowance of half a pint of flour a man for a fortnight and half of that time no meat; climbing hills, passing through morasses, cedar swamps. . . wading creeks and river."

They reached safety in St. Francois on the Chaudiere, having passed the very spot at Woburn, Quebec, where the Riviere Arnold flowing north is crossed by the motorist entering the Laurentian Valley and where the Arnold Hotel now offers hospitality to wayfarers. Ironically, Arnold and his men found refuge in the farmhouses and outbuildings of people he had come to liberate if possible and conquer if necessary. The kindly Canadians treated Arnold's advance party with courtesy and care. Supplies rendered for gold or other coin were sent back to the struggling rearguard while plans were made to shelter, clothe and feed them before sending them down river to Ste. Marie where habitants feasted them in the seigneurie of the Loyalist Taschereau, the latter having gone to Quebec to defend the city.

November 8th found the force on the banks of the St. Lawrence. At Pointe de Levis on the south shore, near where Wolfe's conquering army had camped in 1759, Arnold's force took possession of a farm and mill. The British knew of their approach and had removed all boats from the south shore and kept an hourly patrol of the river. But canoes could be had from the Indians, and Arnold crossed the river under cover of snow and darkness seized Colonel Henry Caldwell's house in the Quebec suburb of Ste. Foye and instructed his subordinates who crossed the river by the slender means at their disposal to occupy nearby farm buildings.

Arnold tried to get his demand for surrender to the fort but his messengers found musket fire their only welcome. He came to realize the Quebec's garrison was strong in numbers, equipment and munitions. Fearing that Colonel Allen Maclean and his Royal Highland Emigrants regiment might come out of the fort and attack, he decided to retreat to the security of General Montgomery's approaching army from Montreal. Just as Arnold was marching along the north shore, a whaleboat bearing Guy Carleton was bringing the Governor to the security of Quebec. Both veterans of the British army's campaigns in America during the Seven Years' War they were no commanders in the field of opposing forces seeking stronger positions from which to fight the battle for Canada.

Under Carleton's directing spirit and the military planning of Maclean, Quebec prepared for its fourth siege of its history. The garrison had 1,248 men and rations which if frugally distributed could last until mid-May. By proclamation Carleton ordered "all useless, disloyal, and treacherous persons" to quit the city and district or be treated as spies or rebels. Now the garrison could defend, as one put it, "against open and avowed enemies" and not against "those lurking about town." All who remained "seemed zealous for the public service." Carleton grouped his forces into four brigades (regulars, British militia, Canadian militia, and seamen) and developed his strategy of letting the invaders come to them, meanwhile preparing for an assault. The gates remained barred to messengers bringing requests for the British surrender; and the Americans had to content themselves with firing arrows with letters attached into the fortress. These missives told of friendly American intentions and painted graphic pictures of how Quebec would lie in ruin and flames unless the inhabitants overthrew their tyrannical governor. They also boasted of a large army which could easily take what Arnold called "a wretched motley garrison". In fact, the American force was about 1,000 effectives and it lacked the weight of cannon to reduce the battlements and gates.

In the siege which followed throughout the winter, the Americans first had to be content to fire their small cannon from several directions. It is said that the only casualties among the defenders was one non-combatant and a turkey whose leg was broken. General Montgomery, Arnold's senior, decided to await falling snow for a cover under which to assault the town.

The opportunity afforded by snowfall came on New Year's Eve and the rest is a story in itself. The American forces made three feints and a main attack, in the Sault-au-Matelot in the Lower Town, where Arnold decided to concentrate his efforts and which ended in disaster for the rebels: 389 of them were made prisoner in what had amounted to a carefully prepared trap in the city streets. Forty-two were wounded and thirty killed. The British killed and wounded were under a dozen. Among the many

American bodies lying in the snow was that of General Montgomery; on Carleton's orders he was buried with full military honours. As for Arnold, he had been injured in the leg at the beginning of the action and would have to command the army from his hospital bed in St. Roch.

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