

Burgoyne's Hessian Troops and the Hessian Heritage of the Schoharie and Mohawk Valleys

by Mark Stolzenburg

This paper explores how some Hessian soldiers, both prisoners of war and deserters, who had fought for the British under John Burgoyne during the 1777 Saratoga campaign came to reside in the Schoharie Valley (then Albany County) and the Mohawk Valley (Tryon County). It has been adapted from an article by Mr. Stolzenburg first published in the Schoharie County Historical Review, Fall-Winter 2021, Vol. 85, No. 2.

Burgoyne's Brunswickers

My exploration of Hessian immigration to the Schoharie area began with curiosity about one individual from a much-recounted local Town of Wright story of the American Revolution, that being the tale of the July 26, 1781 raid by the Tory, Adam Crysler, at Fox's Creek, sometimes referred to as the Battle of the Becker Stone House. I will dispense with another telling here, but an incident recounted at the beginning of the story has always sparked my interest. Historical accounts tell us that Crysler and his band of Tories and Indians descended on that day first upon the farm of Schoharie Committeeman Jacob Zimmer near the present hamlet of Gallupville. They set fire to Zimmer's house and barn and killed and scalped his son Jacob. The raiders also murdered and scalped a Hessian worker at the Zimmer farm, a man who in most accounts of the raid goes unnamed, with but one exception that I know of. Roscoe, in his first account of the attack refers to the Hessian as "one Hoever" almost in passing.¹

I have wondered who Hoever was. If indeed he was a Hessian soldier and thus had fought for the British, how and why did he end up working for a Patriot in the Schoharie Valley on the New York frontier and dying at the hands of his former allies? What brought him to the Schoharie Valley? This paper will explore my research into the question of how some Hessian soldiers came to reside in the Mohawk and Schoharie Valleys.

Who were the Hessians?

The term "Hessian" became commonplace even during the Revolution to represent the nearly 30,000 German soldiers who fought for the British in the War of American Independence. Germany in the 1770's was not one unified country, but a group of independent states. Only about 65 percent of these soldiers were truly "Hessian" and hailed from the German states of Hesse-Kassel and Hesse-Hanau. Others, however, were from other German duchies and principalities, especially, as we will see in the case of Schoharie and Mohawk Valley immigrants, the Duchy of Braunschweig. The name Braunschweig

¹ William E. Roscoe. *History of Schoharie County, New York*. Syracuse: D. Mason & Co. 1882. p.50

was anglicized to “Brunswick”. Over the course of the Revolutionary War 5723 Brunswickers served with the British in America.²

Hessians in the Saratoga Campaign of 1777

Hessian troops fought alongside the British in 1777 as the war of the American Revolution was brought to the Mohawk and Schoharie Valleys by a three-pronged British campaign in the State of New York. Their plan was for British General Barry St. Leger to take the Mohawk Valley by invading from Lake Ontario, Sir Henry Clinton was to come up the Hudson River from New York City and John Burgoyne was to use the Lake Champlain corridor to descend southward from Canada on Albany. There the three would meet, effectively dividing New York State and severing ties between New England and the rest of the thirteen states. Fierce resistance by Patriots, from the Battle of the Flockey, to Oriskany, and to Fort Schuyler drove St. Leger back to Canada, cutting off one of the three avenues of attack. Clinton stalled after taking Fort Montgomery on October 6 along the Hudson highlands in present-day Orange County.

This left Burgoyne on his own with an impossibly long supply line spread over rugged Adirondack terrain and with unreliable communication with St. Leger and Clinton. By the conclusion of the second battle of Saratoga on October 7, known as the Battle of Bemis Heights, it was clear that Burgoyne’s situation was dire. He was seriously outnumbered by the American Northern Army and militias under Major General Horatio Gates. Burgoyne could not advance; he could not retreat. Provisions for the British and Hessian troops were critically low. Gates’ forces stood between Burgoyne and Albany and blocked his possibility of return to Canada.

The principal engagements of the Saratoga campaign commenced with the British taking of Fort Ticonderoga on July 2 and terminated with the two battles of Saratoga, the Battle of Freeman’s Farm on September 19 and the Battle of Bemis Heights on October 7. The British and Hessian forces under Burgoyne surrendered to Gates on October 17. In June 1777 at the start of his march from Canada, Burgoyne’s Brunswick regiments numbered 3291 men and the Hesse-Hanau artillery under his command was about 600 strong.³

Hessian Desertion from Burgoyne’s Army

From the early days of the war, the Continental Congress had decided to welcome deserters of the “foreign” troops, another name given to the Hessian troops who fought for the British:

Journal of Congress, August 14, 1776: Resolved, Therefore that these states will receive all such foreigners who shall leave the armies of his Britannic majesty in America, and shall choose to become members of any of these states; and that they shall be protected in the free exercise of their respective religions, and be invested with the rights, privileges and immunities of natives as established by the laws of these states. ⁴

² Edward J. Lowell. *The Hessians and the Other German Auxiliaries of Great Britain in the Revolutionary War*. New York: Harper and Brothers. 1884. p.20

<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=f0yIkJJU2tEC&pg=GBS.PA20&hl=en>. June 28, 2021

³ Edward J. Lowell. 1884. p. 137

⁴ United States. Continental Congress. Continental Congress Broadside Collection (Library of Congress) Dunlap, John, 1747-1812, printer. LOC loc.gov/resource/bdsdcc.01201/?sp=1

By October of the 1777 Saratoga campaign, Hessian deserters walked from Burgoyne's British lines in increasing numbers daily.⁵ The intractable strategic position that Burgoyne found himself in and the shortage of food certainly contributed to low morale and high rates of desertion. This situation was amply identified by American General Gates, who from camp at Saratoga, October 12, 1777, wrote to John Hancock, President of the Continental Congress:

I am happy to acquaint your Excellency that desertion has taken a deep root in the Royal Army, particularly amongst the Germans, who come to us in shoals. ⁶

Another factor likely contributed to Hessians voluntarily walking over to the Americans, and Gates was indeed happy because he probably felt he could, in part, take credit for it. A few days before he wrote the letter to Hancock, the Major General had hatched and carried out a plan with the help of his German interpreter, John Tilghman, to infiltrate the Hessian lines to distribute propaganda designed to encourage the Hessians to desert. Tilghman, who was born in Germany, wrote a poignant propaganda letter dated October 1, 1777 to his "countrymen," Burgoyne's Hessians. An English translation of the lengthy letter exists in the Gates Papers Collection housed at the New York Historical Society. In his prose, Tilghman appealed to all the sensibilities that may have been going through the mind of a discouraged Hessian soldier who may have been thinking about deserting to live in America. The letter provided a strong economic rationale for desertion: "Employ and live better with half the labour in this country as in Germany." Tilghman also appealed to German family ties: "Even blood relation you will find here." Further, advice and promises to the would-be deserter were offered by Tilghman:

Come only to one of our armies you will be received and rewarded + a free men, and go where you please, and the further you go South and So[uth] West, the more countrymen you will find.

The letter is signed: "from a friend and wellwisher to the German nation." ⁷ The timing of Tilghman's work makes it probable that it is one of the letters, perhaps the only one, described by Jephtha Simms as having been discreetly carried to the Hessian camp and distributed. But someone had to get it there.

Christopher Fischer of Col. Schuyler's regiment was requested by Tilghman to deliver the letter to the Hessian camp. He was a German-speaking private from a Schoharie German family.⁸ According to Jacob Van Alstyne in an interview by Simms, Fischer accepted the dangerous mission knowing he would be treated as a spy by the British if his purpose was discovered. An elaborate ruse was concocted for Fischer to gain entry to the Hessian camp. To bolster Fischer's cover in preparation for the mission, plans were made for some choreographed maneuvers by Col. Morgan's Riflemen that would be in full view of the Hessians shortly after Fischer would be arriving in the Hessian camp. Fischer would pose as a local loyalist with information for the Hessians about American troop movements, specifically those that Col.

⁵ Dean Snow. *1777, Tipping Point at Saratoga*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press. 2016. p. 217

⁶ Horatio Gates to John Hancock. Horatio Gates Papers, 1726-1828. Series 1: Correspondence. New York Historical Society. October 12, 1777. Sanford, NC: Microfilming Corp. of America. Reel 5. Frame 1052.

⁷ John Tilghman. Tilghman's Letter to the Germans of Burgoyne's Army. English Translation. 1 October 1777. Horatio Gates Papers. Series 1. Correspondence. Reel 5. Frame 840.

⁸Fischer may be the Christoffer Visscher who married Johanna S. Canker at the Albany Reformed Church on Jan.9, 1768 and who was the father of Anthon Friederick Fischer, born Oct. 4, 1768 and baptized at the Schoharie Lutheran Church.

Morgan would be executing. He would bring Tilghman's letter and some freshly killed mutton, to ensure he would be welcomed, since everyone knew that provisions in Burgoyne's army were in short supply. Fischer crossed the no man's land between the two armies and was met by the sentries of the Hessian camp.

The ruse was a success. Fischer was taken by the Hessian sentries to their officers whom he convinced of his hatred for the American rebels and that he offered the officers truthful intelligence about American plans and troop movements. After all, everyone could see the Riflemen maneuvering as Fischer had told the officers they would. The Hessians were, of course, unaware of the pre-arranged plan which Col. Morgan's men were acting out. Fischer convinced the officers he was not a threat and was given liberty to wander the enemy camp, presumably distributing Tilghman's letter and talking up the propaganda points to convince the rank-and-file Hessians to desert.

Since Christopher Fischer was both of German descent and had ties to Schoharie, it is possible that the topic of Schoharie and the Mohawk Valley might have come up as a potential welcoming destination for Hessian deserters. German countrymen would certainly be found there as Tilghman had promised. Could Fischer's mission have coaxed some Hessian deserters to the Mohawk and Schoharie Valleys? It seems possible that those who had not already heard about the not-to-distant German communities southwest of Saratoga knew of them after Fischer's visit.

Late in the day a diversion created by Col. Morgan's Riflemen kept the Hessians busy allowing Christopher Fischer to slip away from the enemy camp and return safely to the American lines. He was rewarded with gold and discharge papers.⁹ The date was probably between October 1, the date on Tilghman's letter, and October 7, 1777, the day of the Battle of Bemis Heights.¹⁰ Christopher Fischer's accomplishment was particularly impressive given that the Hessians were under orders as of August 23, 1777 to be on the lookout for just such an intruder in their midst. In fact, they were offered bonuses for exposure of enemy agents who might try to entice German soldiers to desert.¹¹

Tilghman's promise to reward Hessians for desertion was no joke. In the Horatio Gates Papers, Series 2, there is a return (list) of 111 deserters, 100 of them by name, and the amount of cash paid to each of them by Deputy Quartermaster General Udney Hay. In total £555.4 was doled out to the deserters, each receiving from £1.12 to £8.0. Amounts probably varied because there was also pay for arms surrendered, another promise made by Tilghman in his letter to the Germans. A date of desertion is listed for each man from September 21 through October 12 and a note in the margin refers to the list as a "Return of German deserters to the 12th October 1777."¹²

Since this list provides us with a date for each soldier's desertion, it gives us some idea of the desertion rate over time. If the list includes all the deserters from these dates, the daily number of enemy soldiers going over to the Americans was trending upwards from September 21 through October

⁹ Jephtha R. Simms. *History of Schoharie County, and Border Wars of New York*. Albany: Munsell and Tanner. 1845. p.257.

¹⁰ Dean Snow. *1777, Tipping Point at Saratoga*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press. 2016. p.213.

¹¹ Bruce E. Burgoyne. *Enemy Views, The American Revolutionary War as Recorded by the Hessian Participants*. Bowie, MD: Heritage Books. 1996. p. 195.

¹² Return - Account of Monies Paid to Deserters by Col. Udney Hay. Horatio Gates papers. Series 2. Orderly Books and Returns. Roll 18. Frame 1008. Of the 111 deserters, more than forty have so far been confirmed as Hessians, six unnamed are listed as Canadian, and a few have suspiciously British-sounding names.

12. Of the 111 men, 75 of them deserted in the four days from October 9 to October 12, while only 36 deserted in the eighteen-day period before that. As deserters these men were then free to go to Schoharie, Tryon County, or wherever they pleased. There is evidence that other Hessians were sent to the Mohawk and Schoharie Valleys involuntarily.

Hessian Prisoners of War - Where to send them?

From the start of the Saratoga campaign in June 1777 until the October 17 surrender, the Americans had taken 731 British and Hessian prisoners of war.¹³ In the intervals between the major battles there was constant skirmishing and taking of prisoners until a cease-fire was negotiated on October 13.¹⁴ In addition, on October 8 after the Battle of Bemis Heights, Burgoyne moved his camp and abandoned his field hospital leaving behind over 300 wounded soldiers and medical staff.¹⁵ All became American General Gates' prisoners and were then moved to the hospitals in Albany and Schenectady.

It was clear by early October that Burgoyne's surrender was imminent. General Gates was then facing the prospect of dealing with Burgoyne's entire army as prisoners of war on top of the prisoners and deserters already being dealt with. The two jails in Albany were of limited capacity and some American officers were convinced that Albany was still vulnerable to attack from the south by Sir Henry Clinton as evidenced in correspondence. Col. Goose Van Schaick of the First NY Regiment wrote to Gates from Albany on October 17, 1777 concerned about the possibility of a Clinton advance up the Hudson to Albany:

Should the enemy push up the river it will be necessary that the sick, wounded, and prisoners in this town be removed...¹⁶

Even as early as August 12, 1777 officials with the Commissary General of Prisoners of the Continental Army were concerned about the lack of secure locations in New York State to house POWs.¹⁷ There were no good options nearby to keep many prisoners. Gates, it seems, was under pressure to place prisoners wherever he could.

POW Chaos

This early in the war, lack of coordination and cooperation on the part of American officials in charge of POW's may have contributed to the problem of finding places to secure prisoners. George Washington's first Commissary General of Prisoners for the Continental Army was Elias Boudinot, appointed May 1777. Boudinot appointed John Adam (not the president) as his deputy for New York State. Separately, the New York State Committee of Correspondence appointed its own Commissary of Prisoners for New York, Abraham Bancker, whom Boudinot refused to recognize as having any

¹³ David Swain. *Finding Aid on Prisoners of War*. David Library of the American Revolution. Google Books. 2016. p. 222. Loss sustained by the army under the command of Lt. Gen. Burgoyne in different actions in the campaign 1777, before the surrender. Abstract.

¹⁴ Dean Snow. 2016. pp. 200-348.

¹⁵ Burgoyne to Gates. October 8, 1777. Horatio Gates Papers. Series 1, Correspondence. Reel 5. Frame 962.

¹⁶ Van Schaick to Gates. October 17, 1777. Horatio Gates papers. Series 1, Correspondence. Reel 5. Frame 1198.

¹⁷ David Swain. 2016. p. 196. Abstract of letter from John Adam at camp at Peekskill to Boudinot at headquarters.

authority.¹⁸ Meanwhile, Major General Gates, apparently impatient with the Continental Army bureaucracy, appointed Daniel Hale to deal with POW's taken by his Northern Army. By October 1777 Hale was busily finding places to "dispose" of prisoners of war, probably at Gates' direction.

Hessian Prisoners to Schoharie

There must have been a sense of urgency as the surrender of Burgoyne neared, bringing with it thousands more POW's. John Adam, Deputy Commissary General of Prisoners for the Continental Army, having met with Gates in Albany on October 24, wrote to his superior, Elias Boudinot, and said that Daniel Hale had been orchestrating prisoner movements, with at least some directly to Schoharie.

...he (Gates) told me he had appointed one Mr. Haile for that purpose some time ago, and that the British prisoners of war were sent down/who were in health/ to New England, the Hessians to Schoary [sic] up the Mohawk River, amongst the Dutch...¹⁹

In this letter John Adam would be referring to Hessian prisoners taken before Burgoyne's surrender because those men would have been under his jurisdiction as Deputy Commissary General of Prisoners. The rest of Burgoyne's troops who surrendered October 17 were handled totally separately from other POW's and were marched to Massachusetts according to the unique terms negotiated by Gates and Burgoyne.²⁰

Gates' Orders

John Adam's letter to Boudinot is evidence that some Hessians ended up in Schoharie by military orders and not voluntarily. More evidence for this is found in Revolutionary War pension applications of Schoharie Patriots. Private Nicholas Zeh of the Schoharie Valley community of Breakabeen states this in his 1842 affidavit about his 1777 Revolutionary War service in Captain Christian Brown's Company:

A short time previous to the taking of Burgoyne it was reported that Sir Henry Clinton had taken Fort Montgomery, and he (Nicholas Zeh) was ordered out with other militia and marched to Albany to go and oppose Clinton. Stayed at Albany overnight, and next day news came that Clinton had gone back. Before this some Germans belonging to Burgoyne's army had been taken prisoners, and he, the said applicant with the company to which he belonged went to escort eighty-five of them from Albany to Schoharie [sic] and that he formed a part of such escort. That the prisoners were there placed out among the farmers.²¹

If true, this dates the arrival on Schoharie farms of eighty-five Hessian prisoners between the fall of Fort Montgomery on October 6 and the surrender of Burgoyne on October 17, 1777. Other writings have mentioned POW movements to Schoharie and prisoners hired out on farms in the Albany area. Zeh's brother David in his 1833 pension application says he "helped to guard prisoners of the Burgoyne men

¹⁸ Joseph Lee Boyle. *Their Distress is almost intolerable, The Elias Boudinot Letterbook 1777-1778*. Westminster, MD: Heritage Books. 2002. p. 44. Elias Boudinot to Abraham B. Bancker. November 13, 1777.

¹⁹ Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library. "Letter to Elias Boudinot" *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*. 1777. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/bb266ec4-a6f1-320d-e040-e00a180616a6>

²⁰ Articles of Convention Between John Burgoyne and Gates. Horatio Gates Papers. Series 1. Reel 5. Frame 1164.

²¹ Pension application of Nicholas Zee. Transcription of 1842 original. revwarpensions.com/zeenicholas.pdf

from Albany to Schoharie” at about the same time under the command of Capt. Richtmyer.²² Also, German historian and author Max von Eelking, in his 1863 book mentions an unnamed Hessian soldier:

... one of 44 men brought to Albany in October 1777, and at first imprisoned there, then distributed among the farmers...²³

Unfortunately, he does not say where the farmers were or name any of the 44 men. John Adam, the Zeh brothers, and von Eelking could have all been referring to the same prisoners. No list by name of prisoners sent to Schoharie appears to exist.

It is important to note that in early October 1777, local men of the Schoharie and Mohawk Valleys were being called to leave their farms as the militias were ordered out to assist General Gates at Saratoga and in the defense of Albany.²⁴ And many men of the Valleys had also left their farms and families to join the British ranks as Loyalists. At the same time, help was needed to move grain from these fertile valleys to Saratoga to keep the massive American Northern Army supplied with food. Perhaps the arriving Hessian POWs were welcome help on the Schoharie farms, perhaps not. No evidence has so far been uncovered that shows the Schoharie Committee of Safety was consulted or notified before prisoners were sent to them. The question remains as to how comfortable Schoharie residents were with enemy POWs in their midst.

Hessian Prisoners Sent to the Mohawk River Settlements of Tryon County

The Horatio Gates Papers reveal that even several weeks after Burgoyne’s surrender, Gates was still finding places for some Hessian prisoners. Two lists of “German prisoners” are designated as being ordered to Tryon County, which at that time encompassed practically the entire Mohawk Valley. One document indicates a move ordered directly by Gates. One group of 26 prisoners were wounded soldiers left behind at the hospital in Schenectady to recuperate further before being sent to Tryon County on December 5, 1777.²⁵ The other is a list of 17 men held in Albany and ordered by Gates to be sent to the Tryon County Committee on December 23.²⁶ These 43 POWs could perhaps be of the 44 men referred to by von Eelking (described above) as distributed among the farmers.

Prisoners Turned Deserters – The Convention Army

The Saratoga surrender agreement or “Convention” negotiated by Major General Gates and Lt. General Burgoyne was carried out October 17, 1777. According to the agreement, Burgoyne’s remaining men, 2442 British and 2198 German,²⁷ were to be marched as prisoners of war to Boston where they

²² Pension application of David Zeh. Transcription of 1833 original. revwarpensions.com/zehdavid.pdf

²³ Max von Eelking. *German Allied Troops in the American War for Independence*. Translated by J. G. Rosengarten. Albany: Joel Munsell’s Sons. 1893. p. 242. (Book in original German, 1863).

²⁴ Some of the Schoharie-based Albany County 15th Regiment stayed to defend Schoharie.

²⁵ A Return of the German Prisoners in the Hospital at Schenectady Fit to be Discharged and Ordered to Tryon County. Horatio Gates Papers. Series 2. Reel 18. Frame 1192.

²⁶ List of German Prisoners Sent to the Committee of Tryon County by Order of the Hon. Major Gen. Gates. Horatio Gates papers. Series 2. Reel 18. Frame 1212.

²⁷ Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library. "Letter to Elias Boudinot" *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*. 1777. p. 2 <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/bb266ec4-a6f1-320d-e040-e00a180616a6>

would be paroled and sent back to Europe, agreeing not to engage in the Revolutionary conflict again.²⁸ They indeed marched to the Boston area but were not paroled until years later when the war ended simply because the Continental Congress could not stomach the lenient terms of the Convention that Gates had granted to Burgoyne.²⁹ These prisoners, known as the "Convention Army" were held by the Americans for the rest of the war and marched during that time over several states where POW barracks were constructed. Each march and POW facility was another opportunity for escape, parole for work, and desertion. Many Hessians deserted on their first march from Saratoga to Massachusetts in October-November 1777. John Adam, Deputy Commissary of Prisoners wrote to Elias Boudinot from Albany on October 24, having observed some of the Convention Army's journey:

The Hessians I met with at Kinderhook about 20 miles from here on the march down, by all accounts they desert fast.³⁰

There is evidence that some of these Convention Army deserters also found their way to the Schoharie and Mohawk Valleys. Later marches took them to Pennsylvania, where many deserted, worked, and settled.

Summary

Several factors during the latter part of the British Saratoga campaign in September and October 1777 contributed to the movement of some of Burgoyne's Hessian troops to the largely German communities of the Mohawk and Schoharie Valleys. The lack of nearby facilities to secure prisoners of war, the proximity of those valleys to the action at Saratoga, and their largely German population made them attractive locations to expeditiously send Hessian prisoners of war. These POWs were the Hessians who immigrated at least at first, involuntarily. Some others, the deserters, found their way to Tryon County and Schoharie on their own, perhaps with some encouragement and knowledge of their intended destination having been fed to them in American propaganda. Prisoners or deserters, some surely were not welcomed and left the valleys leaving little trace in the local historical record. We know others managed to stay and somehow fit in. We know this because they and their descendants have left and continue to leave their mark on the history of the Mohawk and Schoharie Valleys.

The Author:

Mark Stolzenburg is a member of the Schoharie County Historical Society. As part of the research for this article he has compiled a database of over 550 names of potential Hessian soldiers with ties to our area. If you are interested in Hessian immigration he would like to hear from you at:

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²⁸ Articles of Convention Between John Burgoyne and Gates. Horatio Gates Papers. Series 1. Reel 5. Frame 1164.

²⁹ Thomas Fleming. *Gentleman Johnny's Wandering Army*. American Heritage Magazine. December 1972. Vol. 24 Issue 1. <https://www.americanheritage.com/gentleman-johnnys-wandering-army>.

³⁰ Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library. "Letter to Elias Boudinot" *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*. 1777. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/bb266ec4-a6f1-320d-e040-e00a180616a6>