

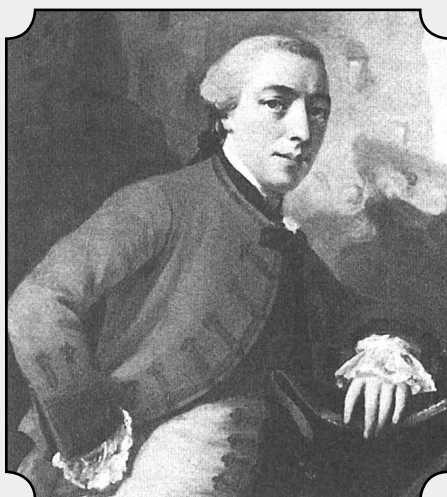
Saratoga, Philadelphia, and the Collapse of Britain's Grand Strategy

Barnet Schecter

At the beginning of July 1777, Lieutenant General Henry Clinton returned to New York as Sir Henry. The previous December, he had done a professional job of seizing Newport, Rhode Island, and establishing a naval base there. Once that mission was accomplished, he went on leave to England, fixated (to the point of obsession by some accounts) on the slights, real and imagined, that Commander in Chief William Howe had inflicted on him. He was determined to resign as soon as he arrived.¹ “The many circumstances which occurred in the course of the last campaign to hurt my feelings made me very desirous of retiring,” Clinton wrote plaintively in his account of the war.² However, the king welcomed him like a conquering hero and, conferring a knighthood on Clinton, asked him to remain in the service. Cajoled by the knighthood and by friends who appealed to his sense of duty, Clinton reluctantly agreed “to recross the Atlantic and resume my former station in Sir William Howe’s army. I was determined, however, to request I might not be forced to retain it any longer than the present campaign.”³

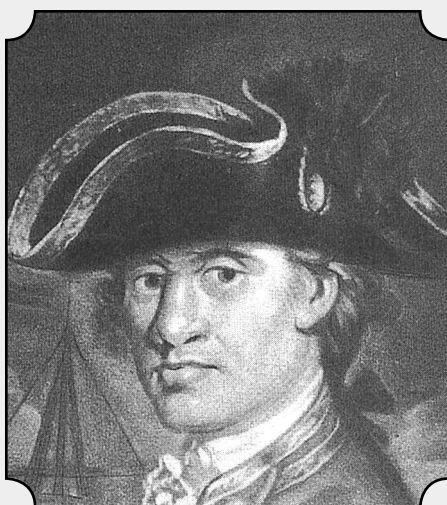
Clinton would have preferred a separate command, and he had lobbied strenuously to replace General Guy Carleton at the head of the army in Canada. However, another general, Sir John Burgoyne, had reached London first and submitted a plan for a march to Albany in 1777 that won him the post. By early May, he was in Quebec; less than two months later, hundreds of British vessels, accompanied by Indian allies in canoes, set out across Lake Champlain toward Ticonderoga.⁴

Back in New York, Clinton was astonished to find that Howe’s army had not struck out from the city even after months of good campaigning weather had gone by. Worse still, Clinton believed the move Howe was finally ready to make was a serious strategic blunder—one that promised to dismantle Britain’s grand strategy of severing the colonies in two along the line of the Hudson River.⁵ Instead of attacking the American forts in the Hudson Highlands and proceeding to Albany for a rendezvous with Burgoyne, Howe planned to set sail in mid-July for an assault on Philadelphia. By threatening the Highlands, Clinton argued later,



NEW YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

General Sir John Burgoyne



NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Admiral Richard Howe

Howe might have forced Washington to defend the vital waterway in the kind of “general action” he feared. Once again, however, Howe preferred the prospect of simply conquering more territory where he believed numerous Tories eagerly awaited him. The news that Burgoyne had captured Fort Ticonderoga during the first week of July merely assured the commander in chief that the northern army could take care of itself without his help.⁶

Howe placed Clinton in command of New York and its environs with some 7,000 men fit for duty, then in early July he loaded the bulk of the army on the fleet of his brother, Admiral Richard Howe, and sailed down to the entrance of the Lower Bay. Since Britain’s great expeditionary force seized New York in 1776, Admiral Howe had drawn steadily mounting criticism from the first lord of the Admiralty, the Earl of Sandwich, for dedicating too many ships to the support of General Howe’s army and not enough to blockading the Eastern Seaboard. The strategy of severing the colonies along the Hudson was designed primarily to strangle New England, and stopping the region’s trade was a vital component of the plan. After a base was established in New York, the Admiralty expected Admiral Howe to shift his emphasis from the army to the embargo. With his squadron of 73 warships, he was to patrol not only the Northeast, but all 3,000 miles of coastline down to Florida.⁷

Originally, the expensive strategy of raising a huge army for a land campaign was chosen in order to win the war quickly, before Britain’s European enemies could intervene. The cheaper but slower approach of using a blockade was to follow if necessary.⁸ After the campaign of 1776 failed to end the war in New York, the British eventually faced not only the demands of an embargo, but the absolute necessity of deploying ships rapidly for naval combat. They soon discovered that the sandbar between Coney Island and Sandy Hook made New York’s harbor the worst possible location for a naval base.⁹ Day after day, the Howes’ expedition to Philadelphia waited for a wind that would take the largest ships across the sandbar. It finally departed on July 23.¹⁰

Reports in early July that Burgoyne was descending on Ticonderoga convinced Washington, whose main army was encamped at Middlebrook, in New Jersey’s Watchung Mountains, that the fleet in New York City had to be destined for Albany and a rendezvous with the northern army. However, still loath to leave Howe a clear overland route to Philadelphia, Washington took his army only as far as Morristown, twenty miles to the north, and dispatched two brigades across the Hudson to reinforce General Israel Putnam, who was in command in the Highlands. The elaborate preparations in New York for the Howes’ voyage suggested that they might be headed for Philadelphia, or even Charleston, but

news on July 12 that Burgoyne had taken Ticonderoga kept Washington poised to intercept a move up the Hudson.¹¹ When he learned that the British fleet had sailed from Sandy Hook, Washington divided his forces to meet each threat, and Clinton reported the disposition of American troops to Howe by messenger.

“...Mr. Washington, who had his spies in New York who gave him the earliest intelligence of all our movements, lost no time in putting his army into immediate motion,” Clinton wrote in his narrative. “The gross of it marched with himself [from Morristown] directly toward the Delaware, after detaching a considerable body of men to join the northern corps under Schuyler; and Putnam was left with about 4000 at Peekskill, where on Rattlesnake Hill they had begun throwing up works for the defense of the Highlands on the east side [of] the Hudson.”¹²

Clinton had begun to feel vulnerable with only 4,000 regular troops and 3,000 Loyalists to defend Manhattan, Kingsbridge, Staten Island, Long Island, and Powles Hook—far fewer men than the Americans had had for the same purpose in 1776. A week after General Howe left New York, he infuriated Clinton again by writing to him with a vague promise of reinforcements as soon as he could spare them, and with the suggestion that, “if you can in the meantime make any diversion in favor of General Burgoyne’s approaching Albany (with security to King’s Bridge), I need not point out the utility of such a measure.”¹³

In Clinton’s view, this contradicted Howe’s parting admonition to stay put and protect New York until “I knew he was landed [near Philadelphia] and Mr. Washington was decidedly gone to meet him.”¹⁴ Clinton therefore assumed the letter was a bureaucratic attempt by Howe to protect himself from the charge of neglecting Burgoyne in the event that the northern army ran out of supplies or was otherwise threatened. Clinton felt Howe had set him up to take any possible blame. Lord George Germain, Secretary of State for the American colonies, bore ultimate responsibility for coordinating strategy, albeit from London. On May 18, he had written Howe authorizing the move against Philadelphia, but admonishing him to return quickly and join forces with Burgoyne. This might have been possible if Howe had gone by land in both directions, an option discouraged by Washington’s vigilance in New Jersey along the road to Philadelphia. By the time Howe received Germain’s letter in August, he was already at sea and wrote back that he would not be able to support the northern army.¹⁵

Burgoyne’s plan did not prescribe that Howe’s forces should come all the way up to Albany to meet him, and until mid-August his dispatches contained no requests for help. However, on August 16, Burgoyne’s march encountered its first severe setback: He allowed a Hessian foraging party of 1,600 men to search for horses and a rebel arms depot near Bennington, to the southeast, but the

detachment was attacked and soundly defeated by an American force before it even reached the Vermont border. The engagement itself cost Burgoyne almost 1,000 men, and most of his 500 Indian allies deserted him in its aftermath. Soon after the battle Burgoyne received Howe's letter informing him of the expedition to Philadelphia.¹⁶

In New York, Clinton had barely enough troops to defend the city and far too few to carry out Howe's discretionary order that he protect Kingsbridge and assist Burgoyne at the same time with an expedition up the Hudson. This became apparent when the ongoing battle for New York flared up again on August 23 and pinned Clinton's forces to the city: He couldn't venture north to make a diversion, because of "the enemy's attacking me in three parts of my command at the same time."¹⁷

As Washington moved south toward Philadelphia, he detached General John Sullivan to Hanover, New Jersey, for an attack on Staten Island. Coordinated strikes at Kingsbridge and the east end of Long Island, timed to distract the British from Sullivan's assault, produced a far more credible show of force than Brigadier General William Heath's fumbled mission the previous January.¹⁸ According to Clinton, Major General William Tryon reported from Kingsbridge "that a considerable body of rebels [had] made their appearance near his foreposts and had cut off part of his advanced picket."¹⁹ This turned out to be a feint, however, and more intense clashes took place at the other two points, where the units of diehard Loyalists enlisted in 1776 bore the brunt of defending New York.

"General [Samuel Holden] Parsons' attack of the post at Setauket on Long Island was, after a brisk cannonade and five hours' perseverance, repulsed by Lieutenant Colonel Hewlett of [Oliver] DeLancey's [Regiment], who commanded there with only 150 provincials," Clinton wrote.²⁰ "But General Sullivan's descent on Staten Island, being made with less alarming preparation and in greater force, might have been attended with the most serious consequences" if the British had not responded as rapidly as they did, Clinton continued.²¹ Sullivan landed in two places at once, overwhelmed the Loyalist units, set fire to their powder magazines, and had started to march toward the town of Richmond before British regulars drove him back and captured some of his men and boats.

The American attacks on New York "were certainly most admirably well combined," Clinton wrote in his narrative. "And, if Mr. Washington had made them with fourteen instead of seven thousand men, they might probably have succeeded" in capturing Staten Island or Long Island, or both.²² In a letter to Commodore William Hotham on August 27, Clinton implied that Washington would have done well to capitalize on Howe's blunder by ignoring his expedition

to Philadelphia—a city that had symbolic but not strategic value. Clinton wrote that “if Washington is not a blockhead, he will leave our chief where he is and exert his whole force against Burgoyne or me.”²³

The Howes’ armada of 260 ships, carrying 13,000 men, spent more than a month at sea before it finally sailed up Chesapeake Bay and landed at the head of the Elk River on August 25. The Delaware River would have been a far shorter route, but General Howe had received exaggerated—albeit convincing—intelligence from a British ship at the mouth of the river warning of American fortifications and sunken obstructions on the route to Philadelphia. Howe also believed that by landing in the Chesapeake he would sever the link between the middle and southern states across the Susquehanna River; once he had seized Philadelphia, he expected to have an easier time clearing the Delaware and securing it as a supply line.²⁴

Detachments from Washington’s army of 8,000 Continentals and 3,000 Pennsylvania militia harassed Howe on his subsequent march to Philadelphia, and the main body of troops tried to stop him completely on September 11 at Brandywine Creek, about halfway to the capital city. As he did in the Battle of Long Island, Washington left one of his flanks open, and Howe seized the opportunity to beat him: 1,000 Americans were wounded, killed, or captured.

Once again, however, Howe did not press his advantage, and Washington’s army slipped from his grasp. As Washington retreated over the next two weeks, he tried to block the path to Philadelphia, but Howe outmaneuvered him and marched into the city on September 26. Congress had already fled to York, Pennsylvania, and Howe had to be content with the city itself as his prize, and with the cheers of the citizens who lined the streets.²⁵

While Howe was marching on Philadelphia, in the north Burgoyne’s situation became critical, exacerbated by Clinton’s hesitancy over diverting troops from New York City, and by the difficulty of communicating from the wilderness. In a letter to Burgoyne on September 11, Clinton had offered to make a diversion at the Americans’ Highland forts in about ten days—a move, Burgoyne hoped, that would draw off some of the American forces that had begun to surround him.²⁶ On September 13 and 14, Burgoyne assembled a bridge of boats across a relatively narrow stretch of the Hudson below Saratoga, marched his army across to the west side of the river, and headed south toward Albany. However, General Horatio Gates, who had replaced Philip Schuyler at the head of the northern army in mid-August, stood directly in Burgoyne’s path with 7,000 troops. On September 19, the armies clashed in the first of two battles at Freeman’s Farm, just north of the American position. Burgoyne, who started the engagement with fewer than

5,000 troops, lost another 600 men.²⁷

Gates, by contrast, had received an influx of volunteers eager to repel the British invasion, and his ranks quickly swelled to 11,000 men. One catalyst for these enlistments was the old feud between New York and New England. The appointment of Gates over Schuyler, his New York rival, elicited an enthusiastic response from the northernmost states.²⁸ Even more powerful was the propaganda surrounding the murder of Jane McCrea, a 23-year-old American woman who had been scalped by some of Burgoyne's Indian scouts on her way to marry her fiancé at the end of July. A letter of protest from Gates to Burgoyne found its way into every newspaper in the region, and McCrea was enshrined as a martyr of the Revolution. The fact that McCrea's fiancé was a Loyalist serving under the British convinced Americans that Burgoyne could not guarantee their safety if they heeded his calls to join him or supply his army, and they fled behind the American lines.²⁹

Clinton's promised attack on the Highlands was supposed to take place on or about September 21, the same day that Burgoyne received Clinton's encouraging letter. His supplies and salted provisions dangerously low, and his line of communications with Canada threatened, Burgoyne decided to let his troops recuperate instead of taking the offensive, hoping that Clinton's diversion might improve the situation. Instead, it grew steadily worse. Clinton was afraid to leave his base in New York exposed, so his offer to move up the Hudson was contingent on the arrival of reinforcements from England, which did not reach the city until September 24. Clinton also awaited a response from Burgoyne, which finally arrived on the 29th, because he hoped such a formal request for help would in some measure relieve him of responsibility for leaving New York City and putting it at greater risk. On October 3, Clinton belatedly sailed up the Hudson with 3,000 men.³⁰

As Clinton prepared to seize the Highland forts, he received a new letter from Burgoyne in which he tried to shift responsibility back to Clinton. Burgoyne enjoyed the power and prestige of an independent command in the north, but now that he was stuck, he suddenly wanted Clinton, who was more than 100 miles away and had no part in his campaign, to issue orders and take responsibility for whether he attacked "the enemy in his front or retreated across the lakes while they were clear of ice," Clinton wrote.³¹

The interplay of cautious and self-serving personalities within the British command structure—the bureaucratic game of enhancing and protecting reputations while avoiding responsibility for the fallout from military decisions—had come full circle. Howe had shifted the burden of helping the northern army to

Clinton, as did Burgoyne in his turn, stipulating that if he did not hear from Clinton by October 12, he would retreat to Canada by way of the lakes.³²

Clinton did an exemplary job of capturing the forts in the Highlands and clearing the river of American ships and obstructions by October 6. When Clinton landed 1,000 men on the east bank of the Hudson, General Putnam thought his position at Peekskill was under attack and retreated northward in search of support. He commanded fewer than 1,500 troops at this point, having sent reinforcements both to Gates in the north and to Washington. Clinton's landing was a feint, however, and he deployed most of his force on the west side of the Hudson to seize Fort Clinton (named for the Governor of New York State) and Fort Montgomery, where he overwhelmed the 700 American defenders. Clinton also took a third fort, Constitution, further upriver.³³

"However, the small number of men which would remain to me for further operations, after garrisoning the extensive posts I had taken—which I was obliged either to defend or dismantle—and securing my communications with New York, precluded every idea for the present of penetrating to Albany..." General Clinton wrote after the war in defense of his actions.³⁴ He had not heard from Howe for more than a month and feared that Washington might send a strong detachment, or even arrive with his whole army, to strike below him on the Hudson and cut him off from the city.

Abandoned, outnumbered, and trapped, Burgoyne despaired of hearing from Clinton and recklessly launched an attack against the fortified American position on October 7. In the Battle of Bemis Heights, the British were driven back to Freeman's Farm, lost another 600 men, and with them the last remnants of their morale. Benedict Arnold, who had commanded and fought brilliantly in the first battle at Freeman's Farm, was a hero of the second engagement as well.³⁵

As Burgoyne's shattered army fled north toward Saratoga, Clinton dismantled one of the three forts he had captured so he could hold the Highlands with fewer men, and prepared to drop back down to New York. However, when he received word that 1,000 reinforcements could be spared from Rhode Island, he decided to make another effort to help Burgoyne. Returning quickly to the city, he ordered "six months' provisions" for Burgoyne's "five thousand men to be directly put on board vessels of proper draft for running up river to Albany." He then dispatched 1,700 men under Major General John Vaughan up the Hudson in galleys "giving him orders to feel his way to General Burgoyne and do his utmost to assist his operations, or even join him if required."³⁶

Vaughan reached Kingston on October 15 and burned it to the ground. He then proceeded as far as Livingston Manor, only forty-five miles south of Albany,

at which point his pilots mutinied and American forces under Putnam, reinforced at this point by Parsons, blocked his advance. The final blow to Clinton's rescue effort, however, came from Howe himself. Vaughan had to be recalled and the Highlands abandoned completely on October 26, after the commander in chief ordered Clinton to send him additional troops on the Delaware and deploy his remaining forces to defend New York City.³⁷

Howe called for reinforcements because Washington had proved to be far more aggressive than he expected. On October 4, while Clinton was in the process of occupying the Highland forts, Washington attacked the British encampments at Germantown, five miles north of Philadelphia. General Nathanael Greene's units briefly put the redcoats to flight, but the morning fog and the overly complex battle plan led to a lack of coordination between the four American columns. American casualties were high, but the troops had savored the sight of British regulars in full retreat. Another positive outcome was the replacement of an incompetent American general who had been drunk during the battle by the Marquis de Lafayette, a young Frenchman who had recently arrived in America to support the Revolution.

The attack at Germantown put Howe on the alert and forced him to consolidate his troops within a more defensible perimeter just north of Philadelphia. At the same time he had to contend with Washington's attempt to cut off his line of supply from the south. By occupying two forts several miles below the city—one on an island in the Delaware and the other across from it on the New Jersey shore—Washington was able to interdict all river traffic coming up from the Atlantic. By also controlling the roads in and out of Philadelphia, Washington had effectively besieged the city. Howe began attacking the forts in mid-October, but the Americans held them tenaciously.³⁸

Howe's demand for reinforcements from New York ended Clinton's attempt to help Burgoyne, but that effort was already too late to be of any use. On October 17, Burgoyne surrendered his entire force to Gates at Saratoga. In the end, the only effect of Clinton's diversion in the Highlands was to make Gates rush somewhat during the negotiations that set the terms of Burgoyne's capitulation. Eager to close the deal quickly when he heard of Clinton's and Vaughan's forays up the Hudson, Gates accepted Burgoyne's demands for a "convention" instead of his surrender.³⁹ This arrangement was supposed to allow the 5,000 captives to return to England on the condition that they not participate further in the current war. However, since their release would allow Britain to use them elsewhere around the globe, thereby freeing up an equal number of troops to fight in America, Congress eventually seized on a pretext to abrogate the convention. Burgoyne and his top

aides returned to England, but the soldiers of the “convention army” spent the rest of the war as prisoners in Virginia.

News of Burgoyne’s surrender at Saratoga—written on a piece of paper and baked into a large loaf of bread—was smuggled to American prisoners in New York City before most of the town had heard. When the entire prison on the Commons “[r]esounded with three Cheers,” the jailer raced the second floor to see what had happened. He instantly branded the report a “Damned Rebel lie,” but when the news became official that the rebels had their hands on so many British soldiers, the treatment of the American prisoners in New York improved considerably.⁴⁰

Even after the capture of the northern army, the British grand strategy would still have succeeded, Clinton argued later, if he had simply been allowed to keep enough men to preserve his hold on the Hudson Highlands. When Howe depleted the garrison in New York to bolster his campaign in Philadelphia, he also prevented Clinton from replenishing it by countermanding the transfer of the 1,000 troops from Rhode Island. Thus, Howe not only doomed the attempt to help Burgoyne, Clinton wrote, but also threw away Britain’s last real chance to win the war.

Clinton had hoped that as soon as Howe “found I had opened the important door of the Hudson, he would have strained to every nerve to keep it so and prevent the rebels from ever shutting it again—even though he had been obliged to place the back of his whole army against it. And I hope I shall be pardoned if I presume to suggest that, had this been done, it would have most probably finished the war. And Sir William’s southern move [to Philadelphia], instead of being censured, would perhaps have been extolled as one of the operative parts of a judicious and well combined plan, and even the loss of General Burgoyne’s army looked upon as a necessary sacrifice, as having both essentially contributed to draw off the two grand armies of the enemy to a distance from that very strong and important hold [the Hudson Highlands], which might possibly have been placed beyond our reach had either remained in its neighborhood.”⁴¹

Proud of his bold stroke against the Highland forts, and angry that Howe had not come back to support him in consolidating the British hold on the river, Clinton had relinquished the insight that he seemed to grasp fully during the campaign of 1776: that the only way to win the war was to capture or destroy Washington’s army, not to seize a strategic waterway or piece of ground. This maxim applied to both sides in the conflict: Burgoyne’s army, in fact, was not expendable under any circumstances.

In the world of international politics, the surrender at Saratoga could not simply be dismissed as a necessary cost of war. The American victory reverberated across the Atlantic, and by early December, the news had reached Paris. Two months later, encouraged by the former colonies' improved prospects, France formally recognized American independence and signed a commercial treaty with the United States. After the French declared war on Britain, Spain, and the Netherlands eventually followed suit. The rebellion of thirteen colonies rapidly became a global conflict, which strained Britain's resources and ultimately brought down the ministry, ushering the opposition into power. The abandonment of Burgoyne had led to his surrender at Saratoga, which proved to be the great turning point of the American Revolution, and it was the misguided strategy of settling comfortably into America's two largest cities that brought it on. When word reached Benjamin Franklin in Paris that Howe had captured Philadelphia, he famously and presciently replied: "No, Philadelphia has captured Howe!"⁴²

Notes

1. Sir Henry Clinton, *The American Rebellion: Sir Henry Clinton's Narrative of His Campaigns, 1775-1782, with an Appendix of Original Documents*, William B. Willcox, ed. (New Haven: Yale University, 1954). Clinton's obsession with his grievances: xxiv-xx; Christopher Ward, *The War of the Revolution*, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 2:514.
2. Clinton, 61.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Symonds, Craig L. and William J. Clipson, *A Battlefield Atlas of the American Revolution* (Baltimore: Nautical and Aviation Publishing Company of America, 1999), 39.
5. Clinton, xxv, 61-62.
6. *Ibid.*; Ira Gruber, *The Howe Brothers and the American Revolution* (New York: Atheneum, 1972), 230-33.
7. Howe and the Admiralty; fleet in disrepair: Gruber, *Howe Brothers*, 136-142, 221, 273-74.
8. William B. Willcox, *Portrait of a General: Sir Henry Clinton in the War for Independence* (New York: Knopf, 1964), 42.
9. John A. Tilley, *The British Navy and the American Revolution* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1987), 84.
10. Delays at Sandy Hook: I.N. Phelps Stokes, *The Iconography of Manhattan Island, 1498-1909: Compiled from Original Sources and Illustrated by Photo-Intaglio Reproductions of Important Maps, Plans, Views and Documents in Public and Private Collections*, 6 vols. (Union, NJ: Lawbook Exchange, 1998), 5:1054; Gruber, 234.
11. Ward, 1:328-31.
12. Clinton, 66.
13. Quoted in Clinton, 66.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Howe's abandonment of Burgoyne and Germain's role: *ibid.*, 67.
16. Details of battle near Bennington: Symonds, 45.

17. Clinton, 67.
18. Douglas Southall Freeman, *George Washington: A Biography*, 7 vols. (New York: Scribner's, 1948-1954), 5: 464.
19. Clinton, 67.
20. *Ibid.*, 68, footnote 20.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*, 68.
23. *Ibid.*, 69, footnote 22.
24. Ward, 1:331-33.
25. Battle of Brandywine, British capture of Philadelphia: Symonds, 53, 55.
26. Clinton, 70-72.
27. Symonds, 47.
28. Influx of volunteers for Gates: Ward, 2:498, 524; Symonds, 47.
29. American reaction to McCrea incident: Ward, 2:496-98; Symonds, 47.
30. Clinton, 70, footnote 26; 72. Symonds, 49.
31. Burgoyne's sudden desire for help: Clinton, 73, 74, 75 (footnote 35), 82-83; quote on 73.
32. *Ibid.*, 73-74.
33. Symonds, 49.
34. The quote is in Clinton, 79. Clinton's fear of Washington cutting him off from the city: *ibid.*, xxvi-xxviii; 79 (footnote 43).
35. Arnold's role in the battles was heroic, but because of friction between him and Gates, his behavior was also the subject of controversy. See Boatner, 27, 77-78.
36. Clinton, 79-80.
37. Howe, in Philadelphia, drew men from New York: Clinton, 80-81.
38. Details of Germantown and siege of Philadelphia: Symonds, 57, 59.
39. Ward, 2:537.
40. Quoted in Thomas Jefferson Wertebaker, *Father Knickerbocker Rebels* (New York: Scribner's, 1948), 139.
41. Clinton, 81-82.
42. Mark Boatner, *Encyclopedia of the American Revolution* (New York: David McKay, 1974), 865.