

The Knox Trail - History



The end of the campaign season of 1775 found the American Army under General Washington in an ambiguous situation. Early attempts to attack the British in Canada had met with defeat and the enemy remained firmly entrenched in Boston, where they had been since their victory in the Battle of Bunker Hill.

Washington knew that he could easily occupy the heights overlooking Boston, which normally would have provided a significant tactical advantage, but he lacked the artillery needed to dislodge the British from the city. Meanwhile, far to the northwest on Lake Champlain, the forts at Crown Point and Ticonderoga were full of the very pieces of artillery Washington needed. And these forts, now under American control, were in no immediate threat from the British that winter.

In a decisive stroke, as winter set in, Washington dispatched Henry Knox, a young Boston bookseller, to organize the transport of fifty-nine of these captured artillery pieces from the forts on Lake Champlain to the heights overlooking Boston, where, it was hoped, they would turn the tide against the British in the city below.

Knox arrived at Fort Ticonderoga on the evening of **December 5, 1775** accompanied by his nineteen-year-old brother William and a servant, Miller. Early the next day, assisted by the garrison of Fort Ticonderoga, he began to move the guns.

It seems probable that Major General Philip Schuyler, Commander of the Northern Department, who had been at Ticonderoga the previous week, had already selected the guns to be sent to Washington. They apparently included forty-three heavy brass and iron cannons, six cohorns, eight mortars, and two howitzers. These were dismounted from their old French and Indian War carriages, which were found to be rotted and weak, removed from the fort walls and assembled in the *Place d'Arms*.

Knox tackled the heaviest and most cumbersome pieces first. Fortunately an appropriate vessel, a gondola or gundalow, was tied up at the King's dock just below the fort and it was to this landing that he moved the cannon by ox cart.

Knox's diary entry for **December 6th** reads: *Employ'd in getting the cannon from the fort on board a Gundaloe in order to get them to the bridge.* Once loaded the gundalow was sailed or rowed around the peninsula of Ticonderoga and into the River LaChute, then about a half-mile up to the bridge that carried the Portage Road across the river just below the lower falls. This

was the head of navigation from Lake Champlain and here the cannon were unloaded off the gundalow while it returned for another load.

It is here, in the vicinity of the bridge, where the guns were transferred to ox carts to be sent down the Portage Road to the north end of Lake George.

Knox's diary entry for **December 7th** reads: *Employ'd in getting the cannon from the bridge to the landing at Lake George.* While Knox was supervising the overland movement of the cannon down the Portage Road to the Lake George Landing, the gundalow was employed moving the sixteen smaller pieces from Fort Ticonderoga to the bridge, where they were ready the next day. Knox's diary entry for **December 8th** reads simply: *Ditto the mortars.*

At the Lake George Landing, a little flotilla was assembled to transport the guns down the lake. The heaviest pieces were put aboard a scow, a double ended, flat bottom, barge-like vessel used to transport bulk cargo. In addition to the scow, Knox had at his disposal a pirogue and a batteau.

Knox's diary entry for **December 9th** reads:

Employ'd in loading the scow, Pettyaugre and a battoe. At 3 O'Clock in the afternoon set sail to go down the lake in the Pettyaugre, the Scow coming after us run aground we being about a mile ahead with a fair wind to go down but unfair to help the Scow.the wind dying away we with the utmost difficulty reach'd Sabbath day Point about 9 O'Clock in the evening -- went ashore & warm'd ourselves by an exceeding good fire in an hut made by some civil indians who were with their Ladies abed - they gave us some Vension, roasted after their manner which was very relishing.

It is here, at Sabbath Day Point, that Knox received report of bad news: *the scow had run on a sunken rock but not in such a manner as to be irretrievable that they had broken all the ropes which they had in endeavoring to move her off - but was ineffectual that they had sent up to the Fort for more ropes, & hands & intended in the morning to make another trial.*

But the batteau would push on, as Knox records:

the crew of the Battoe after having refresh'd themselves told me as they were not very deeply loaded that they intend'd to push for Fort George [at the south end of the lake] Accordingly I jump'd into the Boat & ordered my man to bring my baggage & we would go with them - accordingly we set out it being eleven O'Clock with a slight breeze ahead the men rowed briskly but we had not been out above an hour when the wind sprang up very fresh & directly against us - the men after rowing exceedingly hard for about four hours seem'd desirous of going ashore to make a fire to warm themselves & I knowing them to be very exceedingly weary.

Frustrated in the attempt to reach the south end of the lake, Knox and his crew spent the night of **December 10th** at Bolton Landing . The Knox diary records: *we warmed ourselves sufficiently and took a comfortable nap - laying with our backs to the fire...* The next morning, they started again: *- about half an hour before day break that is about a quarter after rising we set out and in six hours & a quarter of excessive hard pushing against a fresh breeze we reach'd Fort George.*

It was here, at the south end of the lake where Lake George Village stands today, that Henry Knox arrived a little after mid-day, **December 11th**. It was necessary that the boat passage down Lake George be completed before its surface froze. So in that regard, Knox probably hoped for the continuation of the mild weather. But once transferred to land carriage, snow would be necessary if he was to move the guns by sled. And there must be solid ice on the Hudson River; solid enough to take the 1,800 lbs. weight of his largest gun, the twenty-four pounder.

Now safely at Fort George, Knox immediately turned his attention to the forward movement of the guns. His diary continues: *on Monday the 11th I sent an express to Squire Palmer of Stillwater to prepare a number of Sleds & oxen to drag the cannon. to be ready by the first snow.*

Fort George December 12, 1775

Capt. Palmer, Sir.

I must beg that you would purchase or get made immediately 40 good strong sleds that will each be able to carry a long cannon clear from dragging on the ground and which will weigh 5400 pounds each & likewise that you would procure oxen or horses as you shall judge most proper to drag them. I think that you may be able to purchase sleds that are already made which by strengthening might Do - the sleds that they are first put upon are to go to camp near Boston - the Cattle as far as Albany or Kinderhook where we must get fresh ones.

Henry Knox

Knox intended to gather the guns at Fort George ready to be forwarded as soon as snow and sleds arrived. Having made provision for the sleds, he then turned his attention back up the lake where things were not going well at all. By December 13th the vessels still had not arrived from Ticonderoga. He wrote in his diary:

...on the 13th being very uneasy at not hearing of our little fleet we dispatch'd an Express boat - about 2 O'clock but in the afternoon we Receiv'd advice that on the morning of the 10th the Scow had gotten off the rock on which she had run & with great difficulty had reach'd Sabbath day Point -- & on the same night the wind being exceeding high the sea had beat in her in such a manner that she sunk.

In spite of these delays, Knox's account of expenses shows that he paid off the boatmen on **December 15th and 16th**, ten days after his arrival at Fort Ticonderoga. From this we may conclude that all the guns had arrived safely at Fort George by then. And they had arrived in the nick of time, for the lake had already started to freeze. But with no snow cover, progress south was stalled.

Fort George Dec 16 1775

Rec'd of Henry Knox Twenty Six Dollars which capt. John Johnson paid to different Carters for the use of their Cattle in dragging Cannon from the fort of Ticonderoga to the North landing of Lake George.

Wm Brown Jun Lieut.

Knox spent the **16th** getting the guns into Fort George and the 17th catching up on his correspondence. His note to General Philip Schuyler in Albany reveals the circumstances at this point in the expedition and the route he intended to follow:

Sir We have been so fortunate as to get the mortars and cannon safely over the lake to this place - I arrang'd with Capt. Palmer of Stillwater to get proper conveyances for them from here. we are apprehensive of a difficulty. at Albany for want of a proper scow.

I am not well enough acquainted with the road after we cross at the half moon to know whether it be practicable to keep on the east side of the river entirely to Kinderhook -

I expect Capt. Palmer up with the teams on Tuesday or Wednesday and I expect. to move as far as Saratoga if the sledding continues as at present - from thence we must wait for snow.

I wrote to Mr. Livingston at Albany for 500 fathoms 3 inch rope to fasten the cannon to the sleds - It has not yet arrived.

Fort George Dec. 17, 1775 [to General Washington]

I have had made forty two exceedingly strong sleds & have provided eighty yoke of oxen to drag them as far as Springfield where I shall get fresh cattle to carry them to camp - the rout will be from here to Kinderhook from whence into Great Barrington Massachusetts Bay & down to Springfield.

There will scarcely be any possibility of carrying them from here to Albany or Kinderhook but on sleds the roads being very gullied - at present the sledding is tolerable to Saratoga about 26 miles; beyond that there is none - I have sent for sleds & teams to come here & expect to begin move them to Saratoga on Wednesday or Thursday next trusting that between this & then we shall have a fine fall of snow which will enable us to proceed further & make the carriage easy - If that should be the case I hope in 16 or 17 days to be able to present your Excellency a noble train of artillery the inventory of which I have inclosed.

Henry Knox's diary is the major source we have for day-to-day events associated with the expedition. Unfortunately there is a gap in that manuscript from **December 18th to December 23rd**. One may assume that during this period Knox continued to search for sleds and teams to drag the cannon south from Lake George and to wait for sufficient snow to make the roads passable for those sleds.

From fragments in the journal we know that Knox headed off on his own southward toward Albany on **December 24th**. He first went on foot to Fort Miller: *where Judge Dewer procur'd me a sleigh to go to Stillwater...*, and then crossed the river by ferry to the west side and arrived at Saratoga (Schuylerville) where he stopped and had dinner: *We dined & set off about three OClock it still snowing exceeding fast... after the utmost efforts (of the) horses we reach'd Ensign's tavern 8 miles beyond Saratoga - we lodg'd.*

The morning of **December 25th**, Knox woke to find two feet of new snow on the ground. While he may have been heartened by this turn of weather, it did nothing to help him on his own lonely way south. He headed on to Stillwater where he got another sleigh to take him to Albany, noting

in his diary: . *the roads not being broken prevented our getting farther than New City, about 9 miles above Albany - where we lodg'd.*

New City is the settlement now known as Lansingburg, on the east side of the Hudson. The road to Albany at that time would have had him cross the Hudson to the east side at Lansing's Ferry at Half Moon, pass through Lansingburg to what is now Troy, and than pass back to the west side of the Hudson at Schuyler Flatts to reach Albany.

Knox's diary for **December 26th** describes problems he has with the completion of his journey, apparently due to the depth of the new snow and the lack of tracks in the roads to follow:

In the morning we set out & only got about 2 miles when our horses tir'd and refus'd to go any farther. I was then obliged to undertake a fatiguing march of about 4 miles in snow three feet deep thro' the woods there being no beaten path. I got to Squire Fisher's who politely gave me a fine breakfast & provided me with horses which crossed me as far as Col. Schuylers where I got a sleigh to carry me to Albany where I reach'd about (two). I had almost perish'd with the cold.

Once in Albany, he immediately met with General Schuyler to begin negotiations for the resources to continue the transport of the cannon. During **December 27th, 28th and 29th** Knox and Schuyler undertook to locate and send northward the teams and sleds needed to move the cannon over the now snow-coated roads. *General Schuyler ... sent out his wagon master & other people to all parts of the country to immediately send up their slays with horses suitable... allowing them 12 sh per day for each pair of horses & oxen per Ton for 62 miles.*

Apparently from **December 30, 1775 to January 1, 1776** sleds and teams were arriving at Fort George (Lake George) and were being loaded as they arrived and sent southward toward Albany. But while the snow covered roads had solved Knox's weather problems for transport south at least to Lansing's Ferry, the lack of continuing cold had prevented the river from freezing deeply enough to allow the sleds to cross on the ice.

January 2nd and 3rd, as the guns moved slowly down the road from Lake George, Knox waited in Albany for colder weather and even had his men try to thicken the ice by pouring buckets of river water over the surface to freeze.

On January 4th the first of the guns crossed the river at Lansing's Ferry and arrived in Albany. Knox records this arrival: *Thursday the 4th arriv'd a brass 24 pounder & a small Mortar.*

In a letter to General Washington, on **January 5, 1776**, Knox describes his situation: *Snow detain'd us some days & now a cruel thaw hinders from crossing Hudson River which we are oblig'd to do four times from lake George to this Town.* But in spite of these frustrations, Knox reports; *We got over 4 more... 18 pounders...*

Knox hoped that once the thickening ice permits the rest of the guns to get into Albany there will be enough snow on the roads to get them easily to Springfield, and predicts arrival there in *.eight or nine days after the first severe freeze..*

But in his diary he notes a problem: *In the afternoon much alarm'd by hearing that one of the heaviest cannon had fallen into the river at half moon ferry...* The ice is too thin, so he issues orders to send the remainder of the sleds to a safer crossing: *At Sloss's as the ice was so much stronger there than at half moon, the usual place of crossing...* This new crossing is on the Mohawk west of the Hudson, later known as Claus's Ferry, near Crescent.

On **January 7th** Knox loses another cannon through the ice, as he attempts to move them eastward over the Hudson to Rensselaer: *The cannon which the night before last came over at Sloss's Ferry we attempted to get over the ferry here, which we effected excepting the last which fell into the River notwithstanding the precautions we took.*

On **January 8th** Knox notes that the lost gun was recovered and that most of the sleds got over the ice on the Hudson. *Went on the ice about 8 O'Clock in the morning & proceeded so carefully that before night we got over twenty three sleds & were so lucky as to get the Cannon out of the River, owing to the assistance the good people of the City of Albany gave...*

On the morning of **January 9th**, having seen his train of sleds safely on their way eastward from Albany, Knox rides on ahead: *I set out from thence about twelve O'Clock & went as far as Claverack about 9 miles beyond Kinderhook.*

After this date, entries in Knox's diary, the major source of detail for the expedition, become very sparse, and it is nearly impossible to maintain a daily itinerary for either Knox himself, or for the train of sleds that followed him.

Early historians determined that the route through "Claverack" was due south on the Post Road (Route 9H) to the present village of Claverack, and the east on Route 23 into Massachusetts. That is the route marked by the Knox Trail monuments erected in 1927. But research done in the early 1970s suggested a more southeasterly route from Kinderhook toward the Massachusetts border above North Egremont and then on to Great Barrington.

The relocation in 1975 of several of the 1927 monuments in Columbia County from their original locations to new locations reflected this alternative route. While there appears to be no ironclad proof of the route taken east of the Hudson River, there is sufficient evidence to support this revised path. Thus one may consider the markers in their present locations as indicating the last leg of the expedition inside New York State.

The best summary of this evidence may be found in a publication by William L. Bowne, titled **Ye Cohorn Caravan** (NaPaul Publishers, Schuylerville, 1975). Copies may be found in the New York State Library.

The remainder of the journey is poorly documented, and barely mentioned at all in Knox's diary. The locations of the Massachusetts monuments indicate a path that many feel is reasonable for the year in which the journey was undertaken.

The route followed modern Route 23 east out of Great Barrington until it intersected Route 20 west of Westfield, then along Route 20 through Springfield, Wilbraham, Palmer and onto Route

9 at Warren, then along Route 9 to Brookfield, Spencer, Leicester, and Worcester. Then the path went back onto Route 20 to Shrewsbury, through Northborough, Marlborough and Southborough. From there it passed Framingham, Wayland, Weston, Waltham, and Watertown, finally entering Cambridge on **January 24th, 1776**.

Details on this leg of the journey can be found in: Schruth, Susan E., "The Knox Trail Reenactment, 1976," *The Noble Train of Artillery, 200 Years ago and Today*, (Boston, MA: Commonwealth of Massachusetts Bicentennial Commission, March 1976).

On the second week of **March, 1776**, four months before the Declaration of Independence was signed, Washington stood in position to bombard the British in Boston from Dorchester Heights, using the array of heavy guns General Knox had laboriously dragged from Lake Champlain. Lord William Howe recognized that only the evacuation of his army could save it, and on **March 18th** the victorious American army marched into the deserted city.

The fifty-six monuments of the Knox Trail commemorate an epic journey of about 56 days from Fort Ticonderoga to Boston. It was by every measure a monumental undertaking, and truly heroic.

But it was not heroic so much because of the labor involved or the obstacles to be overcome. Every farmer in the northeast in that day encountered comparable labor every time he cleared boulders from his land with a team and sled or tried to move goods overland on snowy roads and across ice covered rivers.

What was heroic in this expedition was that it was a stroke of inspiration, coupled with good timing, skilled logistics and luck. And by this stroke, the British Army was forced to relinquish its hold on one of the great American cities. In a time when proofs of potential victory were precious few, this single event did more than most to energize and inspire the Revolution.

And to follow this trail today - going from marker to marker - one can appreciate the heritage of this event in the places and landscapes where it was created, and by so doing, can still feel this inspiration over two-hundred years later.