The Noble Train Over 200 Years Later: The Henry Knox Cannon Trail in Public History

Ever drive down the some of the Hudson Valley's main roads and notice a particularly mundane looking headstone with a bronze relief on it? You've likely never even glanced twice at this historical monument despite the numerous times I'm sure you've all seen it. I know it's happened to me. A Henry Knox sesquicentennial (that's 150 years) trail has existed for almost one hundred years only a half mile from the house I grew up in, yet I had no idea it was there until I was seventy miles away from it, here at the Hudson River Valley Institute researching this trail via mapping services. I think it's safe to say that a majority of individuals interpret – or fail to interpret – public and local history just as I have in the past 21 years. We appreciate it when told a story, but everyday life tends to get in the way of going out and appreciating the fact that a famous General who was General George Washington's right hand man could have stumbled through our backyards in the middle of a deadly blizzard some two hundred and forty year ago.

Sure, a certain amount of imagination is required to achieve some level of appreciation for what Henry Knox did in my community in 1775, but it takes more awareness of the event's overarching significance to truly provide impactful emotion when interpreting the events of history. This interpretation can come in many forms. Henry Knox specifically is the subject of dozens of books, hundreds of articles, and countless other mentions. To scholars, students of history, and amateur historians, these sources are familiar and the stories they tell transcend history as anecdotal examples of early American greatness in times of great necessity. Individuals such as Knox embody what many Americans today think of when remembering incredible times during the Revolutionary War.

Ultimately however, these memories need to be shored up with traditional academic research and research that is conducted and interpreted by public historians or local amateur historians. Typically, this plethora of investigation and information provides abundant evidence to remember incredible individuals. However in the case of Henry Knox, something interesting occurred. Instead of complimenting each other, classical historical research published in the 19th and 20th century exist as foils to one another. Assertions by authors such as Drake, Sargent, and Callahan are fervently opposed and contested by local historians such as William Browne, a Schenectady New York native and US Navy veteran, and Joe Elliott, a postmaster in North Egremont Massachusetts (a stop along the Henry Knox Cannon Trail) who in 1970 successfully argued against an entire school of classical Knox research about the accuracy of the Henry Knox Trail Markers. How Henry Knox and his infamous Noble Train of Artillery is remembered in history – both public and academic – provides a tale almost as alluring as that of the trail itself. The passionate arguments and conflicting stories provide interesting examples about romanticizing history. In tracing how the Henry Knox Cannon Trail is remembered, my hope is paint a much clearer picture about what is known to be undisputed truth, what is contested, and what needs to be considered by historians to be as important as the Noble Train itself.

In many ways Henry Knox began his journey which is remembered today as the Noble Train of Artillery long before he left Dorchester Heights surrounding Boston in the fall of 1775. Knox's illustrious career with the Continental Army was never a guarantee. He was not born into aristocracy, nor did he maintain any large fortune. That which drove him towards the cause for revolution was self-discovered. As a first generation American in Boston, Knox struggled through poverty as a child. He took up his first job at the age of nine to contribute to family

income and incrementally he began absorbing the knowledge from the bounded books which surrounded him.[1]

Although alone unimpressive, Knox's childhood and adolescence contributed in creating a keen wit and tendency to be placed near incredibly important events. Knox saw with his own eyes the destruction which occurred during the Boston massacre. If anything, witnessing tyranny first hand must have been a great impetus for Knox to embrace the cause for Revolution. Still, his disposition or views cannot be expressed as militant. Before the outbreak of the Revolution, Knox operated a bookstore close to where today stands Boston City Hall. He also drilled in a local artillery militia known as "The Train." There he developed an understanding for discipline, precision, and more than anything – the importance of perfecting the knowledge of military science.[2] The bookstore, called London Booksellers, became a popular spot for officers of the British Army to congregate. During this time Knox became further infatuated with Artillery and its applications in combat. He studied text after text outlining Artillery and military science. This comprised his formal military training.

During this time he also met his future wife Lucy Flucker. After a short time they fell very much in love with each other and wed. Flucker's family had close ties with the British Army, and it just so happened that Knox's in-laws had the utmost protection of the crown.[3] Immediately Knox was urged to declare loyalty to the king and reap the economic and political benefits. Unwilling to do such a thing, Knox and Flucker slipped away from their loyalist

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[1] William L. Browne, *Ye Cohorn Caravan: The Knox Expedition in the Winter of 1775-76,* (Schuylerville NY:NaPaul Publishers, 1975) 2.
[2] Mark Puls, *Henry Knox: Visionary General of the American Revolution* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008) 6
[3] Browne, *Ye Cohorn Caravan,* 9

influence and made their way to patriot strongholds outside of Boston, where the two were clearly postured to become much more impactful in the Revolution.

At this point in their marriage, the couple splits for what is the first time of many. Knox sends his wife Lucy to Worchester, a small city further east of Boston and further away from the danger of the city under siege. Still a civilian, Knox begins to demonstrate that he is interested in being a part of this Revolution. His initial military involvement with the revolution was self-motivated and at first insignificant. Lacking a military commission, Knox volunteered his time and self-taught knowledge as a civilian in charge of a section of breastworks in Roxbury, where the newly formed Continental Army was dug-in. While his restructuring of the fortification eventually gained the attention of General Washington and other general officers in the Continental Army, it certainly did not make him into the man we remember his as today.[4] Instead, Knox's impression on General Horatio Gates, General Charles Lee and other top Continental brass was a result of years of self-development, exposure to key revolutionary events, and consistent and restrained initiative.

This moment can be used as a marker from which Knox began his meteoric rise. Occurring in the spring of 1775, it signifies the point when Knox begins to advocate heavily on his brother and his own behalf as to acquiring a military commission. He refrained from using his commission in "The Train" to advocate on his behalf. He would no longer settle for a lower rank and what he perceived as less influence.[5]

Henry Knox's ambition and foresight at the beginning of the American Revolution helped invigorate his efforts to seek a commission in the Continental Army. Events preceding his

[4] Ibid., 11.
[5] Ibid., 10.

commission – most notably the immediate days before the infamous expedition to Fort Ticonderoga – provide us with the first of many examples of inconsistencies within the school of research on Henry Knox which spans over two centuries. Francis Samuel Drake in 1873 authored *Memoir and Correspondence of Henry Knox: Major-General in the American Revolutionary Army, and First Secretary of War of the United States during Washington's Administration*. In his comprehensive examination of Knox's time and service to General Washington, Drake attributes the idea for the transport of over one hundred potential pieces of artillery (the final number delivered to Dorchester Heights would be 55) to Knox himself.[6] This claim largely stands unsubstantiated by primary source material, but rather it seems it should be true. Nowhere in Henry Knox's correspondence is there any mention of presenting this relatively risky idea to General Washington.

This is the first of multiple claims from Drake's work to be challenged by 20th and 21st century historians whose interest in Knox is not so much about his almost god-like allure, but rather what he has done which can be substantiated by fact. One of these historians is Bernard A. Drew, who authored *Henry Knox and the Revolutionary War Trail in Western Massachusetts.* Drew, a Knox Trail native (he lives in Great Barrington Massachusetts) has geographical privilege when studying the Knox Trail, because he lives in close proximity to it. Drew passively addresses the fact that there is no reliable primary source which credits Henry Knox as the conceiver of the idea to travel to Ticonderoga and retrieve the cannons. Instead, Drew credits no one with the idea, but rather writes what can be substantiated via evidence – that General

[6] Francis S. Drake, *Memoir and Correspondence of Henry Knox*, (Boston: Samuel G. Drake, 1873) 22.

Washington ordered Knox to collect and transport as many pieces of artillery as he could from Fort Ticonderoga in the winter of 1775-1776.[7]

Perhaps Drew was just shoring up a similar argument made by William L. Browne, a US Navy veteran and Schenectady New York native who wrote a history of the Henry Knox Cannon Trail in 1775 entitled *Ye Cohorn Caravan: The Knox Expedition in the Winter of 1775-1776.* Browne and Drew exist within a similar scholarly school concerning the Henry Knox Cannon Trail. Both approach the trail rather academically. Their research is well vetted and thorough, and their conclusions about the Cannon Trail contribute in remembering Henry Knox as the extraordinary man that he was. However they tend to disregard romanticized accounts of Knox which sound good, but have no base in fact. This deviation from their nineteenth century counterparts ultimately creates a work that may be less entertaining, but certainly presents more legitimate and substantiated examples of Henry Knox.

Despite the unlikeliness of the 1775-1776 expedition to and from Fort Ticonderoga being Henry Knox's idea, the mere fact that he embarked on this incredible journey lacking any military commission speaks volumes about the man's character.[8] At the expense of evidenced speculation and what information is available from General Washington and General Knox in the autumn of 1775, Knox's endeavor can be viewed as a combination of his patriotic initiative and General Washington's desire to further test an already proven leader in many fronts. Ultimately however, General Washington was well aware of the vital store of artillery at Fort Ticonderoga,

[7] Bernard A. Drew, *Henry Knox and the Revolutionary War Trail in Western Massachusetts*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2012)154.
[8] Browne, *Ye Cohorn Caravan,* 11.

and Knox was merely a means to achieving a task which was crucial to driving the British out of Boston.

Another dispute among historians revolves around a supposed meeting between Henry Knox and Major John Andre (a British Intelligence Officer) after Andre was captured and held during transport at a cabin on the grounds near Fort George (at the southern end of Lake George). In the biography of Major John Andre entitled *The Life of Major John Andre,* author Winthrop Sargent claims that the captured British officer and Knox shared a cabin for one night while Knox moved north to Fort Ticonderoga and Andre moved south to a prisoner depot in Pennsylvania.[9] This story holds significance for one specific reason which is identified by most historians. The alleged meeting created a bond between the two men, a mutual respect which remained dormant in Knox until after the Revolutionary War, when he sat on the tribunal which ultimately condemned Andre to death for espionage. This episode creates a quality of sympathy within Knox and ultimately adds another complex level to this American hero's personality…if it ever happened.

The problem however, (as noted by Browne) is that no evidence of this meeting exists or is accessible today.[10] Although this has been noted by many historians, none of these claims have been based in fact. Rather, they are all hopelessly embellished explanations of accounts written by Knox which only go so far to state that the Bostonian saw prisoners on their "trek south."[11] Tracing a rough historiography of the repeated fallacy, it appears that Sargent mentions

[9] Sargent Winthrop, *The Life of Major John Andre: Adjutant General of the British Army in America,* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1871) 86.
[10] Browne, *Ye Cohorn Caravan,* 16.
[11] Ibid.

this first in Andre's biography. It is then repeated by Drake a numerous other historians. Finally, Browne disputes this as a tall-tale.

Local Historians Add Valuable Scholarship to Knox Trail

Disregarding the above tall tales, there is still a great deal of fascination surrounding the Henry Knox Cannon Trail. I imagine much of it remains scribbled on legal pads sitting on bookshelves of historians who live along the Knox Trail. Some is found within now public correspondence between enthusiastic citizens and (in particular) the New York Office of State History. A great deal more of it never made it onto paper and likely travels over pints of beer at pubs in towns along the trail, told by men and women whose legitimacy is made not in diplomas or degrees, but rather in the years they spent living and exploring an area which may comprise only a few square miles.

These individuals provide a level of expertise and enthusiasm that cannot be found within the pages of a scholarly nineteenth century biography. They have the luxury and ability to examine the Henry Knox Cannon trail constantly and in great detail. One of these people was Joe Elliot. Elliot, a postmaster in the Massachusetts border town of North Egremont (a stop along the Massachusetts Henry Knox Cannon Trail). He appealed at great length to the New York State Office of History regarding a misplaced Knox Trail Marker.

As a quick but important aside, it is important to understand the Henry Knox Cannon Trail. The trail was an effort by the states of New York and Massachusetts on the sesquicentennial of the 1775-1776 journey to remember one of the most "romantic episodes of

the Revolutionary War"[12] Soon identified by a sub-committee was the route believed to be the one traveled by Knox during the three month journey from Fort Ticonderoga to Dorchester Heights just outside of Boston. Knox embarked from Fort Ticonderoga on December 5th, 1775 with fifty-nine pieces of artillery.[13] They were affixed to sleds and primarily dragged by oxen at first, switching to horses outside of Albany.[14] To commemorate this, fifty-nine stone markers were made; thirty placed in New York and twenty-nine placed in Massachusetts along what was perceived to be the trail based on period maps and a manuscript of an 1832 diary of the expedition.[15] Although the Massachusetts and New York monuments differ in design slightly, both modestly display the following:

THROUGH THIS PLACE PASSED
GEN. HENRY KNOX
IN THE WINTER OF 1775 - 1776
TO DELIVER TO
GEN. GEORGE WASHINGTON
THE TRAIN OF ARTILLERY
FROM FORT TICONDEROGA
USED TO FORCE THE BRITISH
ARMY TO EVACUATE BOSTON[16]

For almost fifty years these monuments existed unbothered as symbols of General Knox's deep connection with the Hudson Valley. That is until Joe Elliot took issue with the location of monument numbers 27, 28, and 29, which were all originally placed near Kinderhook in Columbia County.[17] Elliot first voiced his concern with the monuments location in a letter written to the New York State Historian's office in October of 1969. In the letter, he establishes

[12] "The Knox Trail: Introduction," *New York State Museum Website,* Accessed 28 April 2015. http://www.nysm.nysed.gov/services/KnoxTrail/
[13] Browne, *Ye Cohorn Caravan*, 20.
[14] *Henry Knox Diary, 20 Nov. 1775 - 13 Jan. 1776.* (Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, MA) 25.
[15] "The Knox Trail: Introduction," *New York State Museum Website,* Accessed 28 April 2015.
[16] "The Knox Trail: Monument Design," *New York State Museum Website,* Accessed 28 April 2015. http://www.nysm.nysed.gov/services/KnoxTrail/ktmonumentdesign.html
[17] "The Knox Trail: Field Inventory," *New York State Museum Website,* Accessed 28 April 2015. http://www.nysm.nysed.gov/services/KnoxTrail/ktsign27.html

himself as a local historical expert who was primarily concerned in how the misplaced markers would be "misleading to the schoolchildren."[18] Elliot's enthusiasm and passion for local history shines through much of the harsh letter. Despite the lack of tact shown, it is clear that Elliot has a sense of duty which is unmatched by any scholarship up until that point.

The process of relocating these three markers would be long and arduous. Elliot's claim was finally substantiated after multiple letters lasting the course of years by New York State Researching John DuPont. In a Berkshire Courier newspaper article detailing the process of relocating the markers, DuPont notes that "it was easier for Knox to move his cannons than for Mr. Elliot to get the Department of Transportation to move markers."[19] Elliot's passion for accuracy in public history persevered and because of this, the story of the Henry Knox Cannon Trail became more accurate and that much more real.

A great deal more remains to be accomplished on the Knox Trail, however. To many local historians like Elliot, there will always be inconsistencies and disappointments regarding the placement of the monuments and how the public interprets these monuments. From the current placement and design of the almost one hundred year old markers, not much can be absorbed if the observer does not understand the context of the journey. Additionally, no attempt by New York State has been made to investigate, document, and perhaps monumentalize Henry Knox's journey *to* Fort Ticonderoga in 1775. Along this journey he stayed for a time in Manhattan before moving north through Hudson River communities including Croton and

[18] Joe Elliot to State Historian's Office, October 9th 1969.
[19] "New York Researcher Backs North Egremont Postmaster's Theories on the Knox Trail," Chatham Courier, 24 August 1972.

Poughkeepsie.[20] He purchased his sleds and first livestock from lower- Hudson Valley communities and perhaps spent many nights in small inns or pubs.

The difficult venture of providing the public with a means to interpret incredibly important local history has a tendency to over-simplify complex and important episodes. The Henry Knox Cannon Trail is not exempt in this regard. The way in which the trail is remembered with a simple thirty-six word explanation does not give proper credit to the life Knox lived preceding the journey, and the affects that the cannons had not only in the siege of Boston, but also in how they created an American legend and perhaps one of America's first stories to be truly proud of. To remember this, more effort has to be put into the interpretation of the Henry Knox Cannon Trail. This way, people can appreciate the man, the community, and the affect that this event had on the future of a nation formed in Revolution.

[20] Henry Knox Diary, 8.

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