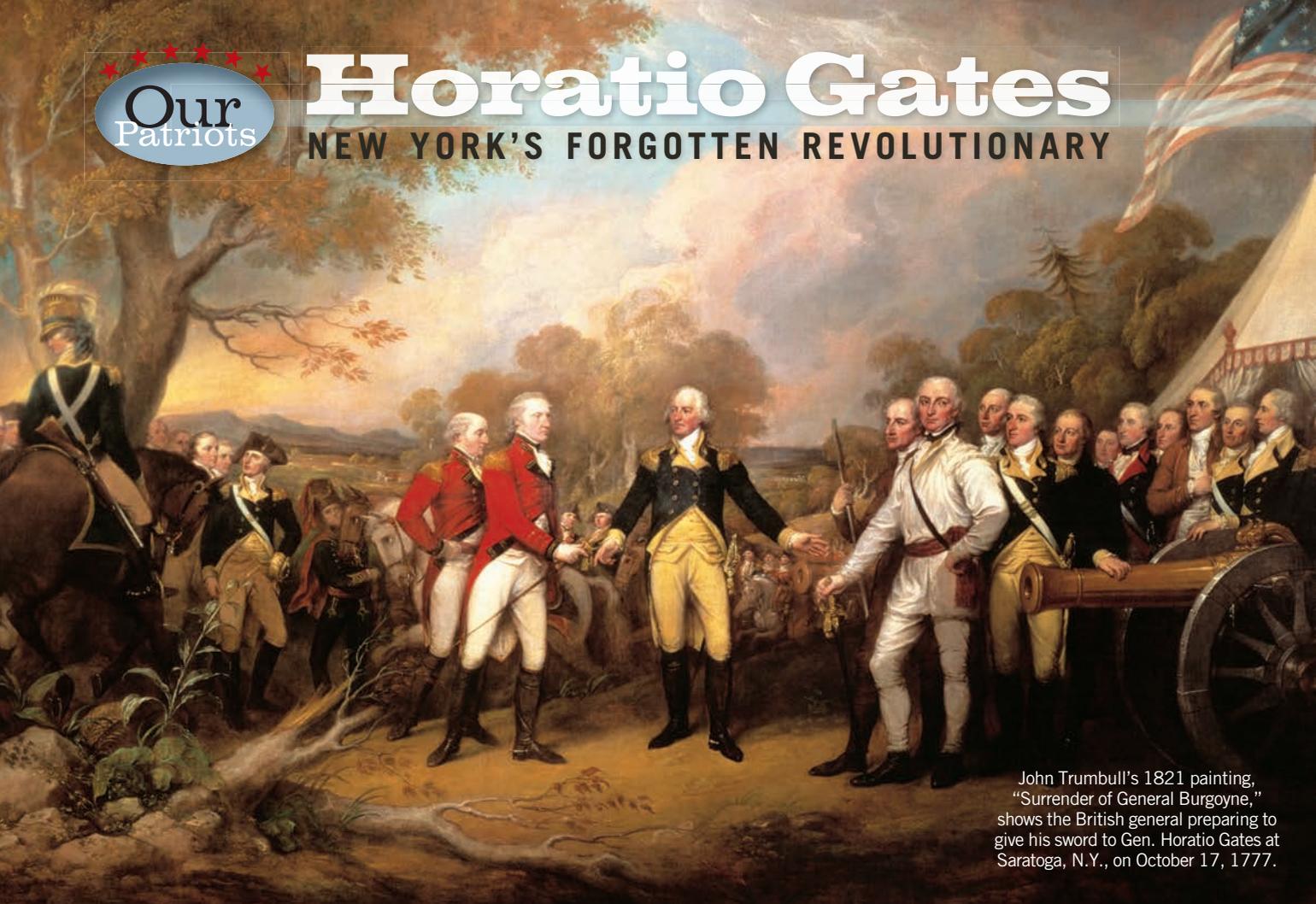


# Horatio Gates

NEW YORK'S FORGOTTEN REVOLUTIONARY



John Trumbull's 1821 painting, "Surrender of General Burgoyne," shows the British general preparing to give his sword to Gen. Horatio Gates at Saratoga, N.Y., on October 17, 1777.

BY JAMES S. KAPLAN

**E**very Fourth of July for the past 13 years, I have carried out a tradition. I rise just after midnight to lead a walking tour of Revolutionary sites in Lower Manhattan in the hours before dawn. Why do I do this?

As one who has worked in New York for more than 35 years, I have had the opportunity to learn much about the storied city's place in history, especially the early American era. I started leading tours in the hopes of passing along that knowledge, especially of the little-known figures and important places connected to the War of Independence.

Lower Manhattan contains the graves of three significant Revolutionary War generals: Richard Montgomery, leader of the Battle of Quebec; Alexander Hamilton, the commander of the final assault at Yorktown and later Secretary of the Treasury; and Horatio Gates, commanding officer of the victorious American troops at Saratoga. General Montgomery's grave is well-marked in front of St. Paul's Church on Broadway and Vesey Street, as is the grave of Alexander Hamilton on the south side of Trinity Church graveyard. However, the grave of General Gates, who was buried in Trinity Church graveyard after his death in 1806, is lost and unmarked. In the hopes of restoring his legacy, I conduct the tour to help others understand Gates' significance to our nation's founding.

### From British Officer to Supporter Of American Independence

Horatio Gates was born in 1728 in Malden, England. His parents, as chief domestic servants to the Duke of

Leeds, were able to obtain a commission for young Horatio as an officer in training in the British army.

As a young British army officer, Gates was assigned to service in

America, and served stints in Canada, the Caribbean and New York. Though not considered a battlefield officer, Gates earned a reputation as an excellent administrator and supply officer. In the French and Indian War, he served as quartermaster of the British troops under General Braddock in his disastrous attack on Pittsburgh. Allied with these troops was a Colonial regiment under a young Virginia colonel named George Washington. Although Gates had some success in the 1760s in organizing and coordinating an attack for his commander in Martinique, he never received the hoped-for promotion. By 1772, he retired from the British army in disgust at his failure to advance, which he may have attributed to his lack of aristocratic birth. With his military pension, he decided to purchase land in Virginia, not far from George Washington's brother Samuel.

Once in America, Gates took an active interest in the developing dispute between England and the Colonies. Like his fellow English immigrants Thomas Paine and his friend Charles Lee, Gates was a bitter opponent of the British monarchical system and a strong supporter of American independence. After active hostilities broke out at Lexington and Concord, he immediately offered his services to Washington, who had him appointed adjutant general of the army, an administrative post. When Washington took command of the American army at Cambridge, Mass., after the Battle of Bunker Hill, Gates became a key member of his staff.

Gates' efficiency in keeping the troops at Cambridge supplied, as well as his ardent support for the American cause, soon brought him to the attention of Massachusetts politicians John Adams and Samuel Adams. In 1776, he was appointed by Congress to lead all operations in Canada, but after the American defeat at the Battle of Quebec, such operations ceased. At the same time, Congress placed Philip Schuyler, a wealthy, politically connected land owner with deep ties to the state's militias, in charge of operations in New York.

In 1776 Lord Howe, the British commander in North America, defeated Washington at the Battle of Long Island, causing the American army to abandon New York. After the battles of Brandywine and Germantown in 1777, the American army was also forced to leave Philadelphia. The prospects for the American cause looked increasingly bleak. A third British force under General Johnny Burgoyne, consisting of 10,000 regular British and Hessian troops, plus 2,000 American Indians, was on its way from Canada intent on taking Albany and the Hudson River. It appeared that if Burgoyne succeeded in his goal of reaching Albany, the Revolutionary War would be over.

With the Continental Army under Washington pinned down and defeated in Pennsylvania, the only American hope to stop Burgoyne would be for the approximately 6,000 New York troops under Schuyler, in conjunction with New England militia companies, to make a unified stand.

Unfortunately, there was considerable friction between the two groups. The New England militia distrusted the aristocratic Schuyler. Similarly, the New York troops refused to serve under a New England commander. In early July, Fort Ticonderoga, the supposedly impregnable fortress blocking the route to Lake George, fell to Burgoyne when General Arthur St. Clair found the fort indefensible and called for a retreat. The situation seemed hopeless—unless by some miracle a commander could quickly convince the different militias to work together and rally to defeat the British.

### Rallying the Troops for Saratoga

After the Patriot retreat from Fort Ticonderoga, the Continental Congress voted to replace Schuyler with Gen. Gates as commander of the entire army in the North. Gates was a supply officer who had never progressed beyond the rank of major in the British army, and he had never commanded troops in a major battle. To many, including Washington, he hardly seemed like the commander who could lead the American troops to victory.

Gates immediately called on the New England militias to set aside their sectional differences and join him and the New York troops at Albany. He also wrote a letter to Burgoyne, his former comrade in the British army, in which he strongly protested the British policy of encouraging hostile American Indian tribes to attack American settlers who did not swear loyalty to the British. Militiamen from throughout New England, encouraged by their

political leaders and outraged by the well-publicized British atrocities, such as the murder of Jane McCrae, soon began joining Gates' camp in droves. The strength of the American army grew from 6,000 men under Schuyler to 18,000 under Gates. Fortified by these augmented forces, American morale



A 1780 illustration of Horatio Gates for *An impartial history of the war in America, between Great Britain and her colonies from its commencement to the end of the year 1779*.

rose, and the New York and New England militias began to work more harmoniously together under their new commander. Gates ordered his now greatly strengthened army to advance 28 miles up the Hudson to Bemis Heights, a ridge with a commanding view of the river near the town of Saratoga and an ideal place for defensive fortifications.

On September 19, 1777, near the farm of a Tory named John Freeman, the advancing British ran into an American scouting party, and a major battle ensued. Benedict Arnold, the impetuous but brilliant young commander whom Gates had placed in charge, sent an urgent request that Gates provide many more troops, possibly the whole army. Gates refused and ordered the Americans to retreat.

For three weeks, the two armies faced each other. Every day the Americans grew stronger and the British, facing dwindling supplies, grew weaker. A situation that had seemed hopeless for the Americans when Gates took command six weeks earlier was now promising. Arnold urged Gates to attack and press his advantage

larger and better supplied force, it was the British position that was now hopeless. Gates cut off their escape routes to the north, and a few days later, Burgoyne surrendered his entire army—almost one-quarter of the British troops in America—to Gates at Saratoga.

The impact throughout the Colonies was electric. The French, waiting for a signal that the American Revolution was viable, joined the war on the American side. British confidence that their professional soldiers could easily defeat American armies of citizen soldiers and militiamen was shattered. The British would ultimately abandon Philadelphia and refocus their strategy to concentrate on the Southern Colonies.

### From Military Battles to Political Ones

At the time, Gates was considered the architect of the stunning American victory at Saratoga. Many in Congress in late 1777 and early 1778 were dissatisfied with Washington's defeats, and since Gates was the victor of the most important battle, he was viewed as a logical replacement as commander in chief. However, Washington had a much stronger political base, and his allies were able to quash any movement to replace him. After his political effort failed, Gates resigned as head of the Board of War and was named commander of the Southern theater. After a much less distinguished performance at the Battle of Camden in which he was accused of abandoning his troops, his reputation was diminished.

After his first wife and only son died in the early 1780s, he married the wealthy widow Mary Vallance in 1786, and, later, they sold his Virginia estate. At the age of 62, he moved with his new wife to an estate near present-day 23rd Street in Manhattan, which was then a suburb outside the city, to live the quiet, comfortable life of a retired general. He had no active role in the

government of the new nation he had helped to found, though he did work with veterans' groups like the Society of the Cincinnati.

Gates' fight for democratic government in America was not over, however. By 1800 in New York City, the Federalist party was committed to the re-election of John Adams and led locally by former Washington aide Alexander Hamilton. The Federalists were being bitterly attacked as too aristocratic by Revolutionary War veterans affiliated with the Tammany Society, which supported the election of Thomas Jefferson.

Aaron Burr, the key strategist for the Jeffersonian effort in New York, asked Gates, whose role at Saratoga 23 years earlier made him a symbol of the Revolution, to run as a candidate for state assembly on the Tammany ticket. Gates agreed, despite his personal friendship with Adams.

With Gates at its head, the Tammany ticket was successful, and New York state and the nation went for Jefferson. The Jeffersonian, or Democratic, party would control the nation's politics into the 1840s, and the Tammany Society (later Tammany Hall) would be the major force in New York City's politics for the next 150 years.

Despite Gates' bravery at the Battle of Saratoga and his celebrity status in the elections of 1800, after his death in 1806, some historians obscured his achievements, giving field commanders the lion's share of credit for victory at Saratoga. Eventually, the location of his grave was lost. Perhaps one day it will be found and marked. More important, maybe one day his proper place in the founding of American democracy will be recognized. 🍌

*James Kaplan's tour, sponsored by the Fraunces Tavern Museum, visits Trinity Church graveyard on July 4 as the sun rises over Manhattan. To learn more, e-mail [jkaplan@herzfeld-rubin.com](mailto:jkaplan@herzfeld-rubin.com) or call (212) 471-8546.*



Title page illustration of George Washington and Horatio Gates for Bickerstaff's Boston Almanack, 1778.

to keep the British army from escaping. Gates refused, correctly guessing that Burgoyne would not retreat, but instead risk all on a frontal attack that could not be won given the American fortifications. Gates relieved Arnold of his command.

On October 7, 1777, Burgoyne sent a probing force of 1,700 men to attack the American lines. It was easily repelled. Arnold, although relieved of his command, commandeered a few regiments and led an attack that overran several key redoubts the Hessian commanders had set up, pushing the British back further. (For this action, he is sometimes today credited as the true winner of the battle, though historians disagree on this point.) Having failed to dislodge the Americans from Bemis Heights and facing a much