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New Hampshire War
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Likenesses of
New Hampshire War Heroes & Personages
In the Collections of
the New Hampshire State House
& State Library

John Stark (1728-1822)

John Stark (1728-1822)

Born at Nutfield
 (Londonderry, NH:
 blacksmith and farmer in
 later life.

Portrait by U.D. Tenney,
 1873, after original by
 Trumbull.

Presented by a descendent,
 1873.



Of all of New Hampshire's military leaders during the American Revolution, there is the most information about John Stark. This is because Stark himself kept good written records, and these records were published as *Reminiscences of the French War [1756-1763], containing Rogers's expeditions with the New England Rangers under his command, as published in London in 1765;...to which is added an Account of the Life and Military Services of Major-General John Stark, &c.* This volume was published in Concord, New Hampshire in 1831. Published anonymously, it was in turn used extensively by the noted 19th century historian Edward Everett, for a "Life of John Stark" which was prepared for the *Library of American Biography* (New York, 1873), edited by Jared Sparks. Everett credited the Stark family with publication of the *Reminiscences* of 1831.

Stark, like the majority of New Hampshire's military leaders during the American Revolution, received his military training during the French and Indian Wars. Everett stresses in his "Life of John Stark" how important it was that the French and Indian War and the American Revolution were separated by only fifteen years:

It is not unlikely, that the recurrence of a war every fifteen or twenty years is absolutely necessary, to keep up the military character of a people, and prevent...the military

art...from dying out. (page 53)

Everett's work is especially valuable for its descriptions of New Hampshire before the American Revolution. This report concentrates on that part of John Stark's life, in the hope that the interested reader will gain new knowledge of the period.

John Stark's father was a native of Glasgow, Scotland who settled first in Londonderry, in Northern Ireland, but then sailed for New England in 1720. His ship was denied entry to Boston, Massachusetts because it was thought to be infected with smallpox (a year later Boston was infected with smallpox arriving on a ship from the West Indies). Archibald Stark and the rest of his shipmates sailed north to winter at what became Wiscasset, Maine; they moved to Nutfield, which was renamed Londonderry in 1722, the following spring [1721]. The community at that time was overwhelmingly Scotch-Irish potato farmers and weavers.

Archibald Stark lived with his family at Derryfield (now Manchester), 1736-1752. John Stark was the second of four sons, and he first comes to our attention in 1752, when he and his brother William joined neighbors David Stinson and Amos Eastman on a hunting trip to Rumney, in the northwest corner of the state. That part of New Hampshire was still Indian Country in 1752, and the group was made prisoner. Stinson was killed, but John Stark saved his brother William, and Eastman. William escaped, but John Stark was severely beaten by the Indians for his part in the escape. After six weeks he and Eastman were rescued by an expedition coming from Fort Number Four at Charlestown, on the Connecticut River. Four months later Stark and Eastman arrived home, having traveled by way of Albany, New York.

According to Everett these events had a life-long impact on John Stark. A year later, at age 25, John Stark was again in Indian Country, traveling to the headwaters of the Androscoggin River as part of an expedition. Stark was trying to raise money to repay Massachusetts for its costs in equipping the group which had rescued him a year earlier.

These two trips to the frontier (1752 and 1753) persuaded the New Hampshire General Court to finance an expedition to the frontier in 1754. The

leader of this expedition was to be John Stark. The Governor of Massachusetts persuaded New Hampshire Governor Benning Wentworth to delay the expedition because of concerns about the Indians and their claims to the territory. But then word was received that the French were building a fort in the northwest part of New Hampshire. Stark and thirty men were sent under a flag of truce to protest to the French; they found no French and no construction but took the opportunity to explore parts of the Connecticut River where Haverhill and Newbury (VT) are now located.

In 1754 the French were deciding to stop English expansion to the west. We recall George Washington's 1754 trip to present-day Pittsburgh (PA) to protest the French construction of a fort built for a similar purpose. The 1754 Albany Plan of Union was an effort by all the British colonies to have a unified response to French initiatives all along the North American frontier.

Friction between French and British North Americans increased. In New Hampshire, Rogers' Rangers were a border police force; in 1756 they were doubled in size, and Stark was made First Lieutenant. In January 1757 French sleds were seen moving between Crown Point, New York and Fort Ticonderoga; some of the sleds were captured but others escaped, and soon more than two hundred French, Canadians and Indians attacked the Rangers. Stark and two men traveled through snow four feet deep more than forty miles to return with a reinforcing party a day later. In the interim the Rangers had been reduced from 78 men to 48 with 6 wounded. The other men had been captured or killed.

In March 1757 Fort William Henry was saved from the French by John Stark, who denied his Irish troops liquor for Saint Patrick's Day. The French attacked the fort, and the Irish Regular Army troops were drunk and could not respond. The Rangers were sober, however, and kept the French at bay. [Fort William Henry surrendered to the French in Summer 1757; its garrison was tomahawked in front of French officers, according to Everett.]

Stark's experiences in the French and Indian Wars gave him a knowledge of the country, and of tactics and military life, which were indispensable during the

American Revolution. The recounting of some of these experiences helps explain why so many of all the colonies' leaders during the War for Independence were frontiersmen familiar with Native American languages, military tactics and the frontier. In April 1775, when word spread about events at Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts, officers and men familiar with the old campaigns rushed to join new military units being formed. Everett writes (op cit, p. 54):

The existing state of things in New Hampshire, as in the other existing colonies, furnished better materials for the speedy organization of a large force, than would at first be supposed. By the old militia law, every male inhabitant, from the age of sixteen to...sixty, was...provided with a musket and bayonet, a knapsack, cartridge-box, a pound of powder, twenty bullets, and twelve flints. Every town was obliged to keep in readiness a barrel of powder, two hundred pounds of lead, and three hundred flints for every sixty men; besides a quantity of arms and ammunition for the supply of those, who were unable to provide themselves with the necessary articles.....

On April 19, 1775 Everett writes that thousands of volunteers rushed to action when news came of Lexington and Concord. Stark was on his way to the seacoast ten minutes after the news came, leaving word for his neighbors to join him at Medford, near Boston, Massachusetts. Twelve hundred New Hampshire men assembled at Medford; some went home again but enough stayed to form two regiments, under authority of the Provincial Congress of Massachusetts. John Stark was made colonel of the first regiment by a unanimous vote; Captain (later Major-General) Henry Dearborn commanded a company in this regiment. "As soon as the Provincial Congress of New Hampshire met they voted to enlist two thousand for eight months, of whom the two regiments...were to make a part. The residue formed a third regiment. Colonels Stark and [James] Reed were...in command of the first two regiments, and Enoch Poor was appointed to the third..." (Everett, op cit, p. 56.)

Stark's first military action came June 17, 1775 at Bunker's Hill, outside Boston. Stark reported on this



engagement to Hon. Matthew Thornton at Exeter, New Hampshire in a letter dated June 19, 1775, an indication of his prompt attention to detail. [The letter is reproduced in Everett, *op cit.*, pp. 62-63.] When the American troops were ordered to march to New York, Stark's regiment and other troops were under the command of General George Washington. They worked to strengthen New York's defenses for two months; but in May 1776 Stark and his regiment were ordered to join the Northern Army in Canada, going via Albany. Then in December 1776 they were ordered to join Washington's army at the Delaware River, where "about seven thousand men" assembled (Everett, p. 70). Stark and his men crossed the Delaware with Washington and fought at Trenton and Princeton; they left Washington when the general established his headquarters at Morristown, New Jersey. During this time Stark's men had all seen their terms of enlistment expire. Stark persuaded them to re-enlist for another six weeks but then he himself was ordered back to New Hampshire to recruit more men.

The problem of expiring enlistments was a constant during the American Revolution. Stark succeeded in his recruiting, but he was passed over for promotion and resigned from the army and returned home. Generals Sullivan and Poor tried to talk him out of resigning; Stark pointed out to them instead that the northern frontier was in immediate danger and that Fort Ticonderoga should be strengthened at once. He added that he would return if the country needed his services.

Ticonderoga was attacked almost immediately, and Stark came back to active duty. From here on, Stark's career meshes more closely with the careers of other New Hampshire military leaders during the Revolution.

In 1810, Miss Hannah Crowninshield of Salem, MA sketched General Stark. Miss Crowninshield (1789 - 1834) was a pupil of the artist Michel Felice Corne; she was known as a portraitist and draftsman. She married James Armstrong of the United States Navy on March 29, 1819. Her sketch of General Stark was used by U.D. Tenney to make a portrait of the general in his old age. This portrait is located in the State Library.

Location: First Floor Visitor Center Wall (Rooms 118,119)

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