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History Happened Here: Whiting was present for historical turning points

By Andrew Amelinckx

Published: Saturday, December 5, 2009 2:14 AM EST

The Rebels' grain was burning. The Tories had struck again and this time it was the grist mill of Col. William Bradford Whiting that had been hit.

Whiting was the commander of the 17th Regiment, Albany County, New York Militia and had been active against the British since before war had broken out.

He was there when, on May 2, 1775, the King's District of Albany County, as the area that encompassed his Canaan home was then called, formed a committee of correspondence and safety. He became its first clerk.

These types of committees were beginning to form in many of the colonies as a way for colonists to let their positions on their treatment by England be known as well as to join with others who may have been like-minded. The King's District committee took a leading role in this.

He was there at William Warner's tavern on June 24, 1776 when they chose delegates to the Provincial Congress and unanimously declared their independence from England. And he was there to take command of one of the 17 regiments that made up the Albany County Militia, of which Columbia County was then a part.

Born April, 15 1731, in Hartford, Conn., to an established New England family, he may have been involved in the West Indian shoe trade before he moved with his second wife Amy Lathrop Whiting to Canaan in 1765.

Amy Whiting was apparently a stalwart woman.

According to family lore, she held off an attack by Native Americans with lye from soap she was in the process of making until her husband and his men returned to the house.

He and Amy had nine children that lived to adulthood.

While Whiting was off fighting the British and their colonial backers, the Tories, the area that now encompasses Columbia County was in the midst of what could be considered a guerilla war as Loyalists and the Rebels burned one another's homes and property and often resorted to bloodshed.

"These Tories hesitated at no crime, however black; not even at murder, which by them was by no means infrequent, and was always accompanied by robbery and pillage," stated local historian Capt. Franklin Ellis, in 1878.

Whiting's regiment was involved in the capture of a well-known Tory leader, Sir John Johnson, whose father was the Superintendent of Indian Affairs and founded Johnstown in Tyron County, northwest of Albany.

According to the recollections of Pvt. Jesse Skinner, who fought under Whiting, in the winter of 1775-1776 they marched from New Lebanon to Johnstown and captured Johnson.

Johnson was paroled, later fled to Canada and rejoined the British cause as part of the King's Royal Regiment of New York.

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Whiting's men would later face Johnson again, with disastrous results for the Rebels.

The Battle of Oriskany on Aug. 6, 1777 was one of the bloodiest in the war and was part of Gen. John Burgoyne's campaign to cut off New England from the rest of the colonies.

Johnson's Loyalist force and Native allies ambushed an American force on its way to Fort Stanwix to relieve a siege there.

Around 450 Rebels were killed as compared to about 150 Loyalists.

While this battle was lost, it was only a few months later that Burgoyne was forced to surrender after the Second Battle of Saratoga.

Whiting and his men were there as well.

As "Yankee Doodle Dandy," floated across the field Burgoyne and 5,200 British troops surrendered.

The second Battle of Saratoga is believed by many to be the turning point of the Revolutionary War. After the battle France joined the fight on the side of the Americans.

Whiting resigned his commission on June 17, 1778 and settled into the life of a politician and judge.

He was a member of the New York state assembly from Albany County from 1777 to 1780 and a state senator for the Western District from 1781 to 1785.

In 1785 Columbia County was formed from part of Albany County and two years later, on Jan. 9, 1787, the Court of Common Pleas of Columbia County began its first session. One of the judges that presided was Whiting.

Whiting was there for the trial of the nine men accused of murdering Columbia County Sheriff Cornelius Hogeboom, during the Anti-Rent Wars — a fight between poor tenant farmers and their rich landlords — that had plagued the area for decades and continued to do so for many years afterwards.

They were all acquitted by the jury.

Whiting died in 1796 and while his deeds may have passed from the memories of most, there is still a marker on Route 295 where the grist mill he built and that was burned down so many years ago still stands.

To reach reporter Andrew Amelinckx call 518- 828-1616, ext. 2267 or e-mail aaamelinckx@registerstar.com.

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