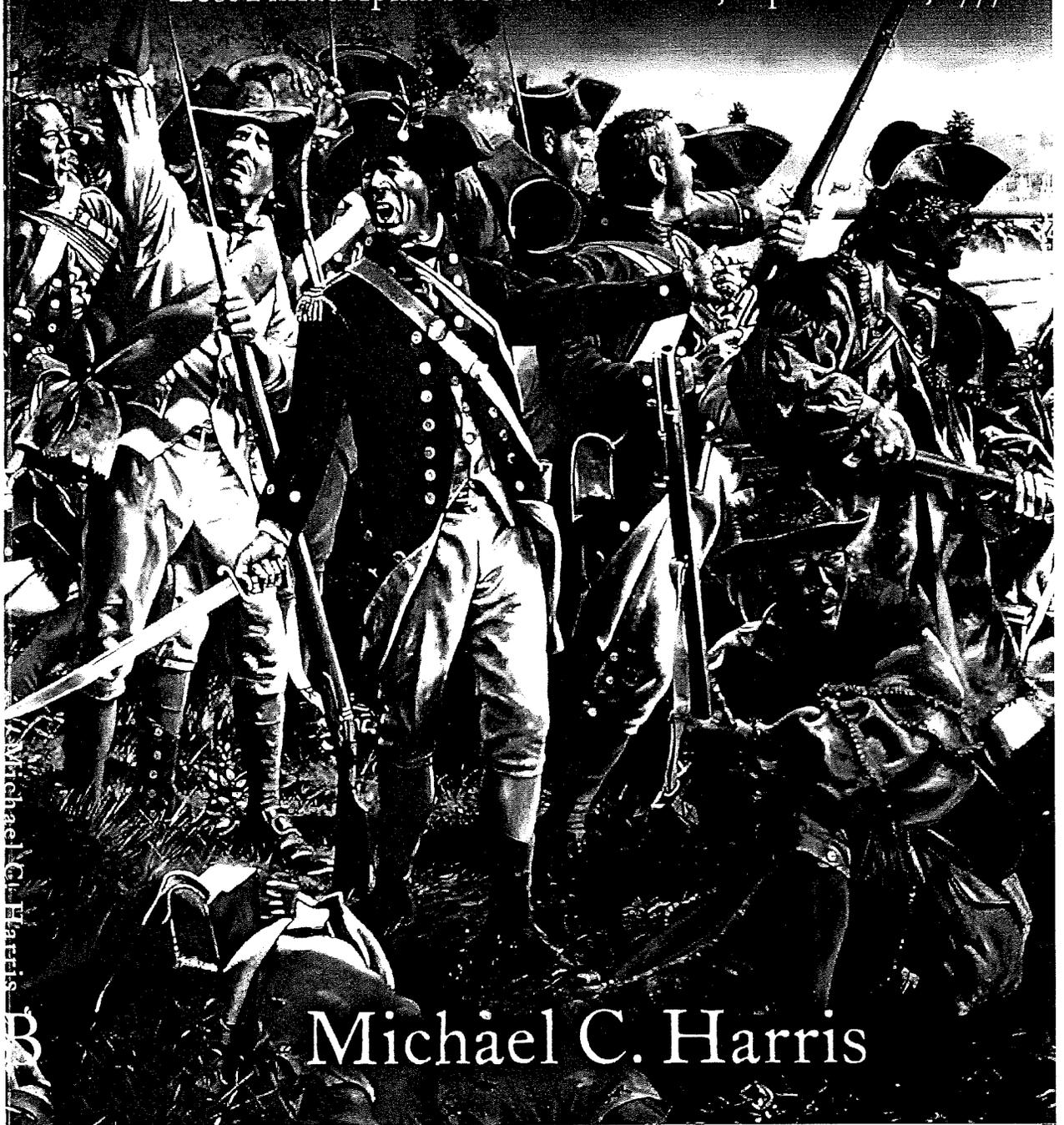


A Military History of the Battle that
Lost Philadelphia but Saved America, September 11, 1777



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of the enemy.” There were not enough British casualties to “cover the ground,” but there is a reasonable explanation why Sullivan left that description: Gen. Howe had trained his soldiers to drop to the ground when the rebels fired upon them. He instilled some light infantry tactics in all of his troops prior to the 1776 New York campaign, and many of the army’s regiments were still following this practice. In the smoke and confusion of battle, men deliberately lying on the ground were easily confused with casualties.¹⁸

Sullivan also went on to claim, “Five times did the enemy drive our troops from the hill, and as often was it regained, and the summit often disputed muzzle to muzzle. The general fire of the line lasted an hour and forty minutes, fifty-one of which the hill was disputed almost muzzle to muzzle, in such a manner, that General Conway, who has seen much service, says he never saw so close and severe a fire.” When Sullivan wrote these words he was defending himself against a series of accusations, and exaggerated some of the details of the fighting. No one disputes, however, that the combat was intense while it lasted, and that the British who made the attack in this quarter suffered as a result.¹⁹

According to official British casualty returns, the grenadier battalions suffered 24 killed and 126 wounded, including 14 officers. One of these officers was Lt. Col. William Medows, the commander of the 1st British Grenadier Battalion. According to Capt. George Harris of the 5th Regiment of Foot’s grenadier company, “He [Medows] received a shot, in the act of waving his sword-arm just above the elbow, that went out at the back, knocking him off his horse, and the fall breaking his opposite collar-bone.” Captain Harris, who was wounded at Iron Hill about a week before the battle and would later rise to the rank of general, was advancing behind the attack in a carriage. He jumped a horse without a saddle and, claimed his biographer, “had the honour to share in the glory of that day, but attended with the drawback of finding his gallant commander and friend most literally in the hands of the surgeon, having lost the use of both his own.” Knocked senseless by the painful wound and subsequent fall, Colonel Medows had not yet “recovered his senses when Captain Harris came to him, but looking at him some time, and knowing his voice, he

18 McGuire, *Philadelphia Campaign*, vol. 1, 209.

19 Hammond, ed., *Papers of Sullivan*, vol. 1, 465.

attempted to put out his hand, and not being able to use either, [said] ‘Its hard.’”²⁰

Assault on Stephen’s Division

While Sullivan’s division was routing and Lord Stirling’s division was being hard-pressed and beginning to fall back, Adam Stephen’s division on the far right of the American line remained in place atop Birmingham Hill. Stephen’s two brigades, the 3rd Virginia under Brig. Gen. William Woodford and the 4th Virginia under Brig. Gen. Charles Scott, were formed on the military crest of the high ground directly above and north of Sandy Hollow, with Woodford on the right side of the division front and Scott on the left. A cloud of skirmishers fanned out well forward of the main line of battle, with the 3rd Virginia Regiment, part of Woodford’s brigade, fighting to hold the cemetery near the Birmingham Meetinghouse.

Advancing against Stephen were, right to left, the British 1st Light Infantry Battalion, stalled on both sides of the Birmingham Road; 15 companies of the 2nd Light Infantry Battalion; and on the far left, elements of the Hessian and Anspach jaegers. The Germans had swung well east of Birmingham Meetinghouse but were now bogged down in the low ground between Street Road and Birmingham Hill. Brigadier General James Agnew’s 4th British Brigade was well behind this advancing line supporting the attack. The British had engulfed the cemetery, threatened the capture of the advanced Virginia outfit (as described above), and forced the regiment to retire.

Lieutenant Colonel Ludwig von Wurmb, the jaeger commander, oversaw the advance and described the initial encounter with the American skirmishers a short time earlier. “I saw that the enemy wanted to form for us on a bare hill, so I had them greeted by our two amusettes and this was the beginning of General

20 *Remembrancer for 1777*, 415-417; Inman, ed., “List of Officers Killed,” 176-205. The following grenadier officers were killed: Capt. Edward Drury (63rd Regiment of Foot), Lt. William Faulkner (15th Regiment of Foot), Lt. Minchin (27th Regiment of Foot), Lt. Richard Barber (40th Regiment of Foot), Lt. Hadley Doyle (52nd Regiment of Foot), and Lts. John Harris and Adam Drummond (33rd Regiment of Foot). In addition to those killed, the following were wounded: Capt. Andrew Cathcart (15th Regiment of Foot), Capt. John Simcoe in the arm (40th Regiment of Foot), Capt. Fish (44th Regiment of Foot), Lts. Ligonier Chapman and Stephen Cooke (37th Regiment of Foot), and Lt. Thomas Peters (64th Regiment of Foot). S. R. Lushington, *The Life and Services of General Lord Harris, G.C.B. During His Campaigns in America, The West Indies, and India* (London, 1840), 88.

Howe's column's [arrival]." The bare hill described by von Wurmb was the eastern extension of the rise that Birmingham Meetinghouse sits upon. The jaegers encountered American skirmishers on the end of this rise about 1,500 feet east of Birmingham Road.²¹

Although the Germans could not effectively use their smaller guns to support their advance, the Americans had no such problem. Situated on good terrain with a commanding view, the battalion guns attached to Stephen's division did outstanding work defending the position with shell and grapeshot, as did the patriot muskets, which were loaded and fired as fast as humanly possible. The inherent strength of Stephen's position was undeniable. According to the *Jaeger Corps Journal*, the Americans were "advantageously posted on a not especially steep height in front of a woods, with the right wing resting on a steep and deep ravine." The stout defense put up by the Americans likely surprised Lt. Richard St. George of the 52nd Foot's light company, who remembered "a most infernal fire of cannon and musket—smoak—incessant shouting—incline to the right! Incline to the Left!—halt!—charge! . . . the balls ploughing up the ground. The Trees cracking over ones head, The branches riven by the artillery—The leaves falling as in autumn by grapeshot." Lieutenant Martin Hunter, another officer in St. George's light company, agreed with his fellow officer and also took note of the imposing defensive nature of the terrain: "The position the enemy had taken was very strong indeed—very commanding ground, a wood on their rear and flanks, a ravine and strong paling in front. The fields in America are all fenced in by paling."²²

One of the jaeger officers fighting on the left wing, Lt. Heinrich von Feilitzsch, recalled the "counter-fire from the enemy, especially against us, was the most concentrated. . . . The enemy had made a good disposition with one height after the other to his rear. He stood fast," he added, perhaps with grudging respect. Lieutenant Colonel von Wurmb agreed: "We drove the enemy [Stephen's skirmish line] from this [bare] hill and they positioned themselves in a woods from which we dislodged them and then a second woods where we found ourselves 150 paces from their line which was on a height in a

21 Von Wurmb to von Jungkenn, October 14, 1777, 10.

22 Burgoyne and Burgoyne, eds., *Journal of the Hesse-Cassel Jaeger Corps*, 14; Richard St. George, "The Actions at Brandywine and Paoli Described by a British Officer," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* (Philadelphia, 1905), vol. 29, 368; Hunter, *Journal of Hunter*, 29-30.

woods and we were at the bottom also in a woods, between us was an open field. Here they [Stephen's main line] fired on us with two cannon with canister and," continued the German commander, "because of the terrible terrain and the woods, our cannon could not get close enough, and had to remain to the right." The German light infantrymen, reported one participant, "were engaged for over half an hour, with grape shot and small arms, with a battalion of light infantry. We could not see the 2nd Battalion of Light Infantry because of the terrain, and while we received only a few orders, each commander had to act according to his own best judgment."²³

Despite the tactical flexibility of light infantry, the wooded, swampy, and sloping terrain in this area, coupled with the heavy American fire, stalled the elite British and German units. The swampy lowlands and thickets had also forced the 4th British Brigade, part of Cornwallis's reserve, to swing well west of the Birmingham Road, which in turn denied the light troops their promised support. Unless the jaegers could turn the American right flank, it would be difficult to reach, let alone carry, Stephen's position.

Stirling's retreat into Sandy Hollow exposed Stephen's left flank to the surging British troops. Stephen attempted to maintain his position rather than retreat, perhaps to provide as much time as possible for Stirling and Sullivan to withdraw their shattered commands to a safe distance and form elsewhere. General Scott's brigade, holding the left side of Stephen's division, was but a short distance from the American artillery position that had just been overrun by the British light infantry and grenadiers, some of whom were still pressing against his front. Woodford's brigade on Scott's right, meanwhile, was facing a fresh threat from the advancing jaegers and newly placed enemy artillery. After encountering significant obstacles in the form of woods, fences, and swampy terrain, the British and Germans finally managed to wheel three guns into an ideal position to enfilade Woodford's brigade with grapeshot. Two of the guns, 3-pounders that were probably attached to the 2nd Battalion of Light Infantry, unlimbered along the 2nd Light Infantry Battalion front, with nine companies on their left and another five companies advancing on their right. The third

23 Burgoyne, trans. and ed., *Diaries of Two Jaegers*, 18; Von Wurmb to von Jungkenn, October 14, 1777, 10; Burgoyne and Burgoyne, eds., *Journal of the Hesse-Cassel Jaeger Corps*, 14. The woods, combined with a slight elevation change, blocked the Germans' view of the British light infantry advancing and fighting on their right. The cannon referenced by von Wurmb were the two 3-pounders assigned to support the advancing jaegers that had been left behind due to the difficulties of terrain.

piece, a 12-pounder, set up between the battalions, with the 1st Light Infantry Battalion advancing on its right. From this advantageous position the British gunners rammed grapeshot down the hot tubes and fired, spraying deadly iron rounds at an oblique angle into Woodford's line. Whether these metal balls were responsible for taking out the horses of Stephen's pair of field pieces is unknown, but the animals fell and when the infantry eventually retreated there was no way to take the invaluable field pieces with them. Woodford was also struck in the hand and retired down the southern slope to dress his injury.

While the British guns roared, the 2nd Light Infantry Battalion and jaegers, supported by an advancing Brig. Gen. James Agnew's 4th British Brigade, pressed Stephen's front. Five companies from the 2nd battalion had finally managed to cross the marshy bottomland in front of Birmingham Hill and assault Scott's brigade on Stephen's left. "The fire of Musquetry all this time was as Incessant & Tremendous, as ever had been Remember'd," wrote Lt. Frederick Augustus Wetherall of the 17th Regiment of Foot's light company, "But the Ardour & Intrepidity of the Troops overcoming every Opposition & pressing on with an Impetuosity not to be resisted." Ultimately, he continued, "the Rebel Line incapable of further Resistance gave way in every part & fled with the utmost disorder." Montresor, Howe's engineer who watched the fighting from Osborne's Hill and later rode the ground to study the terrain, described the difficult attack made by the British light infantry: "the ground on the left being the most difficult the rebels disputed it with the Light Infantry with great spirit, particularly their officers, this spot was a ploughed hill and they covered by its summit and flanked by a wood; however unfavourable the circumstances [the light infantry's] ardour was such that they pushed in upon [the Americans] under a very heavy fire."²⁴

Scott's men held as long as possible, but Stirling's withdrawal exposed their left, which was turned and engulfed by surging British troops. When the patriot guns on the hill ceased firing, the 1st Light Infantry Battalion closed the distance and overwhelmed the front and engulfed the flank of Scott's line, which collapsed and retreated down the back of Birmingham Hill into Sandy Hollow and beyond.²⁵

²⁴ Wetherall, *Journal*; Montresor, "Montresor Journals," 450.

²⁵ Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty-Land-Warrant Application Files (M804) [RWPF], file S37758. William Beale of the 12th Virginia Regiment was wounded in the forehead during the defensive effort by Scott's brigade.

While Scott's brigade was in the process of being driven back, as late as 6:00 p.m. Woodford's embattled brigade was still standing firm against the oncoming jaegers and blasts of grapeshot. His men, however, were falling with uncomfortable regularity. Sergeants Noah Taylor and Banks Dudley, both from the 7th Virginia Regiment, were taken out by flying metal. Colonel John Patton's Additional Continental Regiment lost Pvt. John Stewart with a wound in his left arm and Pvt. Jacob Cook with a shot to his right leg. Captain James Calderwood, whose independent company was attached to the 11th Virginia Regiment, was wounded and died two days after the battle. Eleven years later, his widow would apply to the War Department for half-pay.²⁶

When the fighting intensified on his right, Col. von Wurmb "had the call to attack sounded on the half moon [hunting horn], and the Jaegers, with the [Second] battalion of light infantry, stormed up the height." Despite Woodford's best efforts, once Scott's brigade on his left was swept away, it was simply impossible to remain in place for long. The final straw, however, arrived on the opposite flank when Col. von Wurmb's jaegers struck Woodford's right flank when a sergeant and six men worked around the American right to pick off men from the rear. Captain Ewald recorded this tactic in his diary: "During the action Colonel Wurmb fell on the flank of the enemy, and Sergeant [Alexander Wilhelm] Bickell with six jagers moved to his rear, whereupon the entire right wing of the enemy fled to Dilworthtown." According to another account, Bickell's movement around Stephen's right flank put the German troops in a good position to "inaccomodat[e] the enemy for a half hour." Von Wurmb later wrote with pride that his jaegers "attacked them in God's Name and drove them from their post."²⁷

²⁶ Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty-Land-Warrant Application Files, file S6085; Linn and Egle, eds., *Pennsylvania Archives*, Series 2, vol. 10, 810-811. Jonathan Nicholson to Joseph Howell, September 17, 1788, National Archives and Records Administration, Ltrs sent J. Howell, Comm. Accounts RG93, accessible at www.wardepartmentpapers.org. Lieutenant Philip Slaughter of the 11th Virginia Regiment remembered the bloody day of combat for the remainder of his life. After the end of the Revolutionary War, he returned to central Virginia and named his farm "Brandywine." Slaughter lived a long life and did not die until 1849. Ironically, his farm was the scene of heavy fighting during the American Civil War at the battle of Cedar Mountain on August 9, 1862. Robert K. Krick, *Stonewall Jackson at Cedar Mountain* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1990), 50.

²⁷ Burgoyne and Burgoyne, eds., *Journal of the Jaeger Corps*, 14; Ewald, *Diary*, 86. "Dilworthtown" was Dilworth, about one-half mile southeast of Stephen's position on Birmingham Hill; Von Wurmb to von Jungkenn, October 14, 1777, 10. Two of the jaeger officers were later recognized for their service at the Brandywine: Capts. Johann Ewald and

"They allowed us to advance till within one hundred and fifty yards of their line," remembered Lt. Martin Hunter of the 52nd Regiment of Foot's light company, "when they gave us a volley, which we returned, and then immediately charged. They stood the charge till we came to the last paling. Their line then began to break, and a general retreat took place soon after." An unidentified officer with the 2nd Light Infantry Battalion described the assault from his perspective. "Our army Still gained ground, although they had great Advantig of Ground and ther Canon keep a Constant fire on us. Yet We Ne'er Wass daunted they all gave way." According to the *Jaeger Corps Journal*, "the enemy retreated in confusion, abandoning two cannons and an ammunition cassion, which the Light Infantry, because they had attacked on the less steep slope of the height, took possession of."²⁸

Stephen's division ended up as scattered and difficult to organize as Sullivan's broken command. Unlike Sullivan's men, however, Stephen's troops were in position and prepared when the British attacked, and acquitted themselves well. This was amply demonstrated when the jaegers reached the summit of the hill and realized that "many dead [Americans] lay to our front." The 52nd's Lt. Hunter admitted the Americans had "defended [their guns] to the last; indeed, several officers were cut down at the guns. The Americans never fought so well before, and they fought to great advantage." Although eventually driven from the hill, the Continentals had fought so hard and well against the veteran British units that Gen. Howe believed Sullivan had defended the position with 10,000 troops.²⁹

Many of Cornwallis's units suffered heavily in their victory, not only the grenadier battalions but the light infantry as well. Fifteen light infantry officers fell, and the battalions reported losses of 16 killed and 103 wounded. The jaegers suffered another eight killed, including two officers, and 38 wounded.³⁰

Carl von Wreden received the Hessian order *pour la vertu militaire*. They were the first officers of that rank to be thus honored. Lowell, *The Hessians*, 199.

28 Hunter, *Journal of Hunter*, 29-30; *Captured British Officer's Accounts Ledger, 1769-1771, and Diary*, Washington Papers online, Library of Congress, series 6: Military Papers, 1755-1798: Subseries C, accessed March 28, 2013; Burgoyne and Burgoyne, eds., *Journal of the Jaeger Corps*, 14.

29 Von Wurmb to von Jungkenn, October 14, 1777, 10; Hunter, *Journal of Hunter*, 29-30; *Narrative of Howe*, 98.

30 American losses are reported later in this study, as we do not have them broken out separately as we have for the British and German units. Jaeger casualties are from Burgoyne and Burgoyne, eds., *Journal of the Jaeger Corps*, 15; *Remembrancer for 1777*, 415-417; Inman, ed., "List of

A Note on Generalship

Generals Howe and Cornwallis watched the assault from Osborn's Hill. "A cherished tradition, one fostered by admiring biographers and some generals," explains historian John Luzader, "represented general officers as personally leading their armies into battle in the heroic mode of Alexander the Great and Henry V." While there were times when a commanding general believed his presence on the front line was needed to resolve a crisis, it was far more common for him to exercise command from a central position in the rear where he could be located, receive intelligence, and issue orders through his aides. General Washington had been doing just that all day at Chads's Ford, where he remained near his headquarters at the Ring House so scouts and aides could find him. "The advent of firearms and field artillery wrought a tactical revolution that changed the way officers, especially generals, functioned," continues Luzader. Massed formations of men stacked eight to ten ranks deep at the beginning of the seventeenth century had faded into formations of two or three ranks by the end of the eighteenth century. "That thinning and attendant extension of the front rendered impossible the personal control of large units." While it was not uncommon during the American Revolution for a general officer to ride along the front lines, doing so substantially increased the risk of losing overall control of the battle. A general commanding from the front "ceased to be able to influence events occurring outside his severely limited field of view." Commanding generals had to direct the various divisions of their army, and violating that tenet "was so risky as to limit doing so to moments when extreme conditions demanded extreme measures."³¹

Officers Killed," 176-205. Among the light infantry officers who fell, Lt. Francis Johnson (38th Regiment of Foot's light company) was killed. In addition to those mentioned earlier, the following light infantry officers were wounded: Capt. Thomas Mecan (23rd Regiment of Foot), Capt. James Douglas (15th Regiment of Foot), Capt. Nicholas Wade (49th Regiment of Foot), Capt. Henry Downing (55th Regiment of Foot), Capt. James Murray in the ankle (57th Regiment of Foot), Capt. James DeCourcy (40th Regiment of Foot), Lt. John Birch (27th Regiment of Foot), Lt. Thomas Nicholl (33rd Regiment of Foot), Lt. Charles Leigh (15th Regiment of Foot), Lt. Samuel Ruxton (45th Regiment of Foot), Lt. Thomas Armstrong (49th Regiment of Foot), and Lt. Bent Ball (63rd Regiment of Foot). Over a month and half later, Captain Murray was still recovering from his wounded ankle. That day he wrote, "[N]ow that my fever has left me I shall be perfectly recovered in a few days." Eric Robson, ed., *Letters from America, 1773 to 1780: Being the letters of a Scots officer, Sir James Murray, to his home during the War of American Independence* (New York, 1950), 49.

31 Luzader, *Saratoga*, 227.