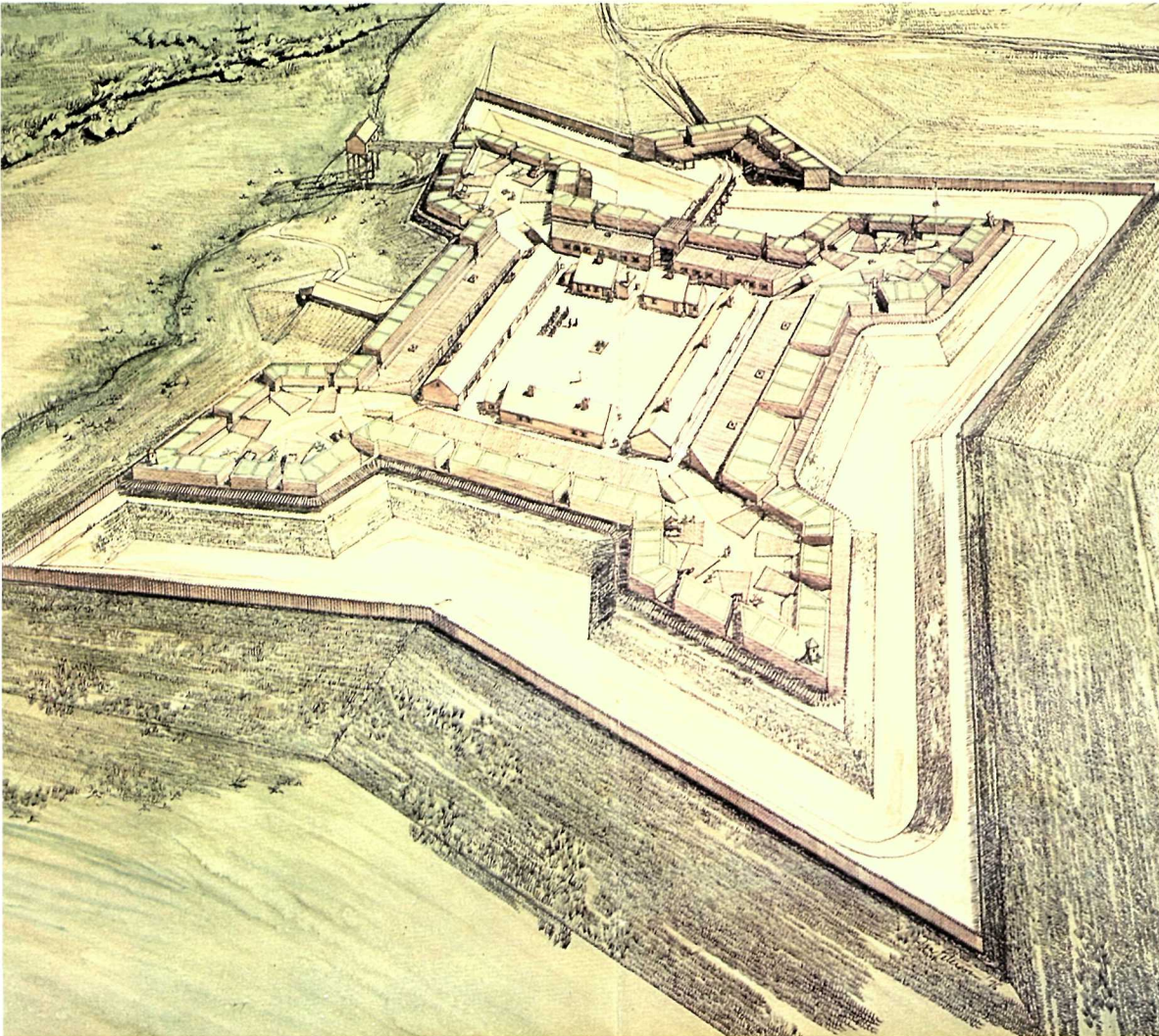




Fort Stanwix



National Park Service
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National Monument, New York

The modern city of Rome, N.Y., where Fort Stanwix is located, lies astride an ancient water route linking the Great Lakes with the Atlantic Ocean. On the city's eastern side lies the Mohawk River, which flows eastward until it joins the Hudson just north of Albany. On the city's western side is Wood Creek, which, along with Oneida Lake and the Oswego River, forms a passage to Oswego and Lake Ontario. Except for the short portage across nearly level ground between the Mohawk River and Wood Creek, a colonial traveler or trader could journey by water all the way from New York City to Canada and back again.

Indians had used this portage for centuries. The Dutch called it Trow Plat; to the English it was the Oneida Carry. During Spring thaws, when both watersheds were full, the distance across the Carry was only 3 miles; in the fall, especially after a drought, a traveler might have had to walk 5 miles to find water deep enough to launch a boat. In the 250 years after white men first crossed it, the portage became a funnel for commerce, military activity, and settlement.

The importance of the Carry can only be appreciated when one realizes how poor the roads and trails were in this area during colonial times. Most were mere ruts worn in the ground by persons on foot and could barely be traversed on horseback, let alone by wagon. Rivers were the main arteries of transportation and trade, and (especially during the period of Anglo-French rivalry) their protection was a major consideration in continental planning. Next to the St. Lawrence River, which until 1760 was under French control, the Hudson-Mohawk-Wood Creek line was the shortest route from the Atlantic Ocean to Canada. To the British, whose

hold on this area was tenuous at best, the Mohawk Valley was a potential invasion route from the north, and the Oneida Carry a vital link between England's several western outposts on the Great Lakes and those on Lake Champlain and the Hudson River to the east.

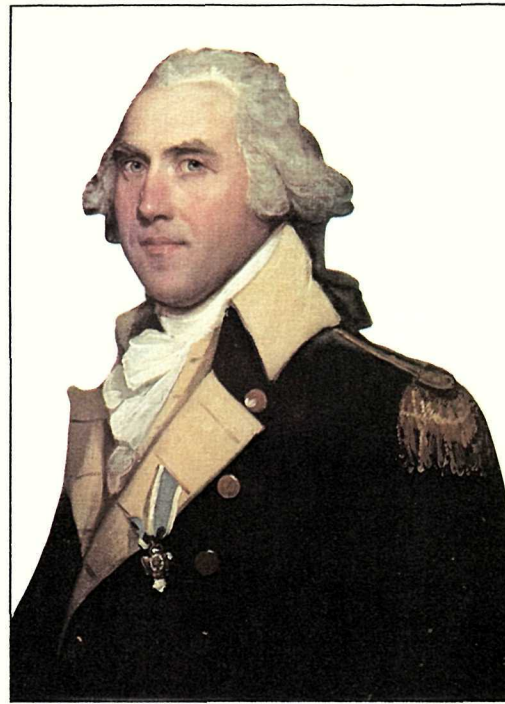
In the early years of the French and Indian War (1754-63) the British built four small forts to protect the portage: Fort Bull at the lower (low water) landing on Wood Creek; Fort Newport near the upper (high water) landing; Fort Craven at the upper landing on the Mohawk; and Fort Williams, north of Fort Craven on the same river. In March 1756 the French attacked, captured, and burned Fort Bull. The British immediately replaced it with Fort Wood Creek (the remains of which can still be seen west of Rome on Route 49). When French troops captured Oswego in August 1756, Gen. Daniel Webb, in command at the Carry, ordered all the forts destroyed and withdrew his force back down the Mohawk Valley.

During the late summer of 1758 the British decided to reoccupy the portage and build a strong fort capable of withstanding the type of raid made on Fort Bull 2 years earlier. The site chosen for it was on high ground overlooking the Mohawk River a short distance north of where Fort Williams stood on the portage road. Work began in the fall, and by the following summer the fort was essentially completed. It was named for Brig. Gen. John Stanwix, who had been in charge of its construction.

The French never attacked Fort Stanwix and, after the British conquest of Canada in 1760, it was gradually abandoned as a military post. The fort did, however, serve as a center for Indian affairs for some 10 years. In 1768 it was the scene of a treaty called the Property Line or Boundary Line Treaty, under which the Iroquois ceded a vast territory east of the Ohio River and thereby cleared the way for another surge of westward settlement.

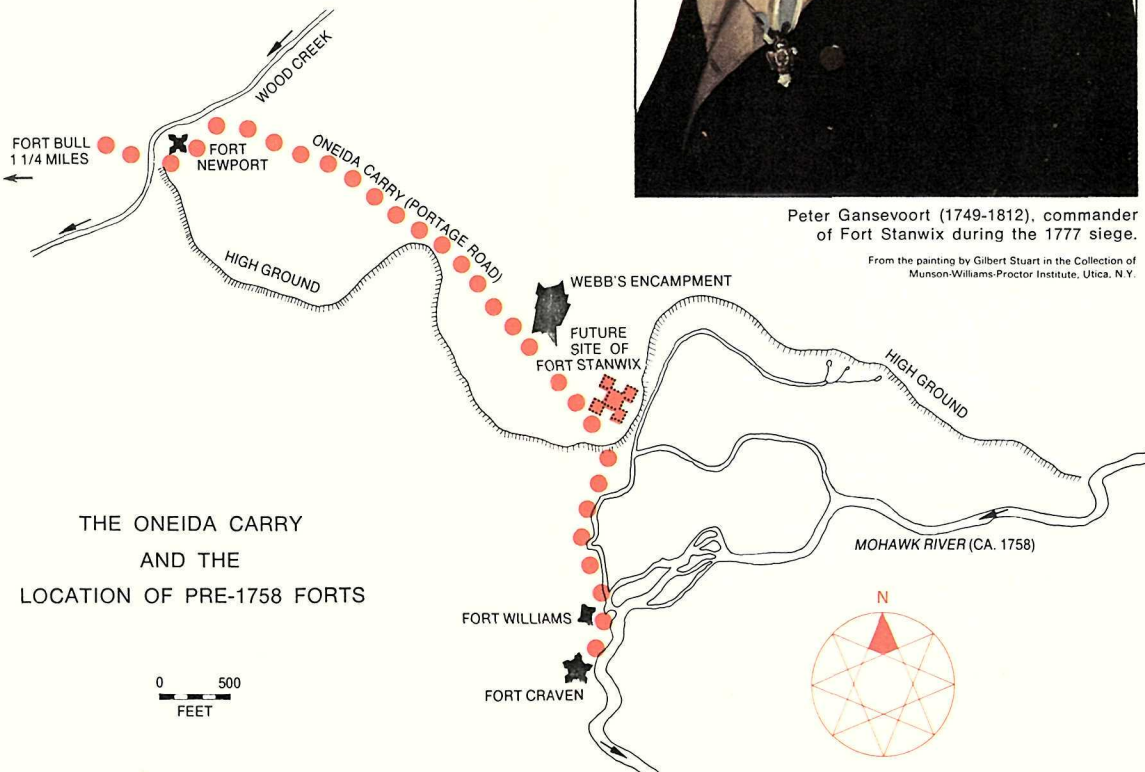
“... It is my Determined resolution with the Forces under my Command, to defend this Fort to the last Extremity. . . .”

Col. Peter Gansevoort to Gen. Barry St. Leger, August 9, 1777.



Peter Gansevoort (1749-1812), commander of Fort Stanwix during the 1777 siege.

From the painting by Gilbert Stuart in the Collection of Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Utica, N.Y.



When the Revolution broke out in the spring of 1775, American leaders recognized the need to defend the Mohawk Valley (and the Oneida Carry) against a possible British incursion. But the valley's defense was complicated by a violent civil war among local residents who, like Americans elsewhere, entered the war against England with divided loyalties. The people of the valley were a mixture of Germans, Scots, and English, with a sprinkling of old colonial Dutch. Communities and families split as some members aligned themselves with the rebelling colonists while others remained loyal to England and her provincial administration. Still others hoped to remain totally aloof from the conflict.

Leadership of the loyalists centered in the family of Sir William Johnson, who, from 1756 until his death on the eve of the Revolution, had been superintendent of Indian affairs and the valley's dominant personality. His political heirs were his son, Sir John Johnson; his nephew, son-in-law, and successor to the superintendency, Guy Johnson; another son-in-law, David Claus; and John Butler, who had been Sir William's deputy. Closely associated with them was Mohawk Indian Joseph Brant (Thayendanege), Sir William's onetime secretary and brother of Molly Brant, Sir William's Mohawk mistress.

Sir John, hereditary head of the family and of the imperial interests, undertook to organize the valley's loyalists and Indians into a provincial military force; but, because of pressures from rebel elements who were not above using the present hostilities to settle old scores, his efforts were thwarted and he and many of his supporters fled to Canada. There he was commissioned to raise a loyalist regiment. John Butler, on the other hand, was stationed at Niagara to maintain the good will of the Indians and to persuade them to support the British.

Indian loyalty and support were important both to Americans and British. The area from the upper Hudson westward to Lake Erie was originally the land of the Six Nations of the Iroquois, composed of the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora tribes. For most

of the 18th century they comprised the strongest native power in North America. By the time of the Revolution, however, the tribes had lost much of their land and the Confederacy much of its strength, its people having become more acculturated and dependent upon the whites. But the Iroquois were still a respectable force and, at a time when few soldiers were available for frontier defense, their support (especially to rebelling Americans) might mean the difference between local victory or defeat.

In colonial times, the Iroquois invariably supported British efforts against the French; but now, while most of the tribes maintained their traditional allegiance to England, the Oneidas and Tuscaroras sided with the Americans. Indeed, as early as June 1775 representatives of the Oneidas urged the Committee of Safety for Tryon County (comprising all of the Mohawk Valley west and northwest of Schenectady) to garrison old Fort Stanwix so that "nothing might pass and repass to the hurt of our Country." In July this sentiment was echoed by settlers around the fort who, "few in number and daily exposed to an invasion of the Frontiers," asked that "a sufficient guard . . . be posted there."

It was not until the summer of 1776, however, largely through the efforts of Gen. Philip Schuyler, that Americans occupied the Oneida Carry and, "aided by artificers of every kind," began to rebuild the then-ruinous Fort Stanwix. Progress on the work was so rapid, despite constant manpower shortages, that by August 1 Col. Elias Dayton, commanding troops from the 3rd New Jersey Regiment, could report that the fort (now renamed Fort Schuyler) was "defensible against almost any number of Small Arms." Construction was still far from complete, however. In October, Dayton turned the work over to Col. Samuel Elmore and a smaller detachment of Connecticut Continentals. In the spring of 1777 Col. Peter Gansevoort and the 3rd New York Regiment replaced Elmore's men and continued the rebuilding. Hampering their efforts were a lack of skilled craftsmen and an incompetent French military engineer.

When Gansevoort took command at Fort Stanwix, there were already rumors of a coming British invasion. In the fall of 1776 the British had launched an offensive southward on Lake Champlain. It was foiled by the naval battle of Valcour Island and the advent of winter. A new campaign was then organized for the summer of 1777. Basically, it was to consist of a two-pronged attack: one south via Lake Champlain, Lake George, and the Hudson River by an army under Gen. John Burgoyne; the other eastward down the Mohawk Valley from Oswego on Lake Ontario by troops under Col. Barry St. Leger. If all went according to plan, both forces would meet at Albany and await further orders. Sir Henry Clinton, commanding at New York City, was to provide whatever support he could to facilitate the success of these operations. The effect of such a strategy would be to isolate New England, still considered the center of American resistance, from the rest of the colonies, thus allowing the British to consolidate their military strength and crush Gen. George Washington's Continental Army.

The Mohawk Expedition consisted of 100 men each from the 8th and 34th Regiments of Foot, a company of Hanau Chasseurs (German light infantry), Sir John Johnson's loyalist regiment (the Royal Yorkers), a company of John Butler's Rangers, 40 artillerymen, and a contingent of Indians and Canadian militia. In all, St. Leger had an effective force of between 700 and 800 whites and 800 to 1,000 Indians.

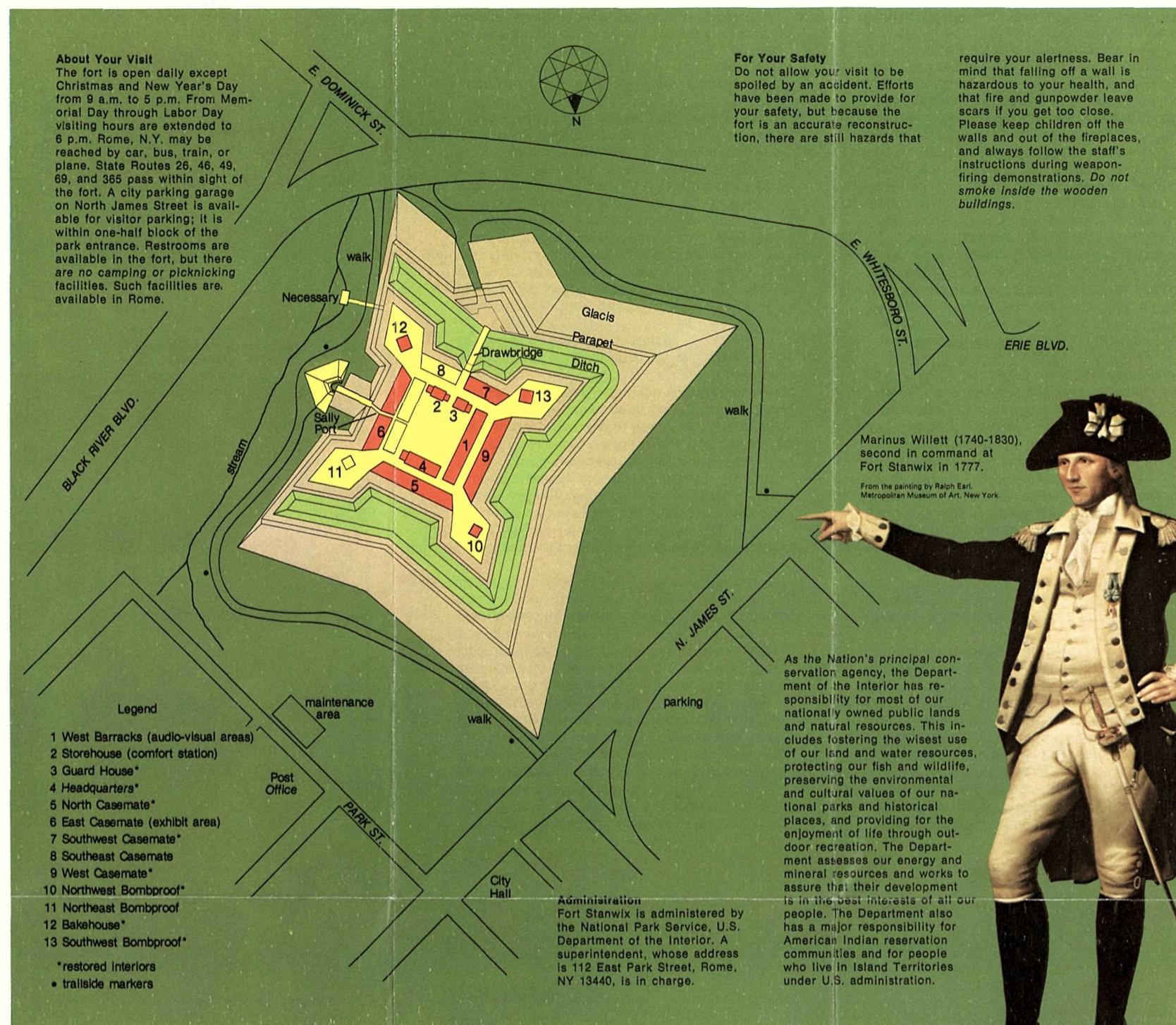
St. Leger (with the temporary rank of brigadier general) marched his army eastward from Oswego on July 26. By the end of the month his troops were approaching Wood Creek. At this time Fort Stanwix was garrisoned by 450 men from the 3rd New York Regiment and 150 men from the 9th Massachusetts Regiment. Gansevoort, kept informed of St. Leger's progress by friendly Oneida Indians, knew by August 1 that it would only be a matter of hours before the British arrived. He and his men had driven themselves hard, felling trees to block Wood Creek and working to make the fort defensible.

The siege of Fort Stanwix officially began on Sunday, August 3, when Lt. Henry Bird invested the fort with a small party of British troops and Indians. St. Leger, finding that getting through the obstructions in Wood Creek was more difficult than he had anticipated, had sent Bird's party ahead to prevent reinforcements from reaching the fort before he could get his army into position to besiege it. They failed, however, to stop a 100-man reinforcement of Massachusetts troops and four boatloads of supplies that arrived just as they approached.

It took St. Leger until August 7 to clear the obstructions from Wood Creek, build a road, and bring up his artillery and stores. During this time, events were shaping up elsewhere for one of the major engagements of the Revolution. On July 30, having learned of St. Leger's advance and determined to go to Gansevoort's relief, Gen. Nicholas Herkimer, in charge of the Tryon County militia, ordered his command to muster at Fort Dayton on the Mohawk River near German Flatts, about 50 miles east of Fort Stanwix. By August 4 between 800 and 900 men had assembled and begun the march westward. They made good progress and by the night of the 5th were encamped at the Indian village of Oriska, 8 miles from Stanwix. Herkimer sent several scouts ahead to inform Gansevoort that the Tryon men were on their way and to ask him to do what he could to facilitate their safe arrival. Gansevoort was to fire off three cannon shots to let Herkimer know that the message had been received and agreed to.

By the early morning hours of August 6, not having heard the expected signal (the scouts being late getting to the fort), Herkimer convened a council of war to determine whether to continue the march or wait for the signal. Most of the council members favored an immediate advance. Herkimer preferred to wait, and he became so adamant about it that some of his officers openly accused him of cowardice or sympathizing with the enemy. (Two of Herkimer's nephews were serving in St. Leger's army.) Herkimer yielded and gave the order to march.

Two miles west of Oriska, the road to Fort Stanwix crossed a broad ravine about 50 feet deep with steep banks. Herkimer's main body, about 600 men, had already entered the ravine and started up the other side when about 400 British



regulars and Indians opened fire from ambush at the militia's front and flanks. The American rear-guard of 200 men managed to escape while the remainder took whatever cover they could find to return the fire. After 45 minutes, a sudden cloudburst enabled Herkimer, who had been wounded in the leg during the first exchange of shots, to regroup his force into more defensible positions. The battle then resumed and lasted, sometimes hand-to-hand, for 8 hours. Finally the British, having lost 72 men, withdrew from the field. The Americans, with at least 150 casualties, were in no condition to pursue and fell back to Fort Dayton. (Several days later, Herkimer died after an attempt to amputate his wounded leg.

Meanwhile, Gansevoort had received Herkimer's message at last and sent his second in command, Col. Marinus Willett, with a detachment of 250 Massachusetts and New York soldiers to create a diversion in the militia's behalf. Willett and his men did not know of the battle raging just a few miles away when they came upon two unoccupied British camps—one belonging to Sir John Johnson's loyalists, the other to the Indians—on the road south of the fort. Instead of marching on toward Oriska, Willett's men began to loot the camps, carrying away some 50 brass kettles, 100 blankets, numerous muskets, tomahawks, spears, ammunition, clothing, and an assortment of papers belonging to British officers, including St. Leger. From prisoners brought into the camps, Willett learned of the ambush at Oriska and decided to return to Fort Stanwix with the booty.

The raid on the Indian camp was to have especially significant results. Coupled with the death of several chiefs at Oriska, the loss of their

clothes, blankets, and provisions dampened Indian enthusiasm for what was threatening to become a long, unrewarding siege—a type of military operation for which Indians rarely showed much affinity. In fact, the British situation was not nearly good enough to promise success, unless St. Leger could persuade the Americans that defending the fort was doomed to failure.

Shortly after midnight on August 9, Gansevoort, having rejected a second surrender demand from the British, sent Willett and another officer out of the fort and down the Mohawk Valley to raise another expedition. The timing was good. General Schuyler, in Albany, before learning of Herkimer's battle at Oriska, had already detached Maj. Gen. Benedict Arnold from the American army opposing Burgoyne on the Hudson with instructions to put together an expedition and march to Fort Stanwix. By the time Arnold reached German Flatts (where he was joined by Massachusetts and New York troops sent out earlier under Brig. Gen. Ebenezer Learned), his force was complete. Together with the Fort Stanwix garrison, the Americans now nearly matched the British in strength, Indians included.

By a stroke of fortune, a group of loyalists was apprehended at German Flatts, among them an amazing young man named Hon Yoost Schuyler, his mother, and his brother. The Indians believed Hon Yoost capable of communing with the spirits and held him in considerable awe. Keeping the mother and brother as hostages, Arnold sent Hon Yoost and a friendly Oneida Indian to St. Leger's camps to spread the rumor that the Americans were coming with an overwhelming army. The plan worked well: before Arnold's troops reached Fort Stanwix, the Indians had deserted, forcing

St. Leger to lift the siege and retreat to Canada. The retreat was almost a rout, and much equipment, including artillery, was abandoned.

This ended the military actions against Fort Stanwix. Two months later, surrounded and cut off, General Burgoyne surrendered his army at Saratoga—an action long considered to be the turning point of the Revolution because it led to the formal French alliance that eventually helped to gain independence for the United States. Although Stanwix was garrisoned until 1781, the war had little effect upon it. In 1779 it did play a minor role in the Sullivan Expedition that destroyed Indian settlements in western New York but which failed to stop Indian raids organized in Canada. On May 13, 1781, the barracks caught fire and the fort burned to the ground. The circumstances of the fire were considered unusual; arson was suspected but never proven. Within a few days, the garrison was ordered to evacuate the fort, the men to take everything, including scrap iron, with them.

Although the Treaty of Paris, signed in 1783, ended the war between England and America, it contained no provision for Britain's Indian allies. Accordingly, in October 1784, American commissioners met at Fort Stanwix with representatives of the Iroquois to set terms for a separate peace. The resulting Treaty of Fort Stanwix forced the Iroquois Confederacy (except for the Oneida and Tuscarora tribes which had generally supported the Americans) to cede a large part of their remaining lands to the United States. (Another parcel was purchased by Pennsylvania for \$5,000.) Much of the land obtained from the Indians was afterwards subdivided and sold to pay Revolutionary War debts or granted to soldiers in lieu of back pay.