

BALDWIN'S FLOATING BRIDGE,A REPORT ON THE IDENTITY OF THE TYPE AND COMPOSITION OF THE AMERICAN  
STRUCTURE BUILT ACROSS THE HUDSON RIVER SEPTEMBER AND OCTOBER 1777

by

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1980

While examining the various contemporary sources that pertain to the Burgoyne Campaign of 1777 when recently writing an essay entitled Burgoyne's Bridges, I found some small reference to the construction of an American Bridge that first spanned the Hudson River at Stillwater and then across from the American position at Bemis Heights and which still later spanned the same River near Saratoga. The necessity to construct this bridge rose from the primary need to open an easy communication and passage for American militia forces gathering on the east bank of the Hudson River. With its completion foraging excursions emanating from the main American position on the west bank could also be extended to the east side of the Hudson.

From the few existing records enough details concerning its dimensions and composition have fortunately survived so that a composite picture can be formed. It should be stated that the American Bridge as it was originally constructed at Stillwater was of an entirely different design than those built by the British during the same period. It was not a "Bridge of Boats" or "Pontoon Bridge," but more likened to a large raft constructed of buoyant logs with planks laid across and secured by cables and ropes on each shore. In one record we are told that it was approximately 16.5' feet wide and 924' feet long and was of sufficient strength to support the combined weight of marching soldiers and loaded wagons. We know that the structure took approximately 24 hours to build as construction began at 2 o'clock in the afternoon of September 9th and was completed by the afternoon hours of September 10th.

The precise location of the American Bridge as first constructed at Stillwater is uncertain. One existing account places it across the Hudson River just north of the house owned by Dirck Swart.<sup>1</sup> On September 12th the American Army decamped from Stillwater and marched 4 miles north to a

new position. At the same time the newly completed bridge was also floated up the Hudson River and re-established adjacent to the American Line. The new location can be established as it is depicted on one contemporary map.<sup>2</sup> Yet another map, which appears in a history of the Campaign written by a local resident in 1844 some 67 years after the construction, depicts the structure in some detail.<sup>3</sup> This map pinpoints the bridge as being located either immediately to the south and east of or just across from the Public House owned by one Jotham Bemus. In modern-day terms this would place the bridge near the junction of U.S. Route 4 with N.Y.S. Route 32.

There is some question as to how long the bridge was left intact near the Bemus Heights position. We know as fact that the bridge was in position between September 12th through October 10th on which date the American Army began to move out of its position on Bemus Heights in pursuit of Burgoyne's retreating army. Whether the American Bridge near Bemus Heights was at this point immediately dismantled or left standing for several more days is unclear. With General Gates' Army in pursuit, Burgoyne made the decision to dig-in at Saratoga. By October 13th Gates had totally surrounded the British position, which in turn led to Burgoyne's ultimate surrender on October 17th.

We know that another American Bridge was placed over the Hudson River between October 13th and the 14th near General Gates' newly established headquarters, which were located about 2 miles south of Saratoga. An American sketch map drawn during the events of October, 1777<sup>4</sup> vaguely depicts the bridge's location. In all probability this bridge was the same structure that had been in place 12 miles further south at Bemus Heights. Whether it was floated up the Hudson to the Saratoga position or dismantled and the materials brought north by wagons is unclear. However, one thing is certain, that by October 18th the bridge at Bemus Heights was gone. This is verified by British<sup>5</sup> and German prisoners who noted that they had to be ferried across the river at Stillwater on batteaux to the east bank. To be sure, if the bridge had still been in place, the Americans certainly would have crossed their prisoners over the river in this manner rather than consume time with a ferrying operation. A structural description of the American Bridge at the Saratoga position is similar to those of the bridge that had originally been at Stillwater, hence the likelihood that they were one and the same. The American Bridge near Saratoga was undoubtedly dismantled almost immediately after

Burgoyne's Army began its march into captivity on October 17th.

The contemporary descriptions of the American Bridge at Stillwater and near Saratoga are as follows:

#### THE BRIDGE AT STILLWATER

Colonel Jeduthan Baldwin, who commanded a Company of Military Engineers and Artificers in the American Northern Army during the Campaign of 1777. All bridges built were done so under his supervision:

Sept. " 5 went up to camp<sup>6</sup> after buying 400 boards.

6 at camp. went up to the Cohoes<sup>7</sup> to the mills, got 6 loads plank of M. Lansing.

7 in camp all day.....Loaded my wagons for a march, 20 wagons with tools & baggage.

9 Marched in the Front with the Carpenters & pioneers.....got to Stillwater about 12 o'clock & at 2 o'clock began a bridge across the River."<sup>8</sup>

Captain Benjamin Warren, an officer serving in the 7th Massachusetts Regiment of the Continental Line notes:

" Wed. Sept. 10th This day Col. Baldwin with his carpenters built a floating bridge across the river, so that they drove over a great number of cattle and sheep from the other side upon it before night. This bridge was a rod wide and fifty six rods long."<sup>9</sup>

Chaplain Enos Hitchcock, serving in Patterson's Brigade of Massachusetts Regiments:

Sept. " 9.....Colo. Baldwin began a bridge across the River in ye afternoon----

10.....The Bridge finished by the middle of the Afternoon----"<sup>10</sup>

Lieutenant Thomas Blake, of the 1st New Hampshire Regiment of the Continental Line:

" Sept. 10.....We began to fortify on the heights back of Stillwater, and built a floating bridge across the river."<sup>11</sup>

Major-General Horatio Gates, commanding the American Northern Army:

Sept. 10th ".....this forenoon, a good Bridge of Communication, will be finished across the River."<sup>12</sup>

Colonel Henry B. Livingston, aide-de-camp to Major-General Philip Schuyler:

".....Gen. Gates has thrown a Bridge of Boards across the river just above Swarts."<sup>13</sup>

John P. Becker, a local resident of the area who as a young boy witnessed the events which occurred about Stillwater and Saratoga during the Revolutionary War. His father was at times serving as a teamster hauling military supplies from Albany to the Northern American Army. He and his father had business to conduct on several occasions in the American camp and as a result crossed the bridge over the Hudson:

" A floating bridge was constructed during this day over the river opposite Gen. Gates's quarters. It was made of boards, and was a kind of raft secured by cables and ropes on both shores. Over this floating structure a brisk foraging was kept....."<sup>14</sup>

#### THE BRIDGE ACROSS FROM BEMUS HEIGHTS

Chaplain Enos Hitchcock, at the new American position on Bemus Heights: Sept. " 12.....the Bridge brot. up----"<sup>15</sup>

#### THE BRIDGE NEAR SARATOGA

Private Daniel Granger, of Captain John Adams New Hampshire Militia which composed part of General Bricket's Brigade speaking of his arrival near the American Camp besieging Burgoyne about October 16th:

".....There was a Bridge placed across the River, of buoyant logs, and Planks laid on them, and each end fastened to the Shores."<sup>16</sup>

John H. Brandow an early 20th Century historian and authority of Revolutionary sights in and around old Saratoga ( modern-day Schuyler-ville ) has this to say regarding the American Bridge:

".....Gates had thrown a floating bridge across the Hudson below Fish creek. The approach to this bridge was just below the mouth of the deep ditch that runs east from Chubb's bridge.<sup>17</sup> This gave easy communication with Fellows to the east;"<sup>18</sup>

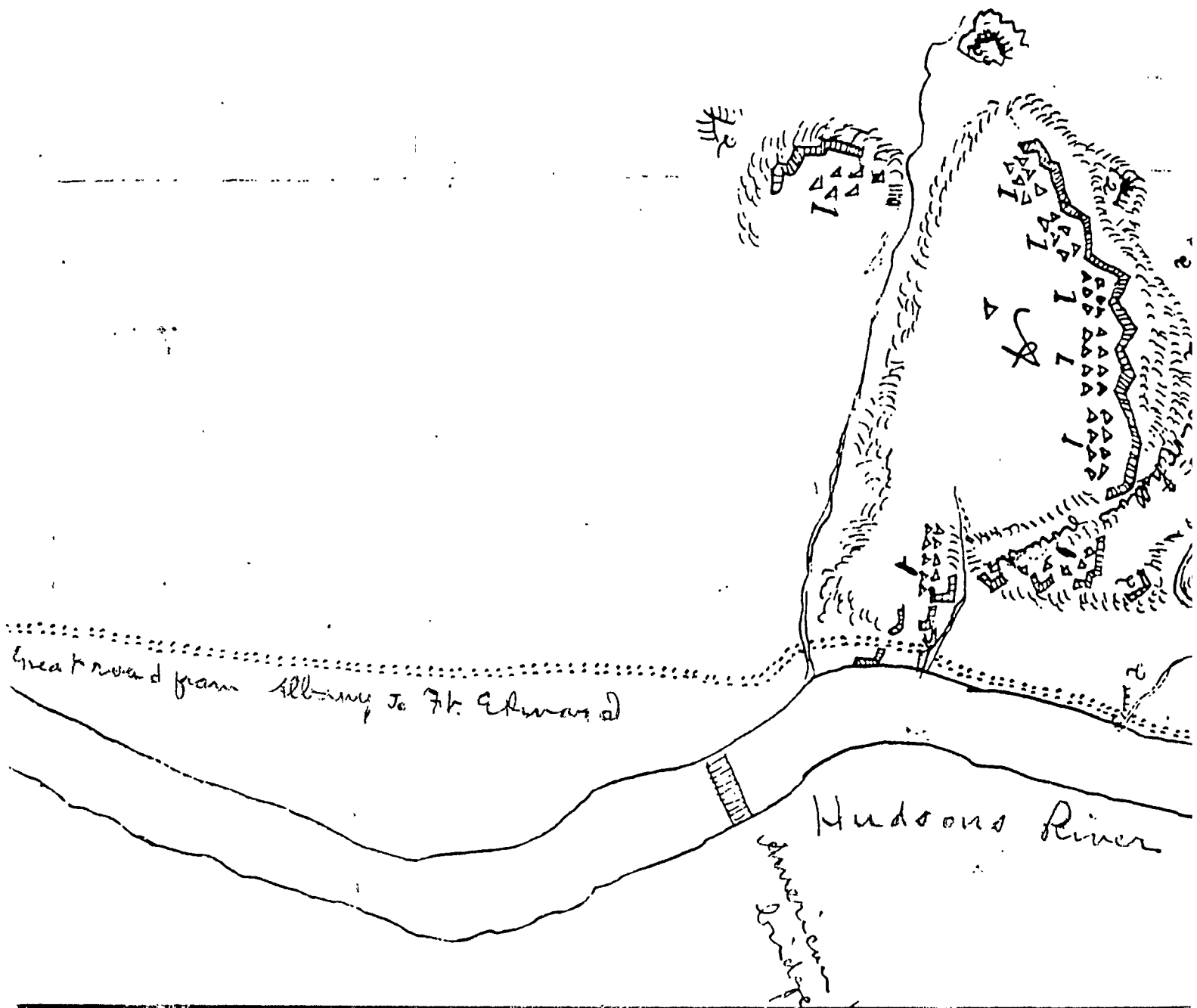
## FOOTNOTES

1. The site of the Dirck Swart House is now marked by an historic marker. It is located on the east side of U.S. Route 4 and N.Y.S. Route 32 between the intersection of Major Dickinson Road and Montgomery Place.
2. Map entitled An Orthographical View of the American and British Armies on the 7th & 8th of October 1777 drawn by Colonel Rufus Putnam (?), who commanded the 5th Massachusetts Regiment of the Continental Line during the Campaign of 1777. Despite the limited dates included in the above title the map actually depicts positions of both armies as well as sites associated with the events occurring between September 19th and October 17th, 1777. Positions of the American Bridge at Bemus Heights and near Saratoga are both depicted. The original map is now housed at the Cartographic Section of the New York Historical Society. A photographic copy is also housed in the map file of Saratoga National Historic Park, Stillwater, New York.
3. Charles Neilson, An Original, Compiled and Corrected Account Of Burgoyne's Campaign, Albany, 1844. The map is located on the rear inside cover. This map contains many errors and should be used with caution. The placement of the bridge as depicted can be considered to be accurate.
4. See Note 2 above.
5. One British prisoner, Lieutenant Thomas Anburey, stated: " As we crossed the river at Stillwater, we observed the army under General Gates marching to Albany,.....In crossing the river, I had nearly lost my baggage, and those in the batteaux had a very narrow escape; about the center a horse proving very unruly, jumped over, and his hind legs hung upon the side of the batteaux, and very near overset it." For these extracts see Anburey's Travels Through the Interior Parts of America, 2 Vols., London, 1789 ( New York, 1969 ), 2: 32-34.
6. Van Schaick's Island located at the point where the Mohawk River empties into the Hudson River about 9 miles north of Albany, New York. The American Army left this position on September 8th and marched north to the position at Stillwater.
7. Refers to the great waterfall on the Mohawk River where several mills were located. A short distance from Van Schaick's Island.
8. Thomas W. Baldwin, ed., The Revolutionary Journal Of Col. Jeduthan

8. Baldwin 1775-1778, Bangor, 1906 ( New York, 1971 ), .pp: 118-119.
9. David E. Alexander, ed., " Diary of Captain Benjamin Warren," Journal Of American History 3 ( 1909 ), p. 210.
10. William B. Weeden, ed., " Diary Of Enos Hitchcock," Rhode Island Historical Society Publications 7 ( 1899 ), p. 133.
11. Frederic Kidder, History Of The First New Hampshire Regiment In The War Of The Revolution, Albany, 1868, p. 33 " Journal Lt. Thomas Blake."
12. Horatio Gates Papers New York Historical Society Box 19 Reel #9  
Letter Gates to Brigadier-General John Stark September 10th, 1777  
Stillwater.
13. Philip Schuyler Papers, New York Public Library, unpublished letter  
( #601 ) Colonel Henry B. Livingston to Major-General Schuyler, Gen.  
Arnold's Quarters Stillwater Sept. 11th, 1777.
14. S. De Witt Bloodgood, ed., The Sexagenary: Or, Reminiscences of the American Revolution, Albany, 1866, p. 99.
15. Weeden, " Diary.....Hitchcock," p. 134.
16. M.M. Quaife, ed., " A Boy Soldier Under Washington: The Memoir Of Daniel Granger," Mississippi Valley Historical Review 16 ( 1930 ), p. 546.
17. Chubb's bridge was a small 19th Century structure spanning the Champlain Canal just below Fish Creek. " below " is almost 2 miles to the south.
18. John H. Brandow, The Story Of Old Saratoga, Albany, 1919 ( 2nd Ed. ), p. 174.

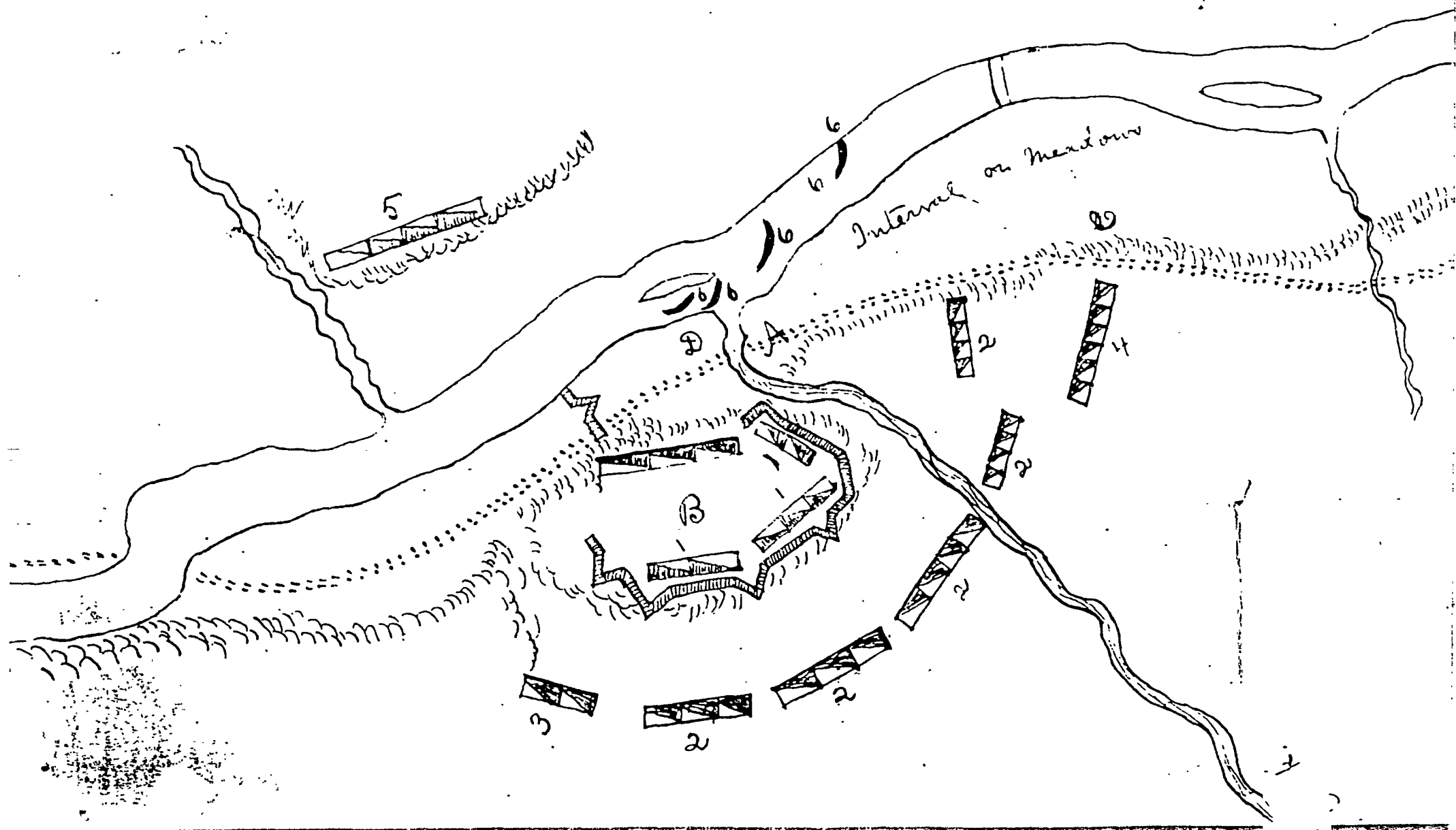
APPENDIX 1 - Extracts from An Orthographical View of the American and British Armies on the 7th & 8th of October 1777 drawn by Colonel Rufus Putnam (?). Reproduced courtesy of the New York Historical Society. I--Depicts the American Bridge at ~~Bam~~US-Heights. II--Depicts the American Bridge near Saratoga.

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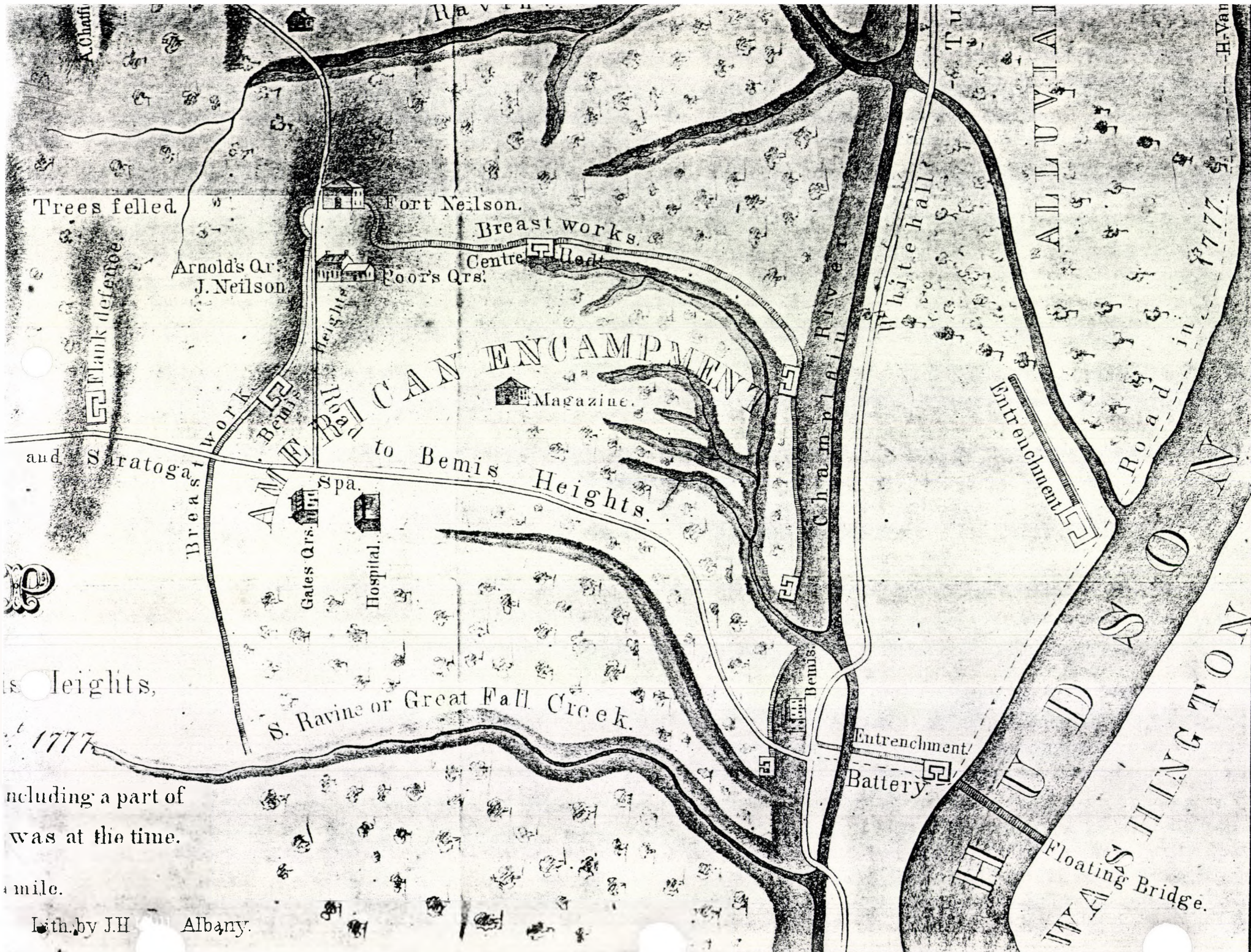


II



APPENDIX 2 - Extract from Map of the Battle ground on Bemis Heights 19th Sept. & 7th Oct. 1777 drawn by Charles Neilson.  
The map can be found in Neilson's An Original, Compiled and Corrected Account Of Burgoyne's Campaign, Albany, 1844.





Trees felled

Arnold's Qr.  
J. Neilson

Fort Neilson.

Breast works.

Centre Red

Poor's Qrs.

AMERICAN ENCAMPMENT

Magazine.

to Bemis Heights.

spa.

Gates Qrs.

Hospital.

S. Ravine or Great Fall Creek.

Champlain River

Entrenchment  
Battery

Entrenchment

Floating Bridge.

ALLUVIAL

WASHINGTON

is Heights,

including a part of  
was at the time.

a mile.

Lith. by J.H.

Albany.