



GENERAL NICHOLAS  
**HERKIMER**

HEROIC SON OF  
GERMAN IMMIGRANTS  
BECOMES  
A MARTYR TO  
AMERICA'S CAUSE

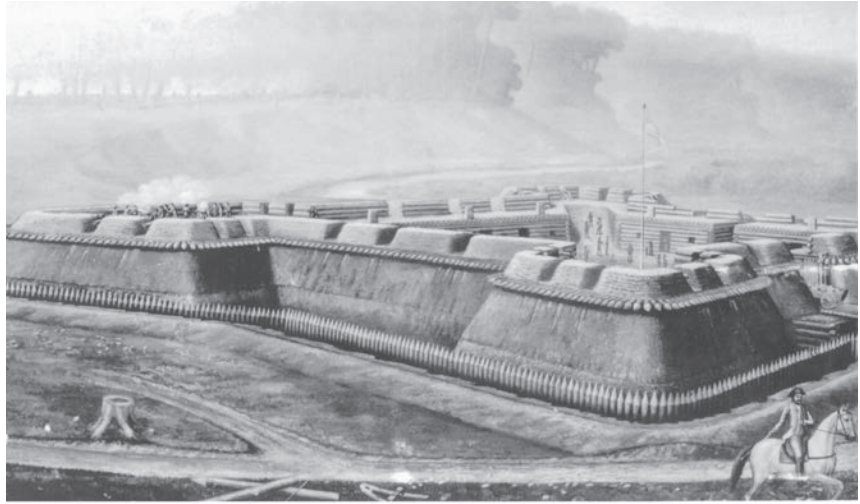
By Dr. Daniel S. Marrone

ON JUNE 14, 1912, the Oriskany Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution erected a series of 14 stone markers honoring American Brigadier General Nicholas Herkimer and the Tryon County Militia at the site of the Battle of Oriskany in central New York. These markers were in tribute to the bloody battle that occurred on August 6, 1777, when Herkimer's militia was ambushed six miles east of present-day Rome, N.Y., at Oriskany Creek. The battle was devastating for Herkimer and his militia, but proved to be one of the pivotal events of the American Revolution.

#### BURGOYNE'S 'GRAND STRATEGY'



British General John Burgoyne had a "Grand Plan" to end the American rebellion. Boasting that he could "crush" the rebels by "splitting in half" the newly created United States of America, Burgoyne would lead a massive invasion force of 7,000 southward from Canada through Lake Champlain with the aim of capturing Albany and the Hudson River—a major city and



18th-century drawing of Fort Stanwix on the Mohawk River at the present site of Rome, N.Y.

waterway for transportation and commerce. Accomplishing this, the United States would be divided, with the rebellious New England isolated from the rest of the Colonies.

Burgoyne's "Grand Plan" to conquer Albany and the Hudson River necessitated military support from two other British invasion forces. Under the command of General William Howe, a British force in New York City was to move north in support of Burgoyne. Unfortunately for Burgoyne, this key part of the plan was never implemented. Instead, Howe decided to move south and capture America's nascent capital city, Philadelphia. General Howe's army did indeed eventually capture Philadelphia. The British Army's conquest and occupation of the city was a major setback for the Americans.

Another British invasion army, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Barry St. Leger, did endeavor to join forces with Burgoyne. Embarking from Canada in July 1777, St. Leger's army landed at Fort Oswego on the south shore of Lake Ontario. From there, they moved south to Oneida Lake and were headed directly to the strategically imperative Mohawk

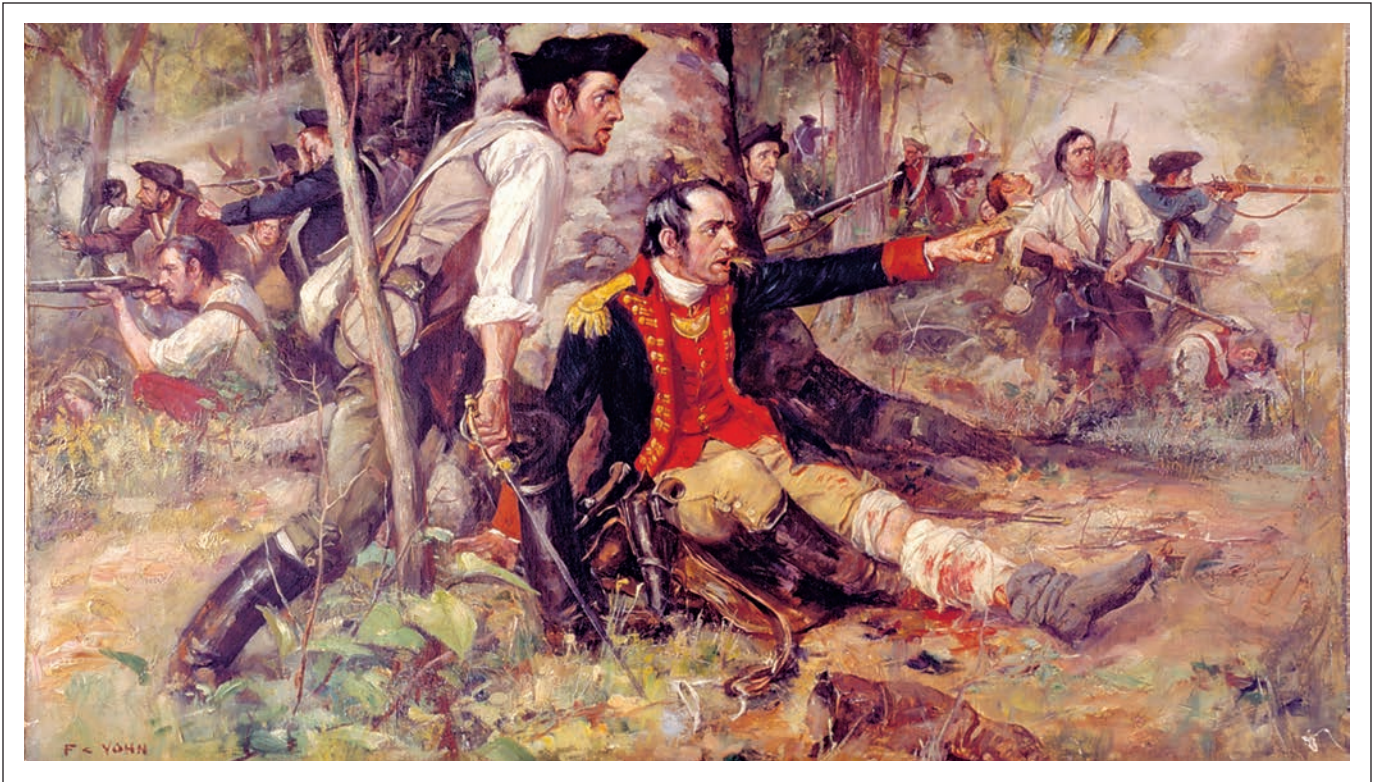
River. However, these British invaders had to conquer Fort Stanwix first.

#### TAKING FORT STANWIX



Erected by the British in 1757 during the French and Indian War, Fort Stanwix—briefly renamed Fort Schuyler when the Americans took the fort in July 1776—was situated on the Oneida Carry, a portage route between the Mohawk River and Oneida Lake.

The British attack on the American-held fort began in the early hours of August 3, 1777. The British invasion army was substantially supplemented by four of the six Native American Iroquois Confederation tribes: Cayuga, Mohawk, Onondaga and Seneca. Thankfully, Herkimer and the militia were allied with two of the Iroquois Confederation tribes, the Oneida and the Tuscarora, at the Battle of Oriskany. After seizing the fort and rechristening it Stanwix, the British hoped to then sweep east on the Mohawk River, quashing American resistance along the way to Albany. But St. Leger severely underestimated the opposing forces and failed to reach Albany, let alone seize the fort.



American artist Frederick Coffay Yohn depicts the wounded Herkimer on his saddle propped up against a beech tree courageously leading his men in the 1901 painting, "I Will Face the Enemy!" The painting is on display at the Utica, N.Y., Public Library.

The first obstacle was the German-speaking Mohawk Dutch settlers, including men, women and children, who refused to surrender at the fort despite being surrounded by St. Leger and his men. The second obstacle was New York's Tryon County Militia. (Colonial-era militias have evolved into today's National Guard.) Herkimer's militia was comprised of local farmers, cheese makers, vintners and trappers whose ethnicity varied widely. However, most of Herkimer's militia was comprised of sons and grandsons of early 19th-century settlers from Europe's Palatine German regions.

Six miles before reaching Fort Stanwix, Herkimer and his militia crossed a narrow stream called Oriskany Creek and were ambushed. The brigadier general was among the

first to be shot, suffering a serious leg wound. But he steadfastly refused to be taken from battle. Instead, he continued to lead and inspired his militia to "stay and fight" throughout this more than five-hour, hand-to-hand



One of 14 erected by the DAR in 1912, this stone marker sits near the site of the beech tree that sheltered the seriously wounded Herkimer.

struggle. The 49-year old Herkimer created an unparalleled model of bravery under fire.

Still, the Battle of Oriskany was devastating for Herkimer and his militia. Of the 760 Tryon County militiamen and 40 Oneida Indians fighting on the American side of the battle, 465 were severely wounded or killed. With a 60 percent casualty rate, it was one of the bloodiest engagements of the war. In fact, the Oriskany casualty rate would not be surpassed until nearly a century later during the American Civil War. Herkimer died 10 days after the battle due to loss of blood stemming from a botched leg amputation. While many Americans were lost at

Oriskany, Herkimer and his militia exacted a considerable toll on St. Leger's invasion force. Demoralized and increasingly sensing defeat, the British ended their siege of Fort Stanwix on August 23, 1777.

Unable to suppress American rebel resistance along the Mohawk River, St. Leger's mission ended in failure, thereby weakening Burgoyne's plan. Burgoyne's huge army approaching Albany never reached its target. Defeated at Freeman's Farm and Bemis Heights, together called the Battle of Saratoga, Burgoyne's army surrendered to the Americans on October 17, 1777. Saratoga and, it could be argued, Oriskany, were significant milestones in the war. With these American victories, French King Louis XVI was sufficiently convinced that the new country would eventually gain her independence from Great Britain. France then entered into the Treaty of Alliance

with the newly formed United States of America on February 6, 1778.

### HERKIMER'S LEGACY



The bravery of Herkimer and his militia was reflected in name and spirit with the aircraft carrier U.S.S. *Oriskany*. Commissioned on September 25, 1950, the carrier took part in numerous battles throughout the Korean and Vietnam wars. In 2006, this warship, with full military tribute, was intentionally sunk in the Gulf of Mexico.

Designated a National Historic Landmark in 1962, Fort Stanwix still stands in Rome, N.Y, and is administered by the U.S. National Park

Service. Herkimer's house and surrounding acreage in Little Falls, N.Y., have been officially designated the Herkimer Home State Historic Site.

Among the 14 stone markers erected by the DAR in 1912, the one at the site where a bleeding Herkimer led his militia best describes the significance of this event:

"Near this spot stood the beech tree which during the Battle of Oriskany sheltered the wounded General Herkimer while he gave orders that made Saratoga possible and decided the fate of the nation." 🌳

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