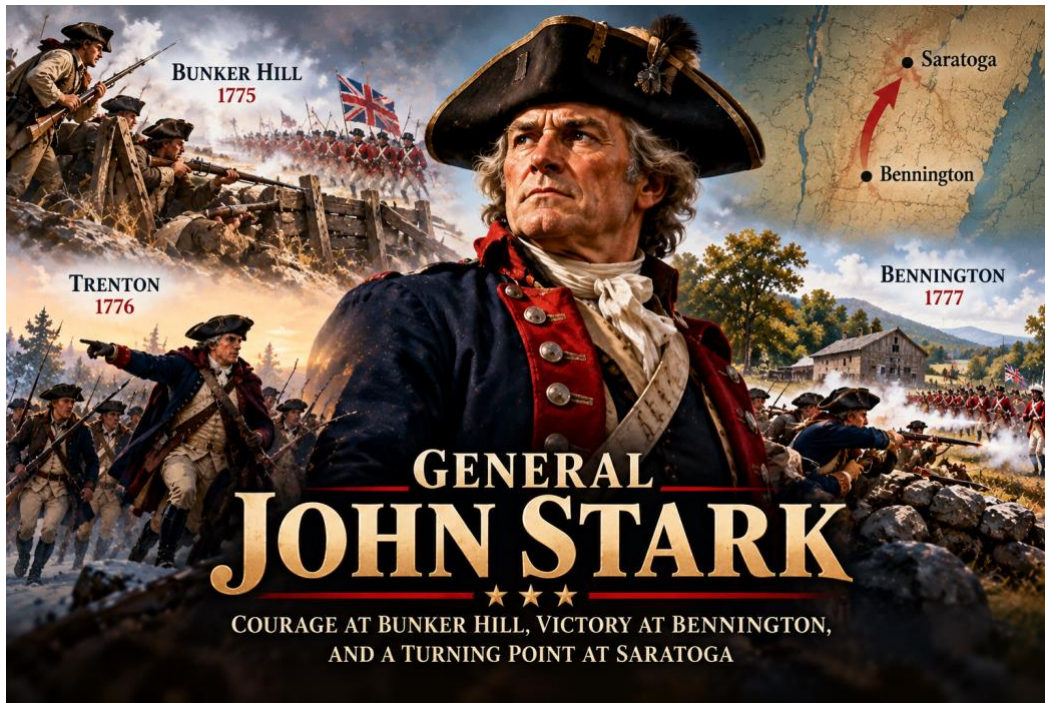




John Stark: The Stubborn General Who Helped Save the Revolution

A New Hampshire Original

When Major General John Stark died in 1822, he was 93 years old and among the last surviving generals of the Continental Army. New Hampshire's most famous Revolutionary War soldier had lived long enough to see the struggling collection of colonies he fought for become an established nation.

Stark's military career was distinguished by courage, battlefield intelligence and an independent streak that sometimes made him difficult for his superiors. That same stubbornness, however, helped produce one of the most important American victories of 1777. His defeat of a British expedition at Bennington seriously weakened General John Burgoyne's invading army only weeks before its surrender at Saratoga.

Learning to Fight With the British

Stark had learned the business of war long before the Revolution. During the French and Indian War he served with **Rogers' Rangers**, the famous colonial unit specializing in scouting, wilderness fighting and raids. The experience gave him an education quite different from that of an officer trained on European parade grounds. It also exposed him to the sometimes difficult relationship between British regular officers and colonial soldiers.

By the time rebellion broke out in Massachusetts in 1775, Stark was an experienced soldier who understood both the strengths and weaknesses of the British military. He soon put that knowledge to use against his former comrades.

Bunker Hill

After Lexington and Concord, Stark was commissioned colonel of a New Hampshire regiment and hurried south with his men. At the Battle of Bunker Hill on June 17, 1775, Stark's troops helped defend the rail fence extending toward the Mystic River, where the British attempted to turn the American flank.

The British eventually captured the American position after repeated assaults, but at a terrible cost. Stark and his New Hampshire men helped stop the attempted British flanking movement and then assisted in covering the American withdrawal. The battle demonstrated something that would become increasingly apparent during the Revolution: colonial soldiers, properly led and positioned, could stand against British regulars. Stark had established himself as one of the men capable of leading them.

With Washington at Trenton and Princeton

Stark remained with the Continental Army through some of its darkest months. He served during the retreat from New York in 1776 and fought in Washington's winter counteroffensive at **Trenton and Princeton**. Those victories restored badly needed confidence after months of American defeats.

Washington recognized Stark as an experienced and dependable commander and sent him back to New Hampshire to recruit additional soldiers. But there Stark discovered something he considered intolerable: Congress had promoted another officer to brigadier general while passing Stark over.

John Stark was not a man who swallowed an insult quietly. He resigned his commission and went home.

General Stark—On His Own Terms

Stark spent several months as a private citizen, but events soon made his military experience too valuable to waste. In 1777, British General John Burgoyne began advancing south from Canada in an ambitious campaign intended to reach Albany and help isolate New England from the other states.

New Hampshire needed Stark and offered him command of its militia with the rank of brigadier general. Stark accepted—but imposed an extraordinary condition. He would operate independently and would not place himself under Continental Army authority.

The arrangement soon created trouble. Continental commanders wanted Stark to move toward Albany and join the main American army opposing Burgoyne. Stark refused. Instead, he

remained with his militia near Bennington, where he believed he could better protect the region and threaten Burgoyne's advance. Hundreds of militiamen flocked to his command.

His insubordination was about to become remarkably useful.

The Battle of Bennington

Burgoyne was running desperately short of supplies, horses and wagons. He therefore dispatched Lieutenant Colonel Friedrich Baum with a mixed force that included German troops, Loyalists, Canadians and Native American allies to seize supplies believed to be stored near Bennington.

Stark moved to intercept them. Despite its name, the **Battle of Bennington on August 16, 1777, was actually fought several miles away near Walloomsac, New York.** Stark devised an aggressive plan that sent portions of his militia around the enemy flanks and rear while other troops occupied Baum's attention from the front.

The fighting was fierce. Stark later described it as resembling a continuous clap of thunder. Baum's force was overwhelmed, and British reinforcements arriving under Lieutenant Colonel Heinrich von Breymann were driven back after additional American troops joined the fight. The consequences went well beyond the battlefield.

Bennington Helps Set Up Saratoga

Burgoyne had sent troops toward Bennington because he needed supplies. Instead of returning with horses, wagons and provisions, the expedition cost him a substantial portion of his available force. Nearly 1,000 men were killed, wounded, captured or otherwise lost to Burgoyne's campaign, while some of his Native American allies subsequently departed.

Burgoyne continued south, but his position steadily worsened. American forces gathered around him while his supply line stretched back toward Canada. Stark later brought additional New Hampshire militia to Saratoga and helped complete the American encirclement. He was there when Burgoyne surrendered on **October 17, 1777.**

Bennington did not by itself win Saratoga, and Saratoga did not immediately end the war. But the chain of events was enormously important: **Bennington weakened Burgoyne; Saratoga destroyed his army; and Saratoga helped persuade France that the American rebellion had a genuine chance of succeeding.** France's subsequent entry into the war provided money, soldiers and naval power that would prove indispensable at Yorktown four years later.

Stark's stubborn decision to remain near Bennington had become part of a much larger victory.

Finally, the Promotion

Congress apparently decided that successful insubordination deserved reconsideration. After Bennington, Stark received congressional thanks and, on October 4, 1777, the promotion to

brigadier general in the Continental Army that he believed he should have received months earlier.

He continued serving during the remainder of the Revolution, although chronic rheumatism increasingly troubled him and required periods away from active duty. He commanded the Northern Department on two occasions and even served on the board of officers that tried British Major John André for his part in Benedict Arnold's treason.

On September 30, 1783, with American independence secured, Stark received a brevet promotion to **major general**. He resigned from the Continental Army that November and returned to New Hampshire, where he lived for nearly another four decades.

The General Who Wouldn't Follow Orders

John Stark never became as famous as Washington, Lafayette or Nathanael Greene. Yet his career illustrates how much the Revolution depended upon experienced local commanders who understood their soldiers, their terrain and sometimes their situation better than distant authorities did.

At Bunker Hill, Stark helped stop a British flanking attack. At Trenton and Princeton, he shared in Washington's victories when the Revolution desperately needed them. At Bennington, his refusal to follow orders placed him exactly where he needed to be when Burgoyne sent a vulnerable force looking for supplies.

Ordinarily, an army cannot function if its generals decide which orders they will obey. **John Stark was the troublesome exception: at one critical moment in the American Revolution, refusing to go where he was told helped put him exactly where history needed him.**