



WHAT WAS BETHLEHEM LIKE DURING THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION?

The first thing one should recognize when considering what Bethlehem was like during the American Revolution is that there was no Town of Bethlehem. We were part of the West District of Rensselaerwyck which was part of Albany County. Albany County was much larger than it is today. Settlement was scattered along the Hudson River, Normanskill and Vlomanskill with such familiar family names as Becker, Slingerland, Van Allen, Van Wie and Winne. Dutch was probably still spoken in homes and churches although we had been under English rule since 1664. Settlers made their living farming and raising livestock for both subsistence and as cash crops, paying their annual rent to the Patroon. Sawmills, gristmills, coopers and blacksmiths were also found.

Bethlehem's residents surely heard the rumblings of discontent with the British government. When news of the battles of Lexington and Concord arrived in May of 1775, Albany's Committee of Correspondence came out into the open and began to organize the resistance to British rule. Residents of the Manor would soon be asked to sign a document called "The Association" a pledge of loyalty to the patriot cause.

Choosing sides would be difficult. Upstate New York demonstrated a strong resistance to anything English, clinging to their Dutch ways. While opposition to English trade laws was found, some upstate New Yorkers resented the influx of settlers from New England and often had an anti Boston sentiment. There was also tension between the Patroon and the tenants on the Manor. Some people became loyalists, some patriots, some tried to remain neutral. While many of Bethlehem's farmers joined the Patriot cause, there was also a purported Tory camp near Mead's Lane.

During the years of 1776-1777 Albany, and hence Bethlehem, was in the middle of British war efforts with General Burgoyne maneuvering in the north and General Howe to the south in order to control the Hudson and Mohawk Rivers, important avenues of transportation. Troops were quartered in Albany and the country side scoured for supplies.

After Burgoyne surrendered at Saratoga in October of 1777 and Howe was bottled up in New York City, the focus of the war shifted southward, leaving Albany and its environs cut off from their normal source of supplies via the Hudson River and New York City. While not directly threatened by the war, residents became constantly alert to threats from Loyalists and had reason to fear Indian attack. The Albany County Commissioners for Conspiracies, established April 13, 1778 begin to investigate Tories, Tory plots and rumors of plots. Life in Bethlehem had a definite siege mentality.

Finally, news of peace reached Albany on March 27, 1783.

Further Reading

Albany Crossroads of Liberty by Alice P. Kenney

Bethlehem Revisited: A Bicentennial Story edited by Floyd Brewer

A Memoir of the Revolutionary War by Sergeant James Selkirk, Town of Bethlehem Archives

Upstate New York in the 1760's by Florence Christoph