

PART III: 1775-1783

The opening battles of the American Revolutionary War took place shortly after dawn on April 19, 1775, on Lexington Green and at Concord's North Bridge. Tidings of the bloodshed sped quickly throughout the countryside, and so swiftly did the news travel that messengers reached New Ipswich, N. H., 60 miles away, the same afternoon.

It was 90 miles from the scene of the conflict to Keene, and there were no roads beyond New Ipswich; only a trail through the woods traced by blazed trees. Nevertheless, a rider pressed on and brought the electrifying news to Keene, either late that same night or early the next morning. Abner Sanger, a diarist in Keene at this period, noted: "The Regulars fight & do mischief at Concord &c."

By April 20 the news was known in Keene, and Captain Ephraim Dorman, then commander of the local militia, was the first to be informed. Too old for active military service, he consulted with Captain Isaac Wyman, a more experienced soldier. Messengers were sent to every part of town, notifying the inhabitants to meet on the "Green" that afternoon.

"Now is News of the Fight with Regulars in Concord Lexcinton [sic] . . . and also of People being Killed. Keene Town is in an Uproar. They warn a Musture," Sanger wrote on April 20. The following day he recorded, "The Town of Keene Mustures in General. A Number List to go off to fight Regulars [and] all that List retire home to make rady to march on ye Morrow."

Captain Wyman assembled Keene's citizen soldiers on the Common in front of the Meetinghouse the afternoon of April 21. He was chosen to head the company, and selected with him as its leaders were Thomas Baker, Jeremiah Stiles, and John Houghton. Experienced by earlier military campaigns, Wyman told the 29 who volunteered for the march to prepare arms and equipment and get several days' provisions, as, he said "All the roads will be full of men and you can procure nothing on the way." In the evening Captain Wyman with. Captain Dorman, Lieutenant Stiles, and other leading patriots met in his tavern to plan for the journey.

At sunrise on April 22 the Keene men, together with some from Gilsun, met before the tavern, drew supplies, and began their march to Concord about nine o'clock. Their route was down Main Street to

the Boston Road (Baker Street). In the afternoon Captain Bellows and a group from Walpole arrived in Keene. "Keene has shown a noble spirit," was Bellows' reply to the news that Wyman's men were already on their way, and he hastened to follow.

"Wet misty & Rany all Day," wrote Sanger. "We through Mud & Mire travil to Winchendon." There the group spent a warm and rainy night, and the occasional thunder sounded like distant gunfire to some. On Sunday morning, April 23, the company started out in rain which continued until mid-afternoon, when Lunenburg was reached. The Walpole men caught up with their Keene neighbors the following day and joined them on the rainy march toward Groton and Littleton. The weather cleared to fair and warm as the men entered Acton and pressed on to Concord, arriving there in the afternoon of April 24. After serving as guard for some cannon the Cheshire County soldiers marched to Cambridge with the ordnance. "We are Honoured on the Caimbridge Common with a Number of Drumers Druming with their Drums," Sanger wrote of that hot afternoon of April 25. At Cambridge the Keene militia joined in exercises and reviews, and Sanger ventured with others as far as a Charlestown hill, where they had "a fair view of Boston &c; of the Regulers Tents & of the men of War in Charlestown Ferry." They heard church bells ringing in Boston but whether for joy or sorrow they did not know.

Intense excitement prevailed throughout the entire Keene region. Soon nearly every town had men marching toward Boston, and by April 23 nearly 2,000 New Hampshire men were assembled at Cambridge. Military law of the period required that every man equip himself with musket, bayonet, knapsack, cartridge box, one pound of powder, 20 bullets, and 12 flints for his rifle. Each town was to keep on hand 200 pounds of lead, a barrel of powder, and 300 flints for every 60 men, besides a quantity of stores for those unable to supply themselves. Even old men and those unfit to do full service were required to keep the same supply of arms and ammunition. With the general feeling of apprehension and anxiety which had been building for some time, it is not difficult to explain how so great a body of armed men responded so quickly to news of fighting. However, the region's military leaders, the Josiah Willards, father and son, were Tories, as were Lieutenant Benjamin Hall, Dr. Josiah Pomeroy, Elijah Williams, Breed Batcheller, and other leaders of civic and political affairs.

At a meeting of New Hampshire officers in Medford on April 26 Isaac Wyman was named lieutenant colonel of the First New Hamp-

shire Regiment, under command of John Stark. Several Keene men enlisted in the regular service and saw action in the conflicts that followed in the Boston campaign. Others, including the diarist Sanger who were farmers anxious for their fields and the spring planting, returned home about the first of May. Lieutenant Colonel James Reed, of Fitzwilliam and later of Keene, raised a regiment in the home area to join the New Hampshire forces around Boston. This unit saw active service at Bunker Hill on June 17, where New Hampshire soldiers, including about 40 from Keene, played an important role.

Excitement ran high in Keene at a meeting on April 27. Lieutenant Timothy Ellis was chosen to represent the town at a hastily-called Exeter convention, where a special committee was set up to procure arms, supplies, and enlistments for the American army. Timothy Ellis also represented Keene later in 1775 at the convention which met to set up a civil government **in** the province, since administrative machinery to continue the war, borrow money to pay soldiers, and conduct governmental affairs required that authority be quickly organized. No courts were held from 1774 to 1778, and communities generally administered justice themselves with reference to former practice, if not dominion. In Keene's spirited town meeting of December 1775 the voters declined to take drastic action against those who sold the hated tea, but named a committee of three to maintain order, suppress idleness, swearing and disorderly conduct, and enforce a boycott on the obnoxious oriental leaf. A census of the town in October 1775 showed 756 living in the community, of whom 31 men were serving in the army. The local military stores included 72 firearms and 92 pounds of powder.

The colony's new government established early in 1776 sent to each town an "Association Test" as a type of loyalty oath to be signed by all males 21 years of age and over. Those refusing to declare their acceptance of the American cause and the new administration were ordered disarmed. In Keene 133 men signed the test, 13 refusing. In all New Hampshire there were only 773, of a population of some 80,000, who refused to sign the Association Test. These were generally men of wealth and influence whose allegiance to the Crown had aided them in their prosperity.

The uncertain military campaign and threats of renewed Indian raids from Canada once again spread fear through New England, especially in the more isolated communities. Colonel Isaac Wyman was selected to head a regiment enlisted to provide protection for the colony's frontier settlements. With other New Hampshire forces, Colonel

Wyman's men marched toward Crown Point in the summer of 1776, but the progress of the force was hindered by an outbreak of smallpox which caused several deaths among the troops.

Sickness was a threat not only to the American army; it also visited the home fronts, and an epidemic of smallpox swept through Keene as well as other places. Inoculation against the disease was known, but, as practiced by inexperienced physicians, was frequently as dangerous as the disease itself. A petition for aid was addressed to the state legislature by Keene citizens in November 1776, and a complaint was lodged against some of the hospitals that were hastily established during the sickness and which seemed only to serve as its breeding places. A "pest house" was set up near the south end of Beech Hill, where the name "Pox Pasture" long perpetuated its sinister associations. Dr. Josiah Pomeroy, the Tory, was the attending physician, and he and others who acted as doctors in Keene at this period (Dr. Obadiah Blake, Dr. Thomas Frink, and Dr. Gideon Tiffany) seemed powerless in the face of the epidemic.

News of the Declaration of Independence had been received with rejoicing throughout New Hampshire some weeks after its adoption in Philadelphia. Citizens of Keene assembled on the Green near the Meetinghouse where a liberty pole was raised. A piece of Spanish silver was offered to anyone who might be brave enough to climb the pole and nail up the flag. A nine-year-old boy was the first to volunteer. He climbed like a monkey up to the place where the pole was so slender that it bent under even his slight weight; the flag was attached, and Keene's celebration carried on in an especially festive mood.

A war economy was soon felt in the town, where all efforts were bent toward the conduct of the war and the support of the army in the field. Food and clothing were gathered by state order to be sent to the front, and Keene was one of the depots of supply. Paper currency issued during the emergency, not backed by sufficient capital, failed to gain the confidence of the people, and depreciated in value. Prices rose. The legislature was unable to check the inflationary spiral. Goods became scarce and life more difficult during the severe winters of the war years. Efforts to foster Keene industry were initiated, including one to manufacture firearms and another to produce wire in Keene, but they lacked the money, raw materials, and trained artisans needed for such enterprises. The hardships at home made army enlistments difficult, in spite of possible invasion from Canada by General Burgoyne's forces. Bounties were offered to soldiers in everything from money to a new suit of clothes, and Keene served as a

recruiting station. "Keene Street" (as Main Street was then called) resounded with the tramping feet of patriots and the rub-a-dub of the recruiter's drum. Though a draft was finally authorized by the state, Keene men had continued voluntarily to join companies called into action whenever an immediate need presented itself. Such a militia unit marched toward Ticonderoga from this area in May 1777 and was discharged when the danger seemed past, only to be called out again in June, when the unit marched to Bennington and saw action under the command of General John Stark in August. Keene, located on the principal military road to Crown Point and Fort Ticonderoga, was frequently visited by troops on their marches to and from the frontier during the period of war operations in the north.

Amid the fear of invasion, an attack upon Royalton, Vt., in 1780 by British and Indians and increased activity on the part of local Tories prompted authorities to move against the dissenting element. Fines were imposed on some of the Tory party, while other members were committed to the rough log jail erected in 1772 near the pillory and whipping post (corner of the present Emerald Street). The **most** notorious Tories, including Dr. Pomeroy, fled to the protection of the British and to Canada. In 1778 the property of some of the most noted Tories was confiscated by the state, their estates being settled as if the owners were dead. Breed Batcheller of Packersfield, Dr. Josiah Pomeroy, Elijah Williams, Thomas Cutler (or Cutter), Eleazer Sanger, and Robert Gilmore of Keene suffered this fate. Dr. Pomeroy's elegant home was later granted to Revolutionary hero General James Reed.

Despite the problems at home and at the war front, the spirit of the people was good and rose at news of the victory at Bennington in August 1777. A call was extended to the Rev. Aaron Hall of Connecticut in December 1777. He was ordained on February 18, 1778, and served the Keene church for almost 40 years. The local pulpit had been vacant for almost six years and had been supplied by visiting clergy and candidates.

Courts were reestablished under authority of the State of New Hampshire in 1778, and with the passing of the threat of invasion from Canada and the shifting of the field of military operation to the south, community life in Keene began to function once again. A canal (at the later site of the Faulkner and Colony Mills) had been dug in 1775, providing a new industrial location nearer the village.

Popular resentment against Tories flared up again once or twice, inspired in part by the hardships and privations of the war. It was

believed that the Loyalists were secretly supplying the British, a rumor that aroused extremists to move against Keene Tories. A band led by Captain Elisha Mack of Gilsum descended on Keene to punish the supposed offenders in May 1779. Entering the village at sunrise, the mob went from house to house seizing Tories, searching cellars for provisions, and greatly alarming the town. The militia was notified and assembled on the Green facing Captain Mack who had his men drawn up near the present railroad tracks. Colonel Alexander demanded to know if the invader intended to carry out the object of his illegal assembly. "I do," replied Mack, "at the hazard of my life." "Then," thundered Colonel Alexander, "you must prepare for eternity, for you shall not be permitted to take vengeance in this irregular mode on any men, even if they are Tories." Such a resolute speech, backed by arms, cooled the ardor of many. The militia retired to the Meetinghouse, and the invaders, having released their prisoners from confinement in Hall's tavern nearby, marched silently toward Gilsum. Along the route the women of Keene furnished noisy accompaniment by beating on pans and kettles until the mob had disappeared from view. A popular ballad soon made the rounds, beginning with the lines:

Upon the thirty-first of May,
appeared in Keene, at break of day,
A mob, both bold and stout;
Great Captain Mack of Gilsum town
Had gathered them and brought them
To rout the Tories out.

While life in Keene regained something resembling its normal balance and the Revolution was drawing to a close, the inflation caused by the war was such that in 1780 it was voted to appropriate 2,000 pounds for the schools, 5,000 pounds for mending roads, and to adjust Rev. Hall's salary in consequence of the great depreciation of the currency. In 1782 in partial payment of his salary, the town voted a parsonage on West Street (site of the present Keene Public Library). The roof of the dwelling (erected in 1783) was raised on a Friday by special order of Rev. Hall, to discourage superstition. Nearby he cultivated an extensive garden with much care.

John Balch established the first regular mail route in 1781 as postrider from Portsmouth by way of Haverhill, Concord, Plymouth, and Charlestown. Daniel Newcomb, a talented lawyer who had come to Keene in 1778, was active in political affairs and represented the

town at a Walpole convention in 1781, at another held in Charlestown, and at the state's Constitutional Convention, where he acted as chairman of a committee to draft a state constitution in 1791-92.

At the end of hostilities the young country experienced severe economic trials. There was no power to collect taxes, pay soldiers, or settle the debts created by years of war. Paper money became worthless and the people found themselves too poor to make roads, build bridges, or erect dwellings. Citizens of Keene lived largely on what they could grow themselves and make with their own hands. Professional men were forced to barter their services for foodstuffs to support themselves and their families. Many were imprisoned for debt. In October 1783 the gaoler, Dan Guild, and unhappy inmates of the Keene jail petitioned for extension of the limits of their confinement or jail yard to include a part of the town itself where they might find employment to pay some of their debts. Discontent and disillusion crept into many minds because the fruits of freedom had turned bitter. In western Massachusetts an open rebellion led by Daniel Shays broke out in 1786.

A petition from Keene in 1782 was addressed to authorities of the state requesting some means of relief, especially for permission that livestock, produce, and the like be made legal tender. In addition to the problems of readjusting to a peace-time economy another difficult question faced Keene and its neighbors.

Increasingly as the area along both sides of the Connecticut River had become more populated, the status of that rich and desirable domain beyond the river itself became a concern. Even prior to 1741 New Hampshire had assumed it was part of her territory. Royal Governor Benning Wentworth had gone so far as to grant a town there named after himself, Bennington, in 1749, as well as to give grants to more than 100 other similar townships. New York, also claiming the area, authorized settlement in some of the townships already granted by New Hampshire. The growing unrest and even violence over the disputed territory had inspired settlers to band together in groups of "Green Mountain Boys" to protect their homes and rights. These groups acted as patriots during the Revolution, while the majority of New York claimants leaned to Tory sympathies. Since Cheshire County lay so close at hand, its towns could not help being drawn into the dispute. When the people across the river declared themselves an independent republic under the name of "New Connecticut, alias Vermont," not a few towns to the east were inclined to join with them, claiming that New Hampshire was too far away to

be of any practical service. Actually during this period New Hampshire civil affairs were unsettled. Keene was divided in sentiment but named delegates to conventions called to discuss the new state.

Vermont's first assembly at Windsor in 1778 saw 16 towns east of the Connecticut represented, though not Keene, where citizens remembered earlier problems with boundary lines. As a whole they remained loyal to New Hampshire. Several conventions were held by delegates from the towns most concerned, and Keene sent representatives to most of them. Much of Cheshire County except Keene, Swanzey, and Winchester seemed to favor union with Vermont. Officials in the new state claimed jurisdiction over the entire contested region, including Keene, and even issued warrants for local elections. Isaac Wyman and Ezra Stiles actually represented the town in the Vermont legislature. Authorities in Vermont tried to take possession of county records and affairs, lay taxes, and appoint judges. This inspired a lively quarrel. The new state's legislative assembly held a session on New Hampshire soil in 1781 at Charlestown and this caused great excitement. A New Hampshire regiment on its way to reinforce Washington's army was ordered by the New Hampshire Committee of Safety to march to Charlestown instead. A serious situation might have arisen had not word been received that the new state might be recognized and received into the Federal Union provided it give up all connections with New Hampshire towns and also return the area annexed from New York State.

Clashes between officials of Cheshire County and Washington County, Vt., which covered the same territory continued, however, to the point of calling out militia by both New Hampshire and Vermont in order to establish their jurisdiction. A number of supposed New Hampshire officials were arrested and jailed under Vermont authority. New Hampshire responded by arresting Vermont men, some of whom were released by partisans. Colonel Samuel King of Vermont was rescued in Keene by a mob of his friends as he was being conveyed to an Exeter jail, and the mob later visited the Chesterfield homes of those favorable to New Hampshire and maltreated the occupants. As the situation grew more tense and a force was being drafted to take up arms, General George Washington responded to a letter from Vermont Governor Chittenden by suggesting that if Vermont claimed only the land in her own original limits, Congress might acknowledge her independence. Thus on the motion of Ezra Stiles of Keene, the Vermont legislature resolved in February 1782 "that this House do judge the Articles of Union between the New Hampshire towns and

Vermont completely dissolved." However, fires of the feud continued to burn for some time. A mob came to Keene to prevent a sitting of the Inferior Court in September 1782. Captain Samuel Davis of Chesterfield entered the court room, approached the clerk, and laying his hand on the official docket, forbade the court to act. The session was adjourned, and supporters of both sides quickly assembled on the Green in front of the Meetinghouse. Outnumbered, the Vermont faction soon melted away and the court reopened in the afternoon.

Later in October as General John Sullivan and his party approached Keene to hold a session of the Superior Court they were informed that the town was full of people determined to prevent the session, at which were to appear some of the offenders of the September affair. Sullivan halted his party for a consultation. The resourceful judge then called for his dress uniform of a major general. When, resplendent in full military attire, he rode into Keene's principal street on his powerful grey horse no one offered resistance. A number loyal to New Hampshire rode out to meet him and were his honor guard to the Meetinghouse through the groups of sullen men. Sullivan, a man of dignified and commanding stature, seated himself with great composure, took off his cocked hat, and laid it on the table. Unbuckling his sword, he laid it beside his hat, then suddenly took up the sword and half drew the blade. The crowd stirred, but Sullivan replaced the sword and rebuked the unruly for their attempt to interfere with the administration of justice. A petition presented to him by those present was read after which the people were sternly directed to withdraw. The following morning Sullivan in civilian dress announced that the large number of cases before the court could not all be tried in the time allotted to the session and such as were not yet ready to be heard would be continued. This satisfied those present, who sent up a shout of approval.

Such action as this on the part of those most responsible for the conduct of affairs and the patience exhibited by the more influential on both sides went a long way to cool tempers and prevent the border situation from becoming critical. The whole problem was resolved without bloodshed, with Keene playing her part to soothe feelings on both sides. More stable times, a more efficient government, and confidence in the principles of the new administration spelled an end to these local disputes and helped foster increased domestic prosperity.