This Week in Saratoga County History –

The Death of Jane McCrea

Submitted by Eric Schnitzer July 30, 2020

Eric Schnitzer has worked at Saratoga National Historical Park since 1997, becoming Park Ranger/Historian in 2000. He has dedicated his life's study to the organization, personnel, and material culture of the military forces associated with the Northern Campaign of 1777. He and his wife, Jenna, live in an 18th-century house in the White Creek Historic District near Bennington Battlefield, N.Y. Eric can be reached at Eric.Schnitzer@nps.gov

Death of Jane McCrea by Jules Turcas, 1896 New York Public Library Digital Collections. Seen here is one of the many ridiculous 19th century artistic renderings purporting to depict the moment of Jane McCrea's death.

What could be more symbolic of British imperial domination, immorality, and unfettered disrespect for human life than the murder of Jane McCrea at the hands of British-allied Indians near Fort Edward, NY, on July 26, 1777. Word spread fast, and McCrea's slaying excited legion numbers of patriotic American militia to seek righteous revenge against the sinister "savages" and General John Burgoyne. Burgoyne could later reflect upon this sad event as the beginning of the end of his sinister, failed military expedition. At least, this is what authors, enthusiasts, and yes—even historians—have led us to believe for centuries.

There is some truth to the oft-told tale. Jane McCrea was a young woman betrothed to a royalist American officer in Burgoyne's Army (not a British officer), and she was killed by an Ottawa warrior (not accidentally by American militia, and not by a Wyandot named "Panther"). She was shot, tomahawked, and scalped—not necessarily in that order—and her body mangled. Although she was not the only American similarly killed that day, she was the sole civilian.

General Philip Schuyler, commander of the American Northern Army, made scant mention of her death in correspondence. This is all the more striking, since it was Schuyler who worked tirelessly (and sometimes furiously) trying to convince various government bodies in New York and New England to turn out their militia and join him against Burgoyne's inexorable advance. Schuyler's call, however, was met with near universal silence. This is counter to the commonly accepted version of what happened in 1777, but the records—they still exist—tell us a very different story.

At the time McCrea was killed, Schuyler's army had more militia than it did nearly two months later! Further, militia present with Schulyer in late July left soon after McCrea's death. This is revealing, since the army was only miles from where McCrea died and yet every militiaman departed for home soon after. What of revenge? This simple fact presents us with an obvious disconnect between truth and myth, but the answer is easily found in contemporary records military records and correspondence. simply put, the militia then with Schuyler were bound for finite, short-term service in response to the loss of Forts Ticonderoga and Independence (July 6). Their enlistments were expiring, and they left as soon as they could. They had practical reasons for leaving, if not patriotic ones: they were terrified of Burgoyne's Indian allies (obviously!) and were desirous to get home in order to tend their farms. It was beyond Schuyler's authority to force them to stay, even when it seemed all hope was lost and Burgoyne's ultimate victory appeared certain.

Nearly two months later, the Northern Army had only five militia battalions (two from Connecticut, three from New York). Their well-documented beat orders make neither mention nor inference to Jane McCrea or other civilians who perished.

So, why has the myth pervaded American culture for generations? Throughout the 19th century, artistic depictions of McCrea's last moments were more numerous than any other single event of the campaign, including the Saratoga surrender itself! Innumerous fictionalized verse appeared, laced with themes of American revolutionary patriotism and American Indian demonization. These culminated in the most popular of all, Kenneth Robert's Arnold-obsessed *Rabble in Arms* (1933), a work of inspired fiction which was misinterpreted by too many readers as being a tome of history. Roberts's drama continues to be referred to as a sourcebook of the campaign's truths to this day.

Sadly, too much of our history is pervaded by fiction. It's up to us to root it out.