

A Christmas Gift of Snow

By Ronald M. Mann



In Route From Fort Ticonderoga to Boston 1775

December 2011

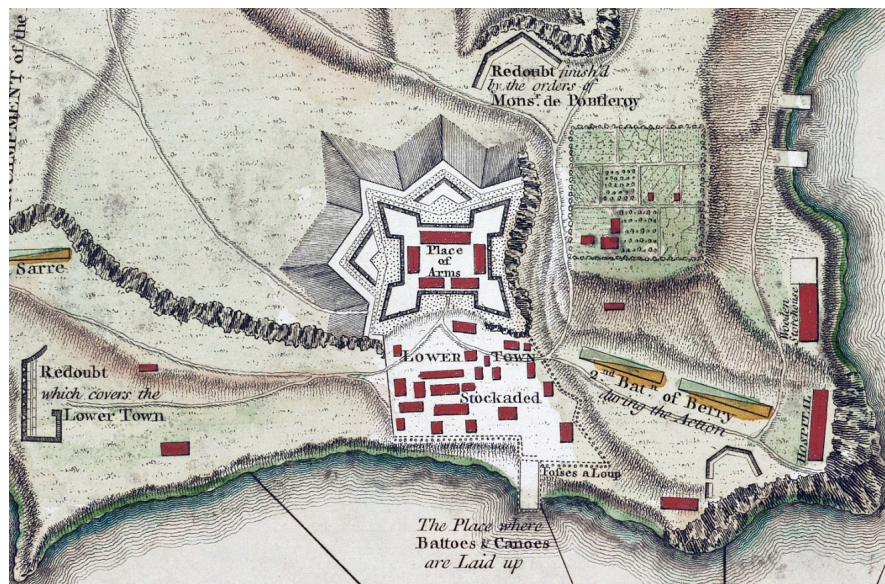
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"With respect to General Knox, I can say with truth, there is no man in the United States with whom I have been in habits of greater intimacy; no one who I have loved more sincerely, nor any for whom I have had a greater friendship."

G. Washington.

As a result of the battles at Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill, the Continental Congress decided it was necessary to put a general in charge one that could represent all the colonies. George Washington was unanimously selected and immediately sent to Boston. On arrival he discovered 20,000 colonial forces, not organized, equipped or trained. Confronting this force were 10,000 well trained and equipped British troops stationed in Boston. They were protected by a small fleet of British frigates. His first efforts were dedicated to organizing and equipping his troops. This proved difficult since most of the colonies were not prepared to support his forces to the extent needed. After a thorough inventory, Washington discovered what he needed to launch an attack or to defend against an attack from the British; 10,000 muskets, flints, powder horns, black powder, swords, cannons and most personal items.ⁱ The British also lacked sufficient troops to launch an all out attack on the Americans. The British's experience at Lexington, Concord and Bunker Hill had taught King George III, that he would have to substantially increase the number of his troops if he wanted to end the American Colonies insurrection, as he called it. General Washington recognized that he needed to prepare quickly or face a sure defeat. What he needed most were cannons, large enough to threaten the British warships. One option was to encourage the citizens to become privateers – experienced seamen who equipped their fishing boats with cannons and armed men. Washington agreed to allow the privateers to keep half of all the contraband they captured – a great incentive for men who were out of work. Almost immediately the privateer ships started producing results.



Fort Ticonderoga

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In Mid-November Washington held his regular General Staff Meeting. The agenda of the meeting was how to get the equipment needed before the British re-enforcements arrived. Most critical were the large bore cannons. Almost a week earlier, he had appointed a new Artillery Commander, a young 25 year old book seller – Henry Knox who had already demonstrated his abilities by building a fort. Knox's immediate challenge was artillery, he had been made commander of the artillery without any artillery. Since the day of his appointment, Colonel Knox had worried about how and where to get cannons and other material he needed. He had finally developed a plan, however, his concern now was whether or not he would be authorized to use it. He was about to get his answer as he had been invited to attend the general's staff meeting and present his plan.



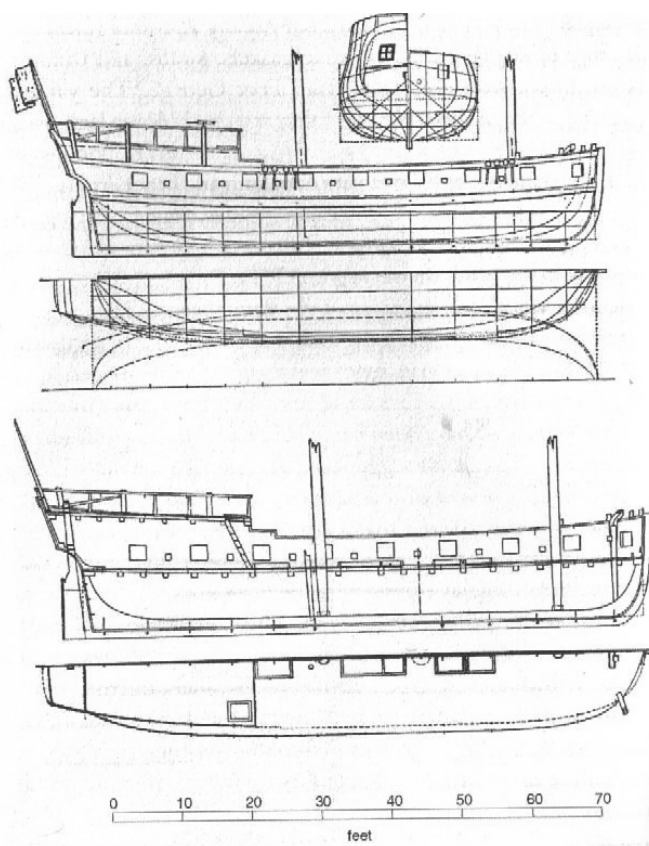
The first item on Knox's plan was to go to Fort Ticonderoga. It had been captured last spring, and supposedly had many cannons that were available for taking. The response to his proposal was not what he had expected. The attendees were unanimous in their opinions: *"Impractical, absurd, and foolhardy. Don't waste time, effort and money on this crazy and impossible scheme. You have obviously overlooked certain facts, you would be traveling in mid-winter, in area where there are few roads and trails, snow covered mountain ranges, dense forests, rivers and lakes that would have to be crossed. You would need wagons, sleds, boats, oxen, horses and men willing to risk their lives in sub-zero temperatures. Impossible!"*

General Washington had just sat quietly listening to the arguments, when his staff was finished, he addressed himself to Col Knox he said: *"I believe you can do it, go and get the cannons. I will provide you with whatever you need."* That said, the meeting adjourned. Those opposed to it filed out, as silent as an open tomb.

On December 4th, barely two weeks after they had left Cambridge, Col Knox, his brother Will and a friend were standing in Fort Ticonderoga staring at a large inventory of cannons. There were Large and small, iron and brass ones, barrels of powder and flints. He was right! There were indeed cannons here. Although it had taken considerable time and effort to get here, they had proved it was possible and there were cannons here - for the taking! Admittedly the return trip would be more difficult, but he believed it could be done. Fifty eight of the best cannons were selected, they weighed more than 160,000 lbs. Next they had to find oxen, horses, boats and men to remove them from the fort, transport them to the waters edge and then load them on 42 boats. It proved difficult, but they did it. They loaded the ships and then started their 36 mile trip down Lake George to Fort Edwards. Complicating their task of traveling down Lake George were contrary winds, rain, sleet and snow and in addition the lake was in the process of freezing over. At present there was only a narrow channel between the ice. Concerned that the open water was closing fast, Col Knox encourage the men to constantly move faster. Failure to do so could jeopardize the mission, once the lake was frozen over travel on the lake would be impossible.

It wasn't too long after Colonel Knox's troops pushed off that the large scow (see illustration above) got high centered. Since it contained the most cannons it was extremely critical to the mission – it had to be saved! Luckily they were close to shore, making it somewhat easier to re-float. Nevertheless several men were required to get in the cold icy water and work. First they had to transfer all the cannons to other ships, then hook several boats on to the scow and have men row, while the men in the water pushed. Finally after considerable effort the scow floated off the rocks. Now they had to repair any damage done by the rocks. Several hours later they had repaired, re-floated and reloaded the cannons. Exhausted, they built a large bonfire and were finally able to get warm and rest.ⁱⁱ This entire endeavor was executed during a rain/snow storm.

After their brief rest they again shoved off, however, the contrary winds continued to pummel them, again forcing them to row most of the way. As the rain and wind increased the old scow started taking on water. As the wind and rain became more violent the scow started to fill with water, eventually causing it to sink. Once more all the boats had to halt while men worked in the icy cold water bailing out the scow. As luck would have it, it was close to the shore, making it possible to save it and its cargo. Since the men were chilled to the bone, from standing up to their thighs in the icy water, it was decided to take a rest. In order to get to the shore it was necessary to bust a path through the ice. As they approached the shore they were startled by a group of Indians watching them. Concerned that they were about to attack they began prepare for a fight. To their surprise the Indians were friendly and invited them to their camp to get warm and eat a warm meal of venison. After a pleasant dinner and rest they decided it was time to leave for Fort Edwards. They thanked the Indians for the hospitality, and reluctantly returned to their boats. As they rowed down the lake they couldn't help thinking about the experiences of the past several days. They were impressed with the miracles they had witnessed. The scow had sunk twice and each time it had gone down in shallow water, where they were able to quickly repair it or bail it out. And it just happened that where the scow had sunk, the last time, friendly Indians had invited them to share the warmth of their homes and warm meal. In addition to all these serendipitous events not a single man had been injured or frozen. Which was indeed Incredible.



Typical gondola (scow) used on the lake

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Returning from Fort Ticonderoga

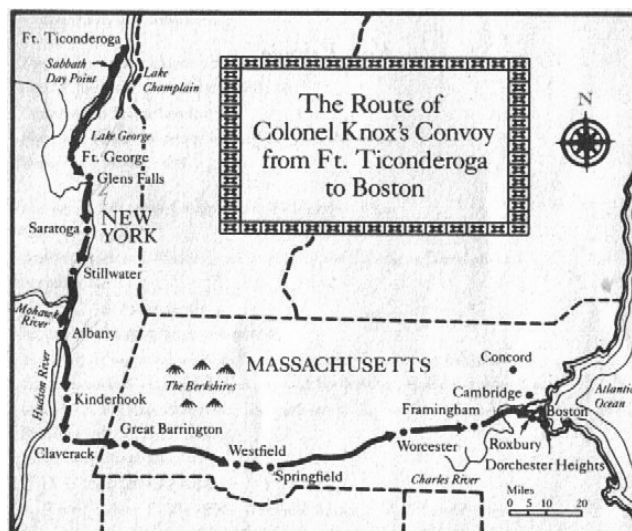
The crews had spent nearly a miserable week rowing in extremely cold weather, but finally arrived safely at Fort Edwards, exhausted but cheerful about their accomplishments. Their journey had been an incredible experience, one, that none of them would soon forget. They were happy that they had helped to provide George Washington with the cannons he badly needed. Once at Fort Edwards they could now eat a warm meal and get some badly needed rest, discussed their recent experiences and prepare to return home for Christmas. Rested, they helped their replacements move the cannons into the safety of the fort.

In order to make the necessary arrangements for the rest of the trip, Colonel Knox had left his brother, Will, in charge several days out of Fort Ticonderoga. He had then rushed ahead to Fort Edwards where he had started making the necessary arrangements for the rest of the trip. What he needed was sleds, wagons, (more than forty), 200 oxen and horses, 3000 feet of three inch rope and teamsters to the drive them. After several days at Fort Edwards, Col Knox became concerned that the fleet had not arrived on schedule. So that morning he sent out a search party, just a few before the fleet arrived – exhausted but safe.

Early the next morning the new team left for Glenn Falls, about 10 miles distant. They were forced to use mostly wagons because there was little snow on the ground for the sleds. It had taken an inordinate amount of time to travel the ten miles to Glenn Falls. The men and animals were extremely exhausted by the time they finally arrived Glenn Falls. Because of this Colonel Knox decided to stay at Glenn Falls and wait for the snow. A man of incredible faith, Knox had total faith that it would snow – and soon. Several days passed, then it was Christmas Eve. Many hoped because it was Christmas Eve, they would get snow by morning - as a Christmas present. That night as they fell asleep, many of their thoughts were focused on General Washington's need of the cannons. If they didn't arrive on time it could cause Washington's forces to be defeated by the British and they would lose their freedoms. Early the next morning snow began to quietly fall, so by the time they awoke there was already two feet, and it was still snowing. They were like excited children on Christmas morning when they saw the snow – two feet of it. Their prayers had been answered! There was hardly a dry eye on that

Christmas morning. Thank heavens they could now resume their journey. By the time they were all dressed and the sled ready to leave it had already snowed another foot. Perhaps they had prayed just a little too hard! They had received their Christmas present, and now they would attempt to bring Washington his.

At Glenn Falls, the exhausted team was replaced with a new crews, and they still had more than 250 miles to travel. To succeed they would be challenged every mile, by cold, snow and rain, thawing, rivers, dense forests, steep hills and roads to be cleared and made. In spite of these challenges, they succeed. As a result of this success, they walked right into our history as one of the truly greatest achievements in the revolutionary war. On January 25th the “Noble Train”, as it was then called, arrived in Cambridge, having taken 56 days. Colonel Knox and his men's dedication made it possible for Washington to force the British to evacuate Boston. They had conquered what most men thought was impossible. It was this type of indomitable spirit that made possible the winning of the Revolutionary War and the freedoms we now enjoy. Their success was in part made possible by the constant interposition of Providence, as had been prophesied in the scriptures (III Nephi 21 and I Nephi 13: 17-19.) Note: I have counted more than a dozen times during this event when Providence's interposition made their success possible.



The Noble Train Route Map

This experience in addition to many others, made it possible for George Washington to express in his inaugural address, on April 30, 1789 the following:

“No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the invisible Hand which conducts the affairs of men more than the people of the United States. Every step by which they have advanced to the character of an independent nation seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency ...”

After many years of research I too can bear my testimony that God did in fact make possible the freedoms we now enjoy, even as His Beloved Son, Jesus Christ had prophesied (III Nephi 21:4).

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- i Shortly after Washington's had made this inventory of his needs, and "*Finding we were not likely to do much in the land way, I fitted out several privateers, or rather armed vessels, in behalf of the continent.*" (GW to Benedict Arnold, December 5, 1775, NDAR, Vol. II, page 1283) Then on the 29th of November a British *ordinance* ship, the Nancy was captured off Cape Ann, by the privateer Lee. The captured Nancy was immediately taken to Cape Ann where it was discovered that they had hit it the jackpot. To Washington's utter amazement the Nancy contained almost 100% of the items he badly needed. It included some of the types of cannon balls, used by the cannons being carried to Washington by Col Knox's Noble Train. "... *The brig Nancy an ordinance vessel from Woolwich, containing a large brass mortar, several pieces of brass cannon, a large quantity of arms and ammunition, with all manner of tools, utensils and machines, necessary for camps and artillery. Had Congress sent an order for supplies they could not have made out a list of articles more suitable to Washington's situation than what was thus providentially thrown into his hands.*" (Life & Times of Washington, Schroeder-Lossing, 1903, Vol II, page 830) To any reasonable minded person this represent a miracle and an answer to Washington's prayers, which he himself quickly acknowledged.
- ii According to all the research done on this incredible journey, there is no record of any person dieing, being serious injured, frost bitten, or seriously sick. When it is remembered the trials; constant freezing weather, the number of times men were required to work in icy water and the constant wind and rain, as well as having to row their boats in these weather extremes, it is truly miraculous.