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A Most Unsettled Time on Lake Champlain: The October 1776 Journal of Jahiel Stewart

Stewart's journal provides a common soldier's perception of the American Revolution in the north. More important, his is one of the very few first-person American accounts of the Battle of Valcour Island.

Edited by DONALD WICKMAN

More than 200 years after the American Revolution ended in 1783, primary documents from that war continue to surface. These newly discovered sources often provide a wealth of details to further enhance our understanding of this country's beginning as a nation. The National Archives in Washington, D.C., contain many such treasures in the form of pension records of soldiers of the Revolution. Originally collected after passage of the federal pension acts of 1818 and 1832, these records were used to document a soldier's service. They include sworn affidavits, letters, and journals covering the time of enlistment. All would have provided suitable proof of service to allow an aged veteran, widow, or dependent children to receive a small government stipend for life.

Rachel Williams Stewart, the seventy-eight-year-old widow of Jahiel Stewart, applied for a widow's pension in Sullivan County, New York, on May 17, 1837. Jahiel had died on March 18, 1813. Part of the documentation Rachel presented to prove her deceased husband's service was a journal he kept in 1775 and 1776 as a militiaman from Massachusetts. Rachel Stewart received her widow's pension, and the journal she presented to support her claim still lies among the pension records. It provides a common soldier's view of a critical time in the American cause.

Jahiel Stewart first served in Captain John Ferguson's company of Col-

onel Timothy Danielson's regiment during part of the first year of the war, then reentered the service with Captain Ferguson to be in Colonel Samuel Brewer's Massachusetts regiment. This regiment received orders to proceed to Ticonderoga and Lake Champlain to assist in averting the threat of the expected British advance from Canada.

Below is a portion of the diary that covers over a month—thirty-five hectic days, from October 1 to November 3, 1776—for the American Northern Army on Lake Champlain. Stewart was selected to be a member of a scouting party and sailed north aboard one of the newly completed row galleys racing to join Benedict Arnold's fleet anchored in Valcour Bay. Stewart was drafted into the midst of the Battle of Valcour Island on October 11, 1776. Aboard the hospital sloop *Enterprise*, he watched bodies and amputated limbs being pitched overboard and took part in the stealthy American retreat past the British ships. After receiving orders to proceed toward the safe haven at Ticonderoga, the men on the *Enterprise* witnessed the slow decimation of the American fleet. Stewart survived to rejoin his regiment in the new fortifications atop Mount Hope, west of Ticonderoga, where troops were preparing for a British attack.

Until the end of October, the American garrisons at Mount Hope, Ticonderoga, and Mount Independence awaited the British, but contrary winds halted the advance for ten days. When British ships sailed into view of the American fortifications on October 27, the ranking enemy officers were startled at the visible strength of the American works. Faced by the growing threat of winter and aware that his men were outnumbered nearly two to one, British general Guy Carleton elected to retreat to Canada and wait until 1777 for another attempt to capture the Lake Champlain forts.

Stewart's journal provides a common soldier's perception of the American Revolution in the north. More important, his is one of the very few first-person American accounts of the Battle of Valcour Island. On the American side General Benedict Arnold, General David Waterbury, and Colonel Edward Wigglesworth recorded their accounts, but they do not represent the nearly 800 officers and men of the fleet. Lieutenant Bayze Wells and Pascal De Angelis¹ left the only other known accounts written by members of the fleet. Stewart's diary supplements the primary documentation by providing new details of the battle and subsequent retreat. He identified the fleet's hospital vessel as the *Enterprise*; described the retreat during the dark night of October 11; portrayed Arnold's concern about protecting the fleet's wounded by sending the *Enterprise* ahead; and told how the *Enterprise* captain tried to gain extra speed by placing three men on each oar originally designed for one rower. Upon his safe return to Ticonderoga, Stewart continued his adventures from Mount Hope,

a post not well documented in primary sources. Stewart's journal is therefore an important discovery for the historians of Lake Champlain in the American Revolution.

Like many journals of the period, Stewart's account is written continuously, without punctuation, and features phonetic spellings. I have left spaces between sentences within each entry and for certain terms have added letters or modern spellings within brackets.

October 1 This morning we went on the alarm post and after we Com of[f] we had prayers

Octo 2 This Day Capt Ferguson² went aboard of one of the Rogallies³ with 11 white men and about 40 Indens⁴ to go Down to the fleet then to go a Shore in order to Skout Capt Ferguson had the Command of the Skout and the most of [illegible] any [illegible] about 4 o Clock and killed Sail put out all the oars and thay fired all the guns aboard⁵ [illegible] Some Days allowece [allowance] flower in Stad of bread and we was sent to make Some the Boys to Boile them with Some meet and we east [eat] about Sun Down and our Rogalley Run A ground and we had Bad work to git of[f] and after we got of[f] we went Down aganst Crown point⁶ but we Com by the other Rogallies a ground we Com to Crown point about twelve o Clock and Capt ankr [anchor]

Octo 3 This morning we Sent a boat to see what Com of the other Rogallies and they got of[f] and Came down to us Just before Sun Set and we Draw no Bread yet Sargent Cambel was put under gard for Refuson to take flower but he got free in a boat an hour & we are forst [forced] to boile Do Boys as yet and Drink lake warter⁷ we Draw Salt pork and pees to Day

Octo 4 This Day we are forst to lie at anker for we have head wind and we lie a bout 5 or Six miles below Crownpoint and the other Rogallows is behind us out of Site

Octo 5 This Day we lay at anker for we had head wind & this Day some of our officers went a Shoare & bought a pig

Octo 6 This morning about fore a Clock thay histed [hoisted] Sail and we had a fine goind [going] and about two a Clock we got to the fleet and when we came in we fired a Round and the admiral⁸ fired a round we went a Shoare on a Island⁹ all the Skouting party and we made us some Birch huts and Camped Down that night

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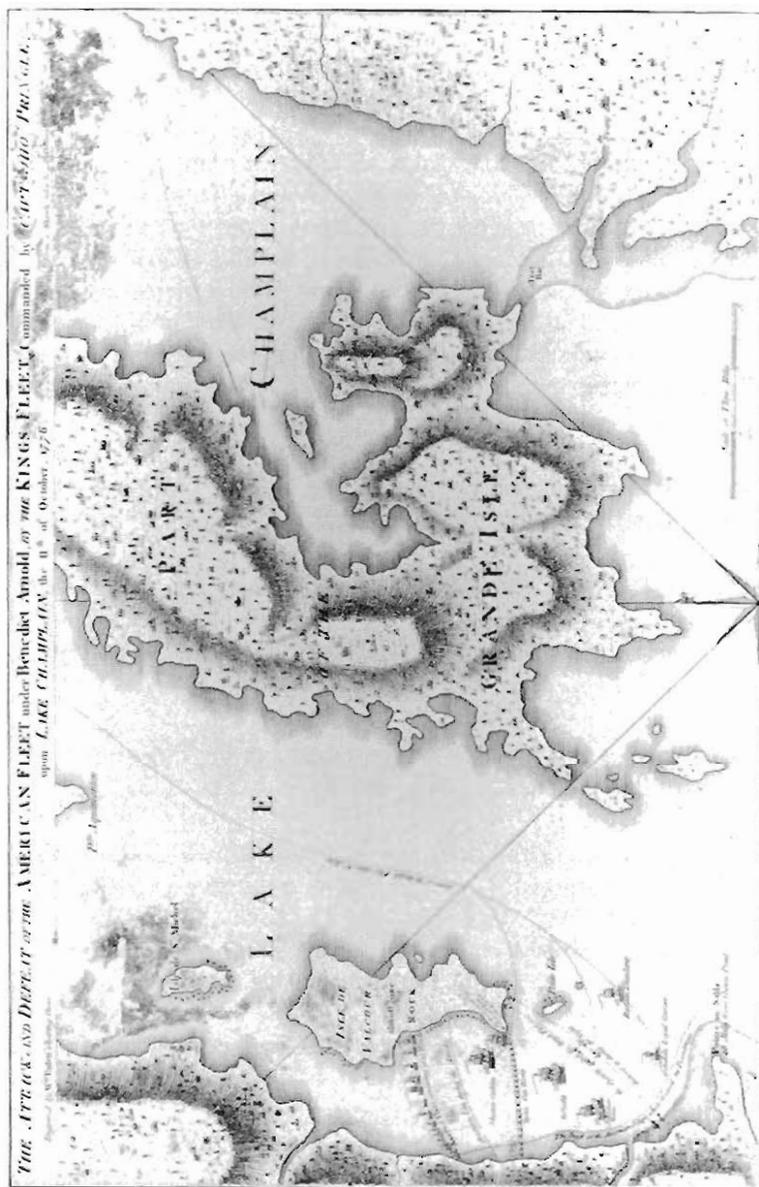
Octo 7 This Day we went a Board and drew two Days allowence of provishens and Rum but we have no deuty to do as yet all we do is to Draw meet and flower and bake and eat

Octo 8 Last night we had a verrey wet night nothing strange to Day we Dont know what we shall be Called for yet

Octo 9 This Day we went aboard the fleet and Drew one barrel of pork and a barrel of flower and Six bushels of portatos and this Day we had orders to make a paddle to evry man

Octo 10 This Day we had orders to make a paddle to a man Last night I and about 17 more went of[f] to git a barch bark Cono [canoe] that an Inden left up a River¹⁰ and we went to the River which was about Six miles and we went up the River about the mile and we got be night for we went of about Sun two hours high which was a verrey Short time to go So far and we got in betwixt nine & ten a Clock at night

Octo 11 This Day about Seven a Clock the morning we had alarm that the Regular fleet was Coming on us and the Skouting group was Sent to the loer part of the Island¹¹ to See which way the fleet was a going and we Retreated to our fleet when we went abored of the fleet wheare [where] we was Stachned [stationed] on the quarter Decks when about tenn A Clock the firen began and the saveg Schooner¹² Run a ground and our men jumped over Bored and Swom a Shoar and the Regulars boarded her and fire from her to our fleet & the battle was verrey hot on both Sides & one of the Regular Skooners¹³ Came up verrey bold and the battel was verrey hot we Cut her Rigen [rigging] most all away & bored her threw and threw & She was forst [forced] to tos[s] of[f] us the Cannon balls & grape Shot flew verrey thick & I believe we had a great many Cilld [killed] and I was abord of the hospitele Sloop¹⁴ and they brought the wounded abord of us the Dockters Cut of[f] great many legs and arm and See Seven men threw overbord that died with their wounds while I was abord and about Sun Down the firen Cesed and we had orders to Set Sail when it was Dark and try to get thre [through] the Regulars fleet for they was betwick us and home so we histed [hoisted] Sails & put out our oars & maid all the Speed we could and they did not give us one gun nor we Did not fier one at them and their maney Did not Recive any Dammage to our Sloop nor men So we got threw the fleet verrey Safe but we Run aground but got of[f] without much Diffelculte and we Sailed all night and Roade [rowed] so we thought we was Safe



Map of the Battle of Valcour Island, October 11, 1776 (London: William Faden, 1776). Courtesy of Special Collections, Bailey/Howe Library, University of Vermont.

Octo 12 This morning we find a Stronge head wind but we Sailed all Day but maid but little head this morning we was got in the wide Lake Some our fleet lay at anker¹⁵

Octo 13 This morning about Sun an hour high we See the Regular fleet in site of us following us so we manned all our oars with three men to an oar and the generals boat Came up and ordered us to make all the Speed we could to ty [Ticonderoga] & all the other Ships to stop which they did and about nine oClock the Regulars begin a fier on some of our fleet and the battle begun verry hot and some of our fleet was forst to Run aground and Jump overboard and blow up the Ship and general wor-terbury¹⁶ was taken and general arnel [Arnold] Run aground and three more & blow up their ships¹⁷ and Came by land and we Came by Crown-point and Set it on fier and left it and so our [illegible] got into ty about 3 o Clock the afternoon their was fourteen of the Skouting party Came with [illegible]

Octo 14 our Capton [captain] is not got in but the men Come in Skatron [scattered] their is but four of the fleet Cam [came] out of Sixteen¹⁸

Octo 15 Nothing verrey Strange this Day on this night we was ordered on the Alarm post And we Stayd about an hour & half then we was ordered to go to hour [our] barracks and be Redy at a moments warnen [warning] but we Keaped a part of our Company their for a gard all night¹⁹

Octo 16 Our men not yet back from the battel at the Bay of malcour [Valcour] yet all the Indens is got in but Six

Octo 17 This morning their was orders that all turned out to pray as Shante have a Dram [dream?] our Capt is not yet in but we live in hope he will git today but we Dont know this Day about four o Clock two of the Skout Come in and they say thay went a Shoar with him and thay got parted with him in the night and that say Thay was on an Island & these that Came home got an old boat and Came off[f] and thay say he intended to Keep away from the lake and thay Dont Dispute but he will Come home

Octo 18 This Day is a weet [wet] Day and this morning their was a party sent off[f] to Cut Down all the Bridges between Ty and Crown point So the Enimis may not git along their artillery by land²⁰ & this night I went on picket gard & a weet night we had of it

Octo 19 This morning Some of the main gard got undergard for being blame for taking Some flower out of the Stours [stores] and this morning their was a man whipld thirty Stripes for Disartion and this night we had orders to fier all the guns that Could not not be drew and all the men on the hill was Drew up in a line and fired at the word of Command and one man Split his gun and another had his gun go off[f] when he was Drawing his Charg and blew his hand all to peeces and all the men fire at ty and mt Indepdent²¹ that Could not Draw their Charges and then fired the Cannon and Cleard all out to be in good order for we expect the Enemis in a few Days for they are at Crown point and two more of the Skouts Com in & thay Say thay parted with Capt Ferguson Yesterday & he went towards St Johns with about 17 for he Saw that was the Rite way home for he was lost for it was Cloudy and foggy

Octo 20 Nothing Strange this morning only fine weather for the Season we all go on fetege [fatigue]²² every Day we are giten in pork and flower and warter [water] in to our fort

Octo 21 This Day I went on feteg [fatigue] over the lake on the mountain²³ Cutin Capt tongues and Ox trees²⁴ and the night Capt Ferguson & Timothy and Asa Blair & adam Blair and Sergeant John Blair Archebel Black and Joseph Grisel and Corporal Thomas Smith and John Lucoar got in from the Skout and all hearty only they Left James Moors at Orter [Otter] Creek

Octo 22 Nothing Strange this morning this night it is Reported that the Indens Cilled one man & took two prison betwixt ty mill²⁵ & Lake Jorge Landen [Lake George Landing] thay Say he was found with a tommahawk tiken [sticking] in his head²⁶

Octo 23 Deuty is very hard at the present²⁷ we have to go on Deuty every other day and this night went on the picket gard & this night Stephen Bolton [illegible] was [illegible] to the Bill that two men agoing to take from a negro man

Octo 24 This I Came off[f] picket and our officers took all the Company that could turn out Down to the grog Shop and taste [toast] the men what pleasant Drink and this night Sun an half hour high Some fifers from Ty Came to our inCampment & Shot three guns & Cornel [Samuel] Brewer Sent out a party of men to take them & thay got their names and let them go

Octo 25 Nothing Strange to Day as yet this Day [illegible] able that was fit for Deuty and this night Capt Ferguson [illegible] to his Charge had out of the Company the two Sickest

Octo 26 This morning Abner Cochran was [illegible] Discharged and the night the picket was warned on the Sun and hour high on we Drew Some more Buck shot and this night there was a Skout Went out and they went out about 12 o Clock and got on about 8 and Discovered a party of Indens the Skout went out and in threw [through] the picket

Octo 27 This morning we had an alarm and the Drums beat to arms and they would not let the picket Com off [f] So we had to Say [stay] till eight a Clock and this morning Capt Ferguson went out with a nother Skout & made a Discovery Some Indens & he got in about two a Clock

Octo 28 This morning we had orders to go on the alarm post verrey arley [early] and about twelve a Clock we alarmed to our alarm posts and then Som had orders to retreat from the hill mount hope to ty and there was an 160 Sent off [f] for a Axmen party and we hav tenn out of Capt Fergusons Company I was one of the 10 and we marchd into the woods & I was one of the Small party to Stand as a part to the main part we Stood till after Sun set then we had orders to go to the main body & then we Soon had orders to go to mount hope again by Some of our party See 7 Indens & one Cannadin [Canadian] So we Returned to our barrick²⁸

Octo 29 This morning we Send out Skout party was to be Redy at a Short notes [notice] this Day I went out to unloading the boat of provishens that are loading at the landen [landing] to Carry to ty in the Carry²⁹ and they think we had orders to one half to keep for us & the other half to Stop

Octo 30 Nothing Strange this morning as yet the milishes [militia] is Coming verrey fast there is four or five Regments got into mount Independent

Octo 31 It is weat and fogey morning but dont Rain much as yet about ten o Clock the Sun Shine out and this Day there was a Cort martial held at Capt Ferguson barrik and Capt Ferguson was the president of the Cort martial this Day we had orders for every man to Cleene the place before his barrick

Nov 1 This Day I and whorfield and E Spalmon and Jorge Black Set out to go a hunting and just as we [came] out of the Breast work we met Some men that was out giting wood and Said thay See 3 or 4 fox on about 50 Rods from the Breast work and we hunted till about three a Clock but See no game and this night I was warned on the quarter guard to Reinforce it but I Did not go on for after that I was warned on the liens [lines] [illegible] So no more for the Day

Nov 2 This morning the snowe was verrey heard [hard] it has not been so heard for the Season this Day I went on the teem gard [illegible] thay was Drawing logs for the Sawing of bords³⁰ this night Capt Ferguson off at a Skout for three Day thay Set out about tenne a Clock

Nov 3 Sunday this morning we Receivd [illegible] pay this morning Capt haney Came to camp [illegible] he brought me letter that Came from Salimon Stuart this morning Isac Chapman Died who belonged to our Company we hear that the Regulas has left Crown point [illegible] by Some of the Skout that has Come in thay Say the Snow is over Shoes at Crown point it is good weather for the Season

Nov 4 Monday fine weather only Some [illegible] but verrey pleasant for the Season this morning Capt Ferguson an all the Skout comin [come in] that went to Crown point thay say the Kings troops has left that place

NOTES

¹ "Journal of Bayze Wells," *Connecticut Historical Society Collections* 7 (1899): 240-296 and "With Benedict Arnold at Valcour Island: The Diary of Pascal De Angelis," *Vermont History* 42 (summer 1974): 195-200.

² Captain John Ferguson, Brewer's Massachusetts regiment.

³ This had to be either the *Congress* or the *Washington*.

⁴ Stewart is referring to an independent company of Stockbridge Indians from Massachusetts who were part of the Ticonderoga garrison. To avoid mistaking the Stockbridge Indians for those allied with the British forces, general orders required them to wear red and blue caps.

⁵ This probably was the only cannon training the crews on the row galleys had before the engagement with the British fleet.

⁶ Here stood the remains of the large British fort constructed in 1759 and burned in 1773. The Sixth Pennsylvania Battalion manned an outpost here for Ticonderoga and Mount Independence.

⁷ Many documents from 1776 describe the near stagnant conditions of Lake Champlain south of Crown Point and the poor water quality. If soldiers had the opportunity, they would have selected well water over lake water.

⁸ Brigadier General Benedict Arnold.

⁹ Valcour Island. The American fleet lay at anchor in the protected bay between Valcour Island and the New York shoreline.

¹⁰ Ausable River.

¹¹ Because Lake Champlain flows toward Canada, this would have been the northern part of the island. The British fleet had anchored overnight in Fleury Bay, just south of Isle la Motte, 15 miles from the American position.

¹² The *Royal Savage* was later set afire and burned throughout the night.

¹³ The British schooner *Carleton*.

¹⁴ The sloop was the *Enterprise*.

¹⁵ This anchorage lay near Schuyler's Island.

¹⁶ The cutter *Lee* ran aground and was taken into British service. General David Waterbury of Connecticut commanded the row galley *Washington*, which later became a part of the British fleet.

¹⁷ This is now known as Arnold's Bay, where Arnold burned his flagship, the *Congress*, and four gunboats.

¹⁸ The survivors were the *Trumbull*, *Enterprise*, *Revenge*, and *New York*. The *Liberty*, in transit between Ticonderoga and the fleet ferrying supplies and dispatches, was absent from the engagement.

¹⁹ Brewer's regiment was stationed at Mount Hope, located on a hill west of Ticonderoga.

²⁰ This order is confirmed in general orders of October 17, 1776, issued at Ticonderoga.

²¹ Mount Independence is located directly across from Ticonderoga. The combination of the two forts effectively blocked the quarter-mile lake channel. The fort earned its name when word of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence reached the Champlain Valley. It is currently owned by the state of Vermont and the Fort Ticonderoga Association and is open to the public.

²² Fatigue duty consisted of manual labor.

²³ Stewart is probably referring to Mount Defiance.

²⁴ Tongues were the harnessing poles attached to the front axle of a horse- or ox-drawn wagon. Stewart could be misinterpreting the term *trees*. He either means a yoke, single tree, or double tree. A yoke is the crossbar used to connect a pair of oxen. The single tree is a bar used with a two-horse team to connect the harnesses to the double tree, which is a crosspiece located on the wagon tongue forward of the front axle.

²⁵ The mill was located at the lower falls on Ticonderoga Creek, where a town park now stands.

²⁶ All three men were from Asa Whitcomb's Sixth Continental Regiment.

²⁷ Mention of rigorous duty appears in many other contemporaneous journals and letters. The garrison was well aware of the importance of maintaining control of the fortifications.

²⁸ On this day the British landed forces at Three Mile Point and approached with their fleet to reconnoiter the fortifications. The combination of strong earthworks, well-placed batteries, a display of American regimental colors, and a well-aimed cannon shot discouraged the British from making further advance.

²⁹ The portage between the lower falls on Ticonderoga Creek and Lake George, which Mount Hope protected.

³⁰ These logs would have been taken to the sawmill on Ticonderoga Creek.