

# **Connecticut and the American Revolution: British Raids on the Connecticut Shoreline Aimed to Sow Terror and Curb the Flow of Supplies to the Continental Army**

Howard Bibbins

*American Public University*

## **ABSTRACT**

In the century and a half of the British Empire's North American colonial era, before the onset of the American Revolution in 1775, Connecticut had established itself as an economic engine unparalleled in the American colonies. When war came, Connecticut mobilized itself in many ways to benefit the Continental Army. Led by Governor Jonathan Trumbull (1710-1785) and the Connecticut Committee of Safety, Connecticut sent enough food, guns, and cannons to General George Washington's Army to earn the nickname "The Provision State" as well as gain unwelcome attention from the British military command just over the border in New York. To stem the flow of these provisions, as well as to terrorize the homes of Patriot sympathizers along the Connecticut coast, the British Army, on three different occasions, undertook a strategy of sending troops to burn supplies as well as homes in Connecticut over eight years of war.

**Keywords:** Connecticut, American Revolution, Continental Army, Whig, Tory, Jonathan Trumbull, General Benedict Arnold, General William Tryon, General David Wooster, General Gold Selleck Silliman

# **Connecticut y la Revolución Americana: Incursiones británicas en la costa de Connecticut destinadas a sembrar terror y frenar el flujo de suministros al ejército continental**

## **RESUMEN**

En el siglo y medio de la era colonial norteamericana del Imperio Británico, antes del inicio de la Revolución de las Trece Colonias en

1775, Connecticut se había establecido como un motor económico sin paralelo en las colonias americanas. Cuando llegó la guerra, Connecticut se movilizó de muchas formas para beneficiar al Ejército Continental. Dirigido por el gobernador Jonathan Trumbull (1710-1785) y el Comité de Seguridad de Connecticut, Connecticut envió suficientes alimentos, armas y cañones al ejército del general George Washington para ganarse el sobrenombre de “El estado de la provisión” y atraer la atención no deseada del ejército británico. comando justo al otro lado de la frontera en Nueva York. Para detener el flujo de estas provisiones, así como para aterrorizar los hogares de los simpatizantes de Patriot a lo largo de la costa de Connecticut, el ejército británico, en tres ocasiones diferentes, emprendió una estrategia de enviar tropas para quemar suministros y hogares en Connecticut en tres ocasiones durante ocho años de guerra.

**Palabras clave:** Connecticut, Revolución de las Trece Colonias, Ejército Continental, Whig, Tory, Jonathan Trumbull, General Benedict Arnold, General William Tryon, General David Wooster, General Gold Selleck Silliman

## 康涅狄格州和美国大革命：英国突袭康涅狄格州海岸线，意图洒下恐惧并阻止大陆军获得补给

### 摘要

大英帝国在北美殖民的150年里，在1775年美国大革命开始之前，康涅狄格州将自身建立为美国殖民地中不可比拟的经济引擎。战争来临时，康涅狄格州从多方面动员自身，为大陆军提供支持。在州长乔纳森·特伦布尔（1710-1785）和康涅狄格州安全委员会（Connecticut Committee of Safety）的带领下，康涅狄格州为乔治·华盛顿将军的军队输送了充足的食物、枪支和大炮，并因此获得了“后勤州”的绰号，同时受到纽约省英国军事指挥的敌意关注。为阻断后勤供应流，同时震慑康涅狄格州海岸线上爱国者的居所，英国军队在8年战争期间三个不同的情况下采取战略：输送部队去焚烧康涅狄格州的补给品和爱国者居所。

关键词：康涅狄格州，美国大革命，大陆军，辉格党人，托利党人，乔纳森·特伦布尔，少将本尼迪克特·阿诺德，中将威廉·特里恩，将军大卫·伍斯特，将军戈尔德·塞莱克·西利曼

Mostly forgotten in the larger panorama that is the conflict known as the American Revolution, are three British raids on the Connecticut shoreline that had a major impact on the state's ability to maintain its place as the largest supplier of men and provisions for the Continental Army throughout the war.

Standing on the doorstep of British-occupied New York for most of the war, Connecticut's people remained ever vigilant to the constant threat from the South. As was the case in most of the colonies, Connecticut's population was split into distinct political factions. New England's Puritan founding more than a century and a half before had resulted in a statewide majority of people who identified politically with Great Britain's Protestant Whig party, and who had spent much of that period advocating for the end to the Empire's absolute monarchy. In 1661, the authorities in New Haven, Connecticut had even taken the most dangerous position of hiding from King Charles II (1630-1685) authorities, three of the regicides who had signed the death warrant for his father, King Charles I (1600-1649) during the English Civil War. It was that sentiment that had diminished little in the colony during the intervening years and had even reignited itself as the colony moved toward revolution in the 1760s.

By the same token, Great Britain's military leaders, headquartered in the American colonies on the southern tip of Manhattan Island, after expelling the Continental Army from the town in the fall of 1776, were always aware of

the threat from the North. For much of the early years of the conflict, the British military strategy was to sever troublemaking New England from the rest of the colonies by way of New York's Hudson River Valley. This precarious frontline dynamic made Long Island Sound and the shoreline villages of both Connecticut and New York a virtual no man's land. The game of cat and mouse that ensued between the two forces was the story of the Revolution for the people of this region for the duration of the long war.

To gain the upper hand, and to stop the flow of men, arms, and supplies from Connecticut to General George Washington's Continental Army, the British leadership in New York undertook a strategy of terror and harassment against the many shipping ports along Connecticut's 96-mile shoreline. The landscape on either side of Long Island Sound was littered with numerous small coves and inlets that were tailor-made for the hit and run tactics of the smugglers and privateers employed by both sides. Hidden from most history books, this obscure part of the American Revolution was vital to the survival of both armies in and around New York.

When war finally came in the spring of 1775, Connecticut had already become an agricultural and shipping engine of immense efficiency. The generations of European settlers to North America who preceded these revolutionaries had cleared the state of most of its timber for farming and were producing agricultural goods at a prodigious level. Unable to continue

to support the growing population in the long term, many farming families were beginning to look beyond Connecticut's borders for adequate land they could leave to their heirs. As was the case with some of the other British colonies, Connecticut's charter called for her western border to extend to the Pacific Ocean. Many families eventually settled in Pennsylvania and Ohio territories that they believed to be part of Connecticut.<sup>1</sup>

As the colony grew, new roads were created out of the long-existent Indian trails throughout the region and these roads worked in conjunction with the many navigable rivers that led south to Long Island Sound. The Housatonic, Quinnipiac, Connecticut, and Thames Rivers all lead to the Sound from inland Connecticut and were uniquely suited for moving goods to the merchant ships anchored there. Many Connecticut farmers bred teams of oxen which could be used to transport their goods to market along these poorly constructed colonial roads. Eventually, these paths allowed them to expand their crop and livestock markets outside of the colony itself. People in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and New York became some of Connecticut's biggest customers for the surplus goods the farmers were producing, but the ships did not stop there. The colony's wares found their way to places as far away as Nova Scotia, the Caribbean, and the British West Indies where they could be traded for sugar and molasses making Connecticut one of the most economically prosperous of Britain's original colonies.<sup>2</sup>

The other area that worked hand in glove with the region's farming community was one that Connecticut was also geographically suited for. With a long shoreline that opened onto the Atlantic Ocean located between her New England neighbors to the north and England's mid-Atlantic colonies to the south, shipping easily became one of the state's largest industries. The eastern-most coastal towns like Mystic, Groton, and New London became world leaders in not only the whaling industry but also the exportation of Connecticut goods to overseas ports. As part of Great Britain's mercantilist system, the colony was required to only use the mother countries approved markets to sell her goods, but as the world's largest empire, there were more than enough places around the globe to create great wealth back home. Other towns located along Connecticut's waterways also began to prosper. Shoreline towns such as New Haven, Fairfield, Norwalk, Stamford, and Greenwich on the coast, as well as river towns like Norwich, Hartford, Wethersfield, Middletown, and Derby all began to see increased merchant activity. There was virtually no area of the small colony that was out of reach of any overseas market.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the most prosperous and influential of these coastal ports, was New London. Located in eastern Connecticut at the estuary of the Thames River, it connected much of the colony's shipping industry with the inland towns of Norwich and Lebanon, the latter of which was the home base of Jonathan Trumbull (1710 – 1785), Connecticut's colonial governor. A member

of the Harvard class of 1727, Trumbull's family had established a trading post in Lebanon on the road that connected the ports of New London and Norwich with inland Connecticut as well as Boston and Providence. What was true in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as much as it is today is that location is perhaps the greatest asset to a successful business, and the Trumbull's spot in Lebanon had it locked. Men moving their goods from the interior of the state to the ports in New London oftentimes stopped at the Trumbull's trading post for additional supplies as well as packaging for shipment overseas. Another of Connecticut's growing industries was known as autumn meatpacking. At harvest time, stores of recently butchered beef and pork were loaded into barrels of salt and sent to the ports downriver where they were loaded on ships for the colony's world markets. It was in this process that his family's Lebanon location paid off handsomely for Trumbull and made him one of Connecticut's most influential men.<sup>4</sup>

Aside from his entrepreneurship, for most of his adult life, Jonathan Trumbull was involved in Connecticut politics as a member of the Governor's Council, but in March of 1765 fate intervened. Parliament passed the Stamp Act and the first step on the road to revolution had been taken. Trumbull was among those who felt by doing so, Great Britain had stepped firmly on the rights of Connecticut's citizens but current Governor Thomas Fitch (1699 – 1774), according to Trumbull's great-great-grandson, was a man who was "careful of the rights of his colony but believing

that the rights of his king were superior, and that his mandates, whatever they might be, should be obeyed."<sup>5</sup>

In taking the oath to enforce the hated Stamp Act in a largely Whig colony, Fitch had secured his political fate. Seeing the writing on the wall, he retired from office the following year. The new governor was a man named William Pitkin (1694 – 1768) and Trumbull was elected his Deputy Governor. When Pitkin passed away in October 1768, the General Assembly elected Jonathan Trumbull to replace him. The citizens of Connecticut continued to put Trumbull in the office at each yearly election for the foreseeable future. It was a post that he occupied through the end of the war, making him the only colonial governor to do so. That continuity of power at the top worked to Connecticut's advantage for the duration of the war.<sup>6</sup>

When war finally did come to Great Britain's American colonies on the morning of April 19, 1775, Connecticut and her governor were in a unique position to do more than their part for the cause. Patriot sentiment dominated the colony in much the same way it did with her troublemaking neighbor to the north in Massachusetts. A few of the western towns tended towards the Loyalist or Tory beliefs held by many in the colony of New York, but most of the people favored the Patriot cause. For the inhabitants of the region, the conflict was very much like a colonial civil war, pitting neighbors against neighbors for the next eight years. Friendships between families that had existed for generations were suddenly

over and violence against each other was a very real possibility.

For Jonathan Trumbull and the rest of the Whig government, the issue was how he could direct the colony's war efforts within his limited powers of the governor. As a British colony with a unique charter, Connecticut's governmental power was mostly located in its legislative branch, but during a time of war, when decisions needed to be made with increasing speed and urgency, a change needed to be made. The twice a year session of the General Assembly, at a time when communication between towns was extremely slow, was just not adequate and Connecticut's leaders knew it. It is a testament to the reputation of Governor Trumbull, that the General Assembly felt obliged to pass the following Act less than a month after Lexington and Concord at their May 1775 session:

*This Assembly do appoint the Hon. Matthew Griswold Esq<sup>r</sup>, and the Hon<sup>ble</sup> Eliphalet Dyer, Jabez Huntington, and Samuel Huntington Esq<sup>r</sup>, William Williams, Nathaniel Wales jun<sup>r</sup>, Jedidiah Elderkin, Joshua West, and Benjamin Huntington Esq<sup>r</sup>, a committee to assist his Honor the Governor when the Assembly is not sitting, to order and direct the marches and stations of the inhabitants inlisted and assembled for the special defence of the colony, or any part or parts of them, as they shall judge necessary, and to give order from time to time for furnishing and supplying said*

*inhabitants with every matter and thing that may be needful to render the defence of the colony effectual.*<sup>7</sup>

The creation of this advisory committee gave Governor Trumbull war powers that no colonial governor of the time enjoyed. It was also assumed, based on the proximity of the hometowns of many of these men, that Connecticut's war government was to be run out of Trumbull's Lebanon general store. Not only was it the Governor's home base, but in 1775 it was centrally located between the fighting in Boston and the New London shipping port that had been the reason for its location from the beginning. From this advantageous location, Trumbull and the advisory committee became instrumental to the American war effort.<sup>8</sup>

Within days after the first shots of the war were fired outside Boston, approximately 3,600 Connecticut men left their lives behind and went to the aid of the militia in the siege around the coastal town. The governor's son Joseph Trumbull (1737 – 1778), currently practicing law in Norwich, was appointed as Connecticut's Commissary General for the colony's troops now located in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It was his job to ensure that the Connecticut men taking part in the siege had all the supplies and provisions they required. Eventually, there were a total of nine commissary locations for the state, all run by Connecticut merchants who had a lifetime of negotiating with farmers for the most advantageous prices as well as keeping detailed records of their transactions.<sup>9</sup>

“On the same day that it established the commissariat, the Assembly voted an immediate embargo on exportation by water out of the colony of wheat, rye, corn, pork, beef, live cattle, peas, beans, flour, and corn meal.”<sup>10</sup> There was no way the colony’s commissaries could obtain the best prices for the required food stores if they had to compete with so many worldwide markets, so the governor and his committee attempted to shut off the spicket. For the most part, the embargo kept the cost of these goods firmly at 1774 prices.<sup>11</sup>

As is the case with any effective embargo, this one created an equally viable smuggling industry. Ships from both sides of the conflict operated throughout Long Island Sound and beyond for the duration of the war, with little or no interference from state officials. The ever-increasing need for gunpowder and arms from the West Indies made much of this illegal trade beneficial to Connecticut’s war production, so officials mostly looked the other way.

Also operating in the Sound throughout the war were Privateers commissioned by both Governor Trumbull and the British military leadership in New York. Privateering was legalized piracy, and these vessels felt free to attack enemy ships and rob them of their cargo, with the agreement that they give 10% of whatever they captured to the government who had provided them with their letter of marque. Connecticut’s Letter of Marque began as follows, in this example of one provided to Captain Eli Rogers of a ship called the Gull.

*You may by force of arms attack, subdue and take all ships and other vessels belonging to the Crown of Great Britain, or any of the subjects thereof, on the high seas or between the high and low water marks except the ships or vessels together with their cargo belonging to any inhabitant or inhabitants of Bermuda or such other ships or vessels bringing persons with intent to reside within the United States...*<sup>12</sup>

The letter also included what was expected of a ship’s captain in the event he came into possession of an enemy ship. They were required to return to Connecticut where the cargo could be accurately cataloged, and settlement of payment could be finalized. Much of this activity took place out of the ports of New London and added a great deal of wealth to the state’s coffers throughout the war.<sup>13</sup>

At about the same time that the General Assembly created the Advisory Committee, they also called for an official ration for Connecticut’s soldiers so that the commissaries could better manage the needed procurement. Each man’s “daily ration was to include three quarters of a pound of salt or fresh pork or beef, a pound of bread or flour, and three pints of beer, plus unspecified amounts of milk, molasses, coffee, sugar, chocolate, vegetables, onions in season, vinegar, and weekly half a pint of corn meal, six ounces of butter, three pints of peas or beans.”<sup>14</sup> For the duration of the war, at least by statute, the

state's troops remained amongst the best fed in the Continental Army.<sup>15</sup>

There was also a great need for weaponry, especially in the earliest days of the war. Connecticut looked to supply her troops with the needed requirement of guns, cannons, and to a lesser degree gun powder. The state was already a colonial leader in gun making, so when the war broke out, these craftsmen were encouraged to increase production motivated with a bounty of five shillings per gun. The increased production helped to keep Connecticut's militia as well as those serving in the Continental Army well-armed.

An even greater advantage Connecticut had over many of her sister colonies, was in cannon production. A foundry in Salisbury Connecticut on the western Massachusetts border had been owned by a man with assumed Loyalist leanings. He had abandoned it soon after the war began and fled to England, never to return. The management of this badly needed plant was taken over by Governor Trumbull and the Council of Safety and soon the state was putting out much of the heavy weaponry required by Washington's army throughout the conflict.<sup>16</sup>

Connecticut's overwhelming production in the suppling of American forces during a time of war quickly drew the attention of the British leadership in New York. Having taken the town from General Washington (1732 – 1799) and the Continental Army in the late fall of 1776, it remained a threat to the American supply line from the north for the remainder of the war. Even under the

brief American occupation, New York's Tory population was a thorn in Washington's side.

No one personified that thorn from New York more than Lieutenant General William Tryon (1729–1788), the former British Governor of the colony. When the Americans had taken control of the town, Tryon had moved his office to a ship just offshore, where he could quickly reinstate himself if the British military was able to retake the town. He was a fanatical believer in British policies, and he had more than a few willing accomplices to assist him on Staten Island which remained firmly in the hands of the Tories for the duration of the war.<sup>17</sup>

Restored to power when Washington and the Continental Army were chased out of the city in the fall of 1776, Tryon soon set his sights on the flow of provisions coming out of Connecticut. Working under the military leadership of Lord William Howe (1729 – 1814), he worked to strengthen the British supply position in any way possible. Tory spies in Connecticut had informed Howe of a large magazine of rebel guns and provisions located at Danbury, just over the state line. This location was advantageous to the Americans because it was a short distance from not only the Patriot held Hudson River Valley, but also to the militia units guarding the Connecticut shoreline near Fairfield. It was decided that should these supplies be required in either area, they could be obtained rapidly. It was also believed that the location was far enough inland to make them out of reach of the enemy.<sup>18</sup>



It was here, that now Major-General Tryon landed with approximately 2,000 men, a combined three full divisions of British regulars as well as Tory troops, on April 25, 1777. The “troops left New York in a fleet of 12 transports, three ships of wars and some small vessels, totaling approximately 26 ships, under the command of Captain Henry Duncan.”<sup>19</sup> While a fleet of this size moving east through the Sound had not gone unnoticed by the Connecticut militia forces on shore, they had been unable to mobilize in time to fully oppose the landings on Compo Beach, east of the mouth of the Saugatuck River in today’s town of Westport. The troops were ashore by 6 PM on the 25<sup>th</sup> and only a brief skirmish ensued as the British left the beach to begin the 25-mile march to Danbury. Being greatly outnumbered, the few militia troops in the area were easily dispatched. The British proceeded northeast from the beach, eventually stopping for the night on the Redding Road at about 2:30 AM, a little more than halfway to Danbury.

General Gold Selleck Silliman (1732 – 1790) was the man in command of the patriot militia for the southwest sector of Connecticut, and he had been made aware of the British presence immediately upon the fleet being spotted off the coast. A veteran of the Battles of Long Island and White Plains the previous fall, this was not Silliman’s first contact with the enemy. As far back as the 7<sup>th</sup> of March, he had been warning Washington of the British naval activity in the Sound. On that date, he wrote the General stating “...I think it my duty to acquaint Your Excellency, that for

about 6 Weekes back the enemy Ships of Warr & Tenders have been, and still are cruising [sic] along the Sound Near Connecticut Shores....”<sup>20</sup> As soon as he was sure of the fleet’s destination, he alerted his subordinates to bring their men to Fairfield as quickly as possible. He also notified his immediate superior, General David Wooster (1711–1777), Commander of the Connecticut Militia who proceeded from his home in New Haven to cut off the British advance on Danbury. Early the next morning, as the day dawned rainy and cold, Silliman and about 500 men took out after the British on the road to Danbury.<sup>21</sup>

As he arrived in Redding, General Silliman and his men were joined by General Benedict Arnold (1741–1801), who had also been at his home in New Haven, taking care of some personal business. His wife had passed away while he was away with the army, and he needed to arrange for the care of his two boys. Recently passed over for a promotion he believed he was owed, by the Continental Congress in March, Arnold had taken a leave of absence from the army. His intension was to resign his commission as soon as the spring thaw allowed for safe travel south. In New Haven “he planned to comfort himself with the adoring family fellowship of his sons and sister before proceeding to Philadelphia.”<sup>22</sup> It was there that the courier from the militia reached him, and instead of heading to the colonial capital to the south, Arnold rode north towards Danbury.

It was on the road to Danbury that Arnold met up with General Wooster.

While Wooster was the ranking militia officer in the state, Arnold was the man with the most actual fighting experience, so it was decided he should take command of the American response. The group continued to ride north until they reached the town of Bethel, just south of Danbury, where they could see the flames of Danbury burning in the distance. They now knew that they were too late to save the guns and supplies held there, so the decision was made to do what they could to stop the British from reaching their ships anchored back in Long Island Sound.<sup>23</sup>

General Wooster took his men north towards Danbury, while Arnold and Silliman moved west toward Ridgefield to cut off the British retreat there. It was a little after midnight on the 27<sup>th</sup> of April when General Tryon was made aware of the approach of the American militia and seeing how a good portion of his men had availed themselves of the stores of rum in Danbury, determined that it might be time to leave. His men had already loaded into their few wagons as much of the American guns and supplies they could carry and set fire to the rest. Now, as his men prepared to march south, the homes of known Tories were marked with a cross, and any remaining residences were also put to the torch. Tryon later reported to General Howe that the burning of Danbury was the accidental result of the burning the stores of supplies, but that was most likely not the case. He had previously advocated for a strategy of “desolation warfare”<sup>24</sup> against the Connecticut shoreline so that rebellion was to be as painful as

possible, but he could never get his superiors to agree.

General Wooster and his men were rapidly coming up behind the enemy as they entered Ridgefield so when the British stopped to rest Wooster ordered an attack on their rear guard. The general as always led his men in that attack, but in the attempt to capture a couple of British cannons, he received a mortal wound for his efforts. His horse was shot out from under him and as he looked to mount another, he was shot in the groin and had to be carried from the field. His wound would prove fatal, and Wooster passed away on May 2<sup>nd</sup> while he rested in a house in Danbury.<sup>25</sup>

Assuming the British most likely would return to their ships by the same route they had taken to Danbury, Generals Arnold and Silliman had taken up a second position on the Redding Road to confront them. Instead, Tryon headed for the coast by way of Ridgefield, so Arnold ordered his men into a forced march through the back roads to the west, trying to stay in between their adversary and their ships anchored in the Sound. A hastily built barricade along the road leading south out of town made up of whatever materials were readily available was constructed. “The site was a good choice because on the right of his position was the Benjamin Stebbins farmhouse with the land that dropped off at a sharp angle, and on the left side of the barricade was a ‘rocky ledge,’”<sup>26</sup> and it was here that the hottest fighting of the raid took place.

Wooster’s attack from behind had surprised Tryon who now became

aware that the Connecticut militia was much closer than he had realized, and he could not return to his ships unmolested. As he continued to move south out of town, he ran headlong into the barricade across the road built by Arnold and Silliman's men, whose numbers continued to increase as militias arrived from towns all over Connecticut and the Hudson River Valley. Still vastly outnumbered by the British, the Americans still put up a respectable effort against the seasoned and better-trained soldiers.

For the better part of an hour, the British tried to overrun the barricade with frontal attacks, but when they realized that these militia troops weren't going to break and run as Tryon expected, the British moved to gain an advantage on the American left around the rocky ledge. Now the enemy was able to fire on them from above and behind the barricade and the militia troops had finally had enough, and they began to retreat from this position.

Arnold, as he always did in the early days of the war, had led an active and spirited defense of the American position at the barricade. As he tried to keep some semblance of order to his men's withdrawal, his horse was shot out from under him. As he attempted to extricate himself from the fallen animal, a British officer approached to take him as his prisoner. Arnold quickly pulled the pistol he kept in his saddle holster and shot the man point-blank and retreated to the shelter of a nearby swamp as his men ran from the barricade.<sup>27</sup> Still more than 15 miles from

their ships, Tryon and his men set up camp just outside of Ridgefield, expecting to resume their march to the coast in the morning.

This concluded what has become known as the Battle of Ridgefield, but not the overall engagement between the Connecticut militia and the British invaders, who continued to move south towards their ships. Once again Arnold and Silliman looked to cut off the enemy's escape and on the morning of April 28<sup>th</sup>, they took up a position at a bridge over the Saugatuck River two miles north of the town of Norwalk. "Unfortunately for Arnold, Tryon learned from his spies where he was making his stand and maneuvered around the American position by crossing the river at a little-known ford."<sup>28</sup> Having been outflanked again, the Americans were now reduced to a hit and run action from the woods as their adversaries marched double-time back to Compo Beach and the safety of their ships.

Not unlike their brethren from Massachusetts and New Hampshire, who had harassed the British during their retreat to Boston from Lexington and Concord in April 1775, the Connecticut men kept up a sniping running battle with Tryon and his men alongside their march the remaining few miles back to the shore. Once they reached the hill overlooking Compo Beach, the British guns mounted on their transport ships in the harbor, chased off the remaining Patriot pursuers and the Red Coats boarded the ships with their stolen booty relatively unscathed.<sup>29</sup>

From a British standpoint, there is no way that General Tryon's foray into Connecticut at the end of April 1777 could be considered anything but a success. Setting aside the terrifying message sent to the citizens of the area with the burning of Danbury and parts of Ridgefield, the number of stores that were either destroyed or ownership was transferred from the Americans to the British had to have had an impact on the coming summer campaigns of 1777.

In all, the British had destroyed or stolen "a quantity of ordinance stores, with iron, etc.; 4000 barrels of beef and pork; 100 large tierces of biscuits; 89 barrels of rice; 120 puncheons of rum; several large stores of wheat, oats and Indian corn, in bulk, the quantity hereof could not possibly be ascertained; 30 pipes of wine; 100 hogsheads of sugar; 50 ditto of molasses; 20 casks of coffee; 15 large casks filled with medicines of all kinds; 100 barrels of saltpeter; 1020 tents and marquees; a number of iron boilers; a large quantity of hospital bedding; engineers', pioneers' and carpenters' tools; a printing press complete; tar; tallow, etc.; 5000 pairs of shoes and stockings."<sup>30</sup> In the coming year, the momentum of the war in the north drastically changed in favor of the Americans, but the winter of 1777 saw the beginnings of the internal strife caused by an insufficient supply of troops that threatened the fragile cohesion of the Continental Army before the war was over.

It also stands to reason, that if the raid on Danbury had not resulted in some hardship to the American cause, then General Tryon would not have

come back again in the summer of 1779, this time setting his sights on the centrally located port of New Haven. Connecticut Colonel Jeremiah Wadsworth (1743 – 1804) had been made Commissary of the Continental Army in 1778 and as a result, much of the provisions for the American army were now stored within the state's borders until they could be shipped off to the various Patriot encampments. Also, during the intervening years, there had been a steady increase in the activities of the Connecticut-based privateers working on Long Island Sound, as they perfected their craft. These men were well versed in the use of whaleboats that, because of their speed and dexterity could be used to great advantage when attacking much larger vessels. Connecticut's seamen had become a major thorn in the side of the British leadership in New York, and General Tryon once again wanted to terrorize the people that supported them into submission.<sup>31</sup>

New Haven sits at the bottom of an upside-down "U" shaped harbor with the town proper in the middle flanked on the sides by the West, Mill, and Quinnipiac Rivers. The towns of East and West Haven sit across these rivers on either side of the harbor. As the British fleet moved east through the Sound they came first to West Haven, and it was here that they began to come ashore when they anchored a place called Southwest Ledge. The town was in the process of holding its first Fourth of July celebration when the British warships left Huntington Long Island with a force of approximately 5,000 men and made their way up the sound.

As was the case the last time, the shoreline militia lookouts marked the fleet's progress up the Sound.<sup>32</sup>

High tide was at about 5 o'clock on the morning of July 5<sup>th</sup>, so it was then that the First division of 1,500 men began to come ashore. Hauling four field cannons, this contingent led by Brigadier General Thomas Garth (1744 – 1829) quickly move inland to the West Haven green virtually unmolested. They rested there while the fleet moved across the mouth of the harbor to East Haven, where they deposited another division of 1,500 men, under the command of General Tryon himself. Taking fire from Black Rock Fort at the very tip of the harbor, the approaching boats were forced to split with half coming ashore at Morris Cove and the rest moving east to the land beyond the rocky point and out of range of the three rebel guns in the fort. It was here that the Connecticut militia put up the most resistance as the British attempted to move north to New Haven. By now the countryside was aware of the landings in West and East Haven, and additional militiamen were gathering from many of the nearby towns, like Derby, Milford, Shelton, and Branford.<sup>33</sup>

This time the British advance was marked by the burning of many of the farms and crops they encountered as they progressed around the mouth of the harbor toward New Haven. The guns on board the British ships in the harbor covered the advance as the army tried to gain a foothold on the beaches. Eighteen members of the Connecticut militia housed in Black Rock Fort did

what they could to make the enemy uncomfortable in their endeavor, but they were eventually forced to withdraw, spiking the guns as they departed their position.<sup>34</sup>

In defense of their homes, the Americans again engaged in the same type of running sniping battle that had taken place on the road back to Boston from Lexington and Concord in 1775 and at Danbury in 1777. Eventually, the Americans were forced to fall back to a spot called Beacon Hill, about three miles from where the enemy had landed. At the high point of the area, the Connecticut militia in 1775 had established a small signal fort and gun battery for just this type of occasion. On this day it was the sight of the final stand of any kind of organized militia resistance. The British eventually advanced up the hill and took this spot as well, forcing the Americans to retreat to the hills surrounding nearby Lake Saltonstall, while the enemy moved into the town of New Haven itself and took up temporary residence on the campus of Yale College.<sup>35</sup>

As nightfall came on the night of July 5<sup>th</sup>, the occupying British troops had once again found the stores of rum in both private residences as well on the Yale campus. Connecticut militia troops continued to arrive from all over the state and it became apparent to Generals Tryon and Garth that they might soon be surrounded by men much soberer than their own. Garth had also burned some of the farms he had encountered on his trek through West Haven and into New Haven, and

this combined with the proclamation that Tryon had made upon his arrival in town had done much to inflame the citizenry of the area. Whether he intended to threaten the people of Connecticut into submission or was himself drunk on power is unclear. He wrote:

*The ungenerous and wanton insurrection against the sovereignty of Great Britain, into which this colony has been deluded by the artifices of designing men, for private purposes, might well justify in you every dear which a conscious guilt could form, respecting the intentions of the present armament.*

*Your town, your property, yourselves, lie within the grasp of the power whose forbearance you have ungenerously construed into fear; but whose lenity has persisted in its mild and noble efforts, even though branded with the most unworthy imputation.*<sup>36</sup>

Whatever his intentions, Tryon and his men now found themselves in a growing beehive of militia activity just outside the city limits. A council of war with his officers held in the old Connecticut State House confirmed this fact and the decision was made to evacuate the town immediately. They had taken heavy losses during the raid, with some estimates as high as 200 men, and it was now time to leave. Tryon's men left New Haven by way of the eastern side of the harbor and by the afternoon of July 6<sup>th</sup>, all were back aboard the transport ships. The militia had now reoccupied Black Rock Fort as well as Beacon Hill, so as the British ships passed by, they

sent a full broadside volley in the direction of both forts. One of the cannonballs severed the head from the body of Isaac Pardee as he ascended Beacon Hill with another man.<sup>37</sup>

Despite the losses his army had taken in New Haven, General Tryon was not yet done terrorizing Connecticut. As the British fleet passed by Fairfield on their way back to New York, they once again came ashore. This time their intention was simply the destruction of a town that had led the rebellion against British authority. They also knew that this time General Silliman would not be at home in Fairfield to coordinate any resistance, having been kidnapped by Tories from his home, along with his oldest son, back in February. The general was still being held in New York awaiting an exchange of prisoners that did not come until the following April when Connecticut privateers reciprocated by capturing a Tory judge from his home on Long Island.<sup>38</sup>

Tryon's intention was solely the destruction of the town and the stores that were being held there. Still believing in a strategy of desolation against any towns and their citizens who remained in rebellion, he was now putting that idea into brutal effect. Any homes, barns, and churches within easy reach of the shoreline were burned to the ground, as the army moved into town. Most people had fled as the army approached up Beach Road, but some, who were determined to stay were shot for resisting. This raid was once again a message to the Connecticut people that resistance to the power of Great Britain

was a deadly mistake and that continued support of the Continental Army could only bring more destruction.<sup>39</sup>

That additional destruction came again sooner than anyone in Connecticut anticipated. After a brief trip back to Huntington, General Tryon returned to the area in a matter of days, this time only a few miles from the New York border at Norwalk. It was here that the largest military engagement of the war within Connecticut's borders took place on July 11<sup>th</sup>. By now the entire state was alarmed by what had already taken place at New Haven and Fairfield, so when the enemy returned, a militia force larger than any during the previous raids was waiting for them. Even with the growing force, the Americans were still greatly outnumbered, and the result was the wholesale burning of most of the town as well the ships in the harbor before the fleet finally returned to New York for good. The destruction of Norwalk was witnessed by General Washington's head of intelligence Major Benjamin Tallmadge (1754–1835) who was nearby with his body of Continental light infantry. Tallmadge and his men were too late to impede the enemy in their task, but in his memoirs, he described "the scene as awful – to see the inhabitants – men, women, and children – leaving their houses, and fleeing before the enemy, while our troops were endeavoring to protect them."<sup>40</sup>

Motivated more by a need to terrorize his neighbors to the north, than the destruction of Connecticut arms and provisions, General Tryon managed to accomplish a little of both

during his July expedition up the shoreline. When it was over, Governor Trumbull attempted to assess the total damage done to his state. According to his calculations, the towns of New Haven, East Haven, Fairfield, and Norwalk had 240 homes, 158 barns, 36 stores, 40 shops, 12 vessels consumed by the fires set by Tryon's men. Also burned was an estimated 2,000 bushels of wheat to be used to feed the American army. It was also reported that there were 23 Americans killed, 15 wounded and another 12 captured. General Tryon reported British losses at 26 killed, 90 wounded and 32 missing. Among the latter figure was included several Hessian mercenaries who simply deserted the British army and had stayed in New Haven to become respected members of the community.<sup>41</sup>

The third and final time that the armies of Great Britain came to attack Connecticut's shores during the war, it came at the hands of the man who had done so much to repel the first raid in April of 1777. At that time, the seeds of discontent were already germinating in the mind of Benedict Arnold, but the remnants of his remaining loyalty to the American cause won out on that day. Now it was more than four years later, and he had spent most of the previous year as a general in the employ of the British army, having betrayed the cause for which he had done so much during the early days of the conflict. His treason in September of 1780 had filled many of his life-long friends in south-east Connecticut with understandable anger. Now he returned to the area of his childhood to set a torch to that anger and the town.

As a young adult, Arnold had spent many months in and around the port of New London as he slowly built his own export business. He knew the area and the people there very well, but now, he had spent much of the past year, begging his new commanders to allow him to lead a British force in the field. In January of 1781, he had led a Loyalist force known as the American Legion to Virginia, having burned the town of Richmond and coming within a whisker of capturing the state's governor Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826). By the following fall, the privateering business operating out of New London had become too lucrative to suit Sir Henry Clinton (1730 – 1795) and the British leadership in New York, so Arnold was sent “home” to put a stop to it.<sup>42</sup>

While much of Connecticut was beginning to show the strains of six years of war, New London seemed to be thriving. Not only was much of the bounty the privateers had captured throughout Long Island Sound and the Atlantic Ocean, brought home through New London, but there was also a brisk business of smuggling with the enemy being carried out in the area. Whaleboats could easily slip in and out of the numerous coves and inlets around New London and Groton, to find more than a few willing Loyalist trading partners on the far eastern end of Long Island, only a few short miles away. Lieutenant Colonel William Ledyard (1738 – 1781), the man in command of the militia in the area, was aware of this illicit trade but lacked the resources to do much about it.<sup>43</sup>

On the early morning of September 6<sup>th</sup>, 1781, Arnold approached New London harbor, with a force of over 1,700 officers and men, transported by a fleet of 24 vessels, including four heavily armed warships. The militia force stationed in Fort Griswold, on the eastern shore of the harbor, sounded the prearranged alarm of two cannon shots to alert the militia in the neighboring towns, but Arnold of course was aware of this signal and followed the two initial shots with one of his own. Three cannon shots meant that a prized ship was arriving, and consequently, the militia units in the area were slow to react to the threat.<sup>44</sup>

Unlike the raid on New Haven two full summers before, Arnold attacked the two sides of the harbor simultaneously. Deploying approximately 800 men towards Fort Trumbull on the western or New London side while an equal contingent of loyalists' troops came ashore below Fort Griswold on the Groton side, the limited American militia troops were unable to concentrate their forces on any one side of the harbor. The third alarm signal combined with a reticence to face down British guns on the part of some members of the militia kept the total number combined in both forts at only about 50 men. Many busied themselves in getting their homes and their families out of way of the advancing enemy, before manning the forts. There was also a very short supply of gunpowder and shot available in the area, making any kind of lengthy defense impossible. Colonel Ledyard, in charge of the defense of Fort Griswold, did what he could to quickly requisition



needed supplies, but with limited time and provisions available, he found himself extremely short on both.<sup>45</sup>

The enemy force moving on Fort Trumbull quickly overwhelmed the approximately twenty-three men defending her with a constant barrage from the ship-bound British guns in the harbor. Attempting to hold off a much larger force with cannonballs flying over their heads was not something these unseasoned troops were prepared to deal with, and the fort surrendered within minutes. Another smaller battery called Town Hill Fort sat behind Fort Trumbull closer to town, but that was also improperly manned and many of the militia in Fort Trumbull found themselves fired upon from both sides until that battery also surrendered. Arnold and his men easily moved beyond these forts and into the town of New London, where it was subsequently put to the flames.<sup>46</sup>

Fort Griswold on the opposite side of the Thames River put up a slightly more rigid defense, but it too was soon in British hands. Colonel Ledyard found himself leading a battery of inexperienced and in some cases, very young troops in a fort badly in need of repair. As troops abandoned Fort Trumbull, many crossed the river to assist in the defense of Fort Griswold, giving Ledyard approximately 165 men when the British arrived at the fort. However, the biggest problem the colonel had was not limited to the number of men, but the lack of prepared ammunition for the cannons. Loading each shot with gunpowder was a time-consuming process and not one that was typically done

while under fire as the smallest spark could set off a catastrophe.<sup>47</sup>

Fort Griswold also surrendered after a battle lasting less than an hour. Once the British had forced themselves inside the walls of Fort Griswold, Colonel Ledyard and his men looked for quarter from an enemy now clearly among them. What happened next has been a matter of some controversy ever since. It was reported in the years immediately following the battle that, as Ledyard attempted to surrender his sword to a British officer standing in front of him, it was taken and immediately used against him, as the officer ran him through with it. This act set off a carnage of reprisals by the British as many of the fort's defenders were also murdered as they looked to surrender. However, the facts of this account have been called into question in subsequent years due to the lack of reliable eyewitness accounts. What cannot be denied, is that American casualties were high in Fort Griswold after the militia attempted to surrender.<sup>48</sup>

According to General Arnold's figures, the raid on New London and Groton resulted in 48 British soldiers killed and 145 wounded. Arnold estimated that 85% of the eventual 300 defenders in Fort Griswold were also killed, but he neglects to report on just how such a high casualty rate was obtained. Much of the towns of New London and Groton were burned to the ground as well as the destruction of approximately 50 cannons and the stores of gunpowder that was supposed to go to the Continental Army, now working its way towards Yorktown, Virginia. It

has also been reported that some of the American troops from Connecticut helped win what became the decisive battle of the war at the Virginia port town, while under the command of the Marquis de Lafayette (1757–1834) who instructed them to “Remember New London,” but this cannot be definitively confirmed.<sup>49</sup>

What can be confirmed is that no state contributed more of its wealth and treasure towards winning the American War for Independence than Connecticut, making it a target of British reprisals throughout the war. While exact total figures can be elusive, it can be accepted as fact that it was because of men like Jeremiah Wadsworth in his position as Commissary General of the Continental Army as well Governor Jonathan Trumbull and his son Joseph who held the position before Wadsworth, that the army was able to survive at all. There can be no dispute that

the destruction of many of these stores of food and weapons in Connecticut resulting from General William Tryon’s raids in 1777 and again in 1779, along with the desolation wrought by the Connecticut traitor Benedict Arnold in 1781, contributed to the almost constant hardship that American forces endured throughout the conflict. Many times, as the war progressed, General Washington was put in the position of begging the Continental Congress for long-promised weapons and supplies, some of which never arrived because they had been destroyed during these raids before ever leaving Connecticut. For an army that was forced to survive with so little for almost eight years of war, the loss of any number of provisions was an extreme hardship and it is for that reason the British military saw fit to continue raiding Connecticut, right up to the final surrender at Yorktown.

## Primary Sources

“Founders Online: From George Washington to Jonathan Trumbull, Sr., 7 July 1779.” National Archives and Records Administration. Accessed February 2019. <https://founders.archives.gov/?q=George%20Washington%20to%20Jonathan%20Trumbull%20Sr.%201779&s=1111311111&sa=&r=48&sr=>

“Founders Online: To George Washington from Brigadier General Gold Selleck Silliman.” National Archives and Records Administration. Accessed February 2019. <https://founders.archives.gov/?q=Gold%20Selleck%20Silliman%20to%20George%20Washington&s=1111311111&sa=&r=12&sr=>

Tallmadge, Benjamin. *Memoir of Col. Benjamin Tallmadge*. Place of Publication Not Identified: Publisher Not Identified, 2017.

“The Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut: Connecticut: Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming.” Internet Archive. January 01, 1970. Accessed April 2019. <https://archive.org/details/publicrecordsofc015conn/page/420>

## Secondary Sources

Author, Unknown. *The Lebanon War Office: The History of the Building, and Report of the Celebration at Lebanon, Conn; ..., Flag Day, June 15, 1891 (Classic Reprint)*. Place of Publication Not Identified: Forgotten Books, 2015.

Baker, Mark Allen. *Connecticut Families of the Revolution: American Forebears from Burr to Wolcott*. Charleston, SC: History Press, 2014.

Case, James Royal. *An Account of Tryon's Raid on Danbury in April, 1777*. London, England: Forgotten Books, 2018.

Cummin, Katharine Hewitt. *Connecticut Militia General, Gold Selleck Silliman*. Hartford, CT: American Revolution Bicentennial Commission of Connecticut, 1980.

Darley, Stephen. *Call to Arms: The Patriot Militia in the 1777 British Raid on Danbury, Connecticut*. Stephen Darley, 2015.

Davies, Wallace Evan. “Privateering Around Long Island During the Revolution.” *New York History* 20, no. 3 (1939): 283-94. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23134696>

Destler, Chester McArthur. *Connecticut: The Provisions State*. Chester, CT: Pequot Press, 1973.

Griswold, Wick. *Connecticut Pirates & Privateers: Treasure and Treachery in the Constitution State*. Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2015.

Lehman, Eric D. *Homegrown Terror - Benedict Arnold and the Burning of New London*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2017.

Martin, James Kirby. *Benedict Arnold, Revolutionary Hero: An American Warrior Reconsidered*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2000.

McCullough, David. *1776*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2005.

Nelson, Paul David. “William Tryon Confronts the American Revolution, 1771–1780.” *The Historian* 53, no. 2 (1991): 267-84. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24447860>

Powell, Walter L. *Murder or Mayhem? Benedict Arnold's New London, Connecticut Raid, 1781*. Gettysburg, PA: Thomas Publications, 2000.

Roth, David M. *Connecticut's War Governor: Jonathan Trumbull*. Guilford, CT: Globe Pequot, 1974.

Townshend, Charles Hervey. *The British Invasion of New Haven, Connecticut: Together with Some Account of Their Landing and Burning the Towns of Fairfield and Norwalk, July, 1779*. Lightning Source, 2015.

Trumbull, Jonathan. *Jonathan Trumbull, Governor of Connecticut, 1769-1784*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1919.

## Endnotes

- 1 Jonathan Trumbull, *Jonathan Trumbull: Governor of Connecticut, 1769 – 1784* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Company, 1919).
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid., 78.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Unknown Author, *The Lebanon War Office. The History of the Building, and Report of the Celebration at Lebanon, Conn., Flag Day, June 15, 1891* (Hartford, CT: Case, Lockwood, and Brainard, 1891), 8.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Chester McArthur Destler, *Connecticut: The Provisions State* (Chester, CT: Pequot Press, 1973).
- 10 Ibid., 16.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Wick Griswold, *Connecticut Pirates & Privateers: Treasure and Treachery in the Constitution State* (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2015), 63.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Chester McArthur Destler, *Connecticut: The Provisions State* (Chester, CT: Pequot Press, 1973), 17.

- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Jonathan Trumbull, *Jonathan Trumbull: Governor of Connecticut, 1769 – 1784* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Company, 1919).
- 17 Paul David Nelson. “William Tryon Confronts the American Revolution, 1771–1780.” *The Historian* 53, no. 2 (1991): 283. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24447860>
- 18 James Royal Case, *An Account of Tryon’s Raid on Danbury in April, 1777* (London: Forgotten Books, 2018).
- 19 Stephen Darley, *Call to Arms: The Patriot Militia in the 1777 British Raid on Danbury, Connecticut* (Stephen Darley, 2015), 14.
- 20 “Founders Online: To George Washington from Brigadier General Gold Selleck Silliman.” National Archives and Records Administration, accessed March 2019.
- 21 Katharine Hewitt. Cummin, *Connecticut Militia General, Gold Selleck Silliman* (Hartford, CT: American Revolution Bicentennial Commission of Connecticut, 1979).
- 22 James Kirby Martin, *Benedict Arnold, Revolutionary Hero: An American Warrior Reconsidered* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 314.
- 23 James Royal Case, *An Account of Tryon’s Raid on Danbury in April, 1777* (London: Forgotten Books, 2018).
- 24 Paul David Nelson. “William Tryon Confronts the American Revolution, 1771–1780.” *The Historian* 53, no. 2 (1991): 283. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24447860>
- 25 Stephen Darley, *Call to Arms: The Patriot Militia in the 1777 British Raid on Danbury, Connecticut* (Stephen Darley, 2015).
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Ibid., 25.
- 28 Ibid., 29.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 James Royal Case, *An Account of Tryon’s Raid on Danbury in April, 1777* (London: Forgotten Books, 2018), 28.
- 31 Wick Griswold, *Connecticut Pirates & Privateers: Treasure and Treachery in the Constitution State* (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2015).
- 32 Charles Hervey Townshend, *The British Invasion of New Haven Connecticut together with some Account of their Landing and Burning of Fairfield and Norwalk, July, 1779* (Lightning Source, 2015).
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Ibid.

- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Ibid., 24.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Katharine Hewitt. Cummin, *Connecticut Militia General, Gold Selleck Silliman* (Hartford, CT: American Revolution Bicentennial Commission of Connecticut, 1979).
- 39 Paul David Nelson. "William Tryon Confronts the American Revolution, 1771–1780." *The Historian* 53, no. 2 (1991): 283. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24447860>
- 40 Benjamin Tallmadge. *Memoir of Col. Benjamin Tallmadge*. Place of Publication Not Identified: Publisher Not Identified, 2017.
- 41 Charles Hervey Townshend, *The British Invasion of New Haven Connecticut together with some Account of their Landing and Burning of Fairfield and Norwalk, July, 1779* (Lightning Source, 2015).
- 42 Eric D. Lehman, *Homegrown Terror: Benedict Arnold and the Burning of New London* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2014).
- 43 Wick Griswold, *Connecticut Pirates & Privateers: Treasure and Treachery in the Constitution State* (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2015).
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Eric D. Lehman, *Homegrown Terror: Benedict Arnold and the Burning of New London* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2014).
- 46 Walter Louis Powell, *Murder or Mayhem? Benedict Arnold's New London, Connecticut Raid, 1781* (Gettysburg, PA: Thomas Publications, 2000).
- 47 Eric D. Lehman, *Homegrown Terror: Benedict Arnold and the Burning of New London* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2014).
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 Ibid.