

# The American Defeat at Quebec

**Anthony Nardini**  
**Department of History**  
**Villanova University**

*Edited by Cynthia Kaschub*

We were walking alongside the St. Lawrence River, along a roadway choked with cars. The small sidewalk was slick, covered in ice, the blustery wind pushing us down the street. I had thought the road would eventually lead back to the heart of the city, but I was wrong. We had become lost in Quebec, stuck between the great cliff the city was built upon and the river. It was here that I first became aware of what had transpired here over two hundred twenty-five years ago. A large plaque, attached to the facing rock, celebrated the bravery of the Canadians who pushed back American General Montgomery and his Rebel force. I wondered just what had happened at this very spot. What had happened to Montgomery and his men? Why were there Americans attacking Quebec City?

## **Cause for Invasion**

On June 16, 1775, just two months after the clash at Lexington and Concord, the First Continental Congress appointed George Washington as “General & Commander in Chief of the American Forces.”<sup>1</sup> By September 14, 1775, the day Washington gave orders to Colonel Benedict Arnold to “take Command of the Detachment from the Continental Army against Quebec,” American forces had already seized Ticonderoga and Crown Point in New York.<sup>2</sup> Earlier in September, an army of 2,000 under Brigadier General Richard Montgomery began to push towards Forts St. Jean and Chambly, in Canadian territory. The Americans were now poised for a full invasion of Canada, fueled by Washington’s belief, as stated by Donald Barr Chidsey, that, “the best defense is an offense and that it is best to keep your enemy off balance.”<sup>3</sup> Controlling the Hudson and the Richelieu-Lake Champlain region would prevent the British from splitting the colonies in two. The knowledge that the opposing British forces in Canada “consisted of 800 regulars divided among a number of different posts” made it even more prudent to

---

<sup>1</sup>Philander D. Chase, ed., *The Papers of George Washington: Revolutionary War Series* Vol. 1 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1985), 1.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 457.

<sup>3</sup>Donald Barr Chidsey, *The War in the North: An Informal History of the American Revolution in and near Canada* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1967), 23.

seize the initiative and invade.<sup>4</sup> But it was more than just military strategy that necessitated an invasion of Canada.

A combination of propaganda, libertarian fervor, and misinformed beliefs energized the Americans to invade. It was believed that the entirety of Quebec felt the same oppression as Americans felt in Boston and that the Canadians would welcome the Americans as liberators. The passage of the Quebec Act incensed many English-speaking Canadians. The act enlarged the province to include the Great Lakes, the area of land north of the Ohio River to the Mississippi, the Mississippi to its source, and the Great Lakes to Hudson Bay territory. This land was then consigned to the fur trade and the Indians.<sup>5</sup> The act also promised more religious tolerance: namely the freedom to practice Roman Catholicism along with a new oath of allegiance that allowed Catholics to participate in government and hold office. American outrage was due to the restrictions on land and the pro-Papist sentiment. English speaking merchants were now alienated in Canada which country?—non-English people were now able to become part of the government without losing their identity.<sup>6</sup> Congress, along with the Committee of Correspondence, sent both letters and Patriots to Canada to assess and sway public opinion. The provisional congress of New York sent north a “batch of letters . . . appealing to Canadians across the border to join them in the struggle for liberty.”<sup>7</sup> Customs officer Thomas Ainslie, who later volunteered to defend Quebec, took note of the attempt to win Canadians over to the American cause: “The Agents & friends of the Congress had not been idle—by word & by writing they had poison’d their minds—they were brought to believe that the Minister had laid a plan to enslave them.”<sup>8</sup>

## II. The Passage to Quebec

Washington, the new commander-in-chief, took the “tatterdemalion mob” that was the Continental Army and formed it into a disciplined unit, “teaching then to drill like soldiers, arming them adequately, getting them into proper uniforms, and enforcing the rudiments of sanitation.”<sup>9</sup> At Washington’s headquarters at Cambridge, Arnold called for volunteers for his expedition from Washington’s troops, and was met with a tremendous response, though Washington agreed to

---

<sup>4</sup>Gustave Lanctot, *Canada and the American Revolution 1774-1783* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 63.

<sup>5</sup>Robert McConnell Hatch, *Thrust for Canada: The American Attempt on Quebec in 1775-1776* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), 9.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 13.

<sup>7</sup>Barry K. Wilson, *Benedict Arnold: A Traitor in Our Midst* (Ithaca: McGill-Queens’ University Press, 2001), 47.

<sup>8</sup>Sheldon S. Cohen, ed., *Canada Preserved: The Journal of Captain Thomas Ainslie* (New York: New York University Press, 1968), 18.

<sup>9</sup>Hatch, *Thrust for Canada*, 64.

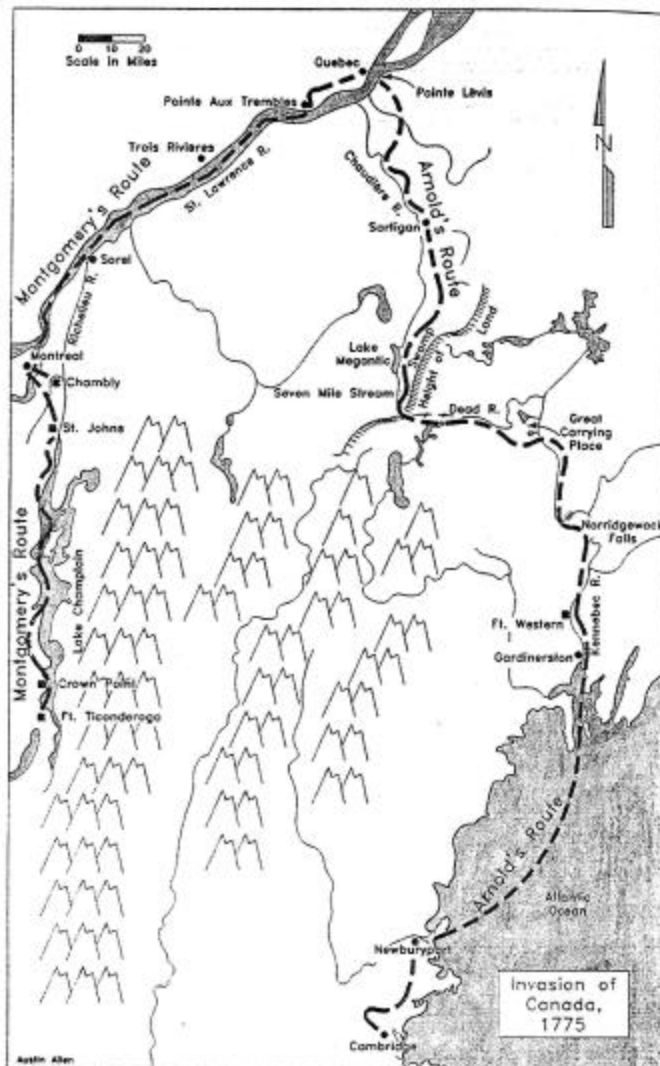
send only eleven hundred men to Quebec. Seven hundred and forty-seven New Englanders were given to Arnold, along with three companies of riflemen from Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania.<sup>10</sup> Private John Joseph Henry, a mere boy of sixteen, noted the differences between the two groups: “The principal distinction

between us, was in our dialects, our arms, and our dress. It was the silly fashion of those times, for riflemen to ape the manners of savages.”<sup>11</sup> Regional prejudices and distrust would later become a factor in the campaign.

The route Arnold was to follow came from a map and journal Lt. John Montresor, a British officer, charted in 1761.

The route led from the Kennebeck River of Maine through an uninhabited wilderness called the Height of Land. From there they would travel down the Chaudière River towards Quebec, crossing overland to the St. Lawrence River. The troops would cross the river, appearing just outside the walls of Quebec on the Plains of Abraham. It was an audacious plan, seeking to surprise the British by taking a lesser-known route. The British

would be more prepared for Montgomery’s force, which took the easier way up Lake Champlain to the Richelieu, and then up the St. Lawrence. Arnold would soon learn that Montresor’s journal and map contained flaws, and his invasion force would not have the easy time that Montresor and his small scout party experienced.



<sup>10</sup> Wilson, *Benedict Arnold*, 54.

<sup>11</sup> John Joseph Henry, *Account of Arnold's Campaign against Quebec* (New York: Arno Press, Inc., 1968), 11.

The expedition touched off from Newburyport on September 18, traveling north-by-northeast aboard the sloops *Commander*, *Britannia*, *Conway*, *Abigail*, and *Swallow*, and the schooners *Houghton*, *Eagle*, *Hannah*, and *Broad Bay*.<sup>12</sup> It traveled to the mouth of the Kennebeck River. The trip was expected to be dangerous, as the Patriots had to run past British warships enforcing an embargo against the colonies.<sup>13</sup> The real problem was with the ships, which caused much sickness for the men, and only allowed them as far as Gardinerstown, on the coast of Maine. The men then traveled to Fort Western (present day Augusta, Maine), nearly forty miles from the sea up the Kennebec River. Arnold's men would now have to travel down the Kennebec on their newly made bateaux. Prior to the expedition Arnold had ordered two hundred of them from a local shipwright, Reuben Colburn. The flat-bottomed riverboats, with flared sides and tapered bows and sterns, measured from eighteen to twenty-five feet long and weighed nearly four hundred pounds apiece.<sup>14</sup> Arnold wrote to Washington that he found "the Batteaus completed, but many of them smaller than the Directions given, & very badly built."<sup>15</sup> The expedition was delayed as Arnold ordered improvements made to his bateaux. This was just the first unexpected halt, a setback for Arnold's invasion timetable, which estimated the invasion to take twenty days.

The troops were able to land at Ft. Western without much difficulty, where Arnold sent out forward scouts and formed his army. Arnold broke them into four divisions, sending the riflemen, under the command of Daniel Morgan, to clear the way. On September 26, they were followed by the second division under Colonel Christopher Greene. Major Return Meigs commanded the third division, which followed Greene the next day. Colonel Roger Enos, who brought up the rear with the supplies, led the fourth division.<sup>16</sup>

Arnold, traveling ahead in a lighter, more dependable birch-bark canoe, met with the forward elements of his force at Fort Halifax. Later they moved on through a waterfall at Skowhegan. Arnold arrived at Norridgewock by Saturday, October 2. It was here that Arnold's men began to face greater challenges, which would lead to problems further into the wilderness. Isaac Senter, a New Hampshire doctor now in the army as a surgeon, witnessed the problems with the bateaux as they were moved over the portages: "Many of our bateaux were nothing but wrecks . . . a quantity of dry cod fish, by this time was received, as likewise a number of barrels of dry bread. The fish lying loose in the bateaux, and being continually washed with the fresh water running into the bateaux. The bread casks

---

<sup>12</sup> Chidsey, *The War in the North*, 32.

<sup>13</sup> Hatch, *Thrust for Canada*, 56.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 70.

<sup>15</sup> Chase, *Papers of George Washington*, 2:40.

<sup>16</sup> Hatch, *Thrust for Canada*, 71-72.

not being waterproof, admitted the water in plenty . . . soured the whole bread. We were now curtailed of a very valuable and large part of our provisions.”<sup>17</sup> The army was delayed almost a week at Norridgewock, “drying out their supplies, throwing out bad food, and getting around the treacherous portage.”<sup>18</sup> Having not even left the area of Maine, Arnold was now delayed two weeks due to faulty boats and poor handling. Arnold’s handpicked men, who were supposed to be accustomed to boats and their operation, turned out to be novices.

The army was finally back on the move on October 9 and by the eleventh had reached the “Great Carrying Place,” which led to the Dead River. The army would have to carry their supplies and equipment over a twelve-mile portage, spaced by three ponds. The portages began to take a toll on the men, as Dr. Senter remarked, “the army was now much fatigued, being obliged to carry all the bateaus, barrels of provisions, warlike stores, &c., over on their backs through a most terrible piece of woods conceivable.”<sup>19</sup> The labor and fatigue, coupled with a diet of heavily salted meat, drove the men to thirst, sucking down quantities of brackish, stagnant water from the ponds: “Water was quite yellow . . . No sooner had it got down than it was puked up by many of the poor fellows.”<sup>20</sup> Arnold called for a blockhouse to be built for the sick. On October 16 the army broke camp, leaving the seriously ill at the hospital.

Food was beginning to become a problem for the army. Arnold wrote to Washington that he had “twenty five Days Provisions for the whole Detachment.”<sup>21</sup> Arnold ordered a yoke of oxen from the rear forward, which were subsequently butchered. The men, on half-rations, tried to fish and hunt, but increasing rain made it difficult. Arnold originally welcomed the rain, since it raised the low-running Dead River “upwards of three feet,” making it easier to navigate.<sup>22</sup> He did not know of the problems the immense rainfall would cause.

On the evening of Saturday, October 21, Arnold’s fatigued, rain-soaked men built fires and tried to dry themselves out before they went to sleep. At about 4:00 A.M. on Sunday morning, they were awakened by “the freshet which came rushing on us like a torrent, having rose 8 feet perpendicular in 9 hours.”<sup>23</sup> The Dead River had flooded, soaking both the men and their baggage. The men scrambled to the top of a nearby hill, salvaging what little they could. Arnold assessed the situation: “The Country road entirely overflowed, so that the course of the river, being

---

<sup>17</sup> Kenneth Roberts, comp., *March to Quebec: Journals of the Members of Arnold’s Expedition* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1953), 202-3.

<sup>18</sup> Wilson, *Benedict Arnold*, 64.

<sup>19</sup> Roberts, *March to Quebec*, 205.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Chase, ed., *Papers of George Washington*, 155.

<sup>22</sup> Roberts, *March to Quebec*, 54.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 54.

crooked, could not be discovered, which with the rapidity of the current renders it almost impossible for the Battoes to ascend the River, or the men to find their way by land or pass the small brooks. Add to this our Provisions almost exhausted, & the incessant rains for three days has prevented our gaining anything considerable, so that we have but a melancholy prospect before us, but in general high spirits.”<sup>24</sup> Arnold was now faced with a growing crisis, despite the “general high spirits.” Supplies were low, the soldiers were weak, and there was no word from any of his contacts in Canada.

Arnold called on his officers to debate their next move. Now was the time to decide whether to press on or fall back. The officers decided to press on. The worst of the wilderness was now behind them and supplies would be available at Sartigan. Word was sent to the rear for Greene and Enos to bring only “as many men as they could feed for fifteen days,” lightening the burden and quickening their pace.<sup>25</sup> Arnold urged his men on, to within twenty miles of Chaudière Pond.

But Arnold was faced with another problem. Roger Enos, Arnold’s second-in-command, met with Colonel Greene, suggesting the invasion was a lost cause and urging others to follow him back in retreat. Dr. Senter, who was present at the meeting, noted that Enos “had been preaching to their men the doctrine of impenetrability and non-perseverance.”<sup>26</sup> Though the vote was in favor of continuing, Enos’s men said they would go back to Cambridge anyway. Enos, obliged to follow his men, returned with them.<sup>27</sup> Not only did Enos and his men do what amounted to mutiny, they also took more than their share of provisions from the rear supply train, sending up no more “than two and a half barrels of flour” before their departure.<sup>28</sup> Their treachery, along with their pilfering of supplies, inflamed and angered Arnold’s remaining men. Captain Henry Dearborn best described this feeling: “Our men made a General Prayer, that Colonel Enos and all his men, might die by the way, or meet with some disaster, Equal to the Cowardly dastardly and unfriendly Spirit they discover’d in returning Back without orders, in such a manner as they had done.”<sup>29</sup> Enos would later be arrested and court-martialed, though he was acquitted.

Arnold was now left with six hundred seventy-five men to storm Quebec. On Friday, October 27 Arnold crossed down from the Height of Land and found hope from a small scouting party he had sent ahead earlier. The scouts reported the inhabitants of Sartigan appeared “very friendly & rejoiced to hear of our

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 55.

<sup>25</sup> Hatch, *Thrust for Canada*, 79.

<sup>26</sup> Roberts, *March to Quebec*, 210.

<sup>27</sup> Hatch, *Thrust for Canada*, 80.

<sup>28</sup> George F.C. Stanley, *Canada Invaded 1775-1776* (Toronto: A.M. Hakkert Ltd., 1973), 76-77.

<sup>29</sup> Roberts, *March to Quebec*, 137.

approach.”<sup>30</sup> Arnold was also encouraged by reports that there were few troops defending Quebec. Later that day Arnold reached Lake Mégantic, where he awaited the rest of his men. He sent a letter to Washington apologizing for his slowness and detailing his lack of supplies. Arnold still expected to reach Sartigan “in three or four Days, in order to procure a Supply of Provisions.”<sup>31</sup>

His half-starved men soon followed through the snow over the Height of Land. Dr. Senter, having only to eat “the jawbone of a swine destitute of any covering,” was still encouraged by the ease of a few crossings, due to their lack of supplies.<sup>32</sup> The last of the food was distributed to the men as they became lost in the bogs and streams leading up to the Chaudière. Arnold and his staff were nearly crushed in their canoe by the rapids. As the men were pushed to the brink, they began to reach a low point which Dr. Senter described as “the zenith of distress.”<sup>33</sup> Captain Dearborn’s dog, who had accompanied the men on the entire excursion, was sacrificed and eaten, leaving Dearborn “very unwell.”<sup>34</sup> Private Abner Stocking described a “fatigue and anxiety” so great that he was “little refreshed by the last night of sleep.”<sup>35</sup> Driven by fatigue and hunger, the men were forced to eat “shaving soap, pomatum, and even the lip salve, leather of their shoes, cartridge boxes, &c.”<sup>36</sup>

Upon reaching Sartigan on October 30, ahead of the rest of the army, Arnold immediately sent back cattle for his starved, weary men. Dr. Senter heard “echoes of gladness” resound “from front to rear” upon the approach of the cattle.<sup>37</sup> The army soon reached Canada and was surprised by the “politeness and civility with which the poor Canadians received” them.<sup>38</sup> The men rested and enjoyed the hospitality of the *habitants*, having experienced extreme privation and pain during their journey. They soon disembarked for Quebec, moving quickly along the Chaudière River. By daybreak on November 7, Morgan’s riflemen had reached the shore opposite Quebec.<sup>39</sup>

### III. Outside the Walls

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>31</sup> Chase, *Papers of George Washington*, 2:245.

<sup>32</sup> Roberts, *March to Quebec*, 214.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 139.

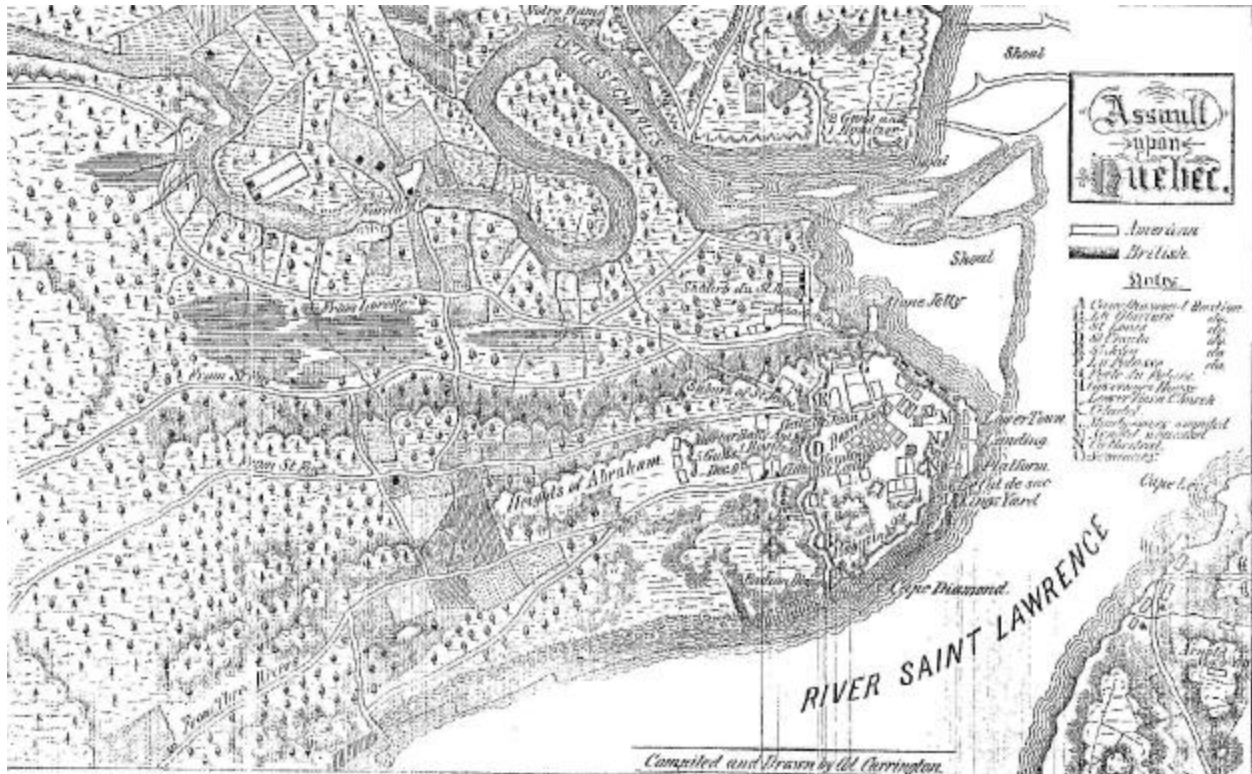
<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 555.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 219.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>39</sup> Hatch, *Thrust for Canada*, 111.



With his army forming just across the St. Lawrence at Pointe de Lévis, Arnold wanted to make a move on Quebec. In a letter to General Montgomery, who had taken Fort Chambly on November 3 and was now pressing towards Montreal, Arnold stated, “I am informed by the French, that there are two frigates and several armed vessels lying before Quebec, and a large ship or two lately arrived from Boston. However, I propose crossing the St. Lawrence as soon as possible.”<sup>40</sup> Arnold would have to wait to cross, however, since his rear was still coming to Pointe de Lévis and “the wind has been so high these three nights past.”<sup>41</sup> To pass the time, Arnold ordered his men to prepare ladders and pikes to clear the walls.

On November 13, the wind dropped and, with a thick cover of clouds, the Americans began moving across the river in canoes. Arnold guided the first wave through a gap in between the sloop-of-war HMS *Hunter* and the frigate HMS *Lizard*, who had been patrolling the river.<sup>42</sup> In seven hours, Arnold moved five hundred of his force to the Plains of Abraham, leaving a rear guard of sixty at Pointe Lévis.<sup>43</sup> On the night of the fifteenth, Arnold made an attempt to draw the guardians of Quebec into a fight. Captain Ainslie described the scene: “A body of men appear’d on the heights of Abraham within 800 yards of the walls of Quebec;

<sup>40</sup> Roberts, *March to Quebec*, 83.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>42</sup> Hatch, *Thrust for Canada*, 114.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.



they huzza'd thrice—we answer'd them with three cheers of defiance, & saluted them with a few cannon loaded with grape & canister shot—they did not wait for a second round.”<sup>44</sup>

Arnold remained inactive in front of Quebec for six days, sending demands for surrender that were received “contrary to humanity and the laws of nations.”<sup>45</sup> Arnold's messengers were jailed and drummed out of the city. He had neither the men nor the supplies, as he wrote Montgomery, “Upon, examination, great part of our cartridges proved unfit for service, and to my great surprise we had no more than five rounds for each man, and near one hundred guns unfit for service. Add to this many of the men invalids, and almost naked and wanting everything to make them comfortable.”<sup>46</sup> Arnold was beginning to see the effects of the journey on his army and its ability to fight. He knew he took too long but was still optimistic the city could be taken: “Had I been ten days sooner, Quebec must inevitably have fallen into our hands, as there was not a man then to oppose us. However I make no doubt Gen. Montgomery will reduce it this winter.”<sup>47</sup>

Arnold pulled back with his men to Point aux Trembles, twenty miles from Quebec, on November 19. Arnold had learned “Col. McClean was making preparations, and had determined in a day or two to come out and attack us.”<sup>48</sup> Arnold believed his force, now down to five hundred and fifty effectives, would not have been able to fight. The men settled into the houses and barns of the *habitants* (a French-Canadian or *Quebecuois*), dining well and keeping warm. Arnold sent to Montgomery for more supplies as his “hard cash” was “nearly exhausted,” and his men would need proper clothing for the coming Canadian winter.<sup>49</sup> As Arnold and his men sat at Pointe aux Trembles awaiting the arrival of Montgomery, the guns of Quebec fired in salute to the arrival of Lieutenant General Guy Carleton, Governor of Canada.

#### IV. Defending Quebec

Prior to the arrival of Carleton, the outlook of the citizens of Quebec was bleak. Captain Ainslie described the proceedings of a town meeting in Quebec, as the citizens began to fear the rebel force just miles from their homes: “Our force is small indeed, theirs is now great & it increases daily—let us be prudent—let us remain neuter—let us secure with our effects good treatment from the friends of Liberty, for they will sooner or later take the town; if we attempt to hold out our

---

<sup>44</sup> Cohen, *Journal of Ainslie*, 22.

<sup>45</sup> Roberts, *March to Quebec*, 88.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>47</sup> Chase, *Papers of George Washington*, 2:403-4

<sup>48</sup> Roberts, *March to Quebec*, 91.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

ruin is unavoidable. Why suffer our property to be destroyed.”<sup>50</sup> Those who had opposed the Quebec Act were now stirring up trouble, attempting to sway others to resist the British government, though not to the point of open aggression. Subsequently, some *habitants* refused to show up for militia duty. The pro-British citizens feared spies were all around the city; Lieutenant-Governor Hector Cramahé ordered the gates closed at six every night.

Help soon arrived in early November, as the frigate *Lizard* “dropped anchor, bringing arms, specie, and a shipment of green and buff uniforms for the Quebec militia.”<sup>51</sup> One hundred volunteers from Newfoundland, commanded by Captain Malcolm Fraser of the Royal Highland Emigrants, arrived on board *Lizard*. The most welcome addition to the city’s garrison was the arrival of Colonel Allan MacLean and his veteran corps of Royal Highland Emigrants. Cramahé, though praised by Ainslie as “indefatigable in putting the town in a proper state of defence,” was more of a pen pusher than a warrior.<sup>52</sup> “A feeble old man,” he was happy to give power to MacLean.<sup>53</sup>

MacLean went into action upon his arrival, breaking up a debate in a bishop’s chapel over surrender. He tolerated no less in discipline and soon had all ranks at work, digging trenches, building gun platforms, and strengthening walls. He ordered the cathedral bell to be rung only to warn of danger. He frightened property owners by declaring nothing would be safe if the rebels took the city. His work and warnings helped to strengthen and unite the citizens.<sup>54</sup>

The outlook of the city improved even more on November 19. Carleton, disguised as a *habitant* and aided by his ability to speak French, slipped through the American lines near Pointe aux Trembles and met the snow<sup>55</sup> *Fell*, which sailed him up to the Quebec.<sup>56</sup> He had escaped from Montreal, knowing his presence was much needed to solidify any hopes of defending the city. Ainslie recognized the importance of Carleton’s arrival, seeing “our salvation in his presence.”<sup>57</sup> Carleton, ignorant to the threat of an invasion, had sent eight hundred men (half his force) to Boston in the fall of 1774.<sup>58</sup> He would now try to recover from this mistake.

---

<sup>50</sup> Cohen, *Journal of Ainslie*, 21.

<sup>51</sup> Hatch, *Thrust for Canada*, 112.

<sup>52</sup> Cohen, *Journal of Ainslie*, 21.

<sup>53</sup> Sheldon S. Cohen, “Lieutenant John Starke and the Defence of Quebec,” *Dalhousie Review* 47, Spring 1967: 60.

<sup>54</sup> Hatch, *Thrust for Canada*, 113.

<sup>55</sup> A snow is a large, two-masted ship, suitable for navigating the waters of the St. Lawrence. See Henry B. Culver and Gordon Grant, *The Book of Old Ships*. (New York: Doubleday, Doran, & Co., 1924), 235.

<sup>56</sup> Paul David Nelson, *General Sir Guy Carleton, Lord Dorchester: Soldier-Statesman of Early British Canada* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2000), 74.

<sup>57</sup> Cohen, *Journal of Ainslie*, 22.

<sup>58</sup> Wilson, *Benedict Arnold*, 84.

Carleton, three days after his arrival, issued an edict that boded ill for the friends of the Americans inside the city. The edict forced all “useless, disloyal, and treacherous persons” out of the city by forcing those “liable to serve in the Militia,” to do so. Those that refused were ordered out of the city by December 1, “under the pain of being treated as rebels or spies.”<sup>59</sup> “Thus was our militia purged from all those miscreants who had already taken arms with a design no doubt of turning them against us when a fair opportunity shou’d offer,” wrote Captain Ainslie. “Their expulsion much strengthened the Garrison.”<sup>60</sup> Carleton effectively eliminated any hopes of American collaboration inside the city.

Carleton ordered for blockhouses to be repaired and gun platforms installed and mounted. Barricades were built at either end of the Lower Town to give his untried troops protection. Two were built at Sault au Matelot “on a narrow roadway that then enemy must follow when approaching from the northeast, a third at Près de Ville, where the road paralleling the St. Lawrence threaded past the face of Cape Diamond. At Près de Ville, a log building was loopholed for muskets and armed with four small cannons.”<sup>61</sup> These barricades would play an important role in the defense of the city, responsible for stopping the Americans in their tracks.

With an embargo on the seaport, the two British warships *Lizard* and *Hunter* were “hailed at high tide as far as possible into the Cul-de-Sac and hove over against the King’s Wharf for the winter.”<sup>62</sup> The sailors cleared the ships of all their stores and weaponry and were ordered to garrison duty. The large naval guns were mounted on the walls.

By Captain Ainslie’s account, the strength of the garrison was eighteen hundred men, with five thousand inhabitants. He estimated provisions would last eight months.<sup>63</sup>

Carleton broke his men into four brigades or battle groups: regulars from the Royal Highland Emigrants, the Fusiliers, and the marines, led by Colonel MacLean, who was also second-in-command; the British militia under Lieutenant Colonel Caldwell, whose home outside the city was taken by the Americans; the French Canadian militia under Lieutenant Colonel Noel Voyer; and the seamen, under Captain John Hamilton, master of *Lizard*.<sup>64</sup> Carleton was content to sit and wait for an attack. Under his leadership, the Americans were now facing a formidable foe.

---

<sup>59</sup> Hatch, *Thrust for Canada*, 118-19.

<sup>60</sup> Cohen, *Journal of Ainslie*, 23.

<sup>61</sup> Hatch, *Thrust for Canada*, 123.

<sup>62</sup> W.H. Whiteley, “The British Navy and the Siege of Quebec, 1775-76,” *Canadian Historical Review* 61, 1980:8.

<sup>63</sup> Cohen, *Journal of Ainslie*, 24.

<sup>64</sup> Stanley, *Canada Invaded*, 87.

## V. Preparing the Assault

On December 3, Montgomery and three hundred men joined with Arnold at Pointe aux Trembles. Arnold was enthusiastic about the situation inside the city, “which has a wretched, motley garrison of disaffected seamen, marines and inhabitants, the walls in a ruinous situation, and cannot hold out long.”<sup>65</sup> The next day, the combined force made their way to Quebec, taking up their positions. Montgomery made his headquarters two miles from St. John’s gate, close to the Plains of Abraham, while Arnold set up in the suburb of St. Roch, just north of the city. Montgomery’s New Yorkers held the right of the line near the St. Lawrence, while Morgan’s riflemen held the left near the St. Charles in St. Roch. The line was stretched across, blocking all roads in and out of the city.<sup>66</sup>

Montgomery’s attempts at communicating surrender to Carleton under a flag of truce were met with the same disdain as Arnold’s. He attempted to frighten the citizens with letters shot over the walls, warning of the destruction of the city if there was no surrender. None of these measures were successful.

Montgomery ordered batteries to be erected along the American lines. Riflemen, working through the streets and houses of St. Roch, began sniping at sentries on the walls. The people of Quebec first feared the guns of the Americans, conceiving that “every shell wou’d inevitably kill a dozen or two of people, & knock down some two or three house; some were in fears about their tenements, but the greatest part were occupied about the safety of their persons.” They were soon surprised, however, at the ineffectiveness of the guns. As Ainslie recalled, “They had anticipated much evil: but after they saw that their bombettes as they called them, did no harm, women and children walked the street laughing at their former fears.”<sup>67</sup> Montgomery’s small nine- and twelve-pound cannons struggled to cause any damage. The besieged soon responded, pounding down American positions with their larger guns, “returning 18 lb, 24 lb & 32 lb shot.”<sup>68</sup> With American artillery taking more damage than it was inflicting, “It became apparent that the American batteries were just not in a position to compete with those of the fortress, and the efficiency of British counter-battery work was apparent from the casualties, and damage suffered by the American guns and gunners.”<sup>69</sup>

Montgomery and Arnold knew they could not perform a successful siege against Quebec. The ground was frozen and thus too hard for trenches. American guns were incapable of damaging the walls. The winter would be too rough on the troops, even with the supplies Montgomery brought down from Montreal. Of

---

<sup>65</sup> Roberts, *March to Quebec*, 101.

<sup>66</sup> Stanley, *Canada Invaded*, 87-88.

<sup>67</sup> Cohen, *Journal of Ainslie*, 28.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

<sup>69</sup> Stanley, *Canada Invaded*, 89.

greater concern were morale and discipline—many soldiers were looking forward to the end of their enlistments, which would expire on January 1, 1776. John Joseph Henry noted the new feelings among the troops in camp: “The patriotism of the summer of seventy-five, seemed almost extinguished in the winter of seventy-six. The patriotic officers made every exertion to induce enlistments but to no purpose.”<sup>70</sup> Congress began badgering Montgomery for some results, sending a committee into Canada to assess the progress of the campaign.<sup>71</sup> Smallpox had also made its appearance in the American camp. Montgomery and Arnold saw their time running out.

After one last attempt to force Carleton’s surrender, it was deemed that Quebec must be attacked. Montgomery, appealing to their feelings of liberty and the cause, swayed the New Englanders to fight despite their expiring enlistments. Montgomery and Arnold met with their officers and decided to attack at night during a snowstorm.

On December 26, after an uncelebrated Christmas, orders were given to ready pikes and ladders, along with rifles and muskets. Montgomery’s New Yorkers and four of Arnold’s companies were to attack the bastion on the promontory of Cape Diamond, while the other troops under Colonel Greene were to advance on the Lower Town. The men put sprigs of hemlock in their hats to distinguish themselves from the enemy—the uniforms Montgomery brought from Montreal were British scarlet. The attack would be called off, however, after a clearing in the skies.<sup>72</sup> Montgomery did not want to risk storming the city under such light.

Though it did not seem like it at the moment, the clearing and subsequent postponement of the attack was a stroke of luck. A British prisoner had escaped from American captivity and informed Carleton of the impending attack, which was confirmed by an American deserter. Disaster was averted, but Quebec was put on alert. “A thousand men were ready,” wrote Captain Ainslie, “to oppose the Rebels in case of an attack; the rest of the Garrison lay in their cloaths with their arms and accoutrements lying by them.”<sup>73</sup> Montgomery rethought his attacking scheme, devised another plan, and waited.

## VI. The Failed Assault

The attack on Quebec would be a two-pronged affair. Montgomery and his New Yorkers would strike the Lower Town by moving alongside the St. Lawrence

---

<sup>70</sup> Henry, *Account of Arnold’s Campaign*, 106.

<sup>71</sup> Hal T. Shelton, *General Richard Montgomery and the American Revolution: From Redcoat to Rebel* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 136.

<sup>72</sup> Hatch, *Thrust for Canada*, 128.

<sup>73</sup> Cohen, *Journal of Ainslie*, 32.

River at the base of a cliff, below Cape Diamond. Pushing past the guard towers and sentry posts, Montgomery's men would move to the staircase that leads to the Upper Town. Arnold's men would approach from St. Roch and storm the Sault au Matelot barricades. The two forces would link up at the staircase, and drive their way up to take the town. Two feints would be made on the walls: a force of Canadians, under Robert Livingston, would attempt to set fire to St. John's Gate, and about one hundred men under John Brown would demonstrate near the guard post at Cape Diamond, setting off rockets to signal Arnold.<sup>74</sup>

On December 31, with the coming of a storm, Montgomery decided it was time. The men formed at their designated stations and prepared to move on the town. John Joseph Henry remembered the harsh conditions in which they would attack: "The storm was outrageous, and the cold wind extremely biting."<sup>75</sup> The British, having been informed of their attack by a deserter—"we shall certainly be attack'd the first dark night"—were prepared for the American assault.<sup>76</sup>

The Americans were spotted as soon as they moved out. Captain Malcolm Fraser of the Royal Emigrants, while on his rounds at 4 A.M., saw "many flashes of fire without hearing any reports." He subsequently "order'd the Guards and Pickets on the ramparts to stand to their arms. The drums beat, the bells rang the alarm, & in a few minutes the whole Garrison was under arms—even old men of seventy went forward to oppose the attackers."<sup>77</sup>

Montgomery, unaware that he had been spotted, led his three hundred men along the riverbank. Brown's men set off the rockets and proceeded to engage the guards at Cape Diamond. Livingston failed to set the St. John's gate afire. Montgomery's men were slowed by the chunks of ice strewn about, forcing them to use time-consuming detours. The men slipped and fell on the snow and ice along the route.

Montgomery, at the front of his men, came to the first barricade, a row of posts stretching from the cliff to the water's edge. Unchallenged, he continued to move close to the cliff towards a log blockhouse which was held by a group of British sailors and militia. Hearing noise coming from the house, Montgomery decided to storm it before its defenders had enough time to get ready. He drew his sword and urged on his men. Less than fifty yards from the house, the Royal Artillery officer in command of the blockhouse gave the order to fire. A cannon roared, spewing grapeshot at the Americans. It was followed by a fusillade of

---

<sup>74</sup> Hatch, *Thrust for Canada*, 130-31

<sup>75</sup> Henry, *Account of Arnold's Campaign*, 107.

<sup>76</sup> Cohen, *Journal of Ainslie*, 33.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, 33-34.

small arms fire. Montgomery, along with his advance party, was cut to pieces. Montgomery died instantly.<sup>78</sup>

With Montgomery's death, command of the column fell to Colonel Donald Campbell. Lacking the mettle and courage of Montgomery, Campbell conferred with the other officers and ordered a retreat. It was an indefensible move. The engagement had not even started; the main force was not even in line yet. Montgomery was down, but the fight was not finished. Arnold was depending on the New Yorkers to be at the staircase for the final push. Campbell, unable to summon any nerve and rally his men, succumbed to fear and fell back.

Having seen the rockets, Arnold moved his six hundred men along the St. Charles. They soon moved past the Palace Gate and drew fire from the city's gunners. Private Henry saw "nothing but the blaze from the muzzles of their muskets."<sup>79</sup> The Americans were in no position to return fire, and continued to press on to the docks and the first barricade at Sault au Matelot. Arnold paused to direct his men forward when he was hit in the leg, the bullet lodging in his Achilles' tendon.<sup>80</sup> He at first refused to be moved, propping himself up with his sword and urging his men forward. He was taken back to the hospital once his men passed.

Morgan assumed command and cleared the first barricade, capturing more than one hundred prisoners. While his men rounded them up, Morgan was guided to the next barricade, whose gate was left open. Morgan saw the barricade there for the taking, but his officers refused to move forward until the rest of the men in the rear caught up.<sup>81</sup> The men Morgan's officers had wanted to wait for were bogged down, lost in the rows of sheds and warehouses that lined the streets. The driving snow did not help, covering "cast-off anchors and abandoned spars" for the men to trip over.<sup>82</sup>

While Morgan waited, Carleton sent reinforcements to the Lower Town. Colonel Caldwell arrived with a detachment of British militia at the second barricade and quickly restored order, forming the regulars in a line behind the barrier and ordering the militia to take up places in the houses surrounding. A detachment, led by a sailor named Captain Anderson, came through the gate, calling on Morgan's men to surrender. They responded by killing Anderson and assaulting the barricade.<sup>83</sup> Morgan's men would have no luck retaking the barricade. No man was able to make it over the top alive, rendering the ladders useless. Crossfire from the adjoining houses left the men exposed to fire. When

---

<sup>78</sup> Shelton, *General Richard Montgomery*, 149.

<sup>79</sup> Henry, *Account of Arnold's Campaign*, 108.

<sup>80</sup> Hatch, *Thrust for Canada*, 135.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>83</sup> Shelton, *General Richard Montgomery*, 146.

Morgan ordered a retreat, no man would move, fearing to step outside of the shelter they found amid the houses. They soon would have no way to get out.

Carleton seized the initiative and sent Captain George Laws with five hundred Royal Highland Emigrants and sailors to trap Morgan in between the two barricades. Along the way, Laws encountered Captain Dearborn's New Englanders, who were late in joining the fight. The Americans had little chance to resist; their gunpowder was soaked and they were heavily outnumbered. Dearborn surrendered his men after a brief fight.<sup>84</sup>

Laws, in a hurry to catch Morgan and his men, was himself taken prisoner at Sault au Matelot. This small victory was short-lived, however, as Morgan and his men were unable to hold out much longer. They were out of gunpowder, with one in five killed or wounded. They capitulated to both Laws' men and Colonel Caldwell's troops, who opened the barricade door to receive their prisoners.<sup>85</sup> The attempt to take Quebec had failed.

## VII. Conclusion

The reasons for the American defeat at Quebec can be looked at in two ways—immediate and overall. In the immediate sense, the attack failed due to lack of cohesion and the loss of leadership. Montgomery's plan depended on speed and coordination, both difficult to achieve in a dark, driving snowstorm, over unknown, icy territory. Montgomery's assault fell apart when he was killed and his subordinates were unable to operate on their own. With Arnold wounded, his assault slowed, leading to indecision at the second barricade. Without Montgomery and Arnold, the men were left without dynamic leadership and ability. Their effectiveness crumbled.

The overall reasons are the condition of the men and their supplies. Arnold's men had a horrific two-month march through wilderness, where they suffered under extremely adverse conditions. Their supplies and equipment ruined they were never able to fully recover, despite help from the *habitants* and Montgomery.

## Epilogue

Disoriented and freezing, we were much like Montgomery's men in 1775. The difference was we were not armed invaders. Eventually we were able to double-back and climb a staircase to the Upper Town, enjoying the success the Americans did not. The Americans eventually withdrew in the spring of 1776 after a failed siege, which was beleaguered by disease and lack of supplies. Without

---

<sup>84</sup> Hatch, *Thrust into Canada*, 139.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 139.



proper guidance, direction, and preparation, we had become lost in Quebec City just as the Americans did in 1775.

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources

Chase, Philander D. *The Papers of George Washington, Revolutionary War Series* vols. 1-3. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1987.

Cohen, Sheldon S. "Lieutenant John Starke and the Defence of Quebec." *Dalhousie Review* 47, Spring 1967: 57-64.

\_\_\_\_\_, ed. *Canada Preserved: The Journal of Captain Thomas Ainslie*. New York: New York University Press, 1968.

Henry, John Joseph. *Account of Arnold's Campaign Against Quebec*. New York: Arno Press, Inc., 1968.

Roberts, Kenneth, comp. *March to Quebec: Journals of the Members of Arnold's Expedition*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1953.

Roche, John F. "Quebec Under Siege, 1775-1776: The 'Memorandums' of Jacob Danford" *Canadian Historical Review* 50: 68-85.

Würtele, Frederick C., ed. *Blockade of Quebec in 1775-1776 by the American Revolutionists (Les Bastonnais)*. Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1970.

### Secondary Sources

Bird, Harrison. *Attack on Quebec: The American Invasion of Canada, 1775*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1968.

Chidsey, Donald Barr. *The War in the North: An Informal History of the American Revolution in and near Canada*. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1967.

Culver, Henry B. and Gordon Grant. *The Book of Old Ships*. New York: Doubleday, Doran, & Co., 1924.

Hatch, Robert McConnell. *Thrust for Canada: The American Attempt on Quebec in 1775-1776*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979.

Lanctot, Gustave. *Canada & the American Revolution 1775-1783*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967.

Nelson, Paul David. *General Sir Guy Carleton, Lord Dorchester: Soldier-Statesman of Early British Canada*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2000.

- Shelton, Hal T. *General Richard Montgomery and the American Revolution: From Redcoat to Rebel*. New York: New York University Press, 1994.
- Smith, Justin H. *Our Struggle for the Fourteenth Colony: Canada and the American Revolution*. 2 vols. New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1907.
- Stanley, George F.G. *Canada Invaded 1775-1776*. Toronto: A.M. Hakkert Ltd., 1973.
- Whiteley, W.H. "The British Navy and the Siege of Quebec, 1775-76." *Canadian Historical Review* 61: 3-27.
- Wilson, Barry K. *Benedict Arnold: A Traitor in Our Midst*. Ithaca: McGill-Queens' University Press, 2001.