

THE 1780 INVASION OF BALLSTOWN

By 1780, a cluster of homesteads had been established along Middleline Road located in the Towns of Milton and Ballston in Saratoga County, which was part of the Kayaderosseras Patent. The Kayaderosseras Patent was a grant of land made by Anne, Queen of Great Britain, in 1701 to thirteen proprietors in upstate New York. The patent included 406,000 acres, which included



Saratoga County, as well as parts of Montgomery, Schenectady, and Fulton Counties. As a way to offset the costs of surveying the land grant, in 1770, the heirs of the original proprietors, offered a five square mile area encompassing parts of the present-day Towns of Ballston and Milton for sale and settlement. Many of the

earliest settlers came from communities in eastern Connecticut Colony, and Westchester and Dutchess Counties in the Lower Hudson Valley. Reverend Eliphalet Ball, a Presbyterian minister from Westchester, convinced many of his parishioners to leave their families to take a chance on establishing a new community near Long Lake (Ballston Lake), with many settling along Middleline Road. Other settlers were recruited by authorized agents of the patent holders, from communities in and around Schenectady and Albany. These early settlers engaged in clearing the heavily forested lands of the area to establish their new farms and homes. Their efforts resulted in the creation of the community which became known as "Balls Town".

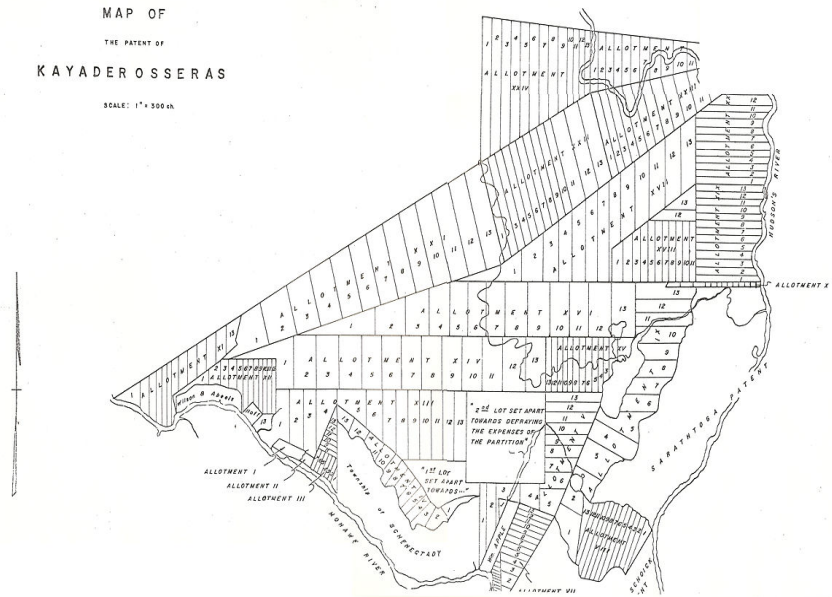
The residents of Ballstown built a Meeting House and Church about a half-mile north of the Reverend Ball's homestead which overlooked Long Lake along present-day Ballston Avenue. In 1771, the Reverend Balls Meeting House was fortified by the addition of a stockade fence around the building in case of attacks, creating Fort Ballstown.

When war came to the English Colonies in 1775, residents in Ballstown had to choose sides. To provide for the defense of Albany County, the New York Legislature authorized the raising of seventeen regiments of militia. The 12th Regiment which would be garrisoned at the fort in Ballstown. It was made up of six companies of men drawn from the Towns of Halfmoon and Ballstown, under the command of Colonel Jacobus Van Schoonhoven, and Lt. Colonel James Gordon. Gordon held a large amount of land around Ballstown and operated a grist and sawmill on Gordon Creek, a tributary of the Kayadeorsseras.

Residents in the area whose families were second and third generation "Americans" tended to favor Independence from Great Britain, many having migrated from Connecticut, or the lower Hudson Valley. Divided loyalties among the residents resulted in open hostilities between once friendly neighbors.

Before the war, people in surrounding areas to the west and north of Ballstown tended to be loyalist in their sympathies. Some had been Scottish and British soldiers who came to America during the French and Indian War. Other settlers, being recent immigrants from Great Britain, had fallen under the sway of proprietors of large land holdings who themselves maintained loyalist leanings.

Daniel Campbell, a Scottish immigrant and Schenectady merchant, had purchased over 20,000 acres in the Kayaderosseras Patent. Sir William Johnson of Johnstown was an Irish immigrant who controlled vast tracts of land along the Mohawk to the west of Ballstown. Johnson's influence over the politics of the region was heightened by his appointment by King George as his representative in dealing with the Indians in the Northern Colonies. Until his death in 1774, Sir William had been a frequent visitor to Ballstown to take advantage of the sulfur springs which he was introduced to by the Mohawks who once inhabited the area. Once war came, Johnson's son, "Johnny", became a key figure among the Loyalist militias in the region. By 1780, many men and their families with obvious loyalist leanings, had been forced to leave Ballstown and flee to Canada. If they had stayed, they likely faced confiscation of their property as well as arrest and possible death at the hands of the Ballstown Militia. Many previous residents of Ballstown enlisted in loyalist units in Canada or joined locally based Tory militias such as the notorious Butler's Rangers. Butler and Mohawk Chief Joseph Brant, who was the brother-in-law of Sir William Johnson, had been increasingly attacking communities up and down the Mohawk Valley.



In 1777, a British invasion force of about 8,000 men under General Burgoyne moved down Lake Champlain and the Hudson River to attack Albany in hopes of splitting the American Colonies and disrupting the war effort. To counter this move, American forces under General Gates established a defensive position in the hills, called Bemis Heights overlooking the Hudson River at its narrowest point in the river in the present-day Town of Stillwater, then called Saratoga. This set the stage for the Battles of Saratoga in September and October of 1777. The opposing armies (built) fortified positions on what is today the Saratoga Battlefield. To support General Gates, the seventeen combined regiments of the Albany County Militia were put on alert. The 12th Regiment took part in the second of the two battles of Saratoga. The second Battle of Saratoga was decisive in bringing about the surrender of the British on October 9th, 1777. This was a major defeat for the British forces in the northern colonies and led the British to shift their main efforts in the war to the more "pro-British" Southern colonies. In the Northern Theater, they utilized less conventional methods of fighting using hit and run attacks carried out by American Loyalists and their Indian allies. This type of warfare proved much bloodier and more destructive to communities in the area. This created a constant state of fear among residents which the British hoped would



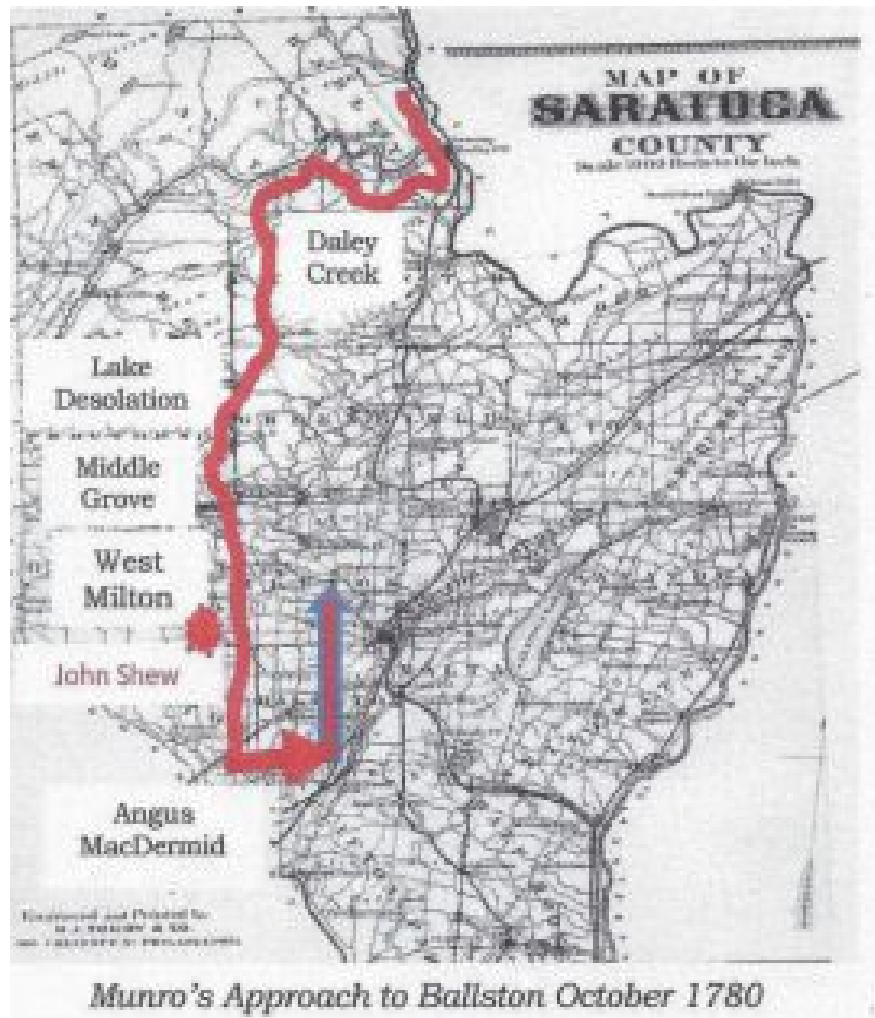
interfere with the ability of the Patriots to support the war effort. The term "Bloody Mohawk" was used to characterize this stage of the war, as attacks perpetrated by the British and their Indian Allies on settlements in the Mohawk Valley were rightfully described as massacres.

By 1780, the men from Ballstown filled the ranks of the 5th and 6th Companies of the 12th Regiment, commanded by Captains Tyranus Collins and Stephen White. In this phase of the war, the people of Ballstown were in constant vigilance, as they reflected on the massacres at Cherry Valley and Johnstown. Believing an attack may come at any time, the Albany County Militia was on constant alert. Local militia forces were stretched thin, and the men of Ballstown were constantly on the move. Whenever an alarm went out men of the local militias would be expected to serve from a few days to several weeks, then return home to care for their farms and families. This took a toll on the 12th Regiment, having reduced its ranks to just 358 men, from over 700 originally enlisted.

The 1780 Raid on Ballstown evolved as part of a three-pronged attack against the Hudson and Mohawk Valleys. A force under Major Christopher Carleton of the 29th Regiment of Foot was picked to lead a party of over 900 British Regulars, Loyalists, and Mohawk warriors down Lake Champlain into the upper Hudson River Valley. Major Carleton was the son of Guy Carleton, former governor of Canada who was replaced after the defeat of Burgoyne at Saratoga.

The party which would attack Ballstown was commanded by Captain John Munro of the King's Royal Regiment. His force of 200 men was composed of 131 members of the 1st Battalion in the King's Royal Regiment, 34 men of Captain William Fraser's Independent Company of Rangers and about 30 Fort Hunter Mohawks led by Captain John, a Mohawk Chief. Accompanying them well as a contingent of Mohawk women, who hoped to carry away plundered goods.

Captain John Munro was a good pick to lead this raid. Originally from Scotland, he came to New York as a British Officer during the French and Indian War. He established himself as a merchant in Schenectady and was very familiar with the area and people of Ballstown. When the Revolution started, his loyalty to the King caused his lands to be confiscated by the government in Albany. Facing arrest, he fled to Canada joining the Loyalist forces of Johnny Johnson. Munro's mission was outlined in a letter from Sir John to Haldimand (governor of Canada), dated September 11: *"I have advised with Colonel Claus and think the best Route for the Mohawks to take not only to favour our intentions, but to render service, will be by Crown Point to Saratoga/ Still Water and Balls Town, and from thence, if properly timed, they might join us upon the Mohawk River; all which may be very easily accomplished if any diversion is to be made to the Eastward, and about one hundred of my Regiment be sent with the Mohawks, under the Command of Captain Munro, who is well acquainted with that country. They should be there by the 8th of next month (October) at furthest, if they could remain concealed till they heard of our arrival, it would be best... "*



On their way toward Ballstown, Capt. Munro and his forces separated from the main invasion force under Major Carleton at Crown Point. He led them into Saratoga by making their way to the Sacandaga Trail, around Lake Desolation, then through the Town of Greenfield into the present-day Town of Milton (both Towns were part of Ballstown). With him was Tory Captain William Fraser and many of his men who had been residents of Ballstown or the surrounding

communities. Years before, they too, had their lands confiscated and faced arrest. These men sought revenge on their "traitorous" former neighbors.

As the attacking British forces moved into the area on October 12th, they encamped for three days on the northside of the Kayaderosseras Creek in West Milton, on Heisler Road. As the area was still largely unsettled, and heavily wooded, their presence was unknown except for a few local Tories in the area who were tasked with resupplying them as they prepared to carry out their attack. Lack of contact with Johnny Johnson's forces, concern of being discovered, and fear of running low on supplies, compelled Captain Munro to break camp on the morning of October 16th. Munro's forces forded the Kayaderosseras Creek (near present day Heisler Road) and marched southward down present-day West Milton Road to Paisley Street. Paisley Street was so named for the large number of Scots who lived in the area. The British force then crossed Amsterdam Road/Route 67 and proceeded down a trail (the present-day Hop City Road) for about five miles to the homestead of a recent Scottish immigrant, Angus MacDermid.

The MacDearmid house still stands on the corner of Devil's Lane and Hop City Road. It was here Munro and his officers planned on spending the night. To gain intelligence, Munro, had earlier in the day, sent out Capt. Frasier and some Mohawk scouts to assess their situation. On his return, Frasier reported that the Ballstown Militia, (Isaac among them) had just returned from an alarm at Fort Anne and Fort Edward on October 12th, where they were sent to help drive off the main British force under Major Carleton. They had reached Fort Edward too late, as the British had already done their damage and left, so the Ballstown militiamen returned to their homes. Additionally, he reported that the stockaded fort in Ballstown was garrisoned with about 200 men of the 12th Regiment, recently strengthened as troops from Schenectady arrived to complement the 5th and 6th Companies in Ballstown. Given this new information Captain Monroe chose not to attack Schenectady as originally intended but developed new plans to capture the local militia commander Col. James Gordon, as well as other known Patriots in the area, and to create a path of destruction across the area before marching with their captives and any captured goods back to Canada. To avoid being detected and cause an alarm at Fort Ballstown, he decided not to attack the settlement on Middleline Road directly, but to travel on a parallel route to the west and then move down Middleline Road as they retreated northward. While enroute, he would attack the homesteads along Middleline Road to obtain the necessary supplies to make the journey back toward Crown Point.

Meanwhile, fears of a pending attack grew among the Ballstown Militia. Recent hit and run attacks on Fort Edward and Fort Ann by the larger Loyalist force under the direct command of Major Carleton had occurred a few days earlier. This encouraged the Ballstown Militia to increase scouting parties along trails in the area. While the actual attack on Ballstown had not yet commenced, the first casualties of the British attack occurred earlier in the day. Reportedly, on the 16th, Private Isaac Parmentier of the 12th Regiment, and a friend from Johnstown, John Shew, were surprised near the present-day Galway-Milton Town line, (near Hop City Road) and captured by Mohawk scouts under the command of Capt. Frasier. By one witness's account "John Shew proceeded to the Ballstown settlements some twenty-five miles from his home in Johnstown, and put up at the house of Isaac Palmatier, another hunter of good repute and friend to John. Not far from Palmatier's residence, chestnuts were abundant, and as deer are fond of them, a visit at that early day to a chestnut grove was sure to reward the hunter for his journey. The two friends took an early start in the morning of the 16th to a favorite deer's haunt, where they were surprised by a party of seven Indians in ambush for them; who had been apprised of their intended visit by a Tory named John Parker, the latter having entered the settlement with the enemy, and been informed by a Tory settler

named Tuttle, of the movement of the hunters. Following their capture, they were taken to the camp of the enemy of whom there were a large number". Under interrogation, Isaac offered his captors a story that they were not members of the militia, but rather two friends out hunting. James Scott, of Ballstown supported the description of Shew and Palmateers capture and Shew's subsequent murder. He describes the capture of young Shew as follows: "Shew discovered his approaching foes just in time to regain his trusty rifle; seeing this, and knowing his skill as a marksman, they called to him to lay down his gun and surrender himself to them; promising if he complied to treat him as a prisoner of war. As they stood but two to seven, Shew was induced by their fair promises to be disarmed; but in the next moment regardless of their solemn assurance of safety he was, as Isaac Palmatier informed Sherman Batchellor, bound to a tree and slain by tomahawks huried at his head." The murder of Shew was believed to be retaliation by two of the Mohawk scouts, brothers John and David Hill, from the Indian Castle at Fort Hunter. Shew had previously been held captive in Fort Hunter in June 1778. After about a year of captivity, Shew had made his escape with another prisoner. Isaac later related the events of his friend's death. Fortunately, Isaac was spared and taken as the first prisoner in the Ballstown raid.

From Angus MacDearmid's farmhouse on Devil's Lane the British forces proceeded eastward toward Middleline Road and stopped at the log cabin of a known Tory, James McDonald, near present-day Courthouse Hill. McDonald informed Munro that Col. Gordon had just returned that very day from a trip to Poughkeepsie. He also agreed to guide him through the woods to the rear of Gordon's home. Around 1:00 a.m. on Tuesday, October 17, 1780, four-year-old Melinda Gordon, asleep in bed with her parents Lt. Col. Gordon, and his wife Mary. Melinda later recalled: "*We were awakened by the breaking of both the windows in the room and looking up saw a number of muskets with bayonets protruding into the room. My father arose and in his shirt went to the hall and opening [the door] he found the hall filled with armed men and Indians. As he opened it, a large Indian lifted his tomahawk and as it was descending, his arm was caught by Munro or Frazer (I forget which). My father was well acquainted with both of them and had befriended them. He was then led out of the door and put under guard - one Langdon had charge of him. The Indians, male and female commenced pillaging.[1] Old neighbors and acquaintances, displaced voluntarily or otherwise from their homes, livelihoods and families by a raw and unforgiving civil war, had returned.*"

While Capt. Munro attacked Col. Gordon's homestead, another party under Capt. Frasier burned Gordon's grist and sawmills on the Mourningkill Creek. Capt. Frazier and his party of Mohawks began their assault on neighboring farms along Middleline Road, including that of militia Capt. Sylvanus Collins. Capt. Collins and his female slave were captured but his son, Mannasah, was able to escape out of a window and ran the mile-and-a-half to alert the Ballstown fort of the attackers. Believing they were likely exposed, the Tories and Mohawks began their retreat down Middleline Road, attacking individual homesteads of known Patriots. They also sought to destroy recently harvested stores of grain, and any livestock they could not take with them. In the process they took as many captives as possible. As the men and older boys of Ballstown were taken prisoner, the women and children were forced into the dark wearing only their night shirts and taking refuge in the woods. Fortunately, some Tories among the raiding party, from the area, were able to prevent attacks on women and children by their Mohawk allies, many of whom they knew.



Meanwhile, the Mohawk women were pillaging the homes and forcing their captives to carry the stolen goods and livestock. Fearing they would be overtaken by the Militia from the Fort; Munro's forces began herding their prisoners and the livestock northward down Middleline Road. As they crossed the Mourningkill (near route 67) into the present-day Town of Milton, they became less concerned with attracting attention and began to set fire to as many homes as possible. Many of the residents, seeing the flames in the night sky, had already fled and were making their way to the fort and safety. Losses were lessened by the fact that many of the Ballstown men had previously sent their families "back home" to safer environs southward along the Hudson, or to their families back in Connecticut.

The raiders crossed the Kayaderosseras Creek at about 4 a.m. and regrouped on the north side of Milton Centre. The raid lasted about three hours, and at this point the raiders were fearing the arrival of the Militia from Ballstown fort. The attacking forces at this point were hastily preparing for the march back to Canada, and in this process, it was decided that each prisoner be placed under the guard of two members of the raiding party.

The attack on Ballstown resulted in many homes being burned, two people were killed - Issac Stowe, an employee of James Gordon, and Isaac Palmatier's companion, John Shew. Thirty-six others were captured, including Col. James Gordon, Cpt. Tyrannus Collins, and Isaac. On the march, a few of the captives were able to make their escape near Lake Desolation as Munro hastily led a retreat. Four others were released near Lake Desolation, being thought too old or injured to make the journey north. The attackers retraced their steps back to Middle Grove and Lake Desolation, following the Sacandaga Trail northward and on to Crown Point. The Ballstown Militia did not make any immediate effort to pursue the invading Army, as they feared that any attempts to rescue the captives would result in them being killed by their captors. Of the remaining thirty-two captives taken in the raid on Ballstown, Munro allowed his Indian allies to take eight prisoners, which included several of the younger captives to be adopted by their Mohawk captors. It is believed that Colonel Gordon instructed one of the four men released to carry a warning to the Militia in Ballstown that any efforts at pursuit could result in their deaths.

James Gordon, and twenty-three others were forced to march for eight days reaching Bulwagga Bay on Lake Champlain. At Crown Point the captives were loaded on ships sailing up Lake Champlain and reached Montreal sixteen days later. On first arrival the prisoners were under guard in a church in Montreal, then the enlisted men, including Isaac, were transferred to a large stone building in the suburbs of Montreal. Here they spent the winter of 1780 with about 200 other prisoners taken in similar raids. One prisoner from Vermont, Zadock Steele, became very familiar with the men of Ballstown and described his experiences here: *"Many of the prisoners as well as myself has only one shirt and were obliged to go without any while we washed that. We are allowed only a pound of bread and a pound of fresh beef per day. But were often robbed even a part of this humble pittance. We were kept almost entirely without firewood, having scarcely enough to cook our meat. Pinched with hunger, half naked and chilled with the cold, we were forced to our vermin ridden straw beds... scented with the smell of the dying and the dead"*. This described the conditions for Ballstown captives in the winter of 1780. Their British captors at times made offers of parole if a prisoner would take up arms in support of the King.

In sharp contrast, some officers were granted paroles if they gave their word, they would not take up arms again. In many cases, as with Col. Gordon, he was allowed more freedom in Montreal, even working for local businessmen in Montreal on their word as gentlemen that they would not act against their captors. Eventually the officers taken in the raid on Ballstown were sent to prisons in Quebec City, where conditions were far better than what Isaac would face. He and fifteen other Ballstown men would be transported about forty miles southwest of Montreal along the St Lawrence to the *Fort at Coteau Du Lac*, known as Prisoner Island. Coteau du Lac accommodated two hundred to three hundred prisoners living in cold damp stone barracks. The fort was located on an island in the middle of the St. Lawrence River. Being surrounded by raging rapids, this prison was virtually impossible to escape, though several attempts were made, usually unsuccessfully. Conditions here were much worse than they had experienced in Montreal. Food was scarce at times, and fuel was often lacking to fight off the cold and dampness, especially in winter. One prisoner, John Fitch, spent a little over a year there and related the following: *"We were made to endure great cruelties and tormented by the threat of murder at every turn. ...the multitudes of men already there had become quite discontented, ready, for any mischief. Each person had barely 1.85 meters of area to call his own."*

In addition to the physical hardships, two of the commandants took pleasure in their cruelty. The first was a Tory named McDaniel, whose treatment of the captives caused them to rebel, refusing to do his bidding. For this they were put in shackles and were refused firewood in the dead of winter, several men suffered severe frostbite. His replacement was far worse, especially for the Ballstown men. The new commandant was himself a previous Ballstown resident. He knew and despised many of the prisoners. His name was James McAlpin, aged 16, an officer in the Loyalist American Volunteers. In 1777, just four years earlier, McAlpin and his family had been rounded up and forced from their homes by James Gordon and his Ballston Militia and forced to flee to Canada. At age 12, McAlpin joined the Loyalist Regiment the American Volunteers and was quickly promoted. Now as commandant of Prisoner Island, McAlpin targeted the Ballston men for special abuse. Zadock Steele related: *"They were taken from their barracks one by one, carried to the guard house and tortured in the most cruel manner. Some were surrounded with soldiers, armed with guns and bayonets pointing directly at them and so near as to render the prisoners unable to move without being pierced, while the infamous McAlpin whipped the prisoners and caned them till he gutted his vengeance."*

Following the victory at Yorktown in 1781, peace negotiations began which included the release of prisoners. For the 419 American prisoners being held in Canada, this was not apparent. Finally, on October 16, 1782 the new commandant of *Coteau du Lac* announced that the prisoners would be released. This was two years to the day after the raid on "Balls Town" and their capture. The following day the four remaining Ballstown militiamen were on their way to Montreal. From Montreal they boarded ships headed for Boston, but first they would stop in Quebec City where they were reunited with other Ballstown prisoners of war. They departed Quebec City on November 12th, and finally landed on American soil, in Boston Harbor on November 27, 1782. Penniless and wearing rags on their arrival in Boston, they were on their own to get home. Without money or provisions, they relied on the charity of people along the way.

Surprisingly, all of those taken prisoner survived their two years in captivity, and most returned to their homes in Ballstown, at least in the short term. After the war ended, many eventually migrated westward taking advantage of land grants offered for their service in the war.

Resources:

"War Along the Middleline," by James Richmond, August 11, 2016.

The History of Saratoga County 1609-1878, by Nathaniel Sylvester, 1878.

Isaac Parmentier's Pension Record, US Military Archives

Parks Canada online, describing the history of the Prison Camp Couteau Du Lac during the Revolution.

Genealogies of the Descendants of the First Settlers of Schenectady. Genealogical website.

The Death of John Shew as reported by Jephtha R. Simms in *Frontiersmen of New York,* Vol. II, pages 477 - 480.