

## Benjamin Becraft U.E.L.

b. 1758, Schoharie, New York Province  
d. 1800-01, Ancaster Twp, OC 24 Feb 1801  
m. Elizabeth Westbrook, 1790-92

Children:

Anne, OC 23 Nov. 1816  
James of the Grand River, OC 23 Nov. 1816  
Sara, OC 25 Feb. 1819  
Anthony of Fairchild Creek, OC 2 Oct., 1822

On April 19, 1799, Benjamin Becraft did something very much out of the ordinary: Ill with an intestinal complaint, he went to see a doctor. That physician was most likely Dr. Oliver Tiffany. Written in a patient ledger ascribed to Tiffany, and opposite Benjamin's name, is evidence of the medicine prescribed - "worm pills No. 2"<sup>1</sup>. Dr. Tiffany was a legend at the Head-Of-The-Lake in the early Nineteenth Century, but it is doubtful that his prescription did the trick. Benjamin died within the next two years at the age of 42. Surely Ben could have expected to live longer than this, given that his own father, William Becraft lived to be 100, and his half-brother, Francis, lived to 90. Why did Benjamin die so young? Arguably, his intestinal complaint was part of something broader: He was a victim of the "skulking war", that cruel, exhausting, barbarous, unknown part of the American Revolution that he had fought, and which shortened his life.

Ben should have lived out his days in Blenheim, a town in the Schoharie Valley, New York Province. Life would have been good there. But revolution came to the Schoharie settlement in earnest in 1777, and life for Benjamin was to take an ugly turn. He lost all because he remained loyal to George III. Nine years later he was a refugee at Fort Niagara and destitute. We find his name on the "Old U.E. List" - "*Benjamin Begraft, Beacraft – S.G. Corpl. Becraft, Indian Dept. single P.L.N., Niagara, stamped book*". Amazingly, in one entry, the clerk managed to spell his name three different ways! Most likely Ben could neither read or write and so was unable to correct the mistake. It must have been very hard to start all over again. But like so many other loyalists, he would manage it, settling on 200 acres in the Home District (Ancaster Township, Lot 11, Concession 2).

It could have gone very differently had the British action of 1777 under Burgoyne, Clinton and St. Leger succeeded. The plan was for General Clinton to move up the Hudson River from New York City, General Burgoyne to pinch south from Crown Point and Lt. Col. St. Leger, based at Oswego, to take Fort Stanwix. The three forces would crush American opposition and meet at Albany, New York and so cut off the New England colonies from those of the centre and south. In the Schoharie region, matters quickly moved towards violence.

In May of 1777, independent statehood for New York was about to become a reality. Loyalists viewed this as highly illegal and started to demonstrate more

openly about their sentiments. In response, patriot hardliners stepped up operations against “Tories”. Pushed hard, many loyalists were radicalized. In June, Joseph Brant ordered Adam Crysler of Breakabeen to organize the Schoharie Mohawks and loyalists in order to support Burgoyne, Clinton and St Leger. Since Blenheim was just a matter of miles away from Breakabeen, Crysler either knew, or knew of Benjamin Becraft. Undoubtedly, Ben was part of the contingent of 70 loyalists who took up arms with Crysler and the Schoharie Mohawks in the summer of 1777. But things did not go as planned. The three British forces never met, did not take Albany, and in the Schoharie Valley, the wider loyalist uprising was thwarted. Crysler’s force was dispersed after the “Battle of the Flockey”<sup>2</sup> on August 13. However, the Schoharie loyalists were not beaten. Benjamin “fled to Canada” in 1777, like many of his loyalist neighbours, only to return repeatedly to destroy crops, and terrorize his former patriot neighbours.

Benjamin’s war was that of “*la petite guerre*”, guerrilla warfare. French Canadians in the Seventeenth Century were the first to adopt the war craft of the indigenous people of North America. The British, in time, took up the same approach. In this “skulking war” as practiced by loyalists and indigenous warriors during the American Revolution, there was no idea of a fair fight, only ambush, raids, surprise and terror. It was savage. It was cruel. It was fought by small groups of irregular soldiers with the aim of killing as many of the enemy as quickly as possible. But most of all this shadow war aimed to destroy the enemy’s ability to feed himself. Entire settlements were left in ashes. Swaths of farms along the Mohawk and Schoharie Valleys were destroyed again and again. Farm animals were driven off or killed, and whole harvests of wheat and corn were burnt.

Small, irregular forces composed of loyalists, including Benjamin Becraft, along with indigenous warriors were the “smartest, liveliest, and most useful troops in the British service”<sup>3</sup>. They came to be feared and hated by patriots who were never able to effectively defeat them. To American “patriots” living near him along the Schoharie Creek, Benjamin was “the tory Beacroft”, or “the notorious Beacroft”. A monster. To Benjamin, these same republican neighbours were “d----d rebels”, equally monstrous, whom he wished to see burning in hell! This was a civil war, one that pitted adversaries in a continuous round of atrocities and revenge seeking where no quarter was given. In this fight, patriot and loyalist settlers alike hated and struggled with an enemy they could name, perhaps had gone to school with, or who were even family.

Ben’s half brothers, Francis and William Jr. fought as patriots. Francis and William are listed in a 1782 Muster roll of the Schoharie militia.<sup>4</sup> And Francis, in his petition to the American pension board in 1832, provided affidavits to prove that during the Revolution he had served as a soldier and scout at Fort Weidman in 1778, 1779, 1780, 1781, and at the new fort at Beaver Dam that same year.<sup>5</sup>

Francis attests that he never saw action, had just manned the fort. Luckily, he and Benjamin never met in battle. But they would never see each other again.

Like so many other staunch loyalists, Benjamin Becraft stood by his promise to “honour the king”. But with the Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776, Ben’s allegiance to George III became high treason. Next came the increasingly more repressive “test” laws of 1776-77, which forced allegiance to the patriotic cause, a repudiation of the King, and a promise not to aid or abet the enemy. Society was increasingly polarized. Moderates were looked upon with suspicion, watched and hounded. The great losses suffered by the Tryon Militia at the battle of Oriskany, Aug 6, 1777 infuriated patriots and created widespread fear. Mobs in Albany put pressure on their elected officials to come down hard on loyalists in the Mohawk and Schoharie Valleys. Those refusing to take an oath of allegiance to the State of New York faced imprisonment, increased taxation (without representation), confiscation of property, or even death. Loyalists were plundered and sometimes horsewhipped. A loyalist was a traitor, and an outlaw with virtually no rights in a court of law, and no legal redress with respect to creditors. Moreover, in New York it was illegal for “Tories” to leave the state. If you attempted to flee and were caught you could be incarcerated, or even hanged. And if you did manage to escape, your estates were seized and sold. From a loyalist point of view, this revolution, which professed to safeguard freedom, did so by denying the central liberty of dissent. You could not say no! The republic was shaping up to be what the loyalists feared most, mob rule and tyranny.

In the relative safety of distant Blenheim, Benjamin, like other loyalists in the valley, kept a low profile. “Tory baiters” and members of the local Committee of Safety watched him. In 1777, and not too far away, two of these patriots, Martines Vrooman and Lawrence Mattice, arrested Baltus Crysler, brother of Adam Crysler. Eventually the committee bundled Baltus off to Albany where he was ultimately hanged. The Vrooman family, numerous, wealthy and politically influential, were strong in their support of the new republic. Peter Vrooman was the secretary of the local Committee, Col. of The Schoharie Militia, and commander of the Schoharie forts. Samuel and Adam Vrooman were also Committee of Safety members. The Vroomans in the Schoharie Valley early came to blows with Palatine settlers. Adam Crysler and his family were Palatine Germans. Was there bad blood stemming from land disputes before the revolution? Was this earlier confrontation heightened by the revolution? It is not clear. But what is certain is that in 1777 and afterwards, there would be no love lost between loyalists and the Vroomans. This would be particularly so in Benjamin Becraft’s case as we will soon see.

When the loyalist uprising of August 1777 fizzled in the Schoharie Valley, men such as Benjamin came to see Joseph Brant’s presence at Oquaga and Unadilla on the Susquehanna River as their deliverance. They gave up resistance at home and fled to join the young war chief’s growing followers. It is highly likely

that Becraft joined Brant's Volunteers in late 1777, or sometime before the summer of 1778. So too would Ben's future father-in-law Anthony Westbrook and his son Alexander, who joined Brant early and remained with him throughout the war. Outwardly, Brant's force was Mohawk. But in the early going, eighty percent of his volunteers were either white, like Benjamin, or freed black slaves. Only twenty percent were indigenous. Although a war chief of the Mohawks, Joseph Brant was young and relatively inexperienced at the beginning of the war. And having no great influence or strong alliances among the Haudenosaunee (Six Nations), he could not attract a large number of indigenous followers<sup>6</sup>. Brant was considered an upstart freelancer, and a man not to be trusted.

But to whites in London, George III included, and loyalists on the New York frontier, Thayendanegea impressed. As the revolution progressed Brant proved to be a great war-chief, brave, innovative and charismatic. He knew what he was about. That appealed to loyalist settlers early in the fight. These men trusted him, were sincerely attached to him, and were willing to go through great hardships with him in order to strike the enemy hard. But it took the British military longer to come up with monetary support. To begin with, Brant received nothing from the government, actually using his own resources and the spoils of battle to keep his corps in the field. Loyalists in Brant's Volunteers were 'associators': They received "issues and rations" from the British authorities, but unlike other loyalist units, were not paid. And in spite of widespread wooing by many loyalist outfits, such as Butler's Rangers, Brant's one hundred, non-indigenous volunteers, Becraft included, absolutely refused other service. This may have been because the men Brant attracted were "wild and undisciplined, unwilling to accept a strict regimen of military discipline"<sup>7</sup>. The award winning American Historian, Alan Taylor supports this view, suggesting, "They preferred Brant's... spontaneous style over the hierarchy, discipline and steady pay of a standard regiment, even if it meant no pay"<sup>8</sup>.

Brant's non-indigenous volunteers all wore the same token in their hats – a piece of yellow lace. But they had no military uniforms. They went into battle dressed and painted as "Indians". This had significant implications. First, since such attire was a disguise, it lowered volunteer inhibitions with respect to fighting former patriot neighbours, allowing them to be brutal. Second, because they dressed as "Indians" and fought with Brant, a Mohawk, their patriot neighbours saw them as "race traitors", says Taylor. Men such as Benjamin Becraft were doubly traitors - against the revolution and their race. If captured, they would be hanged on the spot without a trial. So they were determined to avoid capture. That meant fighting with "desperate effectiveness". And so they ghosted into a settlement, hit quickly and cruelly, and disappeared as suddenly as they came. Patriot settlers considered them blood-thirsty savages, even more so than Brant's Mohawks. Indeed it is alleged that loyalist brutality made the warriors more brutal, not the other way round.

Yet patriot actions could be even more brutal. Alan Taylor says, “Indeed Brant’s Volunteers behaved better than did the Continental Soldiers who ravaged Iroquois villages”<sup>9</sup>. When soldiers and militia from Cherry Valley destroyed Oquaga and Unadilla, Oct. 8-10, 1778, they torched all the houses, butchered the cattle, chopped down the apple trees and destroyed the growing corn crops. But then they killed some native children hidden in the cornfields<sup>10</sup>. And there was more. Brant and his warriors were off campaigning in Ulster County at the time, leaving Oquaga and Unadilla undefended. Helen Caister Robinson alleges that the patriot soldiers and the militiamen who levelled the towns, sexually assaulted their women prisoners. According to the warrior code, abusing women was the ultimate taboo. It was savage, and strictly off the table. Robinson maintains that knowledge of these rapes fuelled the atrocities of the Cherry Valley Massacre on Nov. 11, 1778<sup>11</sup>.

Another incident seems to back up Robinson’s accusations that patriots sexually abused indigenous women. In 1779, the patriots opened a campaign against the Haudenosaunee with an attack on the Onondaga. On April 21, they destroyed Onondaga Town and other villages. Taeqwanda, a renowned Onondaga orator, speaking in 1782 held that in that raid:

they [The American soldiers] put to death all the women and children except some of the young women whom they carried away for the use of the soldiers and were afterwards put to death in a most shameful way<sup>12</sup>.

In his Drums Along The Mohawk, the American historical novelist Walter D Edmonds alludes to both of these incidents. He mentions that Col. William Butler was ordered to wipe out the “Indian” towns of Oquaga and Unadilla in 1778. But since the hostile inhabitants of the towns had all fled, Butler allowed the Morgan Riflemen to kill the four or five Oneida and Tuscarora families, men and women, who had remained in the town because they were friendly to the Americans and expected to be left in peace. They had come to kill “Indians” and so did! Indeed, Edmonds says the Morgan men “made a spree of the process”, and that Col. Butler’s report failed to mention this part of the action.<sup>13</sup>

Then, when writing of the attack on an Onondaga town in 1779, Edmonds writes that these same Morgan Riflemen, with the support of their commanding officers, rounded up fifteen women, mostly young women, and killed them. Their half naked bodies were strewn around the area. But one young woman killed by a blow to the head, was lying naked under a tree in a protected area. Says Edmonds, these were signs that “the discipline had not been observed”.<sup>14</sup> He does not use the word rape, but seems to be alluding to it here. For the most part, Edmond’s novel has a decidedly pro patriot bias. Loyalists are called “destructives” while patriots are brave victims. So when Edmonds admits to American atrocities, even by doing so in such a subtle way, it is significant.

However, pointing out patriot savagery is not meant to condone loyalist atrocities perpetrated during the revolution, but to bring balance to the narrative. And as we now consider the details of Benjamin Becraft's war, we must put his actions into the context of the times, understanding that terrible acts were committed on both sides.

So what then were the details of Benjamin's war after the Battle of the Flockey, Aug. 13, 1777? His name is not to be found in any records until April 7, and August 9, 1780. But if Becraft did join Brant's Volunteers sometime before the summer of 1778, we can get a decent idea of Ben's involvement by considering the actions of Brant and his corps in 1778, 1779, and 1780. This was a busy time as the following chronology indicates:

- May 30, 1778:** The town of Cobleskill is attacked by Brant
- July 18, 1778:** Springfield and Andrus Town are destroyed by Brant
- Sept. 17, 1778:** German Flats is attacked by Brant, his volunteers and "Indians", leaving 719 people homeless
- Oct 8-10, 1778:** Brant is off attacking Ulster County, when his base camps at Oquaga and Unadilla are destroyed by the Americans
- Nov. 11, 1778:** Brant is forced to join Walter Butler in the attack on Cherry Valley. Benjamin was most likely **not** there because Brant's white volunteers refused to serve under Butler in this action.
- 1778 – 1779:** Brant Winters at Niagara
- July 20, 1779:** Brant attacks the Minisink settlement
- July 21, 1779:** Brant destroys the Goshen militia sent after him following the Minisink raid. 40 rebel militiamen are killed.
- Aug. 29, 1779:** Brant and his volunteers fight in the Battle of Newton.
- 1779 – 1780:** Brant winters at Niagara (A terrible winter: much snow, very low temperatures and little food)
- April 7, 1780:** Brant attacks Harpersfield. Benjamin was there (see below)
- July 24, 1780:** Brant raids the Oneida villages (the Oneidas supported the patriots in the war)
- July 26, 1780:** Brant attacks the Oneidas who fled to Fort Stanwix
- Aug 2, 1780:** Brant attacks Canajoharie. A swath of land 6 miles by 4 miles is devastated
- Aug 9, 1780:** Brant and his party, including Benjamin Becraft, lay waste "Vrooman's Land" in the Schoharie Valley.

In the year 1779, there was a hiatus in the raids into the Schoharie Valley. The Americans were gearing up for a huge retaliatory raid on the Haudenosaunee, and Brant sought to disrupt this plan as best he could. On July 20<sup>th</sup>, Brant attacked the Minisink settlement south of the Schoharie Valley with 60 warriors and 27 white loyalists. Benjamin may have been part of a larger body that waited behind at what was called Grassy Ford. But his future father-in-law Anthony Westbrook, and his future brother-in-law Alexander Westbrook were definitely

part of the attack on Minisink, as they lived in that area. Was Benjamin part of the destruction of the Goshen militia at the Battle of the Delaware the next day, on the 21<sup>st</sup>? There is no documentation that places him there. Then on the 29<sup>th</sup> of August, Brant and many others from Fort Niagara were at the Battle of Newton where they were greatly outnumbered by Sullivan's forces, fought well but had to retreat. There is a very good chance that Benjamin was there in the battle, but again no proof.

This drought of historical details on Benjamin becomes a flash flood of information in the contemporary pamphlet "The Captivity and Sufferings of General Freegift Patchin". In this small tract, Patchin provides an intriguing, first hand account of an April 7, 1780 raid on Harpersfield by Brant, his "Indians" and volunteers where they overwhelmed fourteen, patriot militiamen lead by Captain Alexander Harper. Patchin, a young militiamen in the group, gives us a most interesting account of Brant Volunteer fighting style:

So silent had been the approach of the enemy, that three of our number lay weltering in their blood, before I, or any of the rest, knew they were among us....<sup>15</sup>

Blindsided, the patriots had been taken by a group of men who were on the point of starvation, who had walked over three hundred miles from Niagara, through deep snow, to carry the war to their enemies. Harper's group had been blissfully collecting maple sap. Brant's men, having used up all their provisions in the journey, "devoured with the rapacity of cannibals" the maple sap Harper's party had collected.<sup>16</sup>

The captives, says Patchin, were placed in a hog pen for safekeeping, and "a guard of Tories, with one Becraft by name at their head was set over them in the pen". Patchin continues:

All night Brant and his warriors, with the Tories, were in consultation whether the prisoners should be put to death, or taken alive to Niagara....And added to this, the sentry, the bloody Becraft...would every now and then cry out to us, 'You will all be in hell before morning'.<sup>17</sup>

Finally it was decided that the prisoners should be kept alive, and forced to accompany the party back the three hundred miles to Niagara. And so began a twenty-two day trek of horror, which included rafting down the Susquehanna River, and gruelling overland marches through snow that was up to their waists.<sup>18</sup> Interestingly enough, the captives were allowed the same food allotment as their captors, two handfuls of corn a day. Each corn kernel was counted so that all got exactly the same. Grudgingly, Patchin had to admit, "in this respect Brant was just and kind".<sup>19</sup> But the corn ran out long before they returned to Niagara and they were on the point of starvation when they came upon the carcass of a horse that had died during the winter and lay frozen in the snow. Wolves had devoured the exposed side of the animal but could not get to the other side. This, the party

seized upon, rejoicing as at the finding of “hidden treasure”.<sup>20</sup> All parts of the horse were consumed, bones, head and hoofs, and again “equally divided among the whole”.

While Patchin’s narrative stoked patriot hatred of Brant’s Volunteers in general, and Benjamin in particular, it offers us graphic evidence of the group’s tremendous motivation. When you consider that Benjamin and his compatriots started out on this raid in March, faced the cold and hunger of the journey to Harpersfield, and then the extreme danger of the longer return trip, you see their total commitment to attacking the enemy. Officially, the raid was all about destroying the patriot effort to feed their troops. But unofficially, an all-consuming bitterness fuelled loyalists such as Benjamin to seek revenge. The previous year a large American force under the command of Generals Sullivan and Clinton utterly destroyed forty villages, countless farms, and livelihood of the Haudenosaunee, specifically the Seneca, Cayuga and Onondaga. Sullivan’s orders were to refrain from entering any talks with the enemy until all their lands were devastated. George Washington ordered this campaign. And to this day, is known to the Haudenosaunee as “The Destroyer of Villages”.

But Sullivan made the mistake of not destroying Fort Niagara. All through that horrible winter of 1779-80, the hatred built up in the fort, fuelling the desire to make the patriots pay dearly for their destruction of the summer and fall of 1779. The raids from Niagara in 1780 started on Feb. 11. Between that date and July 1, 1780, 495 “Indians” and whites ravaged American settlements. After July 1, 400 at a time ranged the frontiers.<sup>21</sup> The Americans had turned “Indian country” into a wasteland. In 1780 British, “Indian” and loyalists returned the favour in both the Mohawk and Schoharie Valleys. And Benjamin Becraft would be in the thick of things. It is highly likely that he was part of Brant’s party that destroyed the Oneida villages on July 24, and again near Fort Stanwix on July 26. And he was most likely with Brant on August 2 when he attacked Canajoharie and laid waste a six-mile by four-mile stretch along the Mohawk River. From there, Brant moved south to cause havoc in the Schoharie Valley. On August 9, he devastated “Vrooman’s Land” where Benjamin Becraft, says the historical record, played a big role.

Toward the end of his narrative, Patchin relates that:

the tory Becraft took it in his head to boast of what he had done in the way of murder, since the war began. He said that he and others had killed the family of one Vrooman. These, he said they soon dispatched, except a boy of about 14 years of age, who fled across the flat, toward the Schoharie River. “I took after the lad, said the tory and although he ran like the spirit, I soon overtook him, and putting my hand under his chin, laid him back on my thigh, though he struggled hard, cut his throat, scalped him, and hung the body across the fence”<sup>22</sup>



Here is testimony of a great savagery. But can we believe it? Patchin holds that Becraft regaled him with the above details in late April of 1780, toward the end of the march to Niagara. But the “Vrooman’s Land Massacre” happened later that same year, on Aug. 9! How could this be? Were there earlier raids in 1778, or 1779? This is possible. Since the extensive Vrooman families were staunch and active patriots in the Schoharie Valley, they were prime targets for small groups of loyalist raiders. Indeed, they were “severe sufferers”: A number of family members were killed, or taken prisoner, and their property destroyed. However, there are no records that specifically connect Benjamin Becraft to such earlier raids. And there are further problems.

Jeptha R. Simms and William E. Roscoe, two Nineteenth Century amateur historians writing on the Schoharie Valley, agree on the Aug 9<sup>th</sup> date, as do modern day historians such as Barbara Graymont.<sup>23</sup> . But here is where agreement ends, and details get fuzzy. Simms and Roscoe say Peter Vrooman was fourteen, while Graymont holds that the boy was eight. Simms embellishes Patchin’s story saying that Becraft also killed the four-year old daughter with a stone and then scalped her. Roscoe repeats this, adding that the little girl’s name was Janet, and the father’s name was Ephraim. John P Becker agrees that it was Ephraim Vrooman and family that were attacked.<sup>24</sup> Ephraim, he says, was taken prisoner, his wife shot dead and their *eleven* year old daughter had her head crushed by a stone. But in Becker’s account there is no mention of either Benjamin Becraft having been there, or of the death of Peter Vrooman!

So is Patchin in error when he paints Benjamin Becraft as the murderer of the Vrooman boy? Freegift Patchin’s narrative is a fascinating and unique account of the Harpersfield Raid and the journey back to Niagara. However, one must question his charge that Becraft murdered Peter Vrooman, just as we must disbelieve Simms and Roscoe when they accuse Benjamin of killing Janet Vrooman. Patchin, like Simms and Roscoe, hardly provides a balanced account of events. Indeed, the old patriot’s characterization of Benjamin Becraft as a “treacherous villain” whose skin “shrouded a heart in which dwelt a spirit as bad as the devil’s worst”, pretty much sums up his treatment of all “Tories” in his account.<sup>25</sup> Patchin’s anger is understandable. The point is though that his treatment of his former enemies is very much influenced by that enmity. And it must be said that his account was written down in 1830, shortly before his death, and published by Josiah Priest,

an itinerant spectacle and nostrum peddler [who] wrote, published and sold many highly covered narratives of Indian captivities, all notoriously garbled and inaccurate<sup>26</sup>

In the light of this description, one might ask how much of Patchin’s narrative was edited by Josiah Priest.

Freegift Patchin ends his narrative by describing the actions of a group of ten neighbours who took it into their own hands to get retribution. They whipped

Becraft, giving him fifty lashes for his alleged crimes. These men, says Patchin, formed a “jury” though “they lacked two of the legal quantum”. He goes on to say that after punishment was administered, Becraft was ordered to “flee the country and never more return, to blast with his presence so pure an atmosphere as that where liberty and independence breathe and triumph”.<sup>27</sup> Thereupon, Patchin maintains that Becraft thanked them for having been so “gently dealt with, acknowledging his conduct to have been worthy of capital punishment.” This is most interesting in that the story so much echoes the treatment meted out to another Tory by the name of Foster who also returned to his home after the war, only to be attacked by his neighbours. In the midst of buffeting, “he [Foster] was compelled to thank his tormentors for their kind treatment; promising to leave the valley and never return to it...”<sup>28</sup> Many loyalists did try to return to their homes after the Revolution only to be driven out by their former neighbours. But this duplicated progression of confessions, followed by beatings, followed by thanksgiving for leniency, followed by expulsion seems too much of a set-piece, and is therefore as questionable as it is biased. Moreover, a number of patriots, such as Freegift Patchin, who take to the moral high ground in these narratives, also benefited by scooping up confiscated loyalist property after the war.<sup>29</sup>

After August 9, 1780, the documentation on Benjamin Becraft largely goes dark once more. He continued his war, no doubt. Perhaps he was part of Sir John Johnston’s second, devastating raid into the Mohawk Valley in October of 1780. Or he might have been one of the six Brant Volunteers in the raid to Cocksackie led by either Hendrick or John Huff in May of 1781<sup>30</sup>. Or he may have gone on raids with Captain Hendrick Nelles of the Indian Department. There were many small raids into the Schoharie Valley in 1781 that may have included Benjamin Becraft. But there is no documentation to back up his part in any of these actions. What is for sure is that Benjamin did not raid with Joseph Brant in 1781, as Brant was transferred to Fort Detroit, taking with him some young warriors, but no white volunteers. Officially, Brant was in the west to fight George Rogers Clark, a Virginian who was bent on destroying the British alliance with the “Western Indians”.

However, we get a tantalizing glimpse of Benjamin in May of 1781. John Dease, an Indian Department official at Fort Niagara writes to Captain Nelles at Karaghhyadirra:

The Bearer has brought in a small bay mare belonging to Ben. BEACROFT my Servt.– he Borrowed her from an Indn. in Youcasito. I wish you’d Apply to the Indn. to Restore her to B. Ben who can prove his property to her.<sup>31</sup>

This brief reference indicates Becraft’s continuing war, and reminds us of his close association with the indigenous soldiers who were his companions on raids that left Niagara for the Mohawk and Schoharie Valleys. Benjamin was a forester in the Indian Department but also an interpreter.<sup>32</sup> That meant that he had a

good working knowledge of the Mohawk language and therefore a close relationship with the indigenous fighters, such as the Schoharie chief Seth's Henry, who, like Benjamin, was a determined and tireless partisan.

The hatred shown Joseph Brant and his men, including Benjamin, attests to the effectiveness of the guerrilla type war that was waged by Brant's Volunteers, the Butler Rangers and many other loyalist and native groups and nations. Frequent were the instances in which individuals and even whole families in the outskirts of the settlements disappeared without any knowledge on the part of those who were left behind. The smoking ruins of their dwellings, the charred bones of the dead, and the slaughtered carcasses of the domestic animals were the only testimonials of the cause of the catastrophe, until some prisoner furnished more definite information. According to W.L. Stone, the Mohawk and Schoharie Valleys at war's end had the appearance of "wide-spread, heart-sickening and universal desolation". And those who were left at the return of peace were literally a people "scattered and peeled".<sup>33</sup> Stone then adds that one third of the population of the valleys had gone over to the enemy, and that one third had been driven from the country, slain in battle and by private assassination. Another source states that the original ten thousand settlers in the Mohawk and Schoharie Valleys were reduced to thirty-five hundred at the end of hostilities and of these three hundred were widows, and two thousand orphans.<sup>34</sup>

Wheat production in the New England states had fallen even before the war, and the farmers in the Mohawk, Schoharie and Hudson River Valleys rushed to fill the gap. They were at the time of the revolution America's "wheat basket". But they over-specialized in wheat growing because of an expanding market. The plan was for the New York frontier settlements to supply wheat to the northern continental army and the New England states. The burning of the Mohawk and Schoharie settlements, however, brought psychic horror, economic ruin and near starvation for the farmers, and widespread shortages and great hunger for all. The Schoharie Valley was particularly hard hit. "The settlement of Schoharie [in 1780] which alone was able to furnish, according to a letter from General Washington, 80,000 bushels of grain for public use, has been totally laid in ashes."<sup>35</sup>

The ultimate goal of these valley raids was to run off all the settlers and so shut down patriot food production completely. This didn't happen only because the diehards who remained went to a system of fortified homesteads and "holdfasts". These scattered small forts ensured the survival of those farmers who could flee their fields to safety within the walls when the alarm cannon sounded. But that meant that their crops were left to the mercy of the raiders, who would then burn down their farms. Gristmills and barns were prime targets. And although small loyalist and "Indian" raiding groups did not have the firepower to destroy these forts, their continuing existence only served to disperse the local patriot militias, making it almost impossible for militia commanders to put an end to the raids

once and for all by concentrating their forces. And so the burning and the killing went on right into 1782.

Soldiers of "*la petite guerre*", loyalists such as Benjamin Becraft and the first nations warriors who fought along side them, did their part in the Mohawk and Schoharie Valleys. At great cost to themselves, they severely crippled the patriot war effort. But they could not strike the fatal blow. That had to be delivered by British regular forces. This, the British failed to do. Then, when negotiations were made to end the fight, British diplomats and politicians failed to protect their colonial American troops, both "white" and indigenous. When soldiers like General Haldimand, who had fought the war in North America, learned how the articles of peace threatened the security of Canada, and made no provisions for the First Nations and loyalists, they confessed of being bowed down with grief. Said Haldimand, "I am heartily ashamed". Ultimately Britain would help loyalists and the Haudenosaunee relocate to Canada. But they did nothing to help them receive compensation for their lost property in New York State. The years immediately following 1782 were most bitter for Benjamin Becraft, and so many other loyalists.

It is estimated that there were a total of five hundred thousand loyalists during the American Revolution, but that only ten percent ever took up arms and fought.<sup>36</sup> Of these half million "Tories" the vast majority remained in the United States after the end of hostilities. Only sixty thousand actually left, and thirty thousand of these people were from New York State. Benjamin Becraft was among those activist, New York loyalists who left for Canada in 1786. Educated loyalists, like patriots, accepted John Locke's theory of natural rights and limited government, and like patriots criticized British actions such as the Stamp Act and the Coercive Acts. However, loyalists wanted to pursue peaceful protest, fearing that violence would lead to mob rule and tyranny. In backwoods Blenheim, an uneducated Benjamin Becraft did not know about Locke, the Stamp Act, or the Coercive Acts. Yet he did experience the tyranny of the local patriot committees who watched him, and would not allow him to honour his oath to support the king. This prompted him to take up arms, join Brant's Volunteers, and become a fierce partisan in the savage civil war that raged along the frontiers.

How is one to come to grips with this war? What is one to think of the atrocities perpetrated by both sides? No doubt Becraft, like so many other "whites" on both sides of that fight, became savage himself. Thayendanegea, like his Mohawk kin, or the Haudenosaunee altogether, was called a "savage", a favourite epithet of whites that had always incensed indigenous people. To this labelling, Brant replied, "Cease then to call yourselves Christians lest you publish to the world your hypocrisy. Cease too to call other nations savage, when you are tenfold more the children of cruelty than they".<sup>37</sup>

After a raid on a patriot settlement, Brant was quick to point out the duplicity of whites. In a note sent to "the commanding officer of the rebel army" explaining

his motivation for returning captives, Brant wrote, “I do not make war upon women and children. I am sorry to say that I have those engaged with me in the service, who are more savage than the savages themselves<sup>38</sup> Is this an indictment by Brant of some of his white volunteers, perhaps even Benjamin Becraft? Becraft physically survived that cruel conflict. But did the inhumanity of the fight claim part of his being? Did Benjamin, like others on both sides of the conflict, lose his way in the horror of long marches, blizzards, hunger, rain and killing? At war’s end, we hear no more of Benjamin Becraft, other than the statement by Freegift Patchin that he tried to return to Blenheim, only to be whipped and cast out. We know nothing of his final trip from the Schoharie Valley to Fort Niagara, or on to Ancaster Township. And there is no definite record of when he died, nor no known grave. Most likely he is buried on his Ancaster farm. To this day that piece of land just west of Jerseyville is cut in two by a road called the Indian Trail. Appropriate I would suggest.

## END NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> “Ledger of an early doctor of Barton and Ancaster 1798 – 1801”, The Buchanan papers, p. 929 – 1112, Hamilton Public Library Special Collections.

<sup>2</sup> The German name for the flats, level land on either side of Schoharie Creek, was “die Flache”, that then came to be known in English as The Flockey

<sup>3</sup> Hazel C Matthews, The Mark Of Honour, pg. 60, quoting Patrick Campbell, Travels in the Interior Parts of North America In The Years 1791-1792, (Edinburgh, 1793), pg. 274.

<sup>4</sup> William E Roscoe, History of Schoharie County, Mason and Co., Syracuse N.Y. 1882, Chapter III. They were part of company 3. In company 5 is a Jacob I. Becraft.

<sup>5</sup> See [http://albanyhilltowns.com/wikiBio/index.php/Willp?title=Becraft,\\_Francis](http://albanyhilltowns.com/wikiBio/index.php/Willp?title=Becraft,_Francis) for a biography of Francis and also electronic copies of his handwritten petitions. In these petitions he mentions the capture of his commanding officer, Captain William Dietz, and the massacre and scalping of Dietz’s father, mother, wife and children by the Indians. There were three forts in the Schoharie area at the time. For sketches of these go to: <http://threerivershms.com/schoharieforts.htm>. Fort Weidman was 10 –12 miles from the fort at the town of Schoharie.

<sup>6</sup> Thayendanega was Brant’s “Indian” name. In Canajoharie where he grew up, he came to be called Brant’s Joseph by his white friends who found that name easier to pronounce. Brant was Joseph’s stepfather. Eventually Thayendanega came to be called Joseph Brant’s, then Joseph Brant and finally just Brant. Joseph’s stepfather was a shaman and wealthy. But to the Haudenosaunee that meant nothing for Joseph. Your status as a male depended not on what your father was but who your mother was. Joseph Brant’s mother had no great status. She was not a clan matron and had no power to appoint a hereditary chief. So Thayendanega was a nobody. Joseph did get some status from his sister Molly who had married Sir William Johnston but it wouldn’t be until he married his third wife, Catharine Croghan that Brant really came up in the world – Catharine had inherited the right to appoint the Tekarihoga, principal Mohawk shaman of the Turtle Clan. Whites usually had no idea of this. Re. Brant, they automatically followed their

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own prejudices and saw not an upstart who was not to be trusted, but a charismatic and innovative leader to be followed.

<sup>7</sup> Isabel Thompson Kelsay, Joseph Brant, 1743-1807, Man of Two Worlds, pg. 192

<sup>8</sup> Alan Taylor, The Divided Ground, Indians, Settlers, and the Northern Borderlands of the American Revolution, pg. 84–93.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 93

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 94

<sup>11</sup> Helen Caister Robinson, Joseph Brant, A Man For His People, no paging. This is an interesting source. It sits on a shelf in the McMaster Univ. Library in Hamilton Ontario. As I researched for this paper, it struck me that no “white” sources, primary or secondary, ever mention rape in connection with the fighting on the New York Frontier during the American Revolution. I was motivated to leave this alleged rape out of the narrative. But then I came upon the words of Taeqwanda, spoken in 1782, quoted in the text of this article, and found in Watt’s work immediately below.

<sup>12</sup> Gavin Watt, I am Heartily Ashamed, Vol II, pg. 337-8. On April 9 1779 leading up to that attack above, General Clinton sent instructions to Col Van Schaick and Col. Gansevoort who were in charge of the forces advancing on the Onondaga villages, saying, “Bad as the savages are, they never violate the chastity of any women, their prisoners. Although I have very little apprehension that any of the soldiers will so far forget their character as to attempt such a crime on the Indian women who may fall into their hands, yet it will be well to take measures to prevent such a stain upon our army”. If Taeqwanda was correct, more should have been done to keep the corps’ honour untarnished.

<sup>13</sup> W.D. Edmonds, Drums Along The Mohawk, Syracuse Univ. Press, 1997, pg. 400-401 This incident also backs up Taylor’s intimation that racism played a role in the revolution. The inhabitants of Oquaga and Onadilla were brutally abused because they were “Indians”. This racial undertone may also be seen in the case of Seth’s Henry. A sachem of the Schohaire Indians, Seth’s Henry was a fierce partisan and very much hated by patriots. Gavin Watts in The Flockey, (see pg. 71fn), argues that Henry was such a cruel foe because of racial slurs he had experienced at the hands of certain patriot neighbours prior to the revolution. He was called a “dog”. As well, to be called a “savage”, as the Mohawks often were, was very hurt full generally.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 461 To be fair, at another point in the novel, Edmonds alludes to rape done by a group of loyalists. And it is very interesting that in primary sources generally, written by commanders to their superiors, there is never mention of rape. But then why would a commander mention such at thing? To do so would be an admission that you could not control the actions of your men, a sure way to destroy any chance of advancement in rank! But how is one to understand the writings of authors of secondary sources on the American Revolution who continue this silence?

<sup>15</sup> Josiah Priest, “The Captivity and Sufferings of General Freegift Patchin”, Tarrytown N.Y., reprinted W Abbatt, 1918, pg. 286

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 289

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 286

<sup>18</sup> See accompanying map of New York State for the details of the return trip to Fort Niagara

<sup>19</sup> Josiah Priest, *op. cit.*, pg. 292

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 295

<sup>21</sup> Barbara Graymont, The Iroquois in the American Revolution, Syracuse Univ. Press, 1972, pg. 229

<sup>22</sup> Josiah Priest, *op. cit.*, pg. 297

<sup>23</sup> Jephtha R. Simms, History of Schoharie County and Border Wars of New York, Albany, Munsell and Tanner, 1845, pg. 375-379, William E. Roscoe, *op. cit.*, Chapter XIII, Barbara Graymont, *op. cit.*, pg. 237

<sup>24</sup> John P. Becker, The Sexagenary, or Reminiscences of the American Revolution, J Munsell, New York State, 1866, pg. 163

<sup>25</sup> Josiah Priest, *op. cit.*, pg. 306

<sup>26</sup> H. C. Matthews, *op. cit.*, pg. 70 quoting John D Monroe, History of Delaware County, pg. 79

<sup>27</sup> Josiah Priest, *op. cit.*, pg. 307

<sup>28</sup> Jephtha R. Simms, Frontiersmen of New York, Albany New York, 1883, Vol. I, pg. 342

<sup>29</sup> Freegift Patchin settled in Blenheim in 1798. He purchased confiscated loyalist property in Pittstown, Schoharie County along with Abraham Sternbergh. See:

### [Name Index of Loyalist Land Sales, P | New York State Archives](#)

... Pittstown (NY). Volume 9, Page 192 ad. purchaser: **Patchin, Freegift** purchaser: Sternbergh, Abraham, Schoharie County (NY). Volume 9, Page 46. ...

[www.archives.nysed.gov/research/indexes/A4016/A4016i16.shtml](http://www.archives.nysed.gov/research/indexes/A4016/A4016i16.shtml) - [Cached](#)

<sup>30</sup> Benjamin Becraft and Henry Huff had fought together on the Harperfield raid of April 7, 1780. See Matthews , pg. 70 citing P.A.C., Haldiman Trascripts, B. 105, p. 395A; B. 110, p.103 where Benjamin Becraft is listed as 22, forester and interpreter and as a Brant volunteer along with Henry Huff.

<sup>31</sup> Henry Nelles Papers, Archives of Ontario, MU 3296.5 as quoted at <http://www.royalprovincial.com/military/rhist/dian/dianlet9.htm>

<sup>32</sup> P.A.C., Haldiman Trascripts, B. 105, p. 395A; B. 110, p.103

<sup>33</sup> William L Stone, The Life and Times of Joseph Brant – Thayendanegea, pg. 236

<sup>34</sup> C. Gehring, "Agriculture and the Revolution in the Mohawk Valley", see [www.threerivershms.com/agriculture.htm](http://www.threerivershms.com/agriculture.htm).

<sup>35</sup> Simms, *op. cit.*, pg. 444

<sup>36</sup> Robert M. Calhoon, "Loyalism and neutrality" in Jack P. Greene and J.R. Pole, eds., *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of the American Revolution* (1991) p. 235; [Robert Middlekauff](#), *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763–1789* (2005) pp. 563-564; Thomas B. Allen, *Tories: Fighting for the King in America's First Civil War* (2010) p. xx

<sup>37</sup> Barbara Graymont, *Thayandanegea*, Dictionary of Canadian Biography, see <http://www.biographi.ca/en/results.php/?ft=thayandanegea>

<sup>38</sup> W. L. Stone, *op. cit.* Vol. II, pg. 126