Today on Across the Fence ... we step into history to a time of revolution and red coats to celebrate a turning point in history of the United States. Good afternoon ... and thanks for joining us ... I'm Judy Simpson. August 16th is Bennington Battle Day. It's a memorial holiday that is unique to Vermont. It commemorates a series of skirmishes that took place in 1777 ... in New York. Led by the charismatic John Stark, a force of militiamen -- which included Vermont's Green Mountain Boys - would strike the first decisive blow for American independence that led to the British surrender at the Battle of Saratoga a few months later. To recount the battle and its monumental importance to Vermont and the United States let’s join Vermont historian Howard Coffin.

Howard Coffin / reporting: Vermont’s Bennington Battle Monument a monstrosity; 306 feet high, one of the biggest battle monuments in the world. Bigger than anything at Gettysburg or Yorktown. Honoring a battle fought 3 miles away in New York State. A battle with no more than 3500 men involved, a mere skirmish by Civil War standards. Dedicated on August 19, 1891 as a part of the Vermont centennial. President Benjamin Harrison spoke here. Thirty thousand people attended. The crowd included 625 Vermont Civil War veterans. Would they have understood why such a small battle was getting so much attention? Of course they would have. They were veterans and they understood that the importance of a battle is not judged by the number of men involved the number of casualties. It is judged by its strategic importance; by its importance in history and just possibly the Battle of Bennington was one of the most important battles in the world.

In the early summer of 1777 a British army of about 8,000 men commanded by John Burgoyne, gentleman Johnny Burgoyne, invaded the Champlain Valley from Canada. The forces included British regulars, mercenaries, Hessians from German, and some Native Americans. Burgoyne rolled up the valley. He captured Crown Point; he captured Mount Independence and Ticonderoga. He fought a difficult battle in the hills at Hubberton, Vermont that was won only after a struggle, but on came Burgoyne to capture Whitehall and Fort Anne and move south all the way to fort Edward. But he was getting short of supplies and he heard that there was a cache of American arms at Bennington, 20 miles away from the Hudson Valley, so he sent a force under Friedrich Baum consisting mainly of Hessian soldiers, but also some Tories ... east 20 miles toward Bennington. Not only to capture the arms, but to bring back badly needed horses and food, he needed beef. So Baum set out in this direction heading into enemy territory. Baum’s march with his 700 men was going well, until he came within 5 miles of Bennington to a point along the Walloomsac River. Baum sat down here, wrote a message on the head of a barrel to Burgoyne, ‘send me help.’
Though essential the battle of Bennington is a New York battle. Parts of it, the maneuvering were here in Vermont. We're in Vermont now at the site of John Stark's campground. Here he was camped with his 1,500 men on the eve of the battle. Here Stark developed his battle plan. It was a complex one, but it worked. The Plan was that he would lead the main assault on the enemy center by the river. Also, he would send 200 New Hampshire men under Colonel Moses Nichols on a six mile march to the north and then bringing them behind the enemy. Also 200 men under Samuel Herrick mostly Vermonter would swing to the south about 6 miles and come in behind the enemy, enveloping the enemy position. It was probably here, just before the action began, that Stark made his famous remark, 'the Redcoats are there and they are ours or Molly Stark sleeps a widow tonight!'

We’re in New York State, Bennington Battlefield Park. We’re on this 800 foot hill. The top of which Baum fortified and he put about 60 of his Hessians into a big earthwork right on top of that hill. Stark had scouted the terrain carefully before the battle. And so he sent Herrick and Nichols on that long 6 mile march to get behind the hilltop position, why because to the west of it here was a flat field to attack through not come up the steep sides and they came rolling in here about 3 o'clock firing as they came outnumbering the Hessians about ten to one. They waited here until August 16 the middle of the afternoon and then all hell broke loose. The fighting went on here for nearly two hours. John Stark who had been among the fury of the Battle of Bunker Hill said it was the loudest clap of thunder he ever heard this fight for the hilltop. In the end the Americans overran this position, there was hand-to-hand fighting within the fortification and then those Hessians that remained alive ran down the hill to get away, most of them were shot or captured.

Civil War battlefields contain miles and miles of earthworks. Nothing remains at Bennington of the big earthworks that the Hessians built along the river and on this hilltop particularly, but some of their handiwork may remain. It seems to me that this bank was probably cut away for two purposes to provide dirt for the earthworks and to steepen this little hill here as for the defense against the attacks that did come in here from the left. Indeed perhaps this rock may have been laid bare by hessian shovels.

While Herrick and Nichols battled high on the hill. Stark attacked Baum’s position down along the river.

This modern bridge is on the site of the 1870’s bridge that carried the Bennington road across the Walloomsac River. This is as close as von Baum ever got to Bennington. Facing obviously heavy opposition, he dug in here along the river creating breastworks on this side and on the far side he fortified a couple of cabins. But beyond that there’s a hill on the far side of the river that he also felt he had to fortify because it overlooked this position and this position might have been untenable if he couldn’t hold that hill.

So up here on the hill he put 200 local loyalists, Tories, and they hurriedly threw up an earthwork, and they were defending it; looking to the North, looking to the east waiting for the approach of Stark’s men. The fighting began down below them and suddenly they heard something behind them. Turned around and there were Americans behind them and they had to get out of here in a hurry and they skedaddled down this hill and across this river, many of them getting shot in the fields and then in the river and then as they tried to climb the steep bank of the Walloomsac. This position fell in minutes.

The British could do nothing here, but flee, try to save their lives and among those who ran was Fredirich von Baum. Running south through that field he was hit by an American musket ball, mortally wounded.
By late afternoon of August 16, 1777, the Battle appeared to be over. Baum’s forces had been decimated. The Americans were celebrating, but suddenly reinforcements sent by Burgoyne, in answer to Baum’s appeal, marched onto the field led by Colonel Henrich Breymann.

The sudden arrival of Col. Breymann’s 500 men from the West, the relief force caught Stark’s men completely by surprise and they were driven back a mile to this ravine where they formed a line of battle and began to fight as best they could, but their line was beginning to give way. Stark’s hold on this ravine was indeed becoming tenuous. It looked like all could be lost and then the Americans heard behind them cheering. Had they been flanked? Were the British behind them? No! It was 500 reinforcements under the Vermonter Seth Warner. 500 Vermonters come to the rescue and Warner attacked through this ravine across this little brook and drove the British back. The fighting would go on until darkness. Stark said later: ‘lucky for us that moment Col. Warner’s regiment came up fresh, who marched on and began the attack fresh. I push forward as many of the men as I could to their assistance. The battle continued obstinate on both sides until sunset. The enemy was obliged to retreat.

We are now back in Vermont. The battle has ended. In a house that stood near this marker probably on the site of that house, Colonel Baum died. He was put in a cart and brought here on rough roads protesting all the way that he couldn’t stand the pain of the jouncing, but he could only speak German and his American captors did not understand what he was saying. He went into the house and after long hours of suffering he died in agony.

Here in the old cemetery at North Bennington lie many of the Hessian soldiers who died in the Battle of Bennington. Immediately after the battle, Stark brought some 700 prisoners to old Bennington in addition more than 200 of the enemy had been killed, many more wounded. Baum’s force had been decimated and a heavy blow had been struck to the reinforcements under Breymann. When what was left of Breymann’s force returned to Burgoyne on the Hudson. Burgoyne congratulated them for some kind of a triumph, he couldn’t have believed that. At this time George Washington was dealing with another British army far to the south. When word finally reached him of Bennington, Washington remarked on ‘the great stroke by Stark at Bennington.’ A member of his staff, perhaps speaking for the General wrote, ‘there was a cloud in the North, but I really think that matters in that quarter look well just now. I trust Burgoyne will be severely mauled.’ Less than 2 months later, Burgoyne would surrender his entire army at Saratoga. It would be, history says, the decisive battle of the American Revolution. Why? Because France, as a result, decided to come into the war on the American side that would lead to the final surrender at Yorktown. Was Saratoga the decisive battle? Yes. But was that battle’s fate decided by the crushing defeat here at Bennington ... perhaps, perhaps.

Judy Simpson / Across the Fence: Thank you Howard! The Bennington Battle Monument is a Vermont State historic site. It’s open mid-April until the end of October from 9 AM to 5 PM. It’s free to walk the grounds, but if you don’t mind heights ... you can take an elevator to the top of the monument for a small fee. For more information call 802-447-0550. And that’s our program for today. We’ll see you next time on Across the Fence.