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Wilton's Brush with the Revolutionary War: Tryron's Raid on Danbury and Return Through Wilton

No major battle was fought in Wilton during the Revolutionary War, but the town did not emerge unscathed.

***Editor's Note:** The following account of a brief invasion of Wilton as British troops returned to the coast after a raid on Danbury is excerpted from a history of Wilton being completed by former First Selectman, Bob Russell. Note the mention of familiar town place names—Olmsted, Belden, Keeler... They were once live people engaged in a desperate struggle.*

No battles were fought in Wilton during the American Revolution, but Wilton was invaded by an enemy force in 1777.

During the early years of the Revolution, the Americans established a substantial military depot at Danbury, which was thought to be far enough inland to be safe from the British. At first, the officer in charge of the supplies was Ezra Gregory of Wilton, a resident of Belden Hill Road and ancestor of the late Julian A. Gregory.

Unfortunately, Ezra died in 1776 at 50. Another supervisor was in place when in April 1777, General William Tryon was dispatched by the British to destroy the American stores and ammunition at Danbury. General Tryon sailed from New York with 1,800 troops, including 300 American Tories from the Prince of Wales Regiment—Americans who were fighting on the side of the British. Many of these Tories were Fairfield County natives, including one Jared Betts from Wilton, whose brother Nathan was an American soldier.

Tryon landed at what is now Compo Beach on April 25, 1777 and, with the exception of a small skirmish with about fifty of the local militia on Compo Road near the Post Road, marked today by a monument, marched unopposed up to Danbury through Westport, Easton, Redding Ridge, and Bethel, stopping to camp overnight along the way. In Redding, Wilton soldier Lambert Lockwood, who had been sent as a messenger to patriot General Gold Selleck Silliman, was wounded and captured.

In Danbury on April 26, nineteen houses and twenty-two storehouses of supplies were destroyed, including 1,690 valuable tents. The British camped overnight and on the morning of April 27 began the return march to the ships by a different route in an attempt to avoid the patriot soldiers.

Upon hearing of the invasion, the call for militia had been sent throughout western Connecticut and nearby New York, where young Sybil Ludington made her famous

midnight ride to arouse the patriots. General Wolcott sent militia from Litchfield. Continental Army General Benedict Arnold, always eager for a fight, mounted his horse in New Haven and rode to meet Connecticut Militia Generals David Wooster and Silliman in Redding.

They divided their forces, which totaled about 600 men, almost all from the Connecticut Militia, and bravely marched westward to intercept Tryon's 1,800 men at Ridgefield. General Wooster reached him first and was mortally wounded in a skirmish on North Salem Road. Joseph Jessup and Thaddeus Sterling of Wilton stated in their pension requests that they were nearby when Wooster fell. A barricade was set up by Generals Arnold and Silliman on North Main Street where the main Battle of Ridgefield took place on April 27. During the short but furious battle, General Arnold was nearly captured when his horse was struck by nine bullets and killed. This event was witnessed by Jesse Nichols of Wilton. The Americans were outnumbered three to one and Tryon prevailed.*

The Wilton Militia, led by Lieutenant Seth Abbott, participated in the stand at Ridgefield. Nathan Betts IV (brother of Jared) was killed and two Wilton men were wounded: John Waterbury Jr. and Theophilus Mead. James Olmsted and Jacob Patchen were taken prisoner but escaped. Other Wilton Militia men known to be in the battle included Captain Azor Belden, Ensign Samuel Olmsted, David Dunning, Nathan Gilbert, Matthew and Ezra Gregory, Matthew Hanford, Alvin Hyatt, Uriah Keeler, Jesse Olmsted, and Moses Scott. Elihu DeForest, a Wilton native, served as a captain of the Ridgebury Militia.

After camping for the night, the British passed quickly through Wilton on April 28, coming south on Ridgefield Road. During this march, Benjamin Keeler of Bald Hill was arrested, probably for firing upon the British. Samuel Keeler IV (652 Ridgefield Road) suffered the loss of several cows, carried off by the British. When all loss claims were finally recorded by the state government fifteen years later, Samuel claimed a loss value of £30 15s. At Thaddeus Sterling's house (384 Ridgefield Road), they entered and destroyed a large brass kettle. Samuel Middlebrook of Middlebrook Farm fled from his house (274 Ridgefield Road) with his wife and children, but the British entered, broke a large mirror, and drained a hogshead of rum.

At the intersection of Ridgefield Road with Belden Hill and Mill Road (now Lovers Lane), the troops entered the house of Daniel Gregory (11 Belden Hill Road) and were greeted by Daniel's aged mother who shook a poker at them "to show which side I am on." All four houses exist today on Ridgefield Road, designated a state scenic road in 1996.

Having been warned of a possible ambush on the main road (through what is now Wilton Center), the British detoured down Mill Road, which crossed the plain north of Merwin Meadows and joined Old Danbury Road at the Burlock (now Dana) house. At the bridge over Comstock Brook, they found and destroyed 100 barrels of rum, several chests of arms, many cartridges (bullets and powder wrapped in paper), 300 tents, and the forge and bellows of Captain Clapp Raymond, a blacksmith. All of this had been hidden there

for safekeeping, as the Americans did not expect the British to take this route. At Captain Raymond's house (249 Danbury Road, moved to 224 Danbury Road in 2001), they attempted to set fire to his barn, but a Tory neighbor and her Indian slave put out the fire. Raymond later claimed damages of £34 3s. 10d.

Tryon then marched his troops up Dudley Road (Westport Road did not exist at the time), pausing to loot the home of Lieutenant Seth Abbott, to the extent of £55 7s. 3d. in damages. Somewhere in the Chestnut Hill vicinity there was a brief skirmish with the Wilton Militia. From the ridge of Chestnut Hill, Tryon could see that another group of militia lay in wait for him at the only bridge across the Saugatuck River (Old Kings Highway in Westport).** The land had been cleared long before 1777, and one could see great distances from the hilltops. Benedict Arnold had outflanked him to get there first. Tryon detoured again (across today's Red Coat Road in Westport), fording the river at the intersection of Ford Road and Clinton Avenue, now marked by a monument, and after another skirmish at the shore, safely reached his ships at Compo Beach. Patriot reinforcements sent by General Washington arrived too late.

Two years later, the same General Tryon would return to burn Norwalk and several other coastal Connecticut towns.

Source Notes: * Keith Jones, *Farmers Against the Crown*, Ridgefield, 2002. ** Damon Douglas, *The Bridge Not Taken*, Westport, 2001.

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