

HISTORIC ROOTS

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Images from the Past, Bennington, Vermont

This first "official" photograph of the monument was taken in June 1892.

THE BATTLE OF BENNINGTON AND ITS MONUMENT

By TYLER RESCH

*LIBRARIAN OF THE BENNINGTON MUSEUM,
BENNINGTON, VERMONT*

It may surprise you to know that the tallest man-made structure in Vermont is more than 100 years old. It may also surprise you to know that the structure itself—the Bennington Battle Monument—was built in honor of a battle in the American Revolution that did not take place in Bennington at all, or even in Vermont!

The battle took place on August 16, 1777 near the village of Walloomsac in New York, just a few miles west of Bennington. It was a turning point in our war for independence from Great Britain. Here's what happened.

In the summer of 1777 it looked as though the British would win the war. Several thousand British soldiers, commanded by General John Burgoyne, were marching south from Canada. Their plan was to meet other forces at Albany and split the New England colonies from New York. Two things saved the revolution. The first was that the other British forces never arrived. The second was that at the

Images from the Past, Bennington, Vermont



*The monument under construction in June 1888.
It was 40 feet tall at this point.*

Battle of Bennington the American forces proved that they could fight well and win.

On that August day about a thousand of Burgoyne's troops were on their way to Bennington. They had heard they would be able to capture the horses, food, and other supplies they needed there, and they believed the people there would help them. This was not true.

Although there were no phones or radios back then, messengers brought news of the British plans to Bennington and the people had time to get ready. Before the British troops reached Bennington they were met by some

2,000 American soldiers. The battle lasted about three hours. Each side used muskets, bayonets, and cannon.

The Americans won, thanks to the last-minute arrival of a unit of the Green Mountain Boys, commanded by Seth Warner, a cousin of Ethan Allen. (Ethan Allen himself did not take part in this battle. He had been captured by the British in 1775 and was a prisoner of war.) About 200 British were killed or wounded that day, and about 700 taken prisoner. The Americans lost fewer than 40 men.

The Battle of Bennington set the scene for an even greater American victory a couple of months later and not many miles away in New York. After the bloody battles that are known together as the Battle of Saratoga, Burgoyne surrendered. The two victories at Bennington and Saratoga persuaded France, which at that time was an enemy of Great Britain, to come into the war on the American side. The war did not end until 1781, but the battles of Bennington and Saratoga helped turn the tide of the war in favor of independence.

Almost 100 years later, in 1875, the citizens of Bennington decided that such an important battle should have a monument in its honor. Although they argued about what it should look like, they finally agreed with Hiland Hall, a former governor of Vermont who lived in North Bennington. He said that it should be

“massive and lofty.”¹ Governor Hall died before the monument was built, but massive and lofty it is. It rises 306 feet above the ground and is made of double layers of dolomite, a rough, marble-like stone.

It took special railroad lines to bring the stones in from New York State and steam-driven derricks and elevators to put them in place. At first people could only reach the observation deck, 200 feet above the ground, by stairs. Now there is an express elevator.

In 1889, when the monument was finished, a photograph of the town and countryside was

Images from the Past, Bennington, Vermont



This picture of Bennington Center was taken from the top of the monument in 1889. In the days before planes and sky-scrapers few people saw such views.

¹ Massive means huge, heavy, and solid; lofty means very high.

taken from the very top. It amazed everyone who saw it. They had never seen a picture taken from such a height.

For a while the monument was popular with tourists, but people lost interest in it during and after World War II. In fact there was some talk of tearing it down. In the 1950s the state of Vermont took it over. An elevator has replaced the stairs, there is a gift shop, and a staff of groundskeepers and guides takes care of the place. Now about 50,000 people a year come to the monument, to look out toward the countryside where the battle took place, to learn about what happened, and to think about the struggle for freedom and independence so long ago.

Rooting Around

The Bennington Battle Monument is open daily, from 9 am to 5 pm, from mid-April until October 31. There is a charge of \$1 for people 12 and older to ride the elevator up to the observation deck. For children ages 6 to 11 the cost is 50 cents. Younger children ride free. You can call 802-447-0550 for directions and other information.