

America's First Tomb of the Unknown Soldier

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2nd New York Provincial Battalion

Nestled up a quiet side road (almost a driveway), not to far from the Saint Louis Gate at the eastern end of the Grande Allee, is the final resting place of the men killed with Brigadier General Richard Montgomery during the assault on Quebec, New Years Eve, 1775. It is marked with a raised rounded stone and a large plaque.

At the 1998 joint event held on the Plains of Abraham in Quebec City, most of the (non-Loyalist) New York infantry had the honor of performing a brief ceremony before this place. It was very moving and one we will all remember. Yet, the thing that affected me the most was that before us was the marker for the common grave of these thirteen brave men, and we did not know but two of their names. Dating back to the early days of the Revolution, we were paying homage to what in all probability is America's first "Tomb of the Unknown Soldier."

The Mission A number of researchers, both from inside and outside the living history community, have studied New York's Early-War period. Together we have notes, accounts, rosters, and the like. They are sketchy at best, but with all the knowledge there had to be a way to identify these men. For my fellow hobbyists, for my late father (a wounded veteran of World War II), and all veterans, I had to find out who these men were. It was simply the right thing to do. The following is what I have found (so far).

Descriptions or Accounts Most modern descriptions of the assault are apparently derived from the recollections of Mr. James Thompson, Overseer of Works for the Garrison of Quebec. Mr. Thompson lived well into the 19th century and was there for both the burial of the Yorkers and the exhumation of Montgomery. However, he did not appear to have actually witnessed the collapse of Montgomery's division on December 31, 1775:

The path leading round the bottom of the rock on which the garrison stands, and is called Pres-de-ville, was then quite narrow; so that the front of the line of march

could present only a few files of men.... It was General Montgomery's fate to be amongst the leading files of the storming party.... There was but one discharge of the gun, from which the general had received a grape-shot in his chin, one in the groin, and one through the thigh, which shattered the bone. I never could ascertain whether the defection of Montgomery's followers was in consequence of the fall of their leader, or whether owing to their being panic-struck....I afterwards learnt that the men's engagements were to be terminated on 31st December (1775).¹

On its having been ascertained that Montgomery's division had withdrawn, a party [from the garrison] went out to view the effects of the shot, when, as the snow had fallen the previous night about knee deep, the only part of a body that appeared above the level of the snow was that of the general himself, whose hand and part of the left arm was in an erect position, but the body itself was much distorted, the knees being drawn up towards the head; the other bodies that were found were those of his aides-de-camp Cheeseman and McPherson, and one sergeant. The whole were hard frozen.²

Except for the position of Montgomery when he was found, nothing here seems out of line from what we have all read in most history books since time immemorial. Actually, I found four sources for the above account in the last year (see the footnotes). So, what I think we have here is not history repeating itself, but a case where historians repeat each other.

The truth is that Captain John MacPherson and Captain Jacob Cheeseman were not both aides-de-camps to Montgomery. MacPherson, from Pennsylvania, was actually an aide to Major General Philip Schuyler, but was assigned to Brigadier General Montgomery in Schuyler's absence. Montgomery recommended him for Major in late December 1775, but the commission from Congress obviously would never come through.³ Montgomery's aide-de-camp was none other than Aaron Burr, the future Vice President of the United States (see side-bar). Cheeseman had previously served as a private in the Grenadiers, a New York City Independent Company, but was raising his own company just prior to

the war breaking out.⁴ He was commissioned on 5 July 1775 as the 5th ranked company commander in the 1st New York.⁵

Why Mr. Thompson chose to make a statement that the enlistments were about to expire on the 31st is inexplicable. Perhaps the troops with Arnold had enlistments about to expire? I do not know. However, I do know that the Yorkers were given an option, by Montgomery, on or about 15 November to extend their enlistments five months from that point, until 15 April 1776 in exchange for additional clothing. Those not wishing to take the deal, could return home right away. Since those companies with Montgomery's advance force were the best clothed (see below), they obviously were committed until spring.⁶

There is a copy of a letter in the Gersham Mott (Captain in the 1st New York and later the 2nd Continental Artillery) Papers that appears to directly refute some of Mr. Thompson's assumptions. This letter, dated what appears to be 7 February 1776, is to Hugh Gaine, editor of the *New York Mercury*. It complains about a published account of the battle being inaccurate. It is signed by numerous New York Line officers, among them 1st Lt. Aaron Aorson, Cheeseman's second in command. Regarding Montgomery's assault and subsequent retreat, they write:

We observe in your paper of the 29th of January No. 126 is an [account] as it's Called, of the late attack made on Quebec by the Continental Troops, the 31th [sic] of December last; which contains not only positive falsehoods but seems intended to cast a Slur on the Character of the officers in general then present.--That the General fell early in the action at Drummon's Warf, is false, it being notorious that he fell towards the last of the squabble. --That the Troops were thrown into confusion, is as false, as it is Villainously intended; The Troops were not in Confusion from the first to the last, for when they were ordered to retreat, the front retired in the Best order, not the least Confusion appearing among them. & tho' they had above four miles to march back in a single file, a considerable part of the way under the Walls of the Town & In one place exposed to the Enemies Cannon, yet so calm and Steady were these, Terrified men, that not one of them, went out of a Slow march or broke the file; by which means the wounded were brought off --With respect to the retreat, it's well known, that it was the only prudent Step that could be taken in our Situation, for the Soldiers had marched about four miles up to their knees

in Snow, with a Violent Storm of Snow & Sleet beating in their faces, & Three parts of the way, on the Side of a Steep Bank, where only one could go straight, & liable to fall every moment, their fatigues were beyond [expression] great. & not one musket in ten would go off --& those engaged as pilots, were not to be found, after the General fell. --[] in the Dark, with Soldiers ranged near a mile in length, with firelocks rendered useless by the wet weather, without any knowledge of the road, & Without a Single Pilot to guide us--what was to be done? We assert that Colonel Campbell who then reformed the Command, took the only prudent Step in his power, in ordering a retreat. Tho' many of the officers & Soldiers in in [sic] front murmured at the order, not then knowing the necessity of it.⁷

A decades worth of experience with BAR Winter Tacticals has shown me a well equipped soldier (which these men were) cannot run in knee deep snow with a "violent storm of snow and sleet" beating in his face. So, even factoring in that they backtracked and Thompson's confirmation of the amount of snow found in the morning, I tend to agree with the aforementioned New York officers that the retreat was not a panic stricken rout.

On Saturday, December 31, 1775, following the assault, Colonel Donald Campbell sent a lengthy report to General Wooster on the failed attack. The all too brief account of his personal involvement reads as follows:

...[T]he gallant and amiable General Montgomery was killed the first fire; as, also, his valiant Aid-de-camp, Captain John Macpherson, and Captain Cheeseman, of the first New-Yorkers, with two or three more. All this happened in the attack on the lower town, at Anse de Meres, where were the three battalions of Yorkers, commanded by the General, whom I attended; and I found myself under the disagreeable necessity of drawing off the troops (too ready to depart) at about seven o'clock, after having passed the first barrier and just opening to attempt the second.⁸

Hal T. Shelton, biographer of Richard Montgomery, said about Campbell, "At the sound of the gunfire, he had hurried forward from his position with the main body." Where he gets this information is not explained, but considering that this is the best, and perhaps the only, detailed study of the Yorker's entire 1775 campaign, it is something to consider. Yet, Shelton makes a statement that,

"There is no eyewitness account of Montgomery's death." Well, this may not be completely true.⁹

Lacking a regiment of any significance, Lt. Colonel Edward Antil, of Moses Hazen's yet to be formed 2nd Canadian Regiment, was able to be dispatched by Colonel Benedict Arnold to Brig. General David Wooster at Montreal.¹⁰ According to Brigadier General Wooster in a letter to Major General Philip Schuyler, Colonel Antil, "was with the general when he fell, and can give you particulars."¹¹ Antil's report is noted in the personal diary of Lt. Colonel Ritzema of the 1st New York (who was ordered to remain behind at Montreal) on 3 January 1776:

Mr. Antill arrived here Express from Quebec with Intelligence that...the General forced his way thro' the first Picquet or Barrier without receiving a Shot--at the next, he was received with a heavy Fire of Musquetry & two field Pieces which caused Cheeseman's Company to fall back in some little Disorder, while the General was endeavoring to rally these Men he received his Coup de Grace also his Aid de Camp McPherson & Capt Cheesman of our's--The General was shot thro' the Head & both his Thighs--After the Death of the General Colonel Campbell led off the General's Detachment.¹²

That same day, Ritzema penned a letter to the New York Provincial Congress (it was read by the New York Committee of Safety in February of 1776) that essentially reported the same thing. However, he apparently did some interesting editing of his diary entry.

The General forced his way through the first Picket or Barrier without receiving a Shot. At the next, which if he had also forced, would have given him free passage onto the town, he was received with a heavy Fire of Musketry & two field Pieces which caused his troops to fall back in disorder. The General, while he was endeavoring to rally these dastardly scoundrels, received his Coup-de-grace also his Aids-de-camp MacPherson & Capt Cheesman, of my regiment. Thus fell one worthy and brave General.¹³

The Enlisted Men A unattributed Canadian/British account on the recovery of the bodies in the snow has helped to identify one of the other men as an Orderly Sergeant. It proceeds as follows:

The enemy having retired, thirteen bodies were found

in the snow, and Montgomery's Orderly Sergeant desperately wounded, but yet alive, was brought into the guard room. On being asked if the General himself had been killed the sergeant evaded the question, by replying that he had not seen him for some time, although he could but have known the fact. This faithful sergeant died in about an hour afterwards. It was not ascertained that the American General had been killed until sometime afterwards....¹⁴

Research we have been doing with the 2nd New York indicates that Orderly Sergeants were an early form of what is later known as First Sergeants. The personality of these men were not unlike the heroic fellow described above.¹⁵ General orders, relating to the Connecticut troops, dated June 14th, 1775, require, "The drummers of the two Regiments to take their turns to be orderlys, whose duty is to beat Sergeants Call 7 o'clock in the morning on the Grand parade, near the main Guard, at which time the orderly Sergeants of each Company are to repair there to receive Orders from the Brigade Major or Adjutant...."¹⁶

Was this sergeant directly assigned to Montgomery, or perhaps was he lying and actually with a company? Cheeseman's seems the likely possibility, or perhaps it was another? No one seems to know, so for now, let us take the man at his word.

From all this, particularly Antil's account, it appears the actions taking place among the Yorker troops were a lot more than the history books indicate. Granted it was not much of a fight, but one was at least attempted, and Cheeseman's 1st New York company appears to have been the one in front.

Montgomery's orders at Montreal, on 24 November 1775, call for the initial embarkation (by water) of those companies of the 1st, 2nd, & 3rd New York that were clothed and complete.¹⁷ Ritzema, confirms the companies from his regiment, Weisenfels and Cheeseman, as being among them. One company from the 2nd Battalion and two from the Third round out the group. Mott's, Varrick's, and Quackenbos' companies from the 1st battalion would soon follow.¹⁸

A detail study of a few pension records indicate that the 2nd New York company that initially went to Quebec was John Visscher's from Albany (for which no muster roll has been found). Sergeant William Carr, who posted the first picket guard on

the Plains of Abraham, remembered Private John Hogeborne being wounded in the leg upon their landing at Point Aux Tremble and being left temporarily behind. Hogeborne, himself, states he was present when General Montgomery "was killed after storming the first and second pickets and that his aide decamp McPherson and [Capt.] Cheeseman were also then killed...." Private John Rose, a transfer into Visscher's company, was, by his own account, wounded in the assault on Quebec.¹⁹

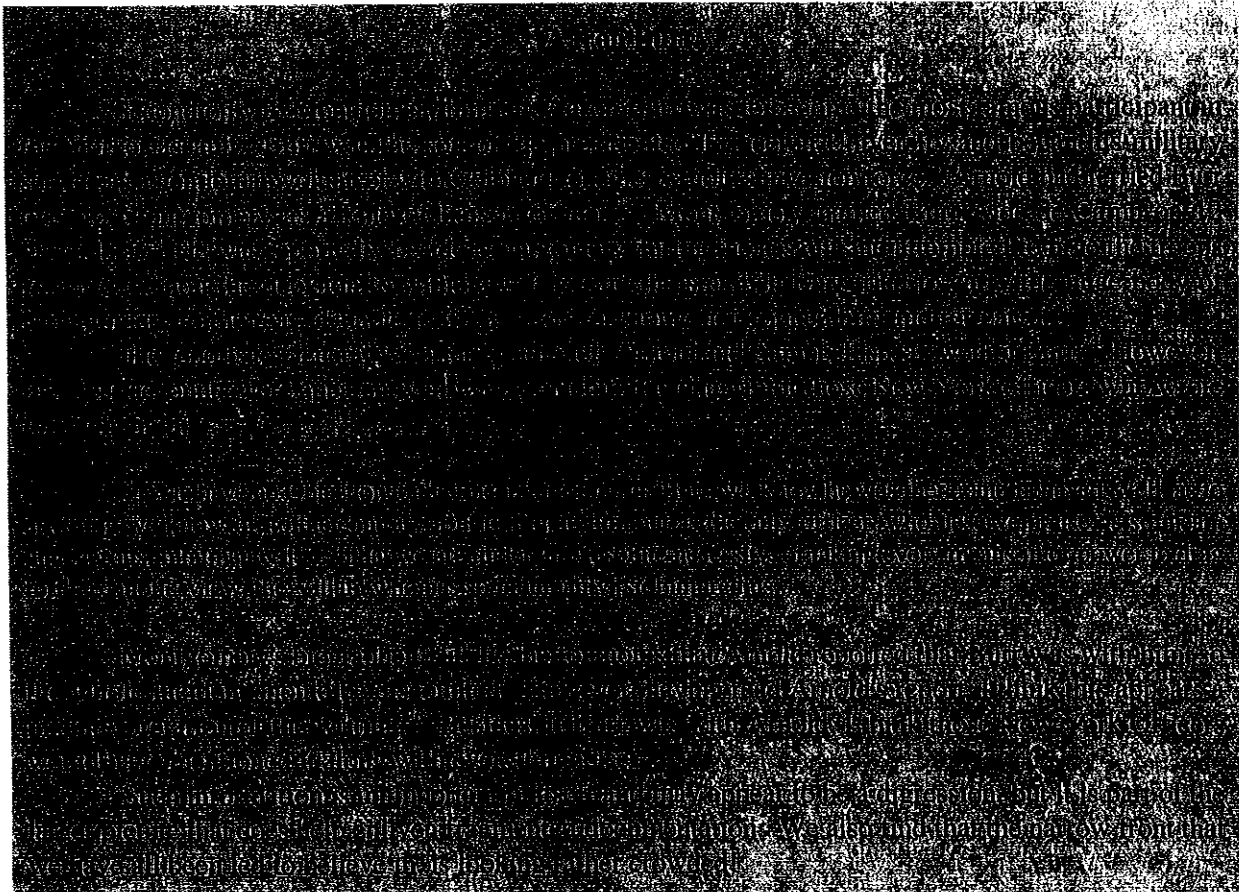
As of now, there is no muster roll known to exist for Visscher's Company, and these men's pension applications were found by accident, so we lack a lot of corroborative information. But if John Rose was wounded, as he said, in the assault, logic dictates Visscher's Company was near Cheeseman's position. How else could they have taken fire? This would also substantiate the deposition of John Hogeborne affirming his presence at the killing of Montgomery, MacPherson and Cheeseman, after crossing the first and second pickets.

The horrors of war fade with time, so pension

records are full of faded memories, but certainly it is clear that like Cheeseman's, Visscher's Company did both the landing and the assault. At this point, it is unknown if these companies made up the assault force, but it appears logical. Cheeseman's certainly did.

What of any Pensions from Cheeseman's 1st New Yorkers? Well, the good news is that there is a muster roll on microfilm in the National Archives collection, but it is taken after the assault on January 1-30, 1776. Unlike rosters, which are sort of a snapshot in time, muster rolls serve as charts that are annotated over time until a new chart is started. This particular muster roll only mentions that Lt. Aaron Aorson, was in command, and that they "appeared this day under arms in Capt. Cheeseman's Company Deceased." In short, we need the chart from before the attack.¹⁹

That being said, I figured there were bound to be even a few survivors of the company who filed a pension application. Perhaps they could shed some light onto the happenings that night? No such luck!



There was only one on the entire list of forty officers and enlisted men: Lt. Aorson filed for a land grant, and there are no documents on file for these.

With the idea of pursuing the remaining members of Cheeseman's Company being all but a complete failure, I decided to look for another company of the 1st New York who were first to leave for Quebec. There is a roster of Quackenbos' Company dated in September and one for Varrick's in June, which means they should have a full list of some 70 names each because they were taken before the November reorganization. Unfortunately, as of this writing I have not had any time to pursue them.

Deductions As more material comes to light, we can start to see that the assault force must have had a considerably wider front at the second barricade than the four men, with Montgomery in the lead, we have traditionally believed. It is physically impossible for all the people discussed above to be at the same narrow place. At the very least, there had to be room enough for Cheeseman's company to make some kind of a stand where Montgomery was "endeavoring to rally these men."

Even though my hopes of proving that the interred soldiers were specifically from Cheeseman's Company have been dashed, I remain optimistic. Beyond a lost diary hidden away at some local historical society, there are still a number of Visscher's 2nd New York that might have filed pension applications. They will be hard to find, without a muster roll, but who knows, with luck a few might be stumbled upon. Plus, there are at least two company muster rolls to review from the 1st New York. Maybe one of them saw something.

In this short monograph it is impossible to cover everything on the subject, but I hope I have given you pause. I think we do the soldiers a disservice to believe there was one cannon shot and everybody ran away like a bad Monty Python skit. There is so much more to be learned about the death of General Richard Montgomery and America's first tomb of unknown soldiers.

Notes

1. The Bulletin of the Fort Ticonderoga Museum (North American Review), Vol. X, Number 1, 1957, 77. Here-in-after Bulletin. Reprinted from Vol. III, No. 3, 1934 Bulletin. See also The Sword of Brigadier-General Richard Montgomery, J. M. LeMoine, (Quebec: Middletown & Dawson, 1870), 26. Here-in-after LeMoine. Both sources state Mr. James Thompson's memoir is extracted from Hawkin's New Historical Picture of Quebec, published in 1843.

2. Bulletin, 76. LeMoine, 25.

3. American Archives, Peter Force, Ed., Volume 4, 4th Series, 464, Gen. Schuyler to President of Congress, 26 December 1775. Here-in-after referred to as Force.

4. "List of Nominations for Officers in the N.Y. Regiments, 1775," Historical Magazine, 7 (1863): 194-5.

5. Berthold Fernow, Documents Relating to the Colonial History of the State of New York, Vol. XV, New York State Archives, Vol. 1., Albany, NY, 1887, 527.

6. Aimone, Alan & Barbara, The History of the 2nd New York, 1775-1783, unpublished manuscript, circa 1980. This discussion is a complete study unto itself and space cannot be spared to examine it here. Apparently, only a small percentage of the Yorkers returned home in November.

7. Letter to Mr. Hugh Gaine, Gersham Mott Papers, Special Collections Department, Rutgers University Library. Reprinted in The Colonial Chronicle, Volume 1, Winter 1996, 6-7.

8. Force, 480, Colonel Campbell to General Wooster, 31 December 1775.

9. General Montgomery and the American Revolution: From Redcoat to Rebel, Hal T. Shelton, (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 149 & 219.

10. Colonel J. F. Hamtramck His Life and Times: Captain of the Revolution (1756-1783), William L. Otten, Jr., (Port Aransas, TX: Otten Publishing, 1997), 24-5.

11. Force, 669, General Wooster to General Schuyler, 5 January 1776.

12. Journal of [L.] Col. Rudolphus Ritzema of the First New York Regiment, August 8 1775 to March 30 1776, from the original in the Collection of the New York Historical Society, entry dated January 3, 1776, 104-105.

13. Force, 1113-1114, letter dated 3 January 1776.

14. Bulletin, 75. Reprinted from Vol. III, No. 3, 1934 Bulletin. See also, LeMoine, 17. This is an unsourced account probably extracted from Hawkin's New Historical Picture of Quebec, published in 1843.

15. Records Group 15, Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty-Land-Warrant Application Files, (Washington: National Archives Microfilm Publications, M804). Lathrop Allen. (W.17208), John Mattoon (W.16339), John Stewart (R.10154), and Josiah Skinner (S.23919) have so far been identified as Orderly Sergeants in the 2nd New York (1775).

16. Orderly Book of Major General Richard Montgomery, June 5 to October 6 1775, transcribed by Joseph A. Galizia, entry dated 14 June 1775. The first portion relates to the Connecticut troops before they fell under Montgomery's direct command.

17. Colonel James Clinton's Orderly Book, 3rd New York Regiment, 7 August 1775 - 11 March 1776, kept by Sgt. Thomas Lenington, transcription by Stephen Gilbert, Early American Orderly Books, 1748-1817, New York Historical Society, Reel No. 2, Document 22, 81-3580, entry dated 24 November 1775.

18. Ritzema, 28 November & 1 December 1775, 103-4. Steve Gilbert, of the 3rd New York (NWT, BAR) is working on determining who the two 3rd New York companies were. From what Steve tells me, I suspect that one may have been the newly promoted Captain Elias Benschoten's rebuilt company.

19. Pension Applications: William Carr (S.22764), John Hogeborne (S.13457), and John Rose (S.42870).

20. Records Group 93, Revolutionary War Rolls 1775-1783, (Washington: National Archives Microfilm Publications, M246), Roll 65, 1st New York Regiment, Jacket 1-2, Capt. Jacob Cheeseman's Company, January 1776.

21. Aaron Burr, The Years from Princeton to Vice President 1756-1805, Milton Lomask, (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979), 32-43. Burr: A Novel, Gore Vidal, (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1973), 60-65.

22. Clinton, entry dated 12 December 1775.

23. Lomask, Op. cit.. Vidal, Op. cit.

24. Force, 482, Colonel Arnold to General Wooster, 31 December 1775. Force, 480, Colonel Campbell to General Wooster, 31 December 1775.

25. Mott Papers, Op. cit.

26. Shelton, 220. Force, 482, Colonel Arnold to General Wooster, 31 December 1775.
