

NEW YORK archives

Volume 9 • Number 4

SPRING 2010

\$4.95

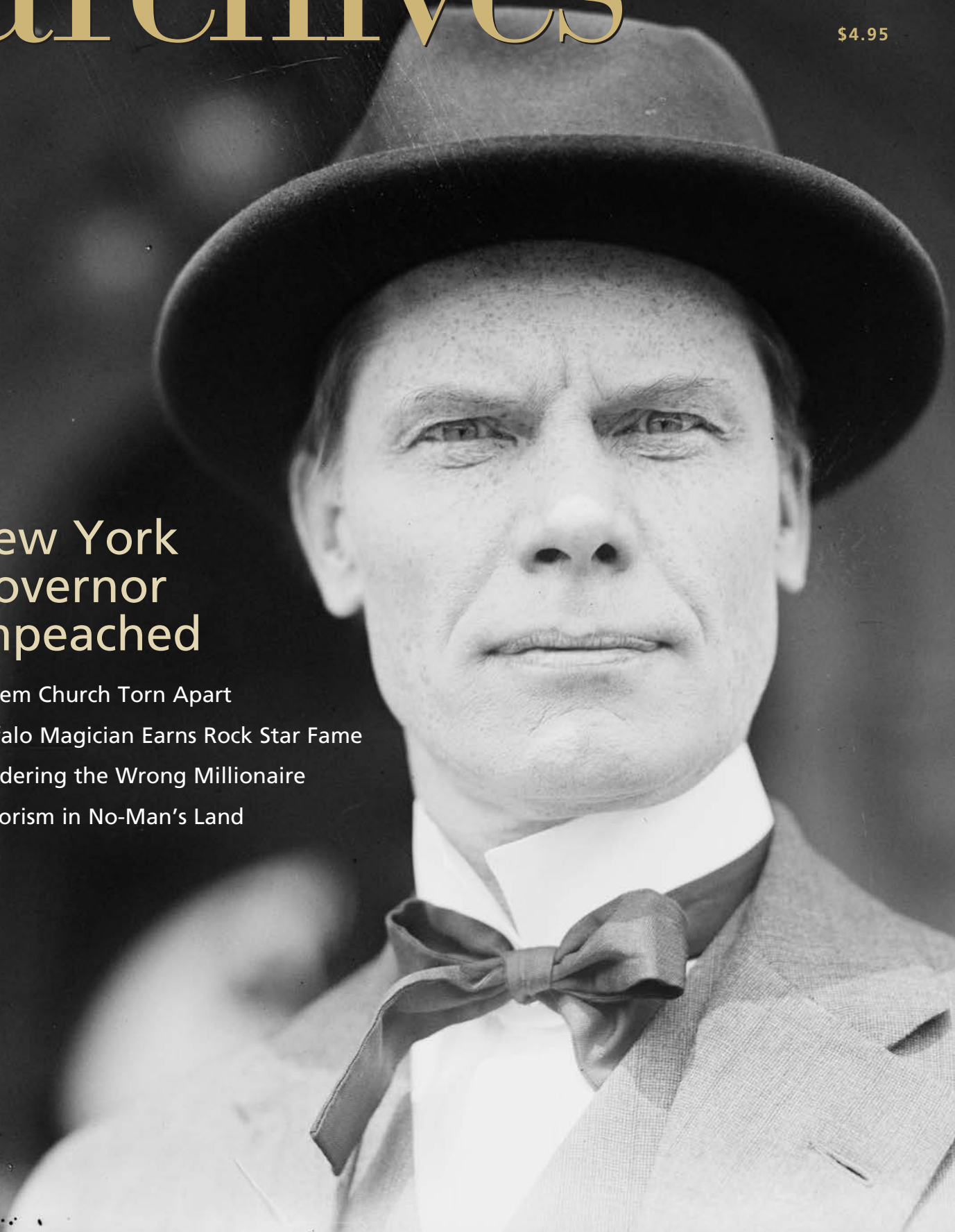
New York Governor Impeached

Harlem Church Torn Apart

Buffalo Magician Earns Rock Star Fame

Murdering the Wrong Millionaire

Terrorism in No-Man's Land



Teacups and

BY G. WILLIAM BEARDSLEE

Interneecine warfare during the Revolution was nothing short of terrorism, and central New York's "no-man's land" was the locus of some of the bloodiest attacks. Yet over 200 years later, legends—and artifacts—still survive.



Historians have identified over 10,000 separate military confrontations between 1775 and 1783 in the American colonies' pursuit of independence. Equally surprising is that nearly one-third of the most significant Revolutionary War battles occurred within New York State, including Ticonderoga, Long Island, White Plains, Harlem, Brooklyn Heights, Oriskany, the Sullivan-Clinton Campaign, and the most important battle of the war, the victory by American forces at Saratoga in 1777.

But for every one of these, there were scores of smaller skirmishes, ambushes, raids, and attacks, particularly at the edges of British-controlled territory. In central New York State, where authority was weak and unsure,

partisan warfare was common. Organized and semi-organized groups of American, Loyalist, or unaffiliated guerrilla fighters attacked and harassed their neighbors and enemies. While some were simply brigands, outlaws, or bandits, many were sophisticated and used both threats of and actual violence against local civilians in order to attain political and social goals. Today we would call them terrorists.

A Twilight Zone

Indeed, central New York and the Mohawk Valley, mostly controlled by American Patriot forces, was the scene of some of the most brutal and recurrent warfare of the Revolution, during which thousands of central New Yorkers were displaced, reduced to poverty, or murdered in seasonal and annual

rites of terrorism and partisan-ship. South of the Mohawk Valley and west of the small Patriot settlement at Cherry Valley was a "no-man's land" extending to the Loyalist-Tory village at Unadilla. Within this twilight zone, no one—Loyalist, American, or neutral—was safe. Aided by the north-south flowing Susquehanna, Unadilla, and Chenango Rivers, each side's partisans quickly appeared and disappeared after raids on frontier settlements. Bands of Iroquois and Loyalists, commanded by Mohawk war chief Joseph Brant and Loyalist John Butler, passed through this area on their way to the August 6, 1777 ambush of the Tryon County militia commanded by General Herkimer at Oriskany as he tried to rescue Fort Stanwix from a siege by British General Barry St. Leger.

A teacup from the Percifer Carr China Collection, unearthed 125 years after being buried by the Carrs in 1778.

VILLAGE OF NEW BERLIN LIBRARY AND MUSEUM



Mohawk Chief Joseph Brant.

The result was one of the bloodiest battles of the Revolution. Loyalists claimed victory, but the Americans controlled the battlefield when dusk descended.

In the following spring of 1778, a few remaining settlers in this "no-man's land" once again prepared their fields for planting. But even before the soil had fully warmed, a party of Indians and Tories attacked the small village of Fairfield on March 15, brutally killing a young boy and taking twelve men as prisoners. On March 29, the settlement at Manheim (Snyders Bush) near Little Falls was attacked. Ephratah was raided on April 20, and Cobleskill (Cobus Kill) was burned on May 30.

In July, Brant and his allies suddenly vanished, only to reappear in Pennsylvania's

Wyoming Valley, where they burned and plundered hundreds of homes, farms, and barns. Two weeks later, Brant reappeared in central New York's "no-man's land," where he raided Springfield and Andrustown and threatened Cherry Valley. In retaliation, on August 10 the small Loyalist village on Butternuts Creek near modern-day Morris was attacked and burned by American militiamen. Several Loyalists were taken prisoner and their homes destroyed.

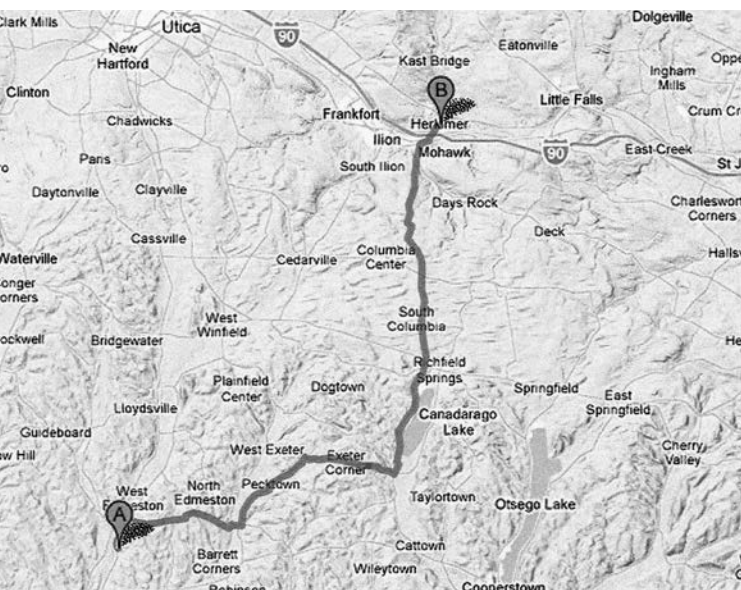
By early September 1778, American forces grew increasingly nervous regarding Brant's whereabouts. It was thought he had returned to Onaquaga, near Unadilla, to prepare for yet another cycle of raids. Would he attack the Mohawk Valley again during the coming harvest to obtain

supplies for the winter ahead, or might he raid the pro-American settlement at Cherry Valley?

A Spy...

To find out, twenty-three-year-old Lieutenant Adam Helmer and a handful of his fellow Tryon County militia Rangers (some historians say three, others suggest as many as nine) were sent to the Unadilla Valley to spy on Brant's company of Indians and Loyalists. Rangers were scouts and were selected from local militias. Typically enlisting for nine months, they virtually "laid out" individually or in small groups at the frontier to detect Tory and Indian movements. They were the "eyes of the army," and their responsibility was the protection and early warning of frontier settlements

Two weeks later, Brant reappeared in central New York's "no-man's land," where he raided Springfield and Andrustown and threatened Cherry Valley.



This modern map shows the likely route of Herkimer's forty-mile run to German Flats (Herkimer) that saved hundreds of lives.

Helmer hid in the
 Unadilla River until
 he could make his
 escape, and then
 heroically outran his
 Indian pursuers for
 nearly forty miles
 to warn settlers and
 villages along the
 way of Brant's
 impending attack on
 German Flats.

against surprise attacks.

In 1777, Helmer most likely had been one of three Ranger scouts sent to relay a message to the besieged Fort Stanwix that General Herkimer and the Tryon militia were on the way; Helmer had been the first to reach the fort after passing through the British lines. After the battle ended, he was assigned the equally dangerous task of re-passing through the besieging forces and alerting the Albany Committee of Safety.

Helmer's choice for his base of operations in observing Brant's movements was Mount Edmeston, two miles north of South Edmeston near the confluence of the Unadilla River and Wharton Creek. Encamped high on its slopes, Helmer and his band of Rangers possessed both a natural vantage point from which to view the Unadilla and an escape route if Brant should approach. Undoubtedly

Helmer also knew that directly downhill was the riverside farm of Percifer Carr, a well-known Loyalist.

Sergeant Percifer "Johnny" Carr was a British army veteran who had served with Colonel Edmeston during the French and Indian War. At war's end, Edmeston and his brother had been awarded 10,000 acres of land along the Unadilla River that included Mount Edmeston. Carr and his wife were chosen as their local agents and established a small community known locally as Edmeston Manor, Edmeston Plantation, or Carr's Farm. Just over a hill to the east was a gristmill that belonged to Carr's close friend, John Tunncliffe, another fervent Loyalist. Many residents believed that Carr and Tunncliffe were actively supporting the local Loyalists-Tories and providing supplies to Brant. Their suspicions proved correct, as Brant had recently written to Carr:

July 9, 1778:

Sir: I understand by the Indians that was at your house last week, that one Smith lives near with you, has little more corn to spare. I should be much obliged to you, if you would be so kind as to try to get as much corn as Smith can spare, he has sent me five skipples already of which I am much obliged to him and will see him paid, and would be very glad if you could spare me one or two your men, to join us especially Elias. I would be glad to see him,

and I wish you could sent me as many guns as you have, as I know you have no use for them if you any; as I mean now to fight the cruel rebels as well as I can; whatever you will be able to sent'd me, you must sent'd me by the bearer. I am your sincere friend and humble serv't,
Joseph Brant.

To Mr. Carr. P. S.—I heard that Cherry Valley people is very bold and intended to make nothing of us. They called us wild geese but I know the contrary.
 Jos. B.

...and a Hero

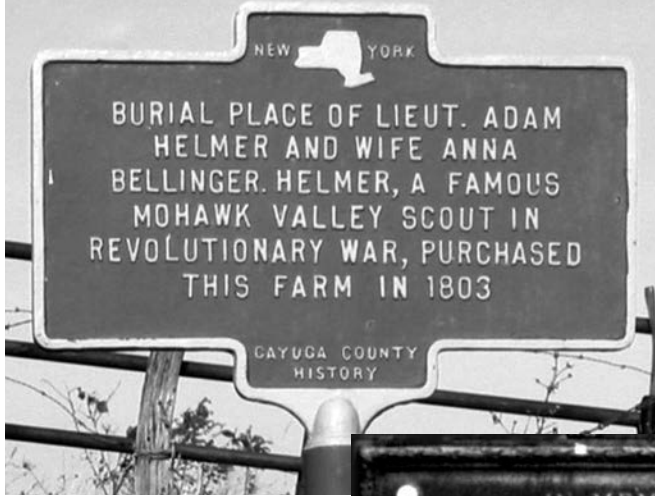
After 232 years, the exact details of the massacre at Carr's Farm on September 16, 1778 are still unclear. Traditional accounts suggest that Helmer and his scouts were simply surprised at the farm's spring by an advance band of Brant's Indians on their way to raid and burn German Flats (modern-day Herkimer). Others, including a Tryon County militiaman named Mathew Calkins who was interviewed in 1842, suggest that Helmer and his scouts inexplicably approached Carr's homestead for food and drink. While Carr entertained them, his wife disappeared, but soon reappeared with a band of forty Indians. In the ensuing melee, at least three of Helmer's scouts were killed. But Helmer hid in the Unadilla River until he could make his escape, and then heroically

THE ARCHIVES CONNECTION

Archives used in the preparation of this article include documents from the Colonel Israel Angell Chapter of the DAR and the Village Library and Museum in New Berlin, Edmeston Village Library and Museum, and the New York State Historical Association Library and Archives at Cooperstown.

Both history and myth concerning Adam Helmer's run and Johnny Carr's buried treasure have entertained several generations of Unadilla Valley residents. Rumors of molten silver pouring out of firewood obtained near Carr's Farm have inspired local treasure hunters. In the author's family document collection are several crude maps of Carr's Farm, prepared by prior generations who searched for the remaining Carr china, silver, and glassware. In addition, several local libraries and museums have newspaper clippings, nineteenth-century local history club presentations, and miscellaneous documents relating to both Helmer and Carr.

AUTHOR'S COLLECTION



Adam Helmer's heroics are commemorated by a historical marker at his burial site in the Helmer Family Cemetery on Cottle Road in the Town of Brutus (Cayuga County). A D.A.R. monument on Otsego County Route 18, two miles north of South Edmeston, remembers the Carr's Farm massacre and the deaths of the three scouts.



AUTHOR'S COLLECTION

outran his Indian pursuers for nearly forty miles to warn settlers and villages along the way of Brant's impending attack on German Flats. This feat of endurance and patriotism became the stuff of legend: Helmer was known as the "Paul Revere of the Mohawk Valley," and "Helmer's Run" served as the basis for the 1939 movie *Drums Along the Mohawk*.

Helmer's precise escape route has long been debated, but his most likely path was over Mount Edmeston via the old trail towards Schuyler Lake (Canadarago Lake), through Andrustown (near Jordanville), Columbia, and down into the Mohawk Valley. His timely warning saved several hundred lives in and around German Flats. With everyone safely inside nearby forts, Brant's partisan force of 300 was "only" able to burn sixty-three houses, fifty-nine barns filled with grain, and three grist mills, and drove off 235 horses, 229 cattle, 279 sheep, and ninety-three oxen.

On September 17, the day after Helmer's Run, while Brant and his Loyalist allies were still burning German Flats, a band of pro-American Tuscarora and Oneida Indians attacked and burned the Loyalist settlements at Unadilla and Butternuts, taking ten prisoners and freeing one. Three days

later, the intrepid Helmer led a large group of Tryon County militia back to Carr's Farm, where they discovered the mutilated bodies of the three Ranger scouts killed in the massacre. They buried them at the site. A DAR monument was erected in 1914 to celebrate Helmer's heroism and the sacrifice of the three unknown scouts.

The Land Gives Up Its Evidence

Later in September 1778, Percifer Carr and his wife were taken prisoner by Indians and cruelly marched all the way to Canada, where they remained until 1783. Probably after the ambush of Helmer and the three scouts, Carr and his wife had buried their household goods, including expensive china, glassware, porcelain, and silver. Upon their return to Carr's Farm after the Revolution, they spent several years trying unsuccessfully to locate the buried items. Nevertheless, Carr, an unrepentant Loyalist and proud

member of the Anglican Episcopal Church, remained on the farm and operated a small tavern and inn until his death in 1804.

Adam Helmer also survived the war. Like many veterans, he moved to west to Cayuga County, where he died in 1804 in the Town of Brutus.

But that is not the end of the story. In 1903, while plowing a field between the Carr farmhouse and the Unadilla River, a tenant farmer uncovered an ancient wooden box filled with porcelain, glasses, and dishes—but no silver. Many were broken, but at least sixty pieces were intact. After several court hearings, the items were distributed to various localities, including the Village Library at New Berlin, where several pieces are on prominent display. Described as China trade transfer porcelain, their existence reminds us today of 1778 and the terrifying partisan warfare in central New York during America's war for independence. ■