

**Major Benjamin Whitcomb (1737- 1828).
Richard Booth's 4th Great Uncle.**

Benjamin Whitcomb was born the second of sixteen children of Benjamin and Dorothy Whitcomb on July 2, 1737, in Lancaster (now Leominster), Massachusetts. The younger Benjamin's great-great-grandfather had come to America in 1629 and moved to Lancaster in 1634.

Whitcomb's introduction to war came during the Seven Years (French and Indian) War when he enlisted in a Massachusetts regiment and joined General Johnson's expedition against Crown Point on Lake Champlain, NY. He was in the battle of Lake George on September 8, 1755.

His next major action came when he enlisted for service with General Jeffery Amherst in the expedition against Montreal. During the campaign, Whitcomb was promoted to Lieutenant.

After the Montreal expedition ended, some of the companies returned home over the Crown Point Road to Fort Number 4 at Charlestown, New Hampshire and then on to Massachusetts. The trip across Vermont must have been enjoyable for Whitcomb for on October 12, 1761, he was one of the original grantees of Cavendish, Vermont. He held on to his land until 1764.

By this time, Benjamin Whitcomb had moved to Westmoreland, New Hampshire where he met and married Lydia Howe in 1769. They then moved to Putney, Vermont and on September 16, 1771, sold several acres and a mill in Westmoreland.

In February of 1772, Maidenhead (now Guildhall), Vermont offered a bounty of 100 acres of land to anyone settling and improving it. Whitcomb and his family took advantage of the offer and moved there.

On April 10, 1772, he was made a Justice of the Peace in Gloucester County. Because of the character of frontier life and the distances and differences between northern Vermont and the settled coastland, the growing disagreements with England were slow to reach the upper Connecticut River Valley. Even with the outbreak of armed conflict in the Spring of 1775, little effect was felt in Maidenhead. Then, in the Winter of 1775, Generals Benedict Arnold and Richard Montgomery took the War to Canada. On January 20, 1776, the New Hampshire House of Representatives voted "to raise one regiment of soldiers forthwith" in addition to the three regiments already in service. The regiment was given to Colonel Timothy Bedel and headquartered in Orford, New Hampshire.

Benjamin Whitcomb enlisted in Bedel's regiment on January 22, 1776, and was appointed 2nd Lieutenant in Captain Samuel Young's Company. Whitcomb was given the job of enlistment officer and as such, in March, remained in Orford when the regiment was ordered to join the Continental Army in Canada. It wasn't until May that he left Orford with his recruits to rejoin Young's company.

At this time, the defeat of the Canadian campaign was nearly complete and the Continental Army was slowly retiring towards Crown Point. Whitcomb, with his recruits finally rejoined Young's Company at Sorel, Quebec on June 2. By June 19, the major part of the Army had reached Crown Point but Young's Company was part of the rearguard and was still at Isle Aux

Soix, Quebec. On June 24, while part of the rearguard, Whitcomb was promoted to 1st Lieutenant. The retreat finally came to a halt in July and Bedel's Regiment reported in on July 18.

Because of his experiences in the Champlain Valley during the Seven Years' War, Whitcomb was employed as a ranger and scout between Fort Ticonderoga and the enemy positions around Saint John's and Montreal. It was on one of these scouting missions that Whitcomb was involved in one of the most notorious events of the War and one that served to make his name famous.

Whitcomb had set out with two other men but one had become ill and had to return to Fort Ticonderoga and the other deserted. In spite of being alone, Whitcomb stationed himself alongside the road between Saint John's and La Prairie in order to observe the traffic. On July 24, 1776, a group consisting of a general field officer, his aides, and an escort came down the road. Whitcomb knew the officer was of high position but could not tell his exact rank. He took aim and fired. Because of the smoke and leaves, he could not tell where he hit the officer, only that he did hit him. The escort immediately set out in pursuit but Whitcomb remained in the hollow until the men had rushed by. He then slipped down the bank to a stream and disappeared into the woods. It wasn't until he returned to Fort Ticonderoga in early August that Whitcomb learned the full story of his shooting.

The officer was the commander of the First Brigade, Brigadier General Patrick Gordon. On July 26, General Phillips had issued an order describing Whitcomb and telling the British soldiers to hang him or any of his party captured.

General Gordon had died on the 1st of August. Subsequently, Canada Governor General Carleton issued a reward of 50 guineas for Benjamin Whitcomb alive or dead. This was the highest reward offered for anyone during the entire War. The British said it was against all rules of war to shoot officers as Whitcomb had and demanded he be turned over. The Americans said that as long as the British used Indians, they had to expect retaliation.

The threat of British vengeance seemed to have little or no effect on Whitcomb. He immediately set out on another scouting mission and returned with much information on the Saint John's positions.

On the 19th of August, Whitcomb received instructions from General Horatio Gates for another scouting mission. He was specifically instructed not to shoot anyone else. He set out on the 20th and, in spite of bad weather and being stricken with ague, was to add more notoriety to his name. On September 13, he positioned himself in the same area where he had shot General Gordon. Shortly, two British soldiers came along and Whitcomb captured them.

One of the men was a Corporal and the other was Alexander Saunders, the quartermaster of the 29th Regiment. On the return to Fort Ticonderoga, the two men did not dare make any attempt to escape for fear of getting lost in the wilderness. The party arrived at the Fort on the 22nd and on the 24th, the prisoners were sent to Congress.

As a result of his prowess as a ranger and scout, General Gates recommended on September 30 to Congress that Whitcomb be given command of two companies of fifty men

each of rangers. There is some evidence that a Captaincy was offered to anyone capturing a British officer but the original document does not seem to be an official order and may have been written as a joke. In any event, on October 15, 1776, in Congress, the following resolution was adopted: "That two independent Companies consisting of fifty Men each, be immediately raised to be commanded by Lieutenant Whitcomb, who should be appointed Captain Commandant and that he nominate the Officers of the said two Companies, who are to be appointed, when approved of by the Commanding Officer in the Northern Department." Captain Whitcomb chose Captain George Aldrich to command the other company and they set about recruiting the men. Although the two companies never reached full strength, they were officially designated for service at Fort Ticonderoga on November 27, 1776.

Much of the Winter of 1776-1777 was spent in recruiting. Captain Aldrich went to recruit in the Connecticut River Valley in January while Whitcomb remained at Ticonderoga. With the coming of Spring and the melting of the snow and ice, Benjamin Whitcomb's Independent Corps of Rangers began doing their job in earnest. Several times, Whitcomb and his Rangers, with other companies attached to them, were sent out in pursuit of Indian and Loyalist scouting and raiding parties. The Rangers were well known for their own skill at scouting and raiding as shown in a letter to General Gates on May 16, 1777: ". . . Whitcomb was detached on the 14th Inst. with a party of 150 Men in quest of Major McAlpin's battalion and will I Fancy spare no pains to Fall in with them." In an earlier letter, General Gates had said that if the Tory inhabitants of Tryon Co. give any trouble he would send Whitcomb with 100 men to "whip them into obedience".

In July of 1777, the British forced the Americans to abandon the Fort - Mount Independence complex. Whitcomb's Rangers retreated with the Army but once positions north of Albany NY were established, the Rangers began their work again.

When Burgoyne's army came up against the American positions at Freeman's Farm on September 19, Whitcomb's Rangers were attached to Dearborne's Light Infantry Battalion and fought in the first battle of Saratoga.

After the battle, the Rangers were moved to Pawlet, Vermont, and were supposed to keep watch on Burgoyne's left flank until General Stark could move into position to cut off the British retreat route to the north. After the surrender of Burgoyne, Whitcomb and his Rangers took up positions at Saratoga.

On November 15, Whitcomb was with General Gates in Albany and was given the following message to deliver to Colonel Bedel in Haverhill, New Hampshire: "Sir, I am desirous you should without delay engage a Regiment of Volunteers, consisting of 300 men, officers included to be commanded by yourself as Colonel, Mr. John Wheelock as Lieut. Colo. & the Bearor Capt. Whitcomb as Major." This force was to be used in an expedition against St. John's.

However, because of political squabbling among Generals of the Army, the plan was abandoned and the regiment ordered to remain for general duty on March 31, 1778.

In the meantime, the Rangers had moved to Rutland, Vermont. This area was the frontier between the United States and Canada and although the Republic of Vermont had some troops there, it was decided best to put Continental troops there. Once Spring arrived, the

Rangers commandeered a sawmill and set about building barracks and a stockade fort. This was Fort Ranger and became the headquarters for Vermont troops during the War.

During the period that Whitcomb was in Rutland, he was the overall commander. He had under his command several companies of militia, some Vermont rangers, and some of Seth Warner's Regiment, the only other Continental troops in Vermont besides Whitcomb's. This amounted to about 500 men and was formidable enough for British intelligence to keep a regular watch on the post. The duty of the Rangers while at Rutland was to scout Lake Champlain and to the north. In a letter to General Washington on September 15, General John Stark states: "The enemy at the Northward have given us no trouble as yet. Major Whitcomb is daily watching their motions, and often bringing in their Sailors, Four came in the other day.

The British knew that Whitcomb had been involved with the planned invasion of Canada the previous Winter and were still worried about the possibility of just such an occurrence. In an attempt to discourage, or at least forestall, an invasion, Major Christopher Carleton, the nephew of the former Governor-General of Canada, Guy Carleton, received orders for a secret expedition up Lake Champlain to burn sources of supplies and mills on both sides of the Lake. In late October, the force of around 400 specially-trained regulars set out. The expedition did not remain secret for long and Carleton soon reported seeing canoes going back and forth across the Lake in front of him. These canoes were likely men from Whitcomb's Rangers. It was reported to Carleton that the expedition ". . . had been expected five weeks before at Rutland, that Whitcomb's post was augmented to five hundred men".

On a report of a large supply of grain being stored at Moore's Mill in Bridgeport, Major Carleton sent a party of 60 men to burn it. The party never reached the mill for they encountered some of the Rangers and a sharp skirmish ensued. The raiding party reported only one wounded and that they had heard several cries from a house the Rangers were in and assumed that many were wounded.

However, the raiders withdrew and the question arises as to why they would retreat after defeating the enemy and being within a few hundred yards of their objective. Muster rolls for the Rangers report no casualties on that date, November 6, but subsequent deaths may have been as a result of wounds suffered in the action.

Whitcomb and his Rangers remained in Rutland through January, 1779. He was ordered to collect his scattered corps in February and report to Bedel in Haverhill, New Hampshire. In April, Bedel's Regiment was relieved by General Hazen who, with the help of Whitcomb and his men, continued the construction of a road to Canada that had been begun in 1777 by General Bayley.

This was to become known as the Bayley-Hazen Military Road. Along with working on the road, Whitcomb's Rangers began scouting missions into Canada. On many of these occasions, the men would reportedly be ". . . dressed like Indians .. or ". . . in the Canadian manner."

The British still thought that an invasion of Canada would be attempted and kept a close watch on Whitcomb's movements. They felt that Whitcomb's scouting into Canada was an effort to lay the way for the invasion. On one occasion, it was even reported that Whitcomb

was leading 600 men into Canada by way of Mississquoi Bay. In fact, there were no formal plans for an invasion and the Rangers' scouting missions were solely to gain information on British plans.

One of Whitcomb's major sources of assistance in Canada was the Captain of the St. Charles Militia. On several occasions, Whitcomb and his men were aided by this Captain and some of his men. In September, Hazen's Regiment was ordered elsewhere and the area was left under the protection and command of Major Whitcomb. By the end of October, Whitcomb and the 200 men under his command had occupied the blockhouses that had been built every ten miles along the still unfinished Bayley-Hazen Road. Along with guarding the area, they continued their scouts into Canada.

For some, as yet, unknown reason, Whitcomb went to Morristown, New Jersey and met with George Washington in late November. He returned on December 11 and carried with him orders for Bedel to appear before a court of inquiry concerning charges of mal-conduct in the handling of the quartermaster's and commissary's departments while at Haverhill.

Through casualties, desertions, and enlistments running out, Whitcomb's companies were well depleted by 1780. On January 18, he sent a formal request to Washington asking him to ask New Hampshire to fill his companies. The area that Whitcomb was guarding, known as Coos, was frontier and very close to the British forces in Canada. Probably because of this request, the New Hampshire General Assembly resolved "That those soldiers that will enlist into Major Whitcomb's Corps of Rangers during the war, shall be entitled to and receive the same pay, cloathing depreciation and other emoluments as other soldiers in the Continental Army." In addition, New Hampshire voted on June 22 to raise 120 men to be sent to the Western frontier under Whitcomb's command. The men enlisted for six months and were taken from the various militia regiments around the State. One of the companies reinforced Haverhill and the other was sent to the fort at Northumberland, also called Upper Coos.

These additional troops freed the Rangers for more scouts into Canada and also across Vermont to the Onion River and Lake Champlain. Their presence also worsened the supply situation and on August 28, Whitcomb wrote another of his many requests for supplies. This time, however, it was directed not to Congress but to Meshech Weare and New Hampshire. An attempt was made to capture Whitcomb and claim the reward still on his head in October of 1780. A prisoner named Hamilton had told the British he knew exactly where Whitcomb was. A party of around 300 men composed mostly of Indians set out under the command of a Lt. Horton and guided by Hamilton. When they reached the Montpelier area, they were told that Coos and Newbury, Vermont were strongly garrisoned. They decided they were too few to take Whitcomb which probably was a wise decision as New Hampshire had just reinforced Whitcomb's corps in September. Instead, the raiders turned south through Chelsea and Tunbridge and finally Royalton. They burned much of the settlement, killed a number of inhabitants, and took others prisoner before turning back to Canada.

In January, 1781, orders were sent to Whitcomb from Congress to send his non-commissioned officers and privates to join the Continental Army at Peekskill, New York and the officers were to retire. This was part of a reorganization of the whole army. The orders were not obeyed and on February 25, a message from 30 of Whitcomb's Rangers to George Washington asked that the unit not be disbanded and that they be allowed to remain at Haverhill.

The message was answered on March 12. The request was rejected and the original orders were repeated. This time the Rangers complied and were drafted into Hazen's Corps.

Now that Whitcomb was a civilian, he was free to do as he wished. The War was all but over by 1751 and the British threat to New England was almost non-existent. At the outbreak of the War, it appears that Whitcomb had taken his family back to Westmoreland knowing that northern New Hampshire could turn into a trouble spot. He now brought them back to Coos to settle down.

Even though he was officially out of the War, there was still a price on his head. In early May, an Abenaki chief named Joseph Louis Gill left St. Francis with ten Indians. Their goal was to capture Whitcomb and claim the reward. On May 15, they surprised Whitcomb and Abel Learned near Peacham and captured them. In order to prevent them from escaping, Whitcomb and Learned were each tied to one of the Indians when night came.

The last night before they were to reach St. Francis, Whitcomb was tied to Gill. During the night, he managed to escape by taking a canoe that had a gun in it and destroying the others to prevent pursuit. There is evidence that Gill and Whitcomb had known each other before the War and even a story that Whitcomb had saved Gill from dying of exposure one Winter. There is also evidence that Gill was actually working for the Americans.

When Whitcomb's escape was discovered, Gill forbade the others going after him and said that God meant Whitcomb to live. When the party reached St. Francis, the Indians with Gill charged him with becoming frightened of Whitcomb's threats to burn his house and village and let him escape. The matter was never pursued by the British.

British intelligence sources constantly maintained a watch on Whitcomb and soon after his capture and escape, it was reported by a spy that he knew of ". . . no intentions in that quarter against this Province (Quebec) except a motion made by Mr. W. to the People of New Hampshire recommending a party to be detached against St. Francis." The raid was not attempted and Whitcomb spent the rest of the year getting settled and hunting.

Whether it was for revenge, thirst for action, or support for Gill's story when he let Whitcomb escape, Whitcomb was reportedly planning an attack on St. Francis again in May of 1782. This information came from a prisoner that told the British that Whitcomb planned to capture Gill and burn at least his house if not the whole village. The raid, like so many others reported by the intelligence network, never materialized. The reports, whether based on fact or not, did serve to keep Whitcomb's whereabouts a priority on British spy reports. Even Riedesal himself, the commander of the German forces, wrote to Governor-General Haldimand in September of 1782 requesting information on Whitcomb's movements.

By the time of Riedesal's letter, Whitcomb had decided to make a permanent home for himself and his family and on October 24, he bought some land in Lisbon, New Hampshire. He continued a practice he had begun just before the War - that of petitioning for the formation of towns in various areas of Vermont. In all, Whitcomb's name appears on over a dozen such petitions. One of these areas was along a section of the Bayley-Hazen Road and was signed by the men in the Rangers and Hazen's Regiment. No action was taken on any of the petitions.

Whitcomb built the first frame house in Lisbon in 1785. He was to become one of the town's most prominent figures and at one time or another held most public offices. He continued his quest for land but on a smaller scale and dealt in real estate in the Lisbon area. According to a contemporary officer, Whitcomb was "a presumptuous fellow, entirely devoid of fear, of more than common strength, equal to an Indian for enduring hardship or privation, drank to excess even when in the greatest peril, balls whistling around his head."

A story of the Lisbon area tells of how one day an Indian appeared in town asking questions about Whitcomb. Some neighbors told Whitcomb of this but he didn't seem to be worried. One day, Whitcomb took his gun and went hunting. A single shot was heard later that day. Soon, Whitcomb returned empty-handed which was a rare sight. Time passed and the Indian and the hunting incident were forgotten until one day some boys were playing in a cave and made a terrifying discovery. On the floor of the cave was a skeleton of a man. The skeleton still had remnants of clothing on it - that of an Indian.

Benjamin Whitcomb applied for a pension in 1818 and was awarded \$240 a year. At the time of his application, he had personal property valued at only \$49.74. In order to avoid letting the State take much and to get a higher pension, he may have given most of his property to his six children. Eventually, all the Whitcomb children except Ruth moved away. Ruth remained in Lisbon to care for her parents.

Major Benjamin Whitcomb died on July 22, 1828, at the age of 91. He was buried next to his wife, who had died in 1823, and with many of his wartime comrades in the Salmon Hole Cemetery in Lisbon, New Hampshire.