

NAME: _____

DATE: _____

Saratoga

National Historical Park



“On Hallowed Ground”

—Battlefield Field Trip—

“Field trip!” Just the sound of this creates excitement in students of all ages. Why do we go on field trips, anyway? We could use the best textbooks in the world, and have a computer for every student to access the Internet, but something would still be missing. What’s missing is the “sense of place.” What does that mean?

Perhaps the simplest explanation might be the feeling of being more connected with what is important about the place. For places like battlefields, it’s a sense of being in the presence of historic events.

The following are some descriptions of five key locations on the Saratoga Battlefield, the grounds where the Battles of Saratoga were fought on September 19 and October 7, 1777. As we go to each of those sites, we’ll read through the descriptions, and you’ll have some time to answer the questions for that site.

John Neilson Farmhouse (Tour Road Stop 2)

Look around you. Atop this ridge, you can see nearly in every direction. The views are spectacular. On a clear day, you can see three different states: New York, Vermont, and the northwestern most corner of Massachusetts.

The small, red farmhouse here was built by John and Lydia Neilson back in 1775 or 1776. When they learned that a British army was invading southward into New York, moving slowly down the Hudson River just about a mile to the east (to your right as you face the porch of the house), they left. Lydia stayed with her parents in the village of Stillwater, two miles south of here. John went to join up with his militia regiment, where he would be carrying supplies with a team of oxen.

The American army set up their fortifications here, in a big “L” shaped line. As you stand facing the porch of the Nelson House —the only standing structure on the battlefield from the time of the battles— you are standing inside those fortifications. Neilson’s house was used as a mid-level headquarters building.

As you look around, you see white marker posts with blue tops. These show you where the American fortified line once stood —a big, log wall standing some 6-10 feet high. Twenty two cannons were set up at different points along this wall; copies of cannons can be found at some of the original cannon locations. Dirt would have been piled up a few feet thick against the front of the wall where the cannons were, giving the wall better protection against enemy cannon fire.

1) Why do you think the Americans wanted to build their fortifications here? _____

2) If you were an American soldier, would you have felt safe here? _____

3) How do you think John Neilson, who favored American independence, felt having to leave his home when the British were invading into New York?

American River Fortifications (Tour Road Stop 3)

As you stand here on this ridge, you are on Bemis Heights. The American fortified line is again shown here with white posts (blue tops). As you look out across the fields below this ridge, you are looking east. At the far side of the fields is a line of trees. You can see glimpses of the Hudson River behind or through that line of trees. Those trees were not there during the Battles of Saratoga. The river was easily visible then.

American cannons were located in several places here on Bemis Heights. These cannons could hit the river, or anything on it. Looking down on the farm below, there was a long, fortified line nearly where the farm buildings are. A second fortified wall stood a short distance to the left (north), and a third stood a short distance to the right (south). These walls blocked the road running along the flood plains –the very road the British had been marching on several miles north of here.

1) Why do you think the Americans built fortifications here? _____

2) If you were a British soldier, would you want to try attacking this position? _____

Balcarres Redoubt (Tour Road Stop 6)

You are standing in one of the British fortified positions. White marker posts with red tops show where their fortified wall once stood.

The British fortifications were 6-10 feet high. Cannons and other artillery pieces were located in multiple positions. Dirt piled up along the wall along most of its length gave better protection against cannon fire.

As you look around you from on top of the slight ridge (once you have walked up the pathway from the parking area, you will notice that the white marker posts seem to wrap around you. The line is in front of you, and it's also behind you. It was shaped something like a collapsed circle, giving better protection from the sides and partially from the back. As the wall was built on this ridge, the wall would have seemed even taller to any attacking American soldiers.

1) If you were a British soldier, would you have felt safe here? _____

2) If you were an American soldier trying to attack this position, what are two features here that would have made this line very difficult to capture?

Breymann Redoubt (Tour Road Stop 7)

Here is another of the British fortified positions. Again, white marker posts with red tops show you where that fortified wall once stood. Unlike the other British positions, though, this line was not as completely built. It was open to the rear. There were fewer cannons: only two of them, with dirt piled up against the front of the wall just in front of those cannons. Copies of those cannons stand here now.

In fighting on October 7th, 1777, over 1000 American soldiers attacked this line from the front (west) and from the left side (south). Fewer than 200 German soldiers, on the side of the British, defended this position. American troops attacking from the south were able to get inside this line, forcing the German soldiers to retreat. Once here, the American soldiers could have attacked from behind, any of the rest of the British positions. The British were forced to begin their retreat.

1) If you were an American soldier attacking this line from the front, with enemy soldiers and cannons shooting at you, how would you feel?

2) How would you feel when you saw fellow American soldiers getting in behind that wall?

3) If you were the British commander, General Burgoyne, how would you respond, knowing that the Americans, who had many more soldiers than you, could now get anywhere behind you?

British River Fortifications (Tour Road Stop 9)

This is perhaps the best view of the Hudson River in the Battlefield. It is here that the British built some fortifications overlooking the river. These fortifications, again, marked with white marker posts with red tops, also overlooked a temporary bridge made of boats, the British hospital, and additional British cannons and other supplies. It is from here that the British began to retreat northward. That move began the evening of October 8th, 1777.

1) If you were the British, why would you think this to be a good position to build fortifications?

Additional Writing Activity:

Imagine you were a British soldier. It has been four months since you left Canada. Now, after the Battles of Saratoga, you must retreat. The weather is chilly and rainy. The dirt roads are now all mud. You are cold, hungry, and tired. What thoughts are going through your mind?

Imagine you are an American soldier. It has been nearly 2 ½ years since the Revolution began. The British have won far more battles than they have lost. You have not seen your home or family since shortly after the war began. You have seen fellow soldiers shot on the battlefield, some injured, some killed. But now, you have been part of a major American victory, one that will surely convince France—which the United States has been trying to get as an ally against the British—to join the war on the side of America. What thoughts are going through your mind?
