

A Portland Revolutionary War Veteran (part 2)

by Doris Sherrow, December 2000

Lt. Samuel Cooper, whose letters you read last month, owned several books on surveying and mathematics. Perhaps his talents drew the attention of **Colonel Benedict Arnold**, who was a good military man before he became infamous as a traitor. Arnold had been ordered to lead an expedition to Quebec, to take it back from the English. In one of Arnold's letters, he boasts of having acquired several of the best "pilots" — surveyors — in the area. It rather looks like Samuel Cooper was one of these "pilots" — he was taken from his own unit and put into Arnold's.

Arnold planned to lead his troops from Augusta, Maine, up the Kennebec River, into the Dead River (which was anything but dead!) toward Lake Megantick, and eventually to the St. Lawrence. To follow this route today would be a challenge for a seasoned athlete with topflight equipment from EMS. To do so in 1775, when there were few people, fewer trails, and potentially hostile Indians, was virtual suicide.

Part of Arnold's optimism was based on the fact that he believed the journey to be 180 miles — it was actually 350. He and 1100 men, including Samuel Cooper, left Cambridge for Maine on the 13th of September. It was a late start — this far north, the weather would soon turn wintry.

Their journey is best documented by a soldier named **John Joseph Henry**, who wrote up his account for publication in 1810. Their boats, wide canoes called bateaux, were cheaply and hurriedly constructed of green wood, which was heavy to carry, until it dried out. Then the bateaux leaked and sank, carrying with them much needed food and supplies. The rivers and streams were lower than expected, so there was much tedious carrying and little smooth paddling. Where there weren't thick tangles of northern New England underbrush, there were swamps and mud flats to be slogged through. And there was snow. The longer journey together with the loss of supplies in the swamps meant that the men were starving for most of their march. One group rejoiced when a large black dog came bounding toward them: they quickly shot and ate it. Others ate bootlaces, boot tops, and raw woodpeckers. Another group, bringing up the rear, had turned back, taking with them (it was felt) a disproportionate amount of the remaining foodstuffs. The trip was wretched by any standards. Of the 1100 who started out, only 500 made it.

Samuel Cooper was in that 500. They arrived in November, sick, starved, freezing, and completely demoralized. They made camp and waited to regain their strength, and to get reinforcements from General Richard Montgomery's forces, approaching from New York.

While he was waiting, Cooper wrote at least one more letter. This letter, reprinted in the **1884 Beers History of Middlesex County**, was addressed to **Deacon David Sage**, whose oldest son, **David Jr.**, was in Cooper's unit. Cooper wrote:

Quebeck Dec 24 1775 To Esqr Sage I write a word to inform you of us here at Quebeck. The notice is short and David not Present, but he is well and harty; but has been sick, but I think I never saw him more fleshe, father can inform you of our travel and affairs. The men that came from Chatham are all well and harty but Goff [probably Joseph] and he will soon be so; but I fear the Small Pox will be too frequent among us for good.

Col. Arnold had one particular time constraint on him: most of these men's tours of duty would expire on December 31st. Then they would be free to leave. But not only must he wait for reinforcements, he needed to mount his attack under cover of snow — the element of surprise was no longer a possibility. It must have been an excruciating wait for him, but finally snow started to fall late on the night of December 31st, and the attack commenced. Samuel Cooper was in the group assigned to breach the gate on the north side of the city. Not only were there high walls, but the ground was rough where the ladders should be set, and the lane to the gate was only 20 feet wide, flanked by buildings with second story windows, from which British soldiers could easily fire on men mounting an attack. Cooper was killed in the early morning hours of January 1, 1776 while trying to scale the wall.

One of his fellow Portlanders, **Abner Stocking**, was taken prisoner, and wrote a journal of his

experiences which rivals the horror of the misbegotten march to Quebec. This journal may be read in the **Shaw-Shoemaker** collection of 1801-1819 literature. Stocking was held for nine months, returning to Portland on a glorious Sunday morning in October.

David Sage, whom Cooper had mentioned, was also taken prisoner, contracted smallpox, and died on March 26, 1776. He was buried in Quebec under the city wall by his fellow soldiers. Years later, his brothers erected a stone to his memory in Center Cemetery beside his parents' graves.

After Samuel Cooper's death, it is not clear what happened to his family. It is possible that his widow married his younger brother, **Del**, after Del's first wife, **Sarah Sage**, died. But one thing is clear: the expedition to Quebec was tragic from the moment they left civilization on the Kennebec River, and Samuel Cooper's great joy in his wife and children was not to continue into his old age.