

The Pioneers of Potton

By Edgar C. Barnett

The following article was taken from a scrap-book donated to the Brome County Historical Society and was written by Edgar C. Barnett of Highwater, P.Q. and is one of many found in magazines and periodicals printed around the turn of the century under the pen-name "The Heron's Quill".

Copied by Howard Eldridge.

- This is a transcription of an article which was re-printed in The Centennial, in three parts, sequentially, in issues appearing every Wednesday, the last of these being November 15, 1967.
- The Centennial was a very locally circulated paper, published by Permar Publishing Co. Ltd, Bolton Center, Brome County, Qc.
- Its publisher-editor was Milton E. Perry. Its managing editor was Russell Marsh, a native son of Bolton Center. (Mr. Marsh's descendants live in Bolton Center) – He served in WWII and was known locally for his interest in history and pronounced patriotism. He was an interesting character whom I had the pleasure of knowing!!
- I believe The Centennial was a short lived enterprise.
- The bold type I used, did not appear in the original article as printed in the Centennial. All that is in bold in this transcription appeared in capital letters. St. Johns is now known as Saint Jean-sur-Richelieu.

Transcribed on February 3 & 4th 2015 by Sandra Jewett for the use of l'Association du Patrimoine de Potton.

Albany, 1742

And what, asks the reader – has this date and a little Dutch town on the banks of the Hudson – (Fort Orange of other days) to do with or have in common with the South-eastern corner of Brome County of today or its settlement? Little, perhaps, but there are few of this World's happenings that may not be traced back to a trivial starting point. Some little event taking place today, unnoticed, may

as years roll on, prove the pivot upon which hinges the fate of nations; and had not the above date been recorded in the little Dutch Reformed Church register at Albany, it might have been General Schuyler, instead of General Montgomery who led the attack on Quebec that fatal morning of December 31, 1775, though the termination might have been the same. It might have been General Schuyler left in command in place of Gen. Gates, to oppose the victorious Bourgoyne at Saratoga, considered one of the World's fifteen decisive battles, though the results might have been the same.

Henry Ruitter was born in Albany, Sept 26 1742, eldest son of Frederick Ruitter, Jr. And Enceltje Van Werken, of stock known as "High Dutch" and but one generation removed from the Fatherland. In possession of some of his descendants still exists a portrait of the old Dutch admiral, ancestor of the American branch, one of the few who according to legend, had been able to flaunt defiance in Britain's face, sailing up the Thames with a broom as his mast-head.

Hendrick (Henry) was left an orphan when less than four years of age, and his brother Johannes (John) seventeen months his junior, and his sisters being scattered – he fell to the not too tender care of a relative who made life little less than slavery for the fatherless boy. One day while employ(ed) as usual, he was surprised at being accosted by a young officer riding past who had noticed the lad's hard life, and who had inquired why he was treated so

harshly, there having been left sufficient means by his father to prevent his son being made a slave. Finally, promising the lad he would look into the matter, the officer left him.

True to the self imposed task, Henry's friend immediately took the matter up, and as the Laws of the Colony allowed the minor to have a voice in the choice of a guardian, young Ruitter immediately named his soldier friend. Scarce more than a boy himself, but already an officer in the army, and a member of the Legislature of the Colony, this man was none other than Philip Schuyler, of Albany, a descendant of one of the most noted men of the country. He immediately took young Ruitter to his own home, where the youth remained treated as a brother, until his marriage, August 16, 1763 to Rebecca Dooth.

He then removed to Hoosick, where he leased a farm from one Daniel Bratt for a term of years, with right of improvements. In 1768, he bought from Jacob Leasing – a lot of land in Stone Arabia Township. A year before the Rebellion of the Colonies, he purchased from William Smith, 303 acres of land in Pitt's Town, just outside the City of Albany, where he erected a saw-mill, two dwellings and other buildings. Thus situated with a family of six children, soon to be increased, peaceful and prosperous, we find him when the war broke out in 1775,

With his old friend and guardian, he had seen service in the late War that had wiped "New France" from the map of North America – a War that an over-ruling Providence had ordained should have implanted in the bosoms (of) the American Colonists, the germ of a Nation – yet to be. And while England's brightest intellects were striving to warn and pacify – blind and self-seeking politicians, at Westminster and bigoted, brainless underlings in the New World, were prematurely hastening the pangs of revolutionary travail which began

at Lexington that eventful morning of April 19, 1775, and ended at Paris – November 30 1782.

But friendship aside, human nature sees only with the eyes God has given, and while ambitious and popular Philip Schuyler saw the time had arrived for the making of a Nation, his friend and ward saw only the King he had served and the Flag 'neath which he lived.

Ruitter offered to remain neutral, but a rebel – Never, but as he had seen service, his assistance to the Colonial cause – at this moment, was particularly valuable. Indicated at last, with a squad of forty men sent to take him, dead or alive, he was forced to flee. Leaving his family, confident that his old friend, now so powerful, would not see extreme measures resorted to, though his wife's life was threatened if she did not disclose his whereabouts, and give up his papers. He lived for three months the life of a guerilla, with a band of men waiting the approach of Burgoyne, in the rear of the rebel force, whom he joined August 1, 1777.

History tells us that the Americans (immediately their appeal to Canadians fell short of its aim) fitted out two expeditions to take by force what they had diplomatically failed to win to their cause. The rash impetuous Arnold, in command of one, was to move up the Kennebec, through the wilderness of Maine, over the height of land, straight down upon the St. Lawrence, while our old friend Schuyler, in command of the other, was to move down Lake Champlain, the Richelieu, take Montreal, and proceed down the St. Lawrence and meet Arnold at Quebec. We are told that he was taken sick and on the brave young Irishman, Richard Montgomery, the second in command, devolved the carrying out of the expedition, which was successful, until he stood with Arnold before the walls of the the grim Northern fortress of Champlain,

where Fate seemed to have beckoned him – for the sole purpose of dying bravely; for the first shot fired killed not only him but his two aides. If Saratoga decided the fate of the Colonies, that shot probably decided the fate of Canada.

Backward slowly rolled the tide of war. Back, back through the same old gateway, across a border, that Fate had allowed and was still to allow, man in triumph to an inglorious end, but which remains comparatively the same as when introduced to History by Champlain's thoughtless expedition in 1609.

Burgoyne is now in command of the successful invaders, one after another of the rebel posts are taken and, and "Old Ty" which Allen had so valiantly taken once more the triple crosses. And tis along this march that the indicted and exiled guerillas of New York and New England, came in touch for the first time with the armies of their King.

As before stated, August 1st, 1777, saw Capt. Ruiter join Burgoyne : August 16th, saw the Battle of Bennington, where he lost the thumb and index finger of his right hand. Two days later Capt. Ruiter's property was raided and his stock consisting of twenty head of cattle, thirteen horses and ten hogs was nearly all taken principally by Captains Bentley and Wright of the rebel army.

Animosity and hate seemed to have been let loose; on both sides – during this campaign, and malice perpense was justified where dead men tell no tales.

'Tis Schuyler who again commands the Northern Army. But sinister rumours are afloat. Even Allen, the hero has been doubted. An express arrives – 'Tis the will of Congress that Horatio Gates take command of the men in the field" – and those it were whom Burgoyne met on Oct. 7th 1777 at Saratoga.

After the disastrous termination of Burgoyne's campaign, with the remnants of his company, Capt. Ruiter retired to St. Johns, where his men were transferred to other companies lacking a full complement. Ruiter now received a commission in the regular Army and was ordered by the Command-in-Chief to return to the Colonies and recruit another company, which he did at great risk, returning to St. Johns with his men where they became of the regiment known as the **King's Rangers** or the **Royal Yorkers** commanded by Major Rogers.

Meanwhile his estate at Pitt's Town had been confiscated and advertised in the "Albany Gazette " as for sale. By 1780 he had become so obnoxious to the Americans, that an order was passed, banishing his family from the States. They soon joined him in St. Johns. But hardship and privation immediately following childbirth wrought their work, and it was a motherless family, that, at the close of the War he took to Caldwell's Manor on Missisquoi Bay. Here he was appointed by Henry Caldwell as his agent.

Shortly before his marriage, near the close of the French and Indian War, while on service one day, he had chanced, nearly exhausted, upon a cabin in the woods, at which he applied for food to allay his hunger. He found only a woman at home, rocking a child which she informed him was sick and therefore she could not leave to prepare him a meal. He told her that he would look after the child if she would prepare him some food, as he was about famished, and as he showed some aptitude, she consented.

After he had appeased his hunger and was preparing to leave, the mother jokingly remarked that, as he had been so good to the child, he might have her, when she grew up, as his wife. And now, at the close of another war, a widower, he returned, proposed and was accepted by that child, Catherine Friott,

now a young lady. He purchased of Caldwell, a farm on what is known as Beach Range, then part of Caldwell's Manor. To this home, he brought his young wife to care for his motherless children.

The close of the War brought Capt. Ruiter preferment. He was appointed one of four commissioners to report upon the loyalty, principals and standings of incoming settlers, and administer the oath of allegiance thereto and therefore – a Magistrate of both the Districts of Quebec and Montreal, which later contained the Border Lands, subsequently known as the Townships.

He was also the first field officer appointed to these Townships, being gazetted Lieut. Col. of the Militia. As in the case of all other officers of the War, he was granted by the Home Government, half pay, according to rank, which amounted to a crown a day for life.

The close of the War opened up to the Government of Canada a task at once arduous and bewildering. I refer to the claims of the United Empire Loyalists. Scarcely had peace been declared ere Gov. Haldimand was interrogated as to what those who had seen service were to expect. Petition followed petition so rapidly that it is small wonder that some waited years for their reward. Many died unrewarded, and some, less persistent than their neighbors, became discouraged, drifted back to the States or elsewhere embittered against the Sovereign they had upheld.

But the Land Committee's hand were full without them. Everybody signed everybody else's petition, so as to be in at the final round-up. But while the Government was willing and ready to grant land to the petitioners in the vicinity of Fort Cataraqui, Kingston and Nova Scotia, as Major Mathews, secretary to Gov. Haldimand, informed Capt. Myers, one of the first petitions in January

1784 – "The Government did not wish to colonize the **Valley of the Missisquoi and Lake Memphremagog**", as had been petitioned but awaited – **a solid peace with the Americans.**

The majority of the Loyalists accepted these terms and sought homes among these distant wilds. But many of the exiles hovered about Missisquoi Bay and the old Seigniorie of François Foucault, then called Caldwell's Manor.

Three years later, March 1787, we find George Smythe, Henry Ruiter, Philip Luke, John Ruiter, Thomas Chandler, Andrew Mabon and Christian Wehr, in a petition to Lord Dorchester, setting forth the advisability of colonization the lands of Memphremagog and Pike River – **with Loyalists, this being the route of intelligence from Connecticut, New Hampshire and Cohoos** and asking for a grant for this purpose, the petition was read and filed – but, with no result.

In January, 1791, Col. Ruiter and Patrick Conroy again petitioned Lord Dorchester, asking for lands along the West branch of the Chateauguay River, in what is now Huntington County. The reply to this was the issuing, at once, of Warrants of Survey to Conroy and Ruiter and three hundred and one associates, of two Townships along the Province Line, West of Lake Memphremagog, to be known as Sutton and Potton. Jesse Pennoyer, Deputy Surveyor, was ordered to run out the side lines of said towns(hips) – which he did in the early summer of 1792.

On June 9th 1792, Lieut. Gov. Clark was petitioned by the following leader of the Associates – H. Ruiter, late Capt. Of the King's Rangers; Duncan Cameron, Late Ensign of the Royal Regt. N.Y.; Daniel Bronson, late Ensign C.W.A. Regt; John Ruiter, late Lieut. Royal Rangers; Philip Luke, late Lieut. of Butler's

Rangers; Patrick Conroy, late Lieut. of Royal Rgt N.Y.; Hermanns Best, late Ensign, L.R.; Christian Wehr, late Lieut. Royal Regt. N.Y. – asking that these towns(hips) be sub-divided, and that Jess Pennoyer be ordered to the service, as many were anxious to enter upon their lands. This was immediately ordered by the Land Committee, with this proviso – **that those not having borne arms, must pay for the survey of their lands.** Pennoyer was sent to Missisquoi Bay on June 18th, 1793, for this purpose and £15 advanced him for expenses. For some reason, a hitch seems to have taken place, for, upon Samuel Holland, General-Surveyor, asking money from the Lieut. Gov. for this purpose, he was told to “wait Lord Dorchester’s return”. In March, 1794, Holland received instructions that no more money would be advanced by the Government, and Pennoyer had to reimburse the £15 he had received.

But in the meantime, Conroy and Ruiters had guaranteed Pennoyer his pay and the survey had been proceeded with, Ruiters paying him that year the sum of £132,11s,2d. The survey of the town(ship) being completed in 1802, when Ruiters paid him the balance of £28,6s,8d, the total expense £160,17s.10d. Of this amount he was later reimbursed by Major McLean and others, who had received lands in the town(ship) to the £94,11s.10d., Conroy, meanwhile had paid £247 for the survey of Sutton.

Ruiters would probably never have left Caldwell’s Manor, where, according to Henry Caldwell – “He owned one of the best farms on the Manor” had it not been for periodical attacks of fever and ague, or lake fever, which was fast undermining his health, and the pure hillside springs of Potton seemed the Mecca which he sought. Here he at once proceeded to take the life of a pioneer, accompanied by his family born of his second wife; two sons-in-law, Joseph DeGroat and Henry Abal and three

grown-up sons, Philip, John and Henry and their families.

Local history has perpetuated many errors, but tradition unsupported is apt to be tinted by pride or prejudice, to say naught of failing memories – the sieve must be fine that preserves the facts alone.

Almost immediately after taking up his abode in Potton, Col. Ruiters had set about erecting both a grist and a saw-mill. He also put in a stock of goods for traffic with the fast increasing population as well as the roving bands of natives. A distillery likewise soon followed.

The town(ship) was fast being settled. The soil seemed productive of large families and the need of a school was soon felt. In 1802 Col. Ruiters and sixteen others petitioned Sir Gordon Drummond, Administrator-in-Chief, for a charter to erect a school in the Township, but it was not until January 24th, 1816 that the same was granted, when Henry Ruiters, James Polson and Perkins Pike were appointed syndics.

It must not be thought that pioneer life was entirely devoid of interest. Class lines – there were none; and whatever the event, distance was no barrier to the socially inclined settlers. Many of these were of Dutch descent, and as such, brought the folk-lore, superstitions and customs of their race with them to their new homes.

One of the customs was seeing the bride and groom safely in the bridal bed. And in the Brome County Historical Society at Knowlton is an old cupboard, which, if it could speak, could give a second “Young Lovell” episode, though happily without the fatal termination. In 1805, when Catherine, Col. Ruiters’ eldest daughter, by his second wife, was united in marriage to

David Heath, the event was one to be remembered. For a wedding present to his daughter, Col. Ruiter had had manufactured – a cupboard, which for that day, was considered to be a rather fine one. Open above for dishes, with two large compartments beneath and closed by a door. When the time had arrived for escorting the happy pair to their nest – no bride could be found – and search where they would, her maidens could find no trace of the truant Katie who, safely ensconced in the lower compartment of her cupboard, was enjoying their discomforture – though not her cramped situation; only after the search had been given over and all had retired, did she emerge from her hiding place and acting as her own escort, seek her room.

Ghosts and haunted houses were among the beliefs of the credulous settlers and many are the weird tales told of supposed happenings and visitations. And for many a long year after Col. Ruiter and his wife had passed to their long home in 1819, and were buried on the little bluff to the West of their dwelling – brave was the man, to say naught of the woman who passed that then, tenantless abode after night had fallen. Later, its timbers went to erect the first school in Glen Sutton. But one incident that happened while the premises were still habitable is worth mentioning.

The wife of the then proprietor had spent the afternoon at a neighbors while her husband had been gathering and storing cabbages, and other vegetables to the cellar, which could be entered from the outside, there being a door for convenience in storing such truck. Arrangements had been made for the master of the house to take supper with her at the neighbor's house to-gether. This plan was carried out, but, in his hurry had forgotten to close the outside door – otherwise the story would never have been told. They arrived home safely in the early evening and at once retired, but scarcely had they done so, when

they were aware of a tap-tap-tap somewhere, apparently on the floor.

Says the wife, "Thomas. What is that noise? Do you hear it?"

"Yes," says her husband in a tremulous voice.

"Well " says she, "Get up and see what it is."

"No, Hannah", says he in a firmer tone, "We can't find out what it is, so leave it alone".

"Bosh" says she. "I'll find out what it is", so springing out of bed, she struck a light which she bade her shrinking husband hold, while she located the sound which seemed to come from the cellar. Grasping a poker and bidding her husband follow with the light, she started for the lower regions. When, partially down the stairs, the light from the candle, held in her husband's nervous grasp, revealed – two bright spots in the darkness in the far corner – that moved side to side followed by the tap-tap-tap on the floor above.

Says the master of the house – "Hannah, let's go back to bed and let it go'.

"No" says she determinedly. "I'm going to find out what it is", and bravely on she went, poker in hand, until she brought up face to face with her husband's two year old bull. He had entered the open door, regaled himself on cabbages to his heart's content and was now quietly chewing his cud – the tips of his horns just reaching the floor above, and their motion, as he chewed, causing the mysterious tap-tap-tap.

But to return – Father of fourteen children – Potton's first settler "has not a descendant today within the Township's borders" – **that bears the name of Ruiter** – though no less than thirty families could claim descent from that staunch old Dutchman – though many of them know it not.

And, of the 2,400 acre of land in the Township of Potton, or the 5,600 acres in the Town of Barford, granted to him and his family – **every foot has passed to strangers, and few today could tell where they were located.** And aside from the little tablet (circa 1914) that marks the site of Potton's first white settler's habitation – **one memorial, and one alone preserves the name of Potton's first settler" – the Ruitter Brook.**

In the little cemetery, West of Henry Ruitter's first home in Potton, now "the Ruitter Cemetery", beautifully situated, showing signs of careful management and tender care – this is the last resting place of the tired old warrior and many of his family.

This is the inscription on a beautiful granite marker:

HENDRICH RUITER
 Captain of Roger's Rangers of
 The Revolutionary War
 Colonel of the 2nd Bat. of the
 Townships – 1812 –1813
 1739-1819

His wife
 CATHERINE FRIOTT
 1760-1819

Their children
 JOSEPH – JACOB – ABIGAIL

Erected by T.M. Woods great grandson –
 Lincoln, Nebraska
 and
 E.C. Barnett – great great grandson – Potton
 Quebec



Collection APP