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Making War Part I: The Knox Diary and Seizing Ticonderoga's Cannons

Matthew Keagle 00:07

The fort is captured by two separate expeditions launched by two separate colonies, one of them being Massachusetts, who seizes the fort less than a month after the Revolutionary War begins at Lexington and Concord in April of 1775 and it represents, really, the first offensive victory of the Americans during this conflict, and forces them into some interesting strategic situations.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:32

[Intro music fades in] This is Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai.

Lauren Gray 00:42

This is Lauren Gray.

Cassie Cloutier 00:43

This is Cassie Cloutier.

Lauren Gray 00:46

And this is The Object of History, the podcast of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:51

Since 1791, the MHS has sought to collect, preserve and communicate the building blocks of history.

Lauren Gray 00:58

Each episode examines an object, document or set of items from the society's millions of manuscript pieces and artifacts.

Cassie Cloutier 01:06

We take you on a behind the scenes tour of our stacks to explore the incredible stories held within our collections.

Lauren Gray 01:13

We are dedicating the entirety of season five of The Object of History to topics related to the American Revolution.

Cassie Cloutier 01:20

We invite you to join us over the next three episodes for an in depth look at the geography, characters, and events that shaped the first years of the American Revolution. This story starts in May of 1775 at Fort Ticonderoga, New York, on the banks of Lake Champlain. In this episode, you will hear from Fort Ticonderoga's curator, Dr. Matthew Keagle.

Matthew Keagle 01:42

The fort is captured by two separate expeditions.

Cassie Cloutier 01:47

We shall talk about the capture of the fort, the colonists dire need for artillery to break the siege at Boston, and how the Canadian campaign developed in the summer and fall of that year. We will also speak with Samantha Couture, Nora Saltonstall Conservator & Preservation Librarian at the MHS, to talk about the diary of Henry Knox.

Samantha Couture 02:07

And you're right about the fragility. The paper cover is a very thin sort of pink paper. It's rather pretty, but a lot of it is missing.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 02:15

So, we're going to do something a little different this season. We've never done a three-episode arc before, but it seems necessary this time. These events, because they are happening in sequence, almost are snowballing and usually with some of the same key players. So, over this three-part episode, we are joined by our colleagues at Fort Ticonderoga, the Maine Historical Society and the Canadian National Battlefields Commission to take us through the pivotal events of May 1775 into the summer of 1776. We shall be traveling from Massachusetts to New York, from New York to Canada, and we shall also be

going on an ill-fated expedition into the Maine wilderness, which in 1775 was still part of Massachusetts. Our story will be marked by successes and defeats and terrible deprivations, but we shall demonstrate how these critical events were pivotal for the Continental Army's eventual victory at the Battle of Saratoga in 1777 which secured a vital French military alliance and shifted the war to the Southern colonies. We shall pick up with the southern narrative in episode six with our colleagues at the South Carolina Historical Society.

Cassie Cloutier 03:37

We began by interviewing Dr. Matthew Keagle, Curator at Fort Ticonderoga, to learn more about the significance of the fort in the early Revolution.

Lauren Gray 03:46

Well, we're so glad to talk with you today, and I know Fort Ticonderoga is so important for these early years of the American Revolution, starting in 1775-1776. Can you tell us a very brief history of the fort and really its importance during those early years.

Matthew Keagle 04:04

Yeah, boy, I'll try to compact a lot into a little bit of space because the history of this site goes back many, many years before the Revolution, which really gives it its significance by the time we get to the period of the Revolutionary War. The first documented military encounter that occurred here was in the summer of 1609, so very shortly after some of the first permanent European colonization, settlement of what becomes Canada and New France. But there are largely native armies that fight in that encounter. And because of where it is, we're situated on Lake Champlain. So today, the border between New York State and Vermont. Ticonderoga is on the New York side of that divide. But this waterway provided an easy form of access and transportation through the heart of northeastern North America. So, it's one of the very few places that you have to take some kind of watercraft over land to get all the way from what is today New York City up to the St. Lawrence River and out to the mouth of the Atlantic. Again, so it really is on this, this arc of water that cuts through the continent and that makes it a point of contact, and inevitably, in some ways, a point of conflict, as evidenced by the early 17th century encounter. Those conflicts are exacerbated over the course of the 17th and 18th centuries with increasing European colonization, settlement, invasion of North America, various Native American nations trying to

counteract that, to play the Europeans off each other. These are, you know, what is broadly known as the French and Indian wars of the 17th and 18th centuries, and it culminates in so many ways, in the middle of the 18th century with what Americans still call the French and Indian War, the Seven Years War in Europe, or various other names, depending on where you live across the world. And it's this conflict that gives birth to the physical structure that becomes Fort Ticonderoga. And even though the British capture the fort in 1759 and they hold on to it throughout the whole piece following the French and Indian War, it still carries that reputation into the period of the American Revolution, when a number of American individuals and bodies see this as a potential target, as the Revolution is beginning really in 1775 because the fort is captured by two separate expeditions launched by two separate colonies, one of them being Massachusetts, who seizes the fort less than a month after the Revolutionary War begins at Lexington and Concord in April of 1775 and it represents, really the first offensive victory of the Americans during this conflict, and forces them into some interesting strategic situations following that capture, which eventually expand into the Canadian front of the war, and really holding on the kind of doorway to the northern part of the colonies for the first three years of the Revolution.

Lauren Gray 06:55

Yes, and I think in schools, we always hear about, you know, Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys coming to take Fort Ticonderoga. The story is a little bit more complex. I think they were joined by someone else of equal notoriety, Benedict Arnold, if I'm not mistaken.

Matthew Keagle 07:10

Absolutely. Yeah, notoriety or infamy, depending on your perspective. That gets to the dual nature of the capture of the fort in 1775 which I think is something that that kind of simple narrative overlooks is the fact that Americans after Lexington and Concord after this army, really it was an army of Minute Men and militia from Massachusetts had pushed the British back into Boston were joined by troops from New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Connecticut within days, hours even, and they begin to encircle Boston. The problem was they could cut off Boston, but couldn't necessarily reach it with heavy artillery, or not the volume of artillery that they needed, which left them kind of in a bit of a bind, because they need to be able to not only hit the British in Boston, but in some ways, more importantly, hit the seaways that lead into Boston that allow the British to resupply their army and to maintain their posts occupying the city. And simultaneously, a number of different Americans started thinking about,

well, where can we get artillery to be able to reach British positions and British shipping lanes? And a number of people hit upon the idea of Fort Ticonderoga. Now, not just Fort Ticonderoga Fort Crown Point as well, which is to our north, which was built by the British, beginning really in 1759-1760 after they captured the area from the French. And both of these fortifications were littered with artillery that had been left over from that war. There were captured French cannon. There were cannon that the British brought expecting to have to bombard these fortifications, as it happened, to capture them with relative ease. The French didn't have the numbers. They evacuated, and so there's all this artillery left here. And you know, it's the situation that we find again and again in wartime, where imperial armies will send material overseas to fight their campaigns, and once the objectives are met, you're not going to spend the money to ship that back to the mother country. You know, it's the same reason you find old vehicles and weapons and places like Afghanistan today, because we didn't pay it doesn't make sense to ship them back. The same thing was true of this artillery in the 18th century. So, there's a lot of cannon, mortars, howitzers, that are, you know, an unusual kind of hall of materiel, but they're sitting here. They're effectively, you know, mothballed, not being used by the garrison that's here largely. And Americans see this as a kind of a soft target that they can hit to get the equipment that they need. And incidentally, on the way to the siege lines outside Boston, a Connecticut officer who's heading back to get reinforcements meets Benedict Arnold, who is on his way to join the Siege of Boston. And they talk about this. They share this idea. The Connecticut agent goes back to Connecticut, and amongst a group of assemblymen and other notables, militia officers, men of business, they concoct this plan to capture Ticonderoga, which is not officially authorized by the government of Connecticut, but they do draw some public money for it, and they send a secret mission out west and north to start doing this. Those individuals ride out of Hartford, and they head to Western Massachusetts and beyond, to this disputed territory known as the New Hampshire Grants, which is today Vermont. This is where the Green Mountain Boys are located, who are effectively a kind of proto military force that was organized to fight New York's claims to the same territory, getting into the complex interactions between colonies prior to the Revolutionary War. And they have manpower, they have guns, they have some military organization, and they provide the bulk of the troops. At the same time, Benedict Arnold, who joins the siege, sees what the Americans need, approaches the Massachusetts Council of Safety part of this, what the British called extra-legal government of Massachusetts, saying, 'Hey, I know where you can get cannon up at Ticonderoga and Crown Point.' And ironically enough, the Massachusetts Council of Committee of Safety commissions this Connecticut captain, Benedict Arnold, to command a regiment

on their behalf. They give him a commission, they give him money, they give him authorization to raise 400 men. And rather than wait around and do that, Benedict Arnold, who is nothing if not energetic and ambitious, hits the road west and north to Ticonderoga. So, all of these individuals are moving at the same time across the New England countryside. They meet up literally just days before the capture will take place. Benedict Arnold, claiming command of the entire expedition by virtue of the commission that he has from Massachusetts, whereas Ethan Allen, who is the commander of the Green Mountain Boys, who's exercising the authority given by this Connecticut operation, says, 'Well, you know, I have the men,' and they're able, however briefly, to iron over their disputes, say, 'Well, we'll share command for the capture of the fort.' And so we get, you know, really, three and a half hours after midnight on May 10 of 1775, the first part of this expedition, and it was only the first part because they could only find two boats to take across about 80 men across Lake Champlain from the Vermont shore make a surprise attack on Fort Ticonderoga. The British garrison, which had been recently reinforced, in fact, they received their reinforcements the night before the Battles of Lexington and Concord. But it was not enough. They were still outnumbered almost two to one. They have no idea that war has been declared. They are unprepared for an attack. There's about 44 soldiers and officers and 26 women and children who are the families of the garrison that are there, and they offer almost no resistance. The fort is taken. And this, in some ways, just adds to the luster of the history of this place that this American surprise attack captured the fort, you know, without any fatalities. Compare this to what it took the British to do in 1758 and it boosts, you know, really elevates the accomplishment of those Americans in 1775.

Lauren Gray 12:59

Absolutely. Thank you. Yeah, that's a wonderful overview of kind of what is happening in these very early, very kind of confusing months for everyone. I think everyone was caught a little bit off guard just how quickly everything kind of coalesced into this, into this war. So, let's go back to Ethan Allen and Benedict Arnold. They've taken the fort. They have all of this artillery that they're kind of rounding up from different areas in the region. What do they do with that? How do they get that artillery back to where it's needed in Boston to lift the siege?

Matthew Keagle 13:26

In short, they don't. The part of this is because of the dispute over command. There's this debate about who is in command. Arnold has no men, but he has the paper. He has the commission from the

Massachusetts Council of Safety that authorizes him as a colonel and gives him authority on this expedition. Ethan Allen doesn't have that, but Benedict Arnold, in the view of the Connecticut expedition, is making himself a bit obnoxious by lording this over everyone. So, the Connecticut agents actually write Ethan Allen kind of a backdated commission to give him some command. Fortunately for everyone, the two groups kind of disperse. Alan and his Green Mountain Boys, largely staying at Ticonderoga. Arnold, taking what men he has been able to recruit and hang up the Crown Point with a schooner that they had captured at the southern part of Lake Champlain. So even that little bit of distance, maybe 12 miles, between here and Crown Point, is enough to kind of separate the two. Both writing letters to various colonial officials, saying they are in charge. They're doing the next step. Benedict Arnold, within a week of capturing the fort almost, takes the schooner, sails north of the Canadian border to attack the British post at Saint Jean, where the British have a sloop. It's the government sloop on the lake. It's the only other vessel of size, and by capturing it, he captures all of the watercraft on the lake. He gives the Americans total control of Lake Champlain, so the British cannot make a counterattack without getting more vessels, and that's hugely important. And on his way back, having realized that, yes, I made this attack, but I'm not there to hold the ground. I'm just there to get the boat and get out, because, of course, the British are going to send reinforcements as he's heading back south, who does he meet coming north? But Ethan Allen, with boatloads of Green Mountain Boys going on the same mission because, of course, they've not coordinated their plans. In fact, Allen has to kind of beg for some food from Arnold because he didn't pack enough provisions. And Arnold gives him some stuff and then heads back south. Allen heads up, doesn't attack directly waits until the next morning, but wakes up to find that, yes, those British reinforcements have come from Montreal, and they open fire in his camp, and he gets sent packing back southward. So again, showing that kind of uncoordination that some ways, marks the early American war efforts here, but it does give the Americans, through Arnold's action, the initiative, the control of the lake that they have. And this, you know, again, not to lead too much towards the Canadian invasion, but it does get us towards this position of this being perhaps a more active theater of the war than simply going up here to get cannons because Arnold does write about starting to get the cannon, and a lot of them, because these forts were in terrible condition at the beginning of the Revolutionary War, some of the cannon, a lot of the shot, the cannon balls that were needed, that were stored here were literally buried in ruins. There had been a major fire at Crown Point in 1773. Fort Ticonderoga had just become slowly falling apart, because at times, this entire fortification, which was designed maybe for 450 men, often had as little as 15 soldiers

stationed here. So, you know, the maintenance is not what it should have been. So, they literally have to dig out cannon and ammunition out of the ruins, which takes time, and then it's getting it loaded onto boats, sending it southwards. And that takes time, and it takes people, and Arnold doesn't necessarily have those people that do the work yet.

Lauren Gray 16:44

I wanted to go back to the cannons themselves. So, you're saying that they're digging them out of the ruins, the artillery and maybe the shot. Would they have been serviceable if they had gone through all of this? Are they sitting out in the weather? Are they rusty? Are we going to just be throwing bits of lead at people? What were their expectation? What was, what was the situation?

Matthew Keagle 17:03

It's a great point because it's worth remembering too that the vast majority of the cannon that were captured here in Lake Champlain, whether in Ticonderoga or Crown Point, are made of iron. All canon in the 18th century are made of either iron or bronze. And bronze is fine. It ages and it oxidizes, especially the copper in it, but it's not going to be damaged too much. Iron, on the other hand, as we all know, if you leave it out, iron rusts, and it can deteriorate. Furthermore, iron cannon can have flaws in them, even from the beginning. Iron is a wonderful, cheap, abundant material to make cannon out of. But when you cast iron, it's quite hard, but it's also quite brittle, and that brittleness can be revealed through flaws that sometimes you can't even see after exposure, after extensive use to cannons, and you get cannons that sometimes just burst in action. And so, you know, one of the things that you have to do after capturing these forts, and Arnold does it, along with the help of a Dutch cartographer and engineer named Bernard Romans, who had originally been part of the Connecticut expedition, was to survey the artillery, simply go through it all. How much was here? They didn't know exactly. The early reports, you know, say hundreds of cannon. Well, there were close to between Ticonderoga and Crown Point, close to almost 200 pieces of canon. But that's great. What size cannon are they? Are they the ones that we need? Are they in a condition where they are usable? And so that's exactly what they do, is they, they start going through to inventory these and then further than that, Benedict Arnold's earliest inventories often have notations saying whether it's serviceable or not, it's most likely simply through a visual observation, perhaps searching the guns to see if there were flaws inside the boar from age or the casting process, and simply write off guns that are just not worth it to begin with. And he does start over

late May and June of 1775, to move the first guns, particularly mortars and howitzers, these weapons that fire explosive shells bombs high up into the air to start get them moving from Crown Point to Ticonderoga, from Ticonderoga to Fort George as the first step of their trip to Boston. The expedition to capture Ticonderoga was not about opening a Canadian front, a northern front of the war. It was about getting these pieces of artillery that were needed to break the siege of Boston, but for all the reasons I've just described, that hadn't happened over the course of the spring and the summer and the early winter and by October, Washington, who's now the Commander in Chief of the Continental Army, is sitting down with officials from Massachusetts and Connecticut and Congress, talking about the plans to make good because they're still sitting in this siege that's kind of gone nowhere over the course of the year. The British are still in Boston. In fact, they're being reinforced over 1775 How do you end the siege? How do you free Boston? And they sit down in that meeting, and explicitly in their minutes of notes, they say, 'Where do we get cannon? We get the ones on Lake Champlain.' And you got to find someone to do that. And this is where Washington hits upon the idea of using this clever young Bostonian who's been volunteering with the army, Henry Knox, who's, you know, he's in mid-20s, has no formal military experience outside of being in a couple militia companies. He's a bookseller. He is self-taught, but he's quite clever, and Washington knows it. John Adams knows it, and he's being promoted as such. They try to think about giving him a commission as an engineer because he'd helped the design fortifications in the siege lines. Knox is not interested in that. He's holding out for a command in the artillery, and this becomes a convenient way while they're still waiting to see if he's approved by Washington and Congress for any higher command. See if he can accomplish this task. And so, he's the one that's selected for the expedition to finally go to Ticonderoga and get done what that whole campaign at the beginning of the year was designed to do.

Lauren Gray 20:55

In winter, an excellent time to move cannon across semi frozen lakes rivers. Tell us about how they did it because in some ways it was a big success, and others, I understand they may have lost a few?

Matthew Keagle 21:06

It's an remarkable expedition in so many ways. In some ways it's remarkable that, you know, Washington literally just sent Henry Knox. Henry Knox brought his brother. There might have been one other clerk with them and \$1,000 to do the mission. He didn't assign a regiment. He didn't assign

soldiers. He didn't give him he's relying on him to use his initiative to accomplish this. However, he does also send orders the same day that he writes to Knox, to General Philip Schuyler, who's in command of the Northern Department here at Ticonderoga, saying, 'I'm sending this guy out your way. Help him as much as you are able because we need this mission to be accomplished.' So, Schuyler, who often doesn't get, I think, discussed in Knox's Expedition discussions of this is really instrumental because Knox has never been to this part of New York. He had never been that far outside of Boston, for that matter. And so, this is a big trip. He is unfamiliar with the landscape. And as much as today, we might not say that upstate New York and Massachusetts are that different or well, maybe we might. But back then, it was even more different, and so Knox has no experience with this. He's going to rely on Schuyler's local knowledge and connections to ensure that this operation is a success, in no small part, because once he gets to Ticonderoga, he is able to benefit from the fact that the army at Ticonderoga is here. There are New York continental soldiers at Ticonderoga, and continental officers can order soldiers to do things. They're the ones that are have already by the time Knox gets to Ticonderoga in early December, are starting to dismount cannon to get them positioned, get them moved along the portage that you need to go overland to get from Lake Champlain to Lake George. Start selecting the most useful cannon for the operation, and then they're able to see them down to Fort George. But once you get from Fort George south, there are no more soldiers until you get to Washington's lines. So, he's got to rely on civilians, and that's where, again, Schuyler's local contacts and networks are going to be of vital importance into mobilizing the civilians that are going to bring their teams of horses, their sleds, their oxen, and ultimately get things where they're going. And as much as it seems baffling to us today that you would do this in the middle of winter, it's actually the perfect time to do it, in part because it's the best way when you've got dense snowfall and ice to move heavy commodities. It's the reason that farmers do their logging in the winter, because it's a lot easier to drag that log. And you know, when you think about it, a big log isn't all that different from a big cannon but moving that over the ice is much easier than trying to haul that through the mud of spring or the wet ground of summer. And so, winter, in fact, in some ways, is the ideal time to conduct an operation like this. It's also a time when those farmers aren't already going to be employed getting their crops out. They're going to have available teams and vehicles to do this work. And so, Schuyler and his connections are able to mobilize a network of largely New York teamsters to get the guns moving across, or really south, across the Mohawk River, over the Hudson River and then over the Berkshires into Massachusetts, before eventually dropping them off in Springfield, where Massachusetts teamsters pick up the next leg of the journey. And so, they start

planning what they're going to do, Schuyler issues orders that along the route of their march have men drill holes into the ice and basically flood the ice so you get water, kind of pooling on top that'll freeze thick to thicken the ice as quickly as possible. They also develop a series of orders that as the teams go across the ice with a sled, like a log sled, basically that, again, farmers would use to haul their logs in the winter. They're using the same technology for cannon. Rather than have the teams of horses directly attached to the tongue of the sled, you have them kind of pulling with a longer lead rope, and the teamster will walk alongside with a hatchet so that if the ice does start to give way and that cannon goes under, you've got this long rope on it. Cut the rope so it prevents the horses from getting pulled under with it. But then also you've got this bit of rope you can tie on a log or a stick, and you can flag the location of that gun. Now this fails on the Mohawk as they're crossing there one of their guns an 18 Pounder, cracked through the ice. It sunk in. It was never recovered. But as they continue along, as they're crossing the Hudson near Albany, which is a bigger river altogether, one of the guns, their biggest gun, a 24 pounder, cracks through the ice and it goes under. But because they've taken these precautions, they're able to locate where it is. They've got a hold on it, because there's a rope attached to it. And as is accounted later, it's the citizens of Albany that come out, and they haul on the line, and they pull the gun out of the river and they salvage it for the expedition. Knox names it the 'Albany' on behalf of the good people of the city, and it makes its way to the American siege lines outside Boston.

Lauren Gray 26:03

We have Henry Knox's diary of the expedition here at the MHS, and it's a wonderful resource. And he has the story of the Albany. He has the story of loading the cannons on barges to go down Lake George. But what I find funny about the diary is the first, I don't know, eight or 10 pages, at least, it's all accounting. Really the devil is in those logistical details, the math of it, trying to figure out who's being paid what, and he's really accountable to this money that has been given him to make sure that this succeeds. So, you can see the merchant in him coming out, trying to make sure.

Matthew Keagle 26:35

Absolutely. Those first pages in his diary are some of my favorites as well because he's also getting some equipment. You know, he's getting some stationary stuff from some of his previous correspondence that he had bought stuff for his business from in New York City, some equipment. I also love that he's, he makes some memorandums of notes to things to buy. He wants to get a sable tippet for

his wife, Lucy. So, he's, you know, he's not leaving her alone. He's going to get some, some things to bring back. He also makes a note to purchase a print of the death of General [James] Wolfe, which I find incredible. That the imagery of this death of a British General in the seizure of Quebec, this iconic moment in the formation of the Anglo-American world of the 18th century, that the vision of a global British Empire is still powerful enough that he wants to buy a copy while he is on an expedition to get cannon to bombard the British out of Boston. And so, you know, the culture that kind of, you know, lingering of a British identity and culture that persists long into the Revolution and even afterwards, arguably, is so fascinating to see out there. I should also say that one of my favorite things about the beginning part of Knox's diary is that I believe it's in there that he has what is, I think, the most timeless sentiment I have ever read from the 18th century, which is 'glad to leave New York, it being very expensive,' which is something that even today, I think we can commiserate with.

Lauren Gray 27:59

We can all agree, I'm sorry, Henry, it doesn't get any better.

Cassie Cloutier 28:05

We then examined this special item from the MHS collections. We took a closer look at the diary that Henry Knox kept on his journey from Ticonderoga to Cambridge between late 1775 and early 1776.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 28:18

Well, this is not exactly what I envisioned it being this Knox diary. It looks rather flimsy, at least in my eyes. I mean, it doesn't seem to have a cover. It's beaten up, it's worn. There are pages that are torn out. There are sections that are missing. It looks more like a book that was certainly a diary but also used for scrap paper because there are random numbers and notes. And I bet that he also tore off pages to write notes and orders to random people.

Lauren Gray 28:56

I suspect so. I think he's using this diary, this paper as both a record of the journey for posterity, and he's keeping accounts of the money that he's owed because he's responsible for these funds that have been given him on this expedition. And you can really imagine him on horseback or beside the campfire in the snow, maybe waiting for the train to catch up or scribbling notes from the end of a long day. He's

probably tired. He's probably doing it by candlelight. And archival documents come down to us in all sorts of conditions, and this diary, it's a little bit of a hot mess. Our conservator has done a wonderful job stabilizing it, but the diary is an absolutely extraordinary glimpse into these pivotal few weeks.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 29:46

Absolutely remarkable that it survived at all. I mean, how many rivers it crossed, how much snow and ice and just being exposed to the elements. That's not great for paper.

Lauren Gray 29:57

No, it's not. I mean, as you said. It's a small volume. I mean, it is basically the size of my hand. I'm sure that Knox took great care to ensure that he was recording the events as accurately as he could given the circumstances. But there are some really wonderful asides in the diary where it demonstrates that he's not just thinking about this expedition or its role in history or breaking the Siege of Boston. He's thinking about his wife. He's thinking about the accounts. He's thinking about the nature he's experiencing around him as someone who really hadn't traveled, who had never seen this part of the world, never seen this part of the colonies, and he's reflecting very deeply on what he's experiencing as he's going along this noble train of artillery.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 30:44

Yes, I was just flipping through it, and I've landed on the account January 4, 1776, and he writes, 'Arrived a brass 24 pounder and a small mortar. I this day sent a letter to General Washington, one to Brigadier General [Horatio] Gates, and one to Captain [George] Baylor, and one to my lovely Lucy. In much the afternoon, much alarmed by hearing that one of the heaviest cannon had fallen into the river at Half Moon Ferry.' So, he's writing to Washington, and he's writing to Lucy.

Lauren Gray 31:18

And he's also looking at the world around him. And one of my favorite parts of the diary is when he kind of steps outside of himself, and he's outside this kind of grandiose falls, and I have to apologize. I'm not from the area. I don't know actually how to pronounce the name of the falls. Is it Cohoes, Cohoes, the New Yorkers will know. I apologize, but he's Knox is outside of these falls, and they remind him of what he's heard about the Niagara. And he's staring at them. These ice crystals or slabs

are like 20 feet long, and he's really putting himself against nature and contemplating his own 'insignificancy', and that's his word, his own 'insignificancy, in the face of what nature can accomplish on its own.' And these early weeks and months of the war must have really like transcended reality for these people. I don't know how else to say it. It was such a momentous time. You know, Knox is putting himself in the course of human events, and kind of considering himself in the grand scheme of things. And I think we see hints of that kind of mental process that's happening in the diary.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 32:24

Absolutely, in fact, that's one of my favorite and probably most often quoted parts of the diary by scholars is this part where he climbs the mountains and looks at the view. So, Knox is not with his artillery convoy the whole way. He does ride ahead on occasion. And this one just, just always captures my imagination, as it probably captured his the view did. This is from the 10th of January, 1776 and he's just crossed beyond Kinderhook. He's seen the cannon set out on a ferry opposite Albany, and he rides ahead, and he talks about climbing this mountain, and his words quote, 'from which we might almost have seen all the kingdoms of the earth.' And he's talking about the Berkshires and just the amazing view up there, and I can sort of imagine, I'd like to imagine, and I don't know how much of a romantic Henry Knox was, but he probably was given his relationship and his deep love for Lucy here, it seems like he can almost glimpse also, not just all these lands, but also the promise of a new nation that may be birthed.

Lauren Gray 33:41

Yeah, they are using these kind of metaphors around nature and states of nature. John Adams writes about how he's crossed the Rubicon after Lexington and Concord. And I think we see that they're, you know, they're conceptualizing this, or Knox is in the diary, and it's, you have to think about George Washington also. The faith that he's putting into this young man, this 25-year-old, untested, uncommissioned dude who shows up with these kind of recommendations from some known folks in Boston, these known patriots and Washington entrusts him with 1000 pounds, sends him into the wilderness, and he says, 'Get These cannon. Bring them back, make it happen.' Knox doesn't have any men. It's just him, his brother, and some other folks that he meets along the way. He shows up in New York, Philip Schuyler gives them an assist, and they make it happen. It's such an important moment for both Knox and the Revolution, and I think that's why this story has persisted, and it's such an incredible

kind of I don't know legacy isn't the right word, but it's this incredible story that's come down to us of something that Henry Knox succeeded in when he really faced a moment where everything could have gone disastrously wrong and it didn't. Everything went right. I think they only lost one cannon.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 34:57

It's really quite a miraculous operation and it shows the skill, the organizational skill. It shows the organizational ability, but it also shows a lot of teamwork. There are a lot of characters who come in and out of this diary. Knox talks about hiring them to transport the cannons from point A to point B. He talks about how much he's paying them and all that. But there are also moments where just normal, everyday people come out and participate in this attempt to rescue Boston. And I think one of my other favorite parts of the diary is from the eighth of January 1776 and you were talking about crossing the Rubicon. Maybe crossing the Hudson is crossing the Rubicon here, but basically one of the cannons is lost. It falls into the river, and this entry from the eighth of January is where they attempt to rescue it from the depths of the Hudson. And the good people of Albany come out and lend a hand. 'January 8, 1776. Went on the ice about eight o'clock in the morning, and proceeded so cautiously that before night, we got over three sleds and were so lucky as to get the cannon out of the river. Owing to the assistances the good people of the city of Albany gave. In return, for which we christened her the Albany.'

Lauren Gray 36:19

I think you mentioned, you know, people coming out all of the way and helping them. Of course, it's winter. The farmers don't have anything to do. They want to make some extra money, and they're, you know, lending their teams, their draft animals to help haul these cannons across their local area. But I think also is, there's this idea of community coming out, supporting, you know, as you said, lifting the siege, supporting the troops that are making this happen.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 36:43

And I think it's really important also that this is not just a glimpse perhaps when Knox goes up onto the Berkshires and looks out and sees that view, maybe a glimpse of the future, but also a glimpse of the fact that these colonies can be united, that there are people from very different backgrounds, from very different colonies, helping each other out because it seems like the right thing to do, and that's probably a good sign for the very hard and difficult and trying years of the Revolution ahead.

Cassie Cloutier 37:17

We then sat down with Samantha Couture, Nora Saltonstall Conservator & Preservation Librarian at the MHS to discuss the complicated process of repairing and preserving the Knox diary.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 37:30

So, tell us about what you do on a day-to-day basis. What does it mean to be a Preservation Librarian?

Samantha Couture 37:37

That part of my job means I'm kind of concerned with the overall health of our collections, so I help to monitor the temperature and humidity controls in our stacks. Light levels that for things that are on exhibition. And as a conservator, I work on repairing items, making sure they have the right housing so that when researchers come to the MHS, they can handle these things safely to do their work.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 38:03

Well, Lauren and I were talking about this very fragile document. I think I saw it for the first time just a few months ago, and I did not expect it to be so short, I suppose. But so stained and fragile in many ways. Of course, when you think about it, this is a diary that has seen a lot of exposure to the elements. Since Knox was writing in it while he was trudging through the wilderness of the Berkshires. What was the condition of the diary when you first saw it?

Samantha Couture 38:44

When I pulled it for to get it ready for exhibition, it had some, a lot of previous repairs, and you're right about the fragility. The paper cover is a very thin sort of pink paper. It's rather pretty, but a lot of it is missing. It had another piece attached to the front to make a whole sheet. But that paper was also kind of flimsy and was getting battered. It also had a lot of older repairs that were very a thick paper, kind of thicker than the paper the writing is on. So that was a little like overkill. So, my main goal was to remove the older repairs and kind of start fresh. So, when you see the diary now, you can see the outlines of that pink cover. It's not complete, but it's stable enough to use. So, you get a sense of this is how we got it in this state. So, there's bits missing from the cover. There are stains inside, probably some water stains and some probably someone spilled their tea at some point, you know, there are a lot

of pages ripped out, so some of what I did was to take the old sewing off and to make sure all the pages kind of lined up, and that it was in an order that made sense, and that each page could be open because when I first got it, it was the pages we wanted to look at for exhibit were a little didn't open flat it like it would have when Knox was writing in it. This is a really simple diary. There's no hardcover binding or anything. It's just gathering of folded pages sewn together with that thin pink paper. He probably stuffed it in his pocket or in his coat over and, you know, pulled it out over and over again, and it's possible that cover was put on later. It's hard to tell sometimes with an older book, like what's been added and taken away over its lifetime.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 40:32

Well so from what you've said, it does seem like the science of conservation and preservation has changed if your predecessors used a thicker paper. That's no longer best practice.

Samantha Couture 40:44

Right. Yeah, yeah. There's a lot of things have changed since conservation became sort of a real practice in the '40s, '50s. Now I use a lot of precoded Japanese paper that's very thin, especially on our iron gall ink documents. It's easier to read through than previous repair the typical repair paper. So, a couple of the pages of the Knox diary had a thicker paper over some text, so I removed that and put the thinner paper on so it's a little easier to read. Yeah, we definitely have changed thinking about how much to do to a document. The treatments used to be a little more aggressive and a little more, 'I've got to make this thing complete again and fill in all the missing bits and make it whole.' But that's not often necessary to make it usable for research. And often it's nice to see something and like the state it came to us in.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 41:42

And so, what else did you have to do to the diary to make sure that it was ready for display and all this attention at the 250th?

Samantha Couture 41:51

I know it's new repairs and new sewing. And then I had to mount it. So it was presented open on museum board and acid and lignin free mat board with polyethylene straps, very safe plastic to use that

are see through to hold it open for the time of the exhibit. And then we switched the pages part way through to limit the light exposure to the one set of pages to another sort of relevant page of text.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 42:19

And how long did this take you?

Samantha Couture 42:22

Probably two to three hours.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 42:24

Oh, okay, so it was actually in pretty good shape.

Samantha Couture 42:27

Yeah, yeah. And I didn't try to take any of the old stains out, you know, a little surface cleaning to get any surface dirt out. And for the most part, it was okay. It was sort of just rebuilding and making things more legible with those new, thinner repairs, and the cover is now easier to open and close without doing any damage.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 42:49

It seems to me like someone looking at the diary would actually be interested in the stains to understand what sort of environmental conditions this was written.

Samantha Couture 42:59

Yes. Yeah, the library world calls it, 'evidence of use.' So, conservation used to be a little more oriented towards, you know, exhibit and returning an item to its original state, like when it was made and it was new and was white. But our historic documents, everything they've been through is told through the stains and the losses and the dog ears and the folds, and so we want to leave that because that tells researchers important things about what's happened to this document.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 43:31

Well, our mission has been the same since 1791 which is to collect, preserve and communicate the past for future generations, and you represent fully 1/3 of that preserve.

Samantha Couture 43:47

Hopefully, yeah, it's a combination. So, the keeping the diary in our climate-controlled stacks does a huge service to our documents to keep them in stable conditions that will extend the usable lifespan of all this all this material, especially the paper and photographs, leather, all those materials do best in a within a range of humidity and temperature. So that's the first most important thing we do and then repairing things so that they aren't further damaged when they're used. I'd say it's that would be the next, next most important thing we do.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 44:28

So, what is your hope for this diary, which has gotten a lot of attention this 250th year of this remarkable campaign that it bore witness to? But what is your hope for this document going forward after the repairs you've done to it?

Samantha Couture 44:46

Well, I need to give it a new little home to live in, on the shelf. When I further flattened it, gave it as new sewing. It no longer fits in its old case, which was made quite.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 44:56

It's like hermit crab.

Samantha Couture 44:57

Exactly. Yeah, yeah, yeah. It's outgrown. It's, it's old housing, which is an and it's an older case that I'm not sure of the materials, how good they are long term. So, it's going to get a new little portfolio with a hard cover so it can sit on the shelf nestled in its nice acid, lignin free materials. I'm hoping it will, you know, still be around in another 100 years.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 45:20

Well, I hope so as well.

Samantha Couture 45:22

A lot of preservation is just kind of constantly checking on conditions and thinking about if I keep this in this material now, will it do damage over time? You know, the goal is always to let it be used, but also hopefully keep it for the next generations.

Cassie Cloutier 45:41

[Outro music fades in]] To look at the items discussed in today's episode, visit our show website at www.masshist.org/podcast. The Object of History, was produced by the research department at the Massachusetts Historical Society. We would like to thank Dr. Matthew Keagle, Curator at Fort Ticonderoga, Samantha Couture, Nora Saltonstall Conservator & Preservation Librarian and Sam Hurwitz, Podcast Producer at the MHS. Music in this episode is by Ketsa Music and Podington Bear. See our show notes for details. Thank you for listening, and please rate, review, and subscribe to both the MHS produced shows wherever you listen to podcasts.