

DR. ISAAC SENTER'S OTHER REVOLUTIONARY WAR JOURNAL

While I was researching information on the journals of the participants in the 1775 expedition to Quebec for my recent book¹, I discovered to my surprise that Dr. Isaac Senter of Newport, Rhode Island had left not one, but two different manuscript journals of his experiences on that expedition. It turns out that he was unique in being the only journalist to do that. I knew from my previous reading that Senter had written one of the more informative and interesting journals of Benedict Arnold's famous march through the wilderness and he was the expedition's physician. He was with the expedition from the time it left Cambridge until it retreated from Canada in June of 1776. I began looking more thoroughly into Senter's life and his two journals wondering why Senter wrote two different versions of his journal and why no one had transcribed the manuscript in the Rhode Island Historical Society.

Life of Isaac Senter

Isaac Senter was born in Londonderry, New Hampshire in 1753 and lived with his family in the Irish settlement of Londonderry. The Senter family subsequently moved to Rhode Island when Isaac was a young boy.² Senter was able to obtain a good enough education to set him up to study to be a physician in Rhode Island.

Prior to the Revolutionary War, he studied under Dr. Thomas Moffat, a well-known Scottish physician from Newport, and may have opened an office in Cranston, Rhode Island.³ After word came regarding the Lexington Alarm, Senter enlisted as a physician with a regiment of men from Rhode Island under the command of Colonel John Church who marched to Boston in response.

Senter's regiment stayed around Boston during the Battle of Bunker Hill and they were still there in August when the recruitment of men for Benedict Arnold's expedition to Quebec began. Senter was one of those who volunteered to go on the expedition and because of his background he became one of two designated physicians on the march. According to his HSP journal, he was provided with three medical aides for the expedition.⁴

¹ Stephen Darley. *Voices from a Wilderness Expedition: The Journals and Men of Benedict Arnold's Expedition to Quebec in 1775*. (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse) 2011.

² William Abbatt. A Neglected Name: Dr. Isaac Senter. *Annals of Medical History, Vol. II* (1920) pp. 381-383.

³ Abbatt, 381.

⁴ The Journal of Isaac Senter Physician and Surgeon to the Troops Detached from the American Army Encamped at Cambridge, Mass. On a Secret Expedition against Quebec under the Command of Col. Benedict Arnold in September, 1775. *Proceedings of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1845-1847, Vol. I*(March, 1846) pp. 2-40.

Senter experienced all of the same hardships and difficulties that the other participants experienced on the march to Quebec plus he was the primary source of medical treatment, which must have proven exhausting and almost overwhelming. He was in the hospital in Quebec during the American assault on the night of December 31, 1775. He was the one who treated his commander, Colonel Benedict Arnold, for the leg wound received in the assault on the second barrier. Senter described Arnold's wound in his HSP journal. "He was wounded in one leg by a piece of a musket ball. It had probably come into contact with a stone, or the like, which had cleft off nigh a third of it, ere it entered the leg. The other two-thirds entered the outer side of the leg about mid-way and in an oblique curve passed between the tibia and fibula, and lodged in the gastrocnemius muscle at the rise of the tendon Achillies, whereupon examination I easily discovered and extracted it."

After Senter came back to the lower colonies in June of 1776, he returned to Rhode Island and settled down to practice medicine in Cranston. His experiences as the chief doctor for a challenging campaign in the wilderness was sufficient and he did not serve in the Revolutionary War again. In 1776, he increased his reputation when he was appointed Surgeon-General of Rhode Island, which was an important post for a young physician. On November 8, 1778, Senter married Elizabeth (Betsy) Arnold, the daughter of Captain Rhodes Arnold of Pawtucket. Senter moved his young family from Cranston to Newport in 1780, occupying the Rodman House, and practiced medicine there the rest of his life.

As a result of his practice, Senter became one of the more eminent physicians in the state during his lifetime. The range of his activities and interests were extensive and helped him achieve the wide recognition that he enjoyed. He had honorary memberships in several U.S. and European medical societies. He was an active contributor to a number of medical journals of the time and one observer described him as "the earliest writer of note among Rhode Island physicians." He developed an extensive library of medical and scientific books which were donated to the Rhode Island Medical Society in 1881. Senter obtained an honorary M.D. degree from Brown University in 1787 and was on their Board of Trustees until his death. He also received honorary degrees from both Harvard and Yale. The Massachusetts Historical Society elected him a corresponding member and he was a member of the American Philosophical Society.⁵

In George Channing's *Recollections of Newport*, he describes Senter's bedside manner as follows. "Dr. Senter exerted a sort of enchantment when summoned to a sick-bed; if the case demanded only simples, his smile proved more potent than his prescription."⁶ His reputation and status was such that he was friends with and treated the important people in Newport and elsewhere in Rhode Island, including the President of Brown University as indicated below.

⁵ Dr. Senter and His Descendants. *The Magazine of History with Notes & Queries*, Extra # 42 (1916) p. i.

⁶ Abbatt, 383.

Because of his status in Rhode Island and despite his limited term of service in the war of less than one year, Senter was elected early on as the President of the Rhode Island Society of the Cincinnati, the elite organization of officers who served in the Revolution. His reputation was such that he held that position for many years.⁷ He also served as the Director of the Rhode Island Military Hospital from 1794 to his death in 1799. Isaac Senter died in Newport on December 20, 1799, at the young age of 45, leaving a widow and six children.⁸

Senter's Journals

As a result of my research, I found that the better known Isaac Senter journal was first published by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP).⁹ It is the only journal that was transcribed by 2009 so it is the one that has appeared in all of the previous publications of the Senter journal.¹⁰ The second Senter journal, located in the Rhode Island Historical Society¹¹, has never been transcribed or published until it was included in my book.

After its initial publication by HSP, that first Senter manuscript then disappeared for a time but showed up in the middle of the twentieth century in the collection of William Allen Munn, a well known book collector. The Munn collection was donated to the Fordham University library by an anonymous donor on February 26, 1943.

The second manuscript Senter journal, located in the Rhode Island Historical Society, has an interesting provenance. It was discovered by a daughter of former Governor John Brown Francis "among some old papers of her father's." When she realized what it was, she sent the manuscript journal to Senter's granddaughter, Mrs. Crawford Allen. The RIHS manuscript was discovered enclosed in a copy of the HSP journal and for a time it was thought that it was the missing HSP manuscript journal. However, it is clear that the RIHS journal is not the missing journal first published by the HSP. Mrs. Allen presented the manuscript to the Rhode Island Historical Society at its meeting of April 30, 1878.¹²

Two notations in the RIHS manuscript show a connection to Isaac Senter. The first is a note written to Senter by the estate of the Reverend President James

⁷ Magazine of History, i.

⁸ Abbatt, 383.

⁹ See Footnote # 4.

¹⁰ William Allen. *The History of Noddigewock*. (Norridgewock, ME: William Allen, 1849) pp. 76-79; *The Magazine of History with Notes and Queries*, Vol. XI, Extra Number 42 (1916) pp. 85-144; Kenneth Roberts. *March to Quebec*. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1946) pp. 197-246; *Eyewitness Accounts of the American Revolution*.(New York: The New York Times and Arno Press, 1969).

¹¹ Rhode Island Historical Society. Dr. Isaac Senter Papers. MSS 165, Box 2, Folder 6.

¹² *Proceedings of Rhode Island Historical Society* (1877-1878, Special Meeting, April 30, 1878).

Manning, President of Brown University. The note is dated July 28, 1791 and is addressed to Senter. Senter signed the note on the bottom with the words "Errors Excepted." Since Senter was alive in 1791, the note establishes a clear link to him. Senter at that time was the most prominent physician in Rhode Island so it is credible that he would have been treating Manning.

The second notation is a signature of John R. Bartlett on the back page of the journal. Although Bartlett was not yet born when Manning's estate wrote the note to Senter, he does have a connection to Governor John Brown Francis. Bartlett was Secretary of State for Rhode Island from 1855 to 1872. In addition to being active in the political life of Rhode Island, Bartlett was also a former bookseller in New York and a member of several historical and scientific societies. From 1754 until his death in 1886, he was the librarian of the John Carter Brown Library. Bartlett's credibility as a historian is beyond question so his signature on the manuscript is solid evidence that he accepted it as an authentic account by Senter.

H. M. Chapin, the librarian of the RIHS, wrote to publisher William Abbatt in 1915 suggesting that the RIHS manuscript journal is "the original notes which Dr. Senter made during the expedition, or possibly a first draft from those notes, which he may have made upon his return home, and that the (Philadelphia) Ms. is probably his second draft, based either on our Ms. or upon his notes written at a later period."¹³

When I first examined the RIHS manuscript, I realized why no one had bothered to transcribe it. The writing was very hard to decipher because many of the words were either too faded or the handwriting was too illegible to read. In fact, the manuscript contains the warning that this manuscript journal "is very difficult to read." Apparently, all previous researchers were discouraged so no one had attempted to transcribe it. It was one of a few manuscripts of any significant Revolutionary War event that remained untranscribed. Realizing that, I felt that it should be made available to the public to increase awareness of the involvement of Isaac Senter in one of the more notable events of the Revolutionary War.

Description of RIHS Journal

The RIHS journal is unusual because it begins with two pages containing the author's perspective on the conditions that led to the start of the Revolutionary War and the activities that occurred prior to the expedition to Quebec, in none of which had Senter been a major participant. Most journals of the era simply start with the journalist's own personal activities and continue with his recitation regarding what he did or what he observed. Senter chose a different approach, but only in his RIHS manuscript.¹⁴

¹³ *Magazine of History with Notes and Queries*, ii.

¹⁴ All of the RIHS Senter journal entries quoted in this article are taken from this author's transcription of the Senter journal published in his book cited in Footnote # 1, pp. 147-160.

The first two sentences read: “To such a pitch of initiation had the contest arrived between Great Britain & the United Colonies early in the year of 1775, that it was thought necessary by the latter to take the most advantageous & effectual measures to secure our frontiers, bordering on the Lakes of Canada, from the hostile invasions of the English & their savage allies, the northern Indians. Consequently the Garrisons of Ticonderoga & Crown Point, the gates & sluices through which these incursions were to have been made, were of too much importance in the eyes of the Americans, not to attract their early attention.”

Senter describes Benedict Arnold’s involvement in the Quebec expedition. “Colo. Arnold who had shown no common spirit of enterprize as well as attachment to the cause of his country, was the first to solicit the conducting of this extraordinary & hazardous undertaking.

It was accordingly given him an armament selected for 1100 including officers, from the Americans camped at Cambridge, who marched from thence on the 13th of Sept 1775, and arrived on the 15th at Newburyport, which on the 20th sail’d with 11 transports for the mouth of the River Kenebec where they arr’d the next day.”

The expedition was initially divided into three divisions and Senter names the commanders of those divisions. “Capt. Morgan with the three rifle companies constituted the first Division, Lieut. Col. Greene the 2d, & Lt. Col. Enos the third.”

The departure from Fort Western, modern day Augusta, Maine, is considered as the real beginning of the expedition because it was the last significant settlement and from there on it would be untamed wilderness. “Thus arrang’d & equip’t, we left Ft. Western, where the officers had been very entertain’d at Mrs. Howard, a polite, hospitable & excellent family, in the following order: 1. Morgan’s Div. five in the a.m. of the 25th. 2d. Green’s on the 26th, & 3d. Enos’s on the following day.”

The three companies of riflemen from Virginia and Pennsylvania were personally selected by the Commander in Chief General George Washington because of their skills and abilities in woodcraft. Senter recognized this special ability in his journal. “The forward Division of Riflemen who were better acquainted as well with the disadvantages of a life in the wood as well as this kind of inland navigation than the New England troops who made up the two rear ones, did not experience such a deduction in the proportion of their provisions.”

Senter’s unique perspective as the chief physician on the expedition enabled him to write about the conditions that the men encountered on the expedition with a high degree of understanding. ∴ we were entirely dependent upon such water as nature afforded us to supply our wants. There water were not only yellow but very

bitter, which brought on either vomiting or diaherrea, or both to a very considerable part of the army.”

Between the 19th and 22nd of October the expedition was hit by an unusual inland hurricane that dumped a huge amount of water on the boats and men. All of the men who wrote journals mention this weather event because it had such a major impact on the expedition. Senter also provided a description of the impact of the hurricane. “The riv’r from being dead now had become so lively that many of our boats lay submerged almost out of sight. By actual measurement it had risen 8 feet during the night & how much in the day we could not definitively ascertain. In many places the land what was dry the day before now was inundated in many places for miles, especially up such creeks & small streams as emptied themselves into it.”

The expedition to Quebec was organized by Benedict Arnold and George Washington around the concept of using large wooden boats called bateaux to transport the men and the supplies from Fort Western on the Kennebec River to the St. Lawrence River in Canada. Unfortunately, due to time constraints the boats were made with green wood which added to the weight and made the many portages that were encountered that much more difficult. All of the journals mention that great effort involved in carrying these monster boats around the locations where the rivers were too difficult or where falls were existing. In his journal, Senter offers an interesting description of the bateaux. “Our bateaux in gen’l weighed not less than 400 lbs, which with the provisions, we made not less than 800 weight on average, to be transported by 5 or 6 hands over each carrying place. This encumbrance however was easily diminishing as scarcely a day passed without several of the boats being stove to pieces & all or part of their loading lost.”

A unique feature in this Senter journal is that for one two day period, October 20 and 21 he has two entirely different entries. The first sentence of the first entry reads “This day we met Maj’r Bigelow with a detachment of the 2nd Division of the Army returning in pursuit of provisions, who informed us that could proceed no further without.” The first sentence of the second entry reads, “This day we met Maj’r Bigelow & 27 men who were returning from the 2d Division in search of Provisions, & inform’d that the men forward would advance no further without.”

The expedition suffered serious hardships including ever declining food supply and at one point in late October it looked like the entire detachment might starve to death in the wilderness. A journal entry for October 24 describes Senter meeting sick invalids who were worn out and sick and were returning to Cambridge. “... we soon met a number of invalids returning with such accts of the almost starved condition of the advanced parties & the impassable state of the River, that we began to conclude that we had arriv’d at our ne plus ultra.”

One of the most controversial incidents that occurred during the expedition was the decision by Lieutenant Colonel Roger Enos and the men of his division to return to Cambridge en mass due to the deteriorating food supply. As the last division in the march, Enos was carrying the bulk of the food for the expedition. Senter's two journals provide the most detailed account of the decision to return made in the wilderness but not in the presence of the commander Benedict Arnold. The RIHS journal gives this account.

"25th. We had a fall of snow last night of about 2 inches and this morning a request was dispatched to Col. Enos & officers to attend a Council which was to consider ___ at this dismal stage." The council then considered "whether to proceed or return. The party against going on argued that there was no provisions for the whole army to last for 5 days.

When all the officers present voted in the following manner.

Greene's Division

Enos's Division

For going forward.

Lt. Col. Greene
Maj. Bigelow
Capt. Topham
Capt. Thayer
Capt. Ward

Capt. Williams
Capt. McCobb
Capt. Scott
___ Hyde
Lt. Pellis

Col. Enos who was President gave his voice for going on.

Senter then comments on Enos' vote and his true commitment to continue. "It ought not to escape observation that altho" Scott [he means Enos] voted for a part of the army to proceed, yet is very understood both by officers who were of his party as well as by those of Col. Greene's that he had pledged himself not to go forward." Senter goes on to then describe how an impasse was reached on the division of the food supply the Enos division was carrying. "Col. Enos was then call'd upon to give a propitious order for an equal division. He replied that his men were out of his power, & that they had previously determined not to part with any. However, finally concluded to give up 2 ½ barrels of flower & this was all that we could do with them."

It should be noted that due to Benedict Arnold's superb leadership at a difficult time, he was able to lead a small party ahead of the rest and rush to the first French settlement in Canada where provisions were purchased and sent back to assist the rest of the expedition. This heroic act saved the men from starvation and enabled Arnold to arrive in Canada with about 60% of his original force.

The RIHS journal ends with the entry of October 27. "... We now proceeded over this chain of mountains, till we came to a descent & then to 7 Mile Stream which heads into the Chaudier Lake. This carrying place was computed 4 _____. The course of this beautiful little riv'r was about N.E. & S.E. Here we found Capt. Morgan's Division with the rest of the advanced party where we were all to be waiting for the rest of the Detachment to come up."