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# The Other Mystery Shot of the American Revolution: Did Timothy Murphy Kill British Brigadier General Simon Fraser at Saratoga?



Hugh T. Harrington and Jim Jordan

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## Abstract

Most historical accounts of the battle of Saratoga in 1777 credit patriot Timothy Murphy as the soldier who shot British Brigadier General Simon Fraser. However, it took sixty-eight years after the battle for an author to name Murphy as the rifleman, and that version was based on dubious testimony. This article analyzes the various accounts of the battle to determine the origins and validity of the Murphy legend, and its repetition by subsequent historians. Additionally, it examines the ballistics involved in shooting a round ball bullet at the one quarter-mile distance attributed to Murphy and concludes that there is no primary evidence to indicate that Murphy shot Fraser.

The bullet that killed British Brigadier General Simon Fraser is not nearly as famous as the “shot heard ’round the world,” but it was important none the less. While the mysterious gunshot at Lexington Green in 1775 started a war, the one at the second battle of Saratoga gave birth to a legend of mythical proportions.

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By the fall of 1777 the American forces were reeling. The British had taken control of New York City and chased George Washington's army through New York and New Jersey in 1776. Despite Washington's dramatic victories at Trenton and Princeton, the British forged ahead with their Philadelphia campaign in the summer of 1777. They defeated Washington at Brandywine, and marched unopposed into Philadelphia on 26 September, sending the Continental Congress scrambling westward to safer surroundings. Washington's subsequent attack on the British encampment at Germantown a few miles north of Philadelphia on 4 October ended in confusion and defeat for the rebels.

To the north, British Lieutenant General John Burgoyne and his army were seeking to isolate New England from the rest of the colonies. They had won a bloody yet costly battle at Freeman's Farm, close to the bank of the Hudson River below the village of Saratoga (now Schuylerville), against Major General Horatio Gates's army on 19 September. The American troops regrouped quickly, and the British attacked again, albeit in a probing fashion, on 7 October near adjacent, well-fortified Bemis Heights, still believing that a victory would enable them to split off the rebel forces in the north from their compatriots in the south.

As the second Saratoga engagement neared its climax, the Americans, led by Major General Benedict Arnold and Colonel Daniel Morgan, were engaged with the British and German troops. Fraser, struck by a bullet, doubled over in his saddle, mortally wounded. He was quickly led from the field. The Americans rallied, and Burgoyne surrendered his 5,000-man army on 17 October. The ripples of the victory spread far beyond Bemis Heights and Saratoga. Morale soared throughout the states, and the French realized that the rebels could indeed defeat the British and were worth supporting openly. The war entered a new phase.

At the time, and for decades afterwards, no soldier was credited with the shot that killed Fraser. Like so many bullets that kill an enemy in war, their shooters are anonymous. Interestingly, one man claims to have witnessed the firing of the shot—General Fraser himself. According to a letter written by Thomas Anbury, a British officer who was with Fraser as the general lay dying from his wound, “when he had reached his tent, and was recovered a little from the faintness occasioned by loss of blood, he told those around him, that he saw the man who shot him, he was a rifle-man, and up in a tree.”<sup>1</sup> In another letter, from the encampment at Freeman's Farm on 6 October 1777, the day before Fraser was shot, Anbury wrote that “the officers who have been killed and wounded in the late action, are much greater in proportion than that of the soldiers, which must be attributed to the great execution of the rifle-men, who directed their fire against them in particular; in every interval of smoke, they were sure to take off some, as the rifle-men had posted themselves in high trees.”<sup>2</sup>

These letters are the earliest documents that provide a first-hand account of the shooting, although they were not published until 1789. The topic of Fraser's

1. Thomas Anbury, *Travels Through the Interior Parts of America in a Series of Letters* (London: William Lane Publisher, 1789), 439.

2. *Ibid.*, 429.



Brigadier General Simon Fraser

death at Bemis Heights lay dormant for years. With the passage of time, however, historians wrote about the famous battle, and different versions of Fraser's demise evolved. Today, over 230 years later, the mystery still remains: who shot Fraser? A chronological look at the various accounts is helpful in understanding the development of the legend.

In 1809 Roger Lamb published *An Original and Authentic Journal of Occurrences During the Late American War*. Lamb, who fought at Saratoga but was not with Fraser when he was shot or in his tent afterwards<sup>3</sup>, claims that General Fraser, on his deathbed, said he "saw the man who shot him; he was a rifle man, and aimed from a tree," essentially repeating

Anbury's account, although Lamb fails to cite Anbury. Nor does Lamb mention the identity of the shooter.<sup>4</sup>

On 10 November 1835, the *Saratoga Sentinel* published a letter dated 7 October 1835 from Ebenezer Mattoon of Amherst, Massachusetts. Mattoon had been a lieutenant in an artillery company during the battle. He stated that while he was helping a wounded officer leave the field, the "very dense" smoke from gunpowder cleared and he saw that

our infantry appeared to be slowly retreating and the Hessians slowly advancing, their officers urging them on with their hangers [short swords]. Just at that moment, an elderly man, with a long hunting gun, coming up, I said to him, "Daddy, the infantry mustn't leave, I shall be cut to pieces." He replied, "I'll give them another gun." The smoke then rising again, several officers, led by a general, appeared moving to the northward, in rear of the Hessian line. The old man, at that instant, discharged his gun, and the general officer pitched forward on the neck of his horse, and instantly they all wheeled about, the old man observing, "I have killed that officer, let him be who he will." I replied, "you have, and it is a general officer, and by his dress I believe it is Fraser."<sup>5</sup>

3. Don N. Hagist, *A British Soldier's Story, Roger Lamb's Narrative of the American Revolution* (Baraboo, Wis.: Ballindalloch Press, 2004), i–iii, and 50–51.

4. Roger Lamb, *An Original and Authentic Journal of Occurrences During the Late American War, From its Commencement to the Year 1783* (Dublin: Wilkinson & Courtney, 1809; repr., New York: Arno Press, 1968), 178.

5. Ebenezer Mattoon letter published in *Saratoga Sentinel*, 10 November 1835, reprinted in *The Campaign of Lieut. Gen. John Burgoyne and the Expedition of Lieut. Col. Barry St. Leger*, by William L. Stone (Albany, N.Y.: Joel Munsell publisher, 1877; repr., New York: Da Capo Press, 1970), 369–74.

The next published account appeared in 1845, sixty-eight years after the battle. Jephtha R. Simms, a New York historian, in his *History of Schoharie County and Border Wars of New York*, writes that Daniel Morgan, an American officer serving under Benedict Arnold and leading the troops in the fight, “selected a few of his best marksmen” and “instructed to make Fraser their especial mark . . . Timothy Murphy . . . was one of the riflemen selected.” As Fraser came into range, each had “a chance to fire, and some of them more than once, before a favorable opportunity presented for Murphy; but when it did, the effect was soon manifest. The gallant general was riding upon a gallop when he received the fatal ball, and after a few bounds of his charger, fell, mortally wounded.” Simms states that “the fact that Murphy shot Gen. Fraser, was communicated to the writer by a son of the former,” but Simms does not give details regarding the name of the son, when or how the son learned of the story, or any other information surrounding the event, or Murphy’s retelling of it. In the preface to his book, Simms says that he began his research in 1837 from “the lips of many hoary-headed persons of intelligence then living, whom I visited at their dwellings.” It is supposed that the unnamed son of Timothy Murphy is one such person.<sup>6</sup> As far as can be determined, this is the first published account naming Timothy Murphy as the man who fired the shot that killed Fraser.

Two years later, an article in a magazine not only names Murphy as the probable marksman, but also identifies his weapon, although no source is given for that bit of information: “In relation to the death wound of Gen. Frazer, it is generally believed to have been from Timothy Murphy, a celebrated marksman, with a double rifle, whose aim was unerring as fate.”<sup>7</sup>

In 1853 the *Virginia Historical Register* published a letter written by a British officer named Joseph Graham (not to be confused with James Graham, a biographer of Daniel Morgan) dated 28 November 1781. Graham had been taken prisoner by the patriots during the battle and claims to have spoken with Morgan afterwards. Graham wrote that Morgan had informed him that

I saw that they were led by an officer on a grey horse—a devilish brave fellow; so, when we took the height a second time, says I to one of my best shots, says I, you get up into that there tree, and single out him on the white horse. Dang it, ’twas no sooner said than done. On came the British again, with the grey horseman leading; but his career was short enough this time. I jist tuck my eyes off him for a moment, and when I turned them to the place where he had been—pooh, he was gone!<sup>8</sup>

6. Jephtha R. Simms, *History of Schoharie County and Border Wars of New York* (Albany, N.Y., 1845; repr., Bowie, Md.: Heritage Books, 1991), v and 259.

7. N. C. Brooks, “The Fields of Stillwater and Saratoga, in Part From Original Documents,” *Graham’s American Monthly Magazine of Literature, Art, and Fashion* 30, issue 4 (April 1847): 211.

8. Joseph Graham, “A Recollection of the American Revolutionary War,” *Virginia Historical Register* 6 (1853): 209–11.



*This U.S. Army Center of Military History poster, "Saratoga, 7 October 1777," depicts the legendary scene in which Daniel Morgan ordered one of his riflemen to shoot Fraser.*

According to Joseph Graham's version, Morgan ordered only one man to shoot Fraser, and he does not supply the rifleman's name.

In 1856 James Graham penned *The Life of General Daniel Morgan of the Virginia Line of the Army of the United States*. Graham had married one of Morgan's great-granddaughters and, one would suspect, had access to oral family history as well as Morgan's papers. Graham describes the shooting of Fraser (which Graham spells with a "z"), by a group of twelve riflemen without referencing a source for this version of the story:

Selecting twelve of his best marksmen, he [Morgan] led them to a suitable position, when, having pointed out to them the doomed officer, he told them to kill him when next he came within reach of their rifles. "He is a brave man; but he must die"—the only observation which fell from Morgan's lips besides his directions to his men—betrayed the struggle of generosity with duty in his breast. He afterwards said, that he attentively and somewhat anxiously observed his marksmen, when, a few minutes having elapsed, and Fraser re-appearing within gun-shot of them, he saw them all raise their rifles and, taking deliberate aim, fire.<sup>9</sup>

In 1877 William L. Stone published *The Campaign of Lieut. Gen. John Burgoyne and the Expedition of Lieut. Col. Barry St. Leger*. The shooting of Fraser is mentioned several times in this volume. Stone quotes a letter dated 31 October 1827, written by Samuel Woodruff, Esq., of Windsor, Connecticut, to Colonel

9. James Graham, *The Life of General Daniel Morgan of the Virginia Line of the Army of the United States* (New York: Derby & Jackson, 1856; repr., Bloomingburg, N.Y.: Zebrowski Historical Services Publishing Company, 1993), 162–63.

William L. Stone (the author's father). Woodruff, who apparently participated in the battle, visited the battlefield on 17 October 1827, and wrote that Benedict Arnold informed Morgan,

“that officer upon a grey horse is of himself a host, and must be disposed of. Direct the attention of some of the sharpshooters among your riflemen to him.” Morgan, nodding his assent to Arnold, repaired to his riflemen, and made known to them the hint given by Arnold. Immediately upon this, the crupper of the grey horse was cut off by a rifle bullet, and within the next minute another passed through the horse's mane, a little back of his ears. An aid [sic] of Fraser noticing this, observed to him, “Sir, it is evident that you are marked out for particular aim; would it not be prudent for you to retire from this place?” Fraser replied, “my duty forbids me to fly from danger,” and immediately received a bullet through his body.<sup>10</sup>

Woodruff does not indicate the source of this information or mention a rifleman's name, but it is consistent with the most common account of the story, that one of Morgan's men shot Fraser.

But in the same book, Stone repeats the Fraser story twice more, and invokes the name of Timothy Murphy as the sharpshooter. In the first instance, Stone writes that Fraser was

conspicuously mounted on an iron grey horse, he was all activity and vigilance, riding from one part of the division to another, and animating the troops by his example. Perceiving that the fate of the day rested upon that officer, Morgan, who, with his riflemen, was immediately opposed to Fraser's corps, took a few of his sharpshooters aside, among whom was the celebrated marksman Tim Murphy, men on whose precision of aim he could rely, and said to them, “that gallant officer yonder is General Fraser; I admire and respect him, but it is necessary for our good that he should die. Take your station in that cluster of bushes and do your duty.” Within a few moments, a rifle ball cut the crouper of Fraser's horse, and another passed through his horse's mane. Calling his attention to this, Fraser's aide said, “It is evident that you are marked out for particular aim; would it not be prudent for you to retire from this place?” Fraser replied, “my duty forbids me to fly from danger.” The next moment he fell mortally wounded by a ball from the rifle of Murphy.<sup>11</sup>

Stone uses practically the same wording as in the Woodruff letter above, but inserts Murphy's name into the event without any citation for Murphy's involvement.

Further in the same volume, Stone quotes Charles Neilson, whose father served at Saratoga, as saying, “The soldier who shot General Fraser was Timothy Murphy, a Virginian, who belonged to Morgan's rifle corps.” Neilson provides no source that names Murphy as the marksman.<sup>12</sup>

10. Stone, *Campaign of Burgoyne*, 324–27.

11. *Ibid.*, 61–62.

12. *Ibid.*, 249.

Stone also discusses the Mattoon version of the incident, and appends a footnote stating, “Still, there seems no doubt that Murphy, by the orders of Morgan, shot Fraser; see [Benjamin] Silliman’s visit in the Appendix where he speaks of Morgan having told his friend, Hon. Richard Brent, to this effect.” Silliman, a professor at Yale, toured the battlefield in 1820. While he was not a participant in the battle, his guide, Major Buel, was. Silliman subsequently wrote about his tour.<sup>13</sup>

However, the account to which Stone refers reads: “The following anecdote, related to me at Ballston Springs, in 1797, by the Hon. Richard Brent, then a member of Congress, from Virginia, who derived the fact from General Morgan’s own mouth.” Allegedly,

Colonel Morgan took a few of his best riflemen aside; men in whose fidelity, and fatal precision of aim, he could repose the most perfect confidence, and said to them: “that gallant officer is General Fraser; I admire and respect him, but it is necessary that he should die—take your stations in that wood and do your duty.” Within a few moments General Fraser fell, mortally wounded.<sup>14</sup>

Nowhere does Silliman’s account say that Morgan told anyone that Murphy fired the shot. In fact, Murphy is not mentioned at all.

Although the account by Jephtha Simms in *History of Schoharie County* is the only one before 1877 naming Murphy as the man who shot Fraser, based on an interview with a son of Murphy an indeterminate number of years after the event, Stone repeats it as historical fact, ignoring other accounts that do not name an individual. Stone followed Simms’s lead, perpetuating the hypothesis that Murphy was the man who shot Fraser.

At this point, 100 years after the battle, there are at least three different versions of the Fraser shooting including an elderly man with a hunting gun, a marksman named Timothy Murphy, anonymous riflemen in Morgan’s unit, and perhaps others.

However, almost all subsequent renditions of the shooting of Fraser repeat the “Murphy” version, with minor additions and variations. In 1883 Simms wrote another book, *The Frontiersmen of New York Showing Customs of the Indians, Vicissitudes of the Pioneer White Settlers, and Border Strife in Two Wars, With a Great Variety of Romantic and Thrilling Stories Never Before Published*. The shooting of Fraser is re-told in the customary manner, with Simms adding two unnamed Murphy daughters plus an unnamed Murphy son as original sources.<sup>15</sup> In 1895 William L. Stone published another book, *Visits to the Saratoga Battle-Grounds 1780–1880*, claiming that

13. Ibid., 374.

14. Ibid., 384–86.

15. Jephtha R. Simms, *The Frontiersmen of New York Showing Customs of the Indians, Vicissitudes of the Pioneer White Settlers, and Border Strife in Two Wars, With a Great Variety of Romantic and Thrilling Stories Never Before Published*, vol. 2 (Albany, N.Y.: George C. Riggs, Publisher, 1883), 126.

Murphy himself was positive he shot Fraser.<sup>16</sup> In 1961 Don Higginbotham wrote *Daniel Morgan, Revolutionary Rifleman*, and describes Murphy's weapon as a double-barreled rifle. Higginbotham erroneously reports that, "Morgan told Graham of the shooting of General Fraser by his rifleman Timothy Murphy," when in fact Graham did not mention any rifleman by name. Higginbotham quotes Graham but inserts Murphy's name in brackets: "Says I to one of my best shots [Murphy], says I, you get up into that there tree . . ." <sup>17</sup> Finally, Richard M. Ketchum, in his 1997 book, *Saratoga, Turning Point of the Revolutionary War*, essentially repeats Higginbotham's version without citing any sources.<sup>18</sup>

Evidently, sometime in 2004 it was noticed that a powder horn in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art had a carving stating, "Saw Tim Murfy plug Gen Frazer at near ¼ mile." The horn allegedly belonged to one Valentine Prentice of Sandisfield, Massachusetts, who was a sergeant in Captain Peter Page's Company at the battle of Bemis Heights. It seemed as if a first-hand account identifying Murphy as the man who shot General Fraser actually existed.

However, Stephen V. Grancsay, Curator of Arms and Armor of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in his book, *American Engraved Powder Horns, A Study Based on the J. H. Grenville Gilbert Collection*, writes of the powder horn, "This horn is old . . . but the engraving is considered modern." He then lists the horn as a forgery, dashing the hopes of the Murphy advocates.<sup>19</sup>

As the Murphy legend grew, so did the magnitude of his marksmanship skills. Not only did he supposedly shoot Fraser, but he did so from a quarter-mile distance according to William Stone, in his *Campaign of Burgoyne*, in 1877, 100 years after the battle. Stone gives no source or justification for this distance.<sup>20</sup>

The standard smoothbore musket of the period was effective at "whites of the eyes" distance. Beyond 50 yards, accuracy decreased to the point that the likelihood of hitting a man-sized target at 100 yards was remote. At 150 yards a hit would be purely by chance. Rifles were effective on man-sized targets to 150–200 yards.

Accurate shooting at a distance such as a quarter mile would be an unbelievable feat, even for a man purportedly as skilled as Murphy. First, Fraser said that he saw a man in a tree fire at him, a virtual visual impossibility from a quarter mile. Second, an accurate shot at this range with the firearms of the day would be remarkable. A rifle from the era of the War for Independence would most likely have been "sighted in" (by filing the sights) at 100 yards, as most combat was fought well within that distance. The reason for this "sighting" is that the ball is not efficient

16. William L. Stone, *Visits to the Saratoga Battle-Grounds 1780–1880* (Albany, N.Y., 1895; repr., Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1970), 246.

17. Don Higginbotham, *Daniel Morgan, Revolutionary Rifleman* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), 73–74 and 170–71.

18. Richard M. Ketchum, *Saratoga, Turning Point of America's Revolutionary War* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1997), 400.

19. Stephen V. Grancsay, *American Engraved Powder Horns, A Study Based on the J. H. Grenville Gilbert Collection* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1945), 20, 40.

20. Stone, *Campaign of Burgoyne*, 62.



aerodynamically and would lose velocity as soon as it left the muzzle of the rifle. If the rifle was sighted in at 100 yards and the target was at 75 yards, the point of impact would be a bit less than 2 inches higher than the point of aim. This would be acceptable on a man-sized target.<sup>21</sup>

However, the difference between the point of aim and the point of impact of the bullet when fired at a target at 440 yards would be far greater. By using an exterior ballistics computer program, and making some logical assumptions, it is possible to determine the path of a ball fired from that distance. For example, let us assume a 50-caliber rifle firing a round ball with a muzzle velocity of 1,750 feet per second. If the target was 150 yards away, the point of impact would be 9 inches lower than the point of aim. But at 200 yards the bullet would drop almost 30 inches. To compensate, the rifleman would have to aim perhaps 2 feet above the target to get a hit. To strike a target at 440 yards, a rifleman would have to aim more than 28 feet above the target. If he mistakenly estimated the distance to be 425 yards, when the actual distance was 440 yards the rifleman would not aim high enough and the ball would hit the ground in front of the target. Due to the very high trajectory (parabola) at these distances, the ball would fall 19 feet below point of aim to hit a target at 425 yards but would fall 28 feet below point of aim in order to hit a target at 440 yards. An additional difficulty was that Fraser was likely not a stationary target, requiring the rifleman to “lead” the horse and rider.

These calculations do not take into consideration other factors such as the effect of the wind on the trajectory. A side wind of only five miles per hour would drift the ball over 5 feet to the side of the target at a quarter-mile distance. Not even the best marksman could hit a target in battle conditions at such extreme distances other than by chance.

Is it possible to say with any certainty who shot Fraser? It might have been the old man who assisted Ebenezer Mattoon. Mattoon claims the shot was 66 yards. An accurate shot could surely be delivered from that distance. Fraser claimed he saw the man who shot him, and he may indeed have seen a distant soldier in a tree with a rifle aimed at him, while being struck with the old man’s bullet.

Of course, it might have been Murphy who fired the fatal shot. He might have been dispatched to a tree with other marksmen to dispose of General Fraser. But the shot that struck Fraser could have come from any of hundreds or even thousands of participants of the battle. We simply do not know based on the available evidence, and unsubstantiated reports decades after the battle took place do not provide reason to conclude otherwise.

One thing is certain: Murphy’s involvement has been so often repeated by historians that the legend is bound to live on despite the lack of solid historical evidence.

21. All references to ballistics and calculations of bullet trajectory are obtained through *Infinity Six*, Exterior Ballistics Software, Sierra Bullets, Sedalia, Missouri, 2008.

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