

BRITISH SPY HANGED IN HURLEY AFTER "SILVER BULLET" TRIAL

By Don Kent

He was the victim of too many coincidences. In the end, 225 years ago, he dangled on a rope flung over a bough of a sweet apple tree here in Hurley.

His name was Daniel Taylor, a British lieutenant convicted of spying by his American captors though he insisted he wasn't a spy but was only carrying a message, innocuous in content, to British General Burgoyne at Saratoga. British General Henry Clinton, making his way up the river from British occupied New York City, had dashed off a short note -- on thin tissue -- to Burgoyne and stuffed it into a silver capsule and screwed it together in the middle. Because it was "about the size of a fusee bullet" according to American General George Clinton, someone later referred to it as a "silver Bullet"; and that description has persisted for two centuries. The message would have been worthless to Burgoyne, and similarly of no use to Americans.

"Thee Spy House", known as the DuMond House, is most recently dated by Hurley Town Historian David Baker, as before 1700". During the Revolutionary War, the Continental Army used it as a guardhouse; so it was not unusual that Lieutenant Daniel Taylor was being held here when Kingston was burned by British troops October 16, 1777

A week earlier Taylor had been convicted at New Windsor of spying near Continental Army headquarters, down river about 30 miles. Sentenced to hang, Taylor was marched north to the guardhouse in Hurley where he was probably held in the cellar along with two dozen other prisoners. The cellar walls are about three feet thick and the dungeon-like rooms, still dank and dismal, made ideal cells in those days.

As Kingston was burning, General George Clinton ordered Taylor to be hanged "when the troops are paraded and before they march tomorrow morning." But the hanging was delayed until the next day, October 18, possibly because the whole town was busy taking care of Kingston's refugees. Burgoyne surrendered that same day, so the whole episode left Taylor the victim of one of wartime's quirks of fate.

Taylor most likely wasn't a spy but a messenger carrying a short innocuous note from General Henry Clinton to fellow General Burgoyne at Saratoga. The message was stuffed into a small silver capsule, and when captured, Taylor swallowed the ball which was recovered after he was given an emetic. The capsule is now prominently displayed at Fort Ticonderoga.

General Henry Clinton's message to Burgoyne, dated October 8, 1777 came from Fort Montgomery.

"Nous y voici and nothing now between us but Gates. I sincerely hope this little success of ours may facilitate your operations. In answer to your letter of the 28th of September by C.C. I shall only say, I cannot presume to order or even advise, for obvious reasons. I heartily wish you success."

The attempt by General Burgoyne and General Henry Clinton to split the colonies in two by taking control of the Hudson River Valley ended with Burgoyne's defeat at Saratoga, the momentous "turning point of the Revolution." The story of Hurley's Spy House is now a footnote in that history as is Lieutenant Daniel Taylor, of Captain Stewart's Company, 9th Regiment, British Army. As for the pleasant little greeting, and chit-chat from Clinton to Burgoyne. it was hardly worth the final cost.