

DAVID WOOSTER

A GENERAL OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Lyman D. Wooster

Grandson Tyler Wooster and his elementary school project on David Wooster revived my long dormant interest in investigating the life and military career of our distant relative. This biography is the result of my research, for which Tyler is in no way responsible.

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GENERAL DAVID WOOSTER

In the 1950s upon reading Douglas Southall Freeman's multi-volume biography of George Washington my interest was especially attracted to those passages in which the name of General David Wooster appeared and often unfavorably so. In brief, the biographer gave the impression that General Washington thought very little of Wooster as a Revolutionary War general. I informed my father of this critical assessment and cautioned him about claiming, at least boastfully, any relationship to General David Wooster, a message he passed on to one of his sisters who was something of a genealogist. She resented my comments and pointed out that David Wooster was a collateral ancestor, an uncle X-generations removed; that he had been mortally wounded in the Battle of Ridgefield in 1777; and that he had married the daughter of the president of Yale College -- none of which dealt with his generalship. That family issue, such as it was, lay dormant for many years, until I became a volunteer at Hilton Head Island's Heritage Library, which provides ready access to a wealth of genealogical and historical material. There one day, I came upon information that suggested further research into the life of David Wooster might be profitable, not so much as a family matter -- the disputatious aunt having died years ago -- but as a footnote to colonial and Revolutionary War history.

My aunt, I discovered, had been correct on two points: David Wooster had married the daughter of the President of Yale and he had been mortally wounded. The judgment that he was an uncle is disputable; to have been an uncle our ancestor would have had to be a brother of David and that does not appear to have been the case. The two men were probably first cousins. More important was the discovery of some adverse comments

regarding David Wooster's character. In the Dictionary of American Biography the following words and phrases were used to describe him: tactless, hearty rather than firm with his undisciplined troops, brutal toward the civilian population in Montreal, dull and uninspired, garrulous about his thirty years of service, and displaying "incapacities . . . with which Washington was in guarded agreement." On the other hand, Henry C. Deming in his lengthy oration at the dedication in 1854 of a monument to Wooster said he was "equal to any in courage, in patriotism, in generosity, in zeal for liberty, in that true magnanimity which can forget all personal slights and affronts in her great cause"; and "second only to Putnam in the length, variety, and hardship of his martial labors." All of which encouraged me to find out more about the man -- using the somewhat limited sources available here on Hilton Head Island. The information at hand is for the most part what others have said about him, not what could be called original material.

David Wooster and my direct ancestor were the grandsons of Edward Wooster, who has been described as the progenitor of American Woosters, or at least of our branch of the family tree. Edward was born in Buckinghamshire, England in 1622 and migrated to America in 1642, settling first in Milford, Connecticut, and moving to Derby in 1654 for the specific purpose of raising hops. He and his first wife had five children, and his second wife, Tabitha Tomlinson, whom he married in 1669, also had five. Edward died in 1680. One of Edward's second group of five children was Abraham, a weaver by trade and said to be well-to-do. After Abraham's marriage to Mary Walker in 1699, they settled in Stratford where their children -- Ruth, Joseph, Sarah, Mary, Hannah, and David -- were born. A biography of David Wooster in the National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans describes Abraham and Mary as "very respectable parents."

David Wooster's early years have been made obscure to biographers because family papers were destroyed by British troops in 1779 when they pillaged the Wooster home in New Haven. It has been frequently recorded, however, that he was born on March 2 either in 1710 or 1711 and that he graduated from Yale College in 1738. The following year was the first of many years of public service. He was appointed a lieutenant and served in the Spanish War, also known as the War of Jenkins' Ear, that broke out in 1739. Jenkins was captain of a British ship and he claimed that Spanish coastguards had cut off his ear in 1731. He exhibited the detached ear in the House of Commons and the display so aroused public opinion that the government declared war in 1739, a war that fundamentally was one involving commercial rivalry between England and Spain and one that subsequently merged into the War of Austrian Succession. Wooster served first as a lieutenant on the sloop "Defense" then became captain of that ship; it patrolled the coast from Connecticut to Virginia without incident from 1741 to 1743. The war in the New World was confined largely to the southern-most American colonies and the Caribbean.

The late winter and the spring of 1745 was a key period in the life of David Wooster for on March 6 he was joined in matrimony to Mary Clap, daughter of the Rev. Thomas Clap, president of Yale College, and a month later he joined the Connecticut contingent that sailed northward to participate in the attack on Canada's Fort Louisbourg. It was also about this time that he purchased a home in New Haven on the street that now bears his name.

Mary Clap was 16 years of age when she and David Wooster were married and her qualities are described by Samuel Orcott in his History of the Old Town of Derby, Connecticut, 1642-1880: "The properties of this lady's understanding and of her heart

were such as are rarely found in the same person. The powers of her mind were strong, active and firm. These were awakened, enlightened and enlarged by an early, uniform and well regulated education. Her understanding was enriched by a great variety of useful information. Her knowledge of New England, particularly Connecticut, was extensive and minute. She was conversant with all the historical and natural curiosities of this country. Her society was much sought, and her conversation much employed by persons of literature. The pleasure in noting these characteristics would be much less than it is were we obliged to stop here. What most distinguished, most adorned and most ennobled her was the gospel of the son of God. . . . She was charitable to the poor, sympathetic to the afflicted, and benevolent to all. . . . Her light seemed to be truly that of the just, which shineth more and more until the perfect day.”

As for the siege of Louisbourg, the “Gibraltar of America” had become a source of severe annoyance to colonial fishing boats and their crews working the Grand Banks. Massachusetts’ Governor Shirley rather easily persuaded the leaders of other New England colonies to join in taking action against this curse. The British also contributed naval forces to the expedition against Louisbourg, the one event in North America associated with King George’s War, a European conflict between Britain and France. Wooster was appointed a captain in Colonel Burr’s regiment, and “proved himself an active and spirited officer, and bore a distinguished part in the siege and capture of that strong fortress.” North America’s Gibraltar surrendered on June 19, 1745 -- only to be restored to France by the Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1748.

Deming, in his 1854 oration, tells the following story of an incident involving Capt. Wooster during the siege: “A British captain ventured to apply his ratan [a stick or switch

made of the tough stems of palms] quite freely to the shoulders of one of Captain Wooster's men, a respectable freeholder and church-member from Connecticut. Wooster remonstrated with the regular for so grossly abusing official superiority. The Briton resented this advice in unmeasured terms, and finally drew his sword to chastise the adviser upon the spot. Wooster successfully parried his thrusts and speedily disarmed him. Applying his own sword to his adversary's breast, he told him that the life he had just forfeited could only be redeemed by asking pardon and promising that he would never again disgrace with a blow, any soldier in the service.. The terms were accepted without a parley. The jeers of his companions soon drove the officer from the army, while Wooster won the title of the soldier's protector and friend."

Wooster's record in the Louisbourg adventure -- details regarding his record have not been recorded by his biographers -- prompted his superiors to select him to take command of a cartel ship (one carrying prisoners of war for exchange) and sail to England. He would have gone to France as well but the French would not grant permission to land. In England, Wooster immediately became popular with the people for his well-publicized military exploits, and he was presented at court. There, the king (George II) made him a member of the regular military service and presented him with a captaincy in Sir William Pepperel's regiment with half pay for life.

Back in Connecticut, he returned to private life in New Haven and to his wife; a son (Thomas) was born in 1752 and a daughter (Mary) in 1755. One source notes that there were four children born to the Woosters; evidently two children died in infancy. Upon his return from England, Wooster procured from the Provincial Grand Lodge of Massachusetts a charter under which Hiram Lodge was founded, the first lodge of Free

Masonry in Connecticut -- and incidentally a lodge which Benedict Arnold joined in 1763. Wooster was a devout Christian and as such he occasionally officiated as a chaplain to his troops.

Wooster's civilian status and his role as a merchant were short lived. Efforts in 1750 by British and French representatives to settle territorial disputes in North America failed and a few years later the French and Indian War began. Fighting in the early 1750s occurred in western Pennsylvania, in New York state, and in Canada, but war was not declared until 1756. Wooster immediately became much involved; he was appointed a colonel and commanded a regiment raised in Connecticut, and subsequently took over a brigade and thus became a brigadier general.

Deming's account of a 1757 battle (probably in the vicinity of Ticonderoga or Crown Point) in which Col. Wooster participated is worth quoting: "Abercrombie, whom they afterward described as 'one a child could outwit and a popgun terrify' was the imbecile dispatched by the ministry to conduct this campaign. Reckless of everything but his own personal safety, without waiting for his artillery, he pushed forward the flower of his troops, over brushwork, stumps of trees, and all sorts of rubbish, to storm a breastwork of logs, bristling with swivels, and flanked by cannon, behind which Montcalm, the bravest of the brave, lay, with thirty-six hundred French and Canadians. The result can be readily foreseen; swivels and small arms mowed down officers and men. Courage and intrepidity only rendered the carnage more terrible. Wooster led his regiment into the thickest of the storm. They stood up to the butchery with unfaltering pluck, and his own escape was one of the miracles of the battlefield. After this prodigal sacrifice of life to his incompetency, Abercrombie emerged from a saw-mill, two miles from the field, where he had been safely

ensconced during the action, and in the extremest fright and consternation, hurried his troops back to the foot of Lake George.“ Deming notes that before the next campaign opened, fortunately for the English dominion in America, and for the great interests of human freedom, the ministry had placed at the helm a man born to command: General Amherst.

In May 1759, Col. Wooster and his regiment of Connecticut men joined an army under General Amherst that forced the French to evacuate Ticonderoga and Crown Point and finally, along with Wolfe’s conquest of Quebec, brought Canada under British control. This was a summertime (1759) campaign that required Col. Wooster and his regiment to undertake “one of the longest and most laborious marches recorded in our military annals,” so said Deming in his oration. Wooster’s unit and others made their way through upper New York state, at that time largely unsettled, and then across Lake Ontario to Montreal where Amherst’s forces surrounded the unfortified city. It surrendered in September. Meanwhile, Quebec had fallen to the British, so that with Montreal’s capitulation the Paris Peace Treaty of 1763 confirmed Briton’s possession of Canada.

The peace also permitted David Wooster to enjoy civilian life for the next 12 years. He returned to his home in New Haven, engaged in a profitable mercantile business, drew a salary as His Majesty’s collector of the customs of the Port of New Haven, and received half-pay as a captain in His Majesty’s service. In short, he was quite well off financially and possessed the numerous comforts that wealth could provide. He had the pleasures of a charming and much admired wife, of the company of an adoring daughter and of a son, and of visits from friends, many of whom he had acquired through his years of military service.

The dozen years of domestic tranquility and financial prosperity came to an end with the action in the spring of 1775 at Lexington and Concord. Wooster rejected an offer to serve as a high ranking officer in the British Army; instead, he resigned his captaincy with its pay and offered his military services and his personal wealth to the State of Connecticut and to the Continental Congress.

The Connecticut General Assembly prepared for war by arming and equipping six regiments and appointing David Wooster major general and commander-in-chief, and naming Joseph Spencer and Israel Putnam brigadiers. In a letter dated June 23, 1775, Robert Sherman, a Connecticut representative in the Continental Congress sitting in Philadelphia, informed Wooster of general officer appointments in the Continental service. He noted that George Washington was commander-in-chief and that Ward, Lee, Schuyler, and Putnam were major generals and that Pomeroy, Montgomery, Wooster, Heath, Spencer, Thomas, Sullivan (N. H.) and Green (Rhode Island) were -- in that order -- given the rank of brigadier. Spencer added: "I am sensible that, according to your former rank you were entitled to the place of a major general; and as one was to be appointed in Connecticut, I heartily recommended you to the Congress. . . . But, as General Putnam's fame was spread abroad, and especially his successful enterprise at Noddle's Island, the account of which had just arrived, it gave him a preference in the opinion of the delegates in general, so that his appointment was unanimous among the colonies."

Wooster was not pleased to have a former subordinate (Putnam) and a junior officer (Schuyler) appointed to major generalships, and to receive only a brigadiership for himself. He replied to Sherman, according to Deming, as follows: "No man feels more sensibly for

his distressed country, nor would more readily exert his utmost effort for its defense than myself. My life has been ever devoted to her service, from my youth up, though never before in a cause like this, a cause for which I would most cheerily risk, nay, lay down my life. Thirty years I have served as a soldier; my character was never impeached, nor called in question before. The Congress have seen fit, for what reason I know not, to point me out as the only officer among all that have been commissioned in the different colonies, who is unfit for the post assigned him. The subject is a very delicate one." He briefly considered rejecting his appointment, but Wooster accepted his commission, and upon receiving a letter, dated June 17, 1775, directing him and his Connecticut troops to go to New York, he began moving his troops as directed.

One of the criticisms of Wooster noted earlier was that he was "garrulous about his thirty years of service." If his responding letter is an example of being excessively talkative about trivial matters then it would seem it is the criticism that was excessive rather than David Wooster's reaction to being passed over. At age 65 in 1775, he was 20 years older than George Washington and most of the men who had been designated major general, a factor that might well have influenced Congress in its assignments. Wooster himself would have considered age irrelevant; and he did not refer to the matter of age as a reason for being passed over. He simply noted that Congress evidently considered him not fit to be a major general. Also unmentioned by Wooster -- but referred to by John Adams -- is the provincial politics that prevailed in Congress, an anti-New England view held by the representative of mid-Atlantic and southern colonies. Wooster and his Connecticut troops reciprocated; they mistrusted the New Yorkers and, as we shall see, disliked the assignment of protecting New York from English intrusions.

The month before, in May of 1775, Wooster and a few others in the Connecticut General Assembly planned an expedition to seize Ticonderoga from the British. He and they privately obtained a loan of \$1800 from the state treasury to finance the campaign for which they became financially responsible. On May 10, the fort was surprised and conquered by Ethan Allen and Benedict Arnold and their troops. Samuel Orcutt comments that "This step, one of the boldest taken at that period of the contest, was at the sole risk and responsibility of Gen. Wooster and other individuals."

The Connecticut unit's stay in New York was brief and apparently of little consequence for most accounts of the period -- the summer of 1775 -- in the life of David Wooster are brief if noted at all. A collection of the public letters written by David Wooster between April 1775 and 1777 (the year of his death) reveal his various locations on Long Island and his military role there. He was in Harlem on July 22 and making arrangements to move his unit to Albany. On August 9 he wrote from Oyster Pond, noting that the English "had taken cattle, sheep, etc. from Fisher's Island." Five days later he reported from Oyster Pond that he had taken cattle and sheep from Plumb Island, and he concluded by reporting that "tomorrow I shall go to Gardiner's Island." In late August Wooster wrote to General Washington, the subject of the letter having to do with the disposition of his troops; General Schuyler had ordered Wooster's unit to join their regiment at Ticonderoga in preparation for an assault on Canada, while local inhabitants (New Yorkers) wanted Wooster's troops to remain and protect them.

The collection of letters written by Washington, Schuyler, and Wooster make clear a growing contentiousness involving the latter two men. Transferring troops to Schuyler's command was probably preferable to the Connecticut militiamen than to be serving under

New York politicians: at one point Wooster declared he had no faith in the New Yorkers' honesty in the cause and he suspected trickery. Such comments no doubt fueled the dispute between the two men, Schuyler being a New Yorker from the Albany area.

General Schuyler was a commanding figure: slender but well-muscled. He evidently was courteous to his equals but not to men he considered to be of a lesser station. An historian, Christopher Ward, in his The War of the Revolution, had this to add to his assessment of Schuyler: "In depth and breadth of mind, in stability of intention, in firm decisiveness to plan and to execute, in the ability to meet a confused situation, discern its essentials and expend his energies upon them only, Schuyler was somewhat deficient. . . . He was wrongly placed as a military officer; his proper place was at the council table."

This apparently was the nature of the man who was Wooster's immediate superior during America's ill-fated military move against Canada. Ward states that there were no orders or directions to invade Canada, but Congress on June 27, 1775 recommended "aggressive movement if Gen. Schuyler should find it practical and not disagreeable to the Canadians." Problems between the two men went beyond their personality differences; there were intercolonial jealousies as well. Some of Wooster's Connecticut men, according to Ward, refused to adhere to the New Yorkers' orders until Wooster was present.

Deming, in his oration, reported that Wooster on his way from the New York City area to Ticonderoga had "provoked the enmity of his immediate chief" by permitting some of his men to return home on furlough and by ordering a general court-martial for offenses during the brigade's march. These actions Schuyler considered a presumption of his authority and he so informed Wooster, who replied that his men were under Connecticut

martial law and thus subject to his authority. As for military etiquette, Wooster declared that no disrespect was intended. Schuyler was not appeased. He demanded to know if Wooster considered himself above General Montgomery in rank, to which Wooster replied, "I have the cause of my country too much at heart to attempt to make any difficulties." He cooperated fully with Montgomery and actually considered him a personal friend.

The two generals, Montgomery and Wooster, led their forces against Canada's St. John's, which capitulated, after which they marched on Montreal. Then, Wooster remained in command of the troops holding Montreal while Montgomery moved on Quebec where he was killed during the December 31, 1775 assault on that city. Montgomery's death left Wooster in command of the American army of 2,000 men, of which more than half were unfit for duty: many were physically ailing (small pox was rampant); most were underpaid and desertions were common; and winter clothing was lacking as was equipment such as artillery. To attack Quebec with such a force was impractical so a siege was begun. The difficult situation was made more so because Wooster was again bedeviled by Schuyler, and acrimonious correspondence between the two men led them both to refer their grievances to Congress.

The Dictionary of Canadian Biography says that "Wooster had embarked on a series of arbitrary and ill-judged actions over the winter of 1775-76 which broke most of Montgomery's promises. He closed the Mass Houses on Christmas Eve, attempted to arrest loyalists, . . . and announced that all who opposed Congressional wishes would be arrested as traitors." Why Wooster allegedly imposed these "actions" is not evident from the account in that Dictionary, but June Callwood in her Portrait of Canada asserts that it

was the anti-Catholicism of Wooster and his troops, a religious prejudice not uncommon among 18th Century New Englanders. Wooster was apparently criticized by one of the Canadian commissioners to the Continental Congress; and Wooster's enemies worked to prejudice others in authority. In April, however, he assumed command of the forlorn American army before Quebec until superseded by Thomas.

The on-going dispute between Schuyler and Wooster prompted the latter to recommend to Congress that it should investigate his administration of affairs and conduct in Canada and this the Congress did. In the Genealogy of Woosters in America, it is noted that as a result of a thorough and long investigation and the examination of witnesses and correspondence, even Wooster's enemies in Congress were forced to unite with his friends and acquit him of every charge. He was now 66 years of age and, having been away from his family for nearly a year, he obtained leave of Congress to return to Connecticut. He resigned his commission as brigadier general in the Continental Army but was reappointed a major general and commander in chief in the state's militia by Connecticut authorities.

In spite of the degrading treatment Wooster had to contend with as a result of the Canadian experience, his devotion to the Revolution remained as strong as ever. Upon returning to his home in Connecticut he used his influence and standing in the state to recruit soldiers and to gather supplies and equipment; and he often traveled throughout the area in his capacity as commander-in-chief of the Connecticut militia. One near-by town of particular importance was Danbury where there was stored an abundance of military provisions: 3,000 barrels of pork, more than 1,000 barrels of flour, several hundred barrels of beef, 1,600 tents, 2,000 bushels of grain as well as rum, wine and rice. It was to destroy this depot's supplies that the British chose to launch an attack on Danbury.

Brigadier General William Tryon, in a letter to King George, gave his account of this raid. Under orders from General Howe, 2,000 troops, including some Hessian mercenaries, a small contingent of Indians, and 300 loyalists, sailed on April 25, 1777 from New York into Long Island Sound. The force landed at Compo Hill (near Westport) and then the next day in a heavy rain it moved inland arriving in Danbury in the late afternoon. There, the British went about destroying the depot's food and other supplies and setting fire to 19 houses.

In a follow-up letter to the king, Tryon wrote of events on April 27: "Your Majesty: Having achieved our objective of destroying the Danbury, Connecticut Supply Depot [the depot was in fact a church] we became aware through intelligence sources that the Rebels were gathering in militias to force a confrontation. I immediately ordered a withdrawal to our ships at Westport via an alternate route, but apparently some of the locals became aware of our changed plans and alerted their militias by midnight rides through the countryside. It is becoming increasingly apparent that we cannot count on the loyalty of the locals. Indeed, in this instance they went so far as to dispatch a 16-year old girl to alert the enemy to our whereabouts, an indication of the desperation. As we made our way down a country road we were attacked from the rear by a contingent of some 400 troops under the Rebel command of Brigadier General David Wooster, who has long been on our list of hostile enemy combatant leaders. After experiencing some casualties, several as a result of overturned wagons, our forces were able to beat back Wooster's militia and the General himself was struck by our superior firepower, and we believe he will not survive the night. Nevertheless it was incumbent upon us to hasten our withdrawal.

“Unfortunately, we were blocked by a force of 400 Rebel militia at the town of Ridgefield under the command of Brigadier General Benedict Arnold. At this point it became obvious to us that the Rebel forces were not as disorganized and demoralized as we had been led to believe by some of our informants. Despite three cannon and the force of our coalition troops, General Arnold seriously delayed our progress. He himself was twice unseated from his horse by cannon, but nevertheless managed to escape unharmed. (There are rumors afoot that Arnold may be willing to defect, depending upon certain conditions he has stipulated privately. Meanwhile, he continues to be a formidable foe).”

The American account of what became known as the Battle of Ridgefield differs interestingly from the British. For one thing, it notes that the large quantity of liquor among the stores in Danbury was consumed by the British troops, most of whom were so intoxicated that they would have been incapable of coping with an attack by the Patriots if the Americans had known of the situation. General Tryon was concerned enough that at two a.m. he ordered his troops to prepare to depart for their fleet at Compo and to travel by a route different from the one they had taken from Compo to Danbury.

To go back in time for a few days: when the Americans became aware of the British force arriving on the Connecticut shore, Generals Wooster and Arnold were both in New Haven and they immediately gathered up militia forces and started for Fairfield in a heavy rain to meet with General Silliman and his 500-man militia. Upon their arrival the combined force totaled 700 men. When Wooster subsequently learned that Tryon was leaving Danbury, the American forces were divided: 500 men under Arnold were sent to Ridgefield where they were expected to intercept the British, and Wooster taking a different route, went cross-country in the general direction of Ridgefield, expecting to

approach the British from the rear. This in fact occurred, and upon overtaking and surprising the British troops, who were having breakfast, at around eight in the morning of the 27th, Wooster's militia captured 40 men and inflicted some damage. He then withdrew until the British were on the march again.

Wooster's militia made their second charge about two miles from Ridgefield village and were met by heavy musket and cannon fire that frightened his men and slowed their advance. Subsequent action is described in some detail in a History of Ridgefield. To rally his troops, Wooster turned in his saddle and shouted, "Come on, my boys, never mind such random shots." After that exhortation, "he was struck by the fatal musket ball. He fell from his horse and his sash was stripped from him and used to bear him from the field of battle. . . . The brave general was carried back a half mile over the line of march just passed by his foes. Upon a large flat rock on the westerly side of the road, the wounded patriot was laid. Dr. Turner, a surgeon with the militia, dressed his wounds. The General was then placed in a carriage and taken back to Danbury."

Mary Clap Wooster, who was in New Haven when notified of her husband's condition, left immediately for Danbury; she arrived before he died, though he was unconscious and failed to recognize her. After suffering severe pain for several days General Wooster died on May 2 and two days later, on a Sunday, his funeral was held in a Danbury church. He was reportedly buried in an unmarked grave in the church's cemetery.

Wooster died insolvent. He had sometimes paid his troops with his personal funds, but the written evidence of such transactions was destroyed by the British. Two years after Wooster's death, General Tryon, the British officer who had set the destructive fire in Danbury and whose unit had been attacked by Wooster's militia, raided New Haven in

July 1779 with, according to one source, the Wooster house as his specific target. The British troops are said to have made a bonfire in the street with the house's furniture, and they carried off two trunks filled with early records of Yale College and with personal papers of the Wooster's. Without written financial accounts, which were lost by the British raiders in the waters of Long Island Sound, as evidence, it was not possible for Mrs. Wooster to recover the money her husband had advanced to his troops; she was declared a debtor and forced to appeal to the state legislature for financial relief. She died in New Haven in June, 1807 at the age of 78.

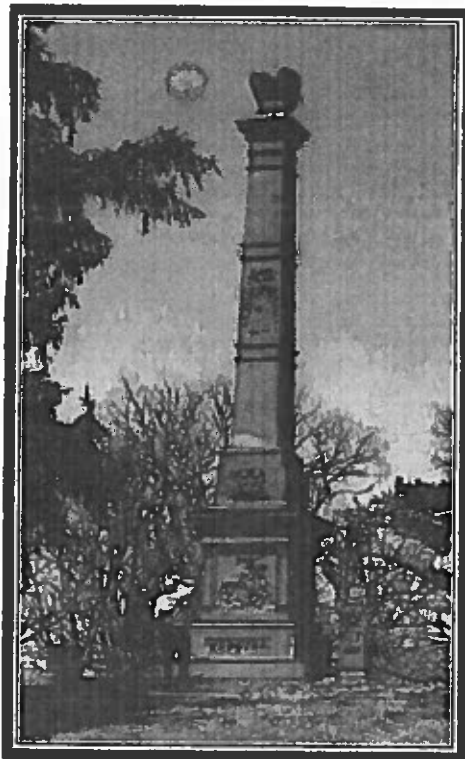
Several biographies note that the Continental Congress, upon learning of General Wooster's death passed a resolution on June 17, 1777 that a monument be erected to his memory. It further appropriated \$500 for that purpose, but the money was never forthcoming. Another biography notes that in 1822 the U. S. House of Representatives passed a resolution and appropriated \$500 for the purpose of constructing a monument honoring Wooster. The Senate, however, did not concur because of the numerous requests for similar expenditures. It was the Masons, of which David Wooster had been the founder of Connecticut's first lodge, that had a monument of Portland granite erected in the Danbury cemetery (now called the Wooster Cemetery). It was unveiled and dedicated on April 27, 1854 with a crowd of 10,000 in attendance and with Henry C. Deming, a prominent political figure, delivering a biographic oration.

That public ceremony suggests that the one blemish on Wooster's military career had been forgotten by the generation of Connecticut residents living in the mid-Nineteenth Century. The blemish has not, however, been forgotten by historians. The author, S.M.P. (the initials of Stanley M. Pargellis, a noted historian), of Wooster's biographic sketch in

the Dictionary of American Biography describes the general as tactless, brutal, dull, and uninspired. SMP indicates that his source was J. H. Smith, author of "Our Struggle for the Fourteenth Colony," and notes that Smith was "unsparing" in his criticism. Both Smith and SMP were writing of Wooster more than a 100 years after Wooster's death and thus making judgments without benefit of a personal acquaintanceship. One possible source of their pejorative opinions is the report of two commissioners, Samuel Chase and Charles Carroll, who had been sent to Canada to investigate the military situation there, although neither man had had any military experience. Their report to John Hancock, President of the Continental Congress, stated that General Wooster is "unfit, totally unfit to command your Army and conduct the war" and they suggested that he be recalled. Without having access to the full text of that report it is not possible to know what factors of unfitness were found by the commissioners. Another historian, James Nelson, writing in the 21st century a biography of Benedict Arnold, used such words as "crotchety," "pompous," and "contentious" to describe Wooster. A contemporary of Wooster's that is a likely source of those uncomplimentary words used by Nelson, by the views of the commissioners, and by some historians is Schuyler. He and Wooster quarreled on more than one occasion and their correspondence revealed Schuyler's intemperateness, so that the New Yorker's opinion of Wooster -- like his judgment -- was almost certain to be harsh. Historians rely on other historians when assessing the character of persons they could not have known personally, and they are attracted to those descriptions that tend to fit the views they wish to emphasize and that put the subject of their biography in the best possible light.

There is little question that the assessment of General Wooster by most historians is

largely based on his role in the 1775-76 Canadian campaign, and the critics of Wooster's generalship there were either ignorant of the conditions or their judgment colored by bias. And what has too often been overlooked in assessing Wooster's conduct is the Congressional investigation of his role in the ill-fated Canadian campaign of 1776: that is the report that acquitted him of all blame, of all charges. It was not neglect or ignorance that prevented him from attempting to conquer Quebec. It was, instead, a proper assessment of the military situation, that the British forces there had been reinforced, that the Patriot's forces had been severely depleted, and that his own forces had not been reinforced and key equipment not resupplied as requested. In short, Wooster correctly estimated that the Americans were outnumbered and had no chance of defeating the Canadians. He was much more capable than "a general . . . of a hayfield," which is what one critic asserted.



Monument to David Wooster

The large crowd at the granite monument's dedication ceremony was in effect paying homage to David Wooster's courage, his patriotism, his generosity, and his military acumen. The Dictionary of American Biography, in a sketch lacking specificity, stated that Wooster displayed "incapacities," presumably meaning military incapacities. What did people who weren't alive when David Wooster served his country know of his capacities and incapacities? Well, men who served under him and who moved to Ohio after the war thought well enough of him and his contribution to the Revolution to name a town and subsequently a college for him, and some of those at the dedication ceremony may have been children of men who had served under Wooster and had learned from their parent something about Wooster; others may have been students of history; and in 1854 the Revolutionary War was recent enough for many to be knowledgeable of its course and the contributions of its leaders.

David Wooster's record in combat was almost certainly well known in 19th Century Connecticut. His conduct in the French and Indian War as well as in the Revolution showed him to be personally courageous, and the affection his men had for him must have paid off in creating units, whether a company or a regiment or a brigade, that faced the enemy bravely. But generals are supposed to be more than unit commanders. So what can we surmise about his abilities as a strategist and tactician?

As for strategy, one can look at the group in which Wooster was a leading member that planned and financed the 1775 attack by Ethan Allen and Benedict Arnold on Ticonderoga, the results of which were a major accomplishment: not only had the Patriots

acquired a strategically located fort, but the conquest yielded 100 pieces of invaluable artillery. Upon receiving the news of that achievement, Gen. Washington dispatched Knox, then a colonel, to Ticonderoga with instructions to get some of the cannon to the Continental Army in the Boston area, and that Knox accomplished by oxen-drawn sleds during the winter of 1775-76. As a strategist and tactician, there is also Wooster's decision to resist the recommendation of some Patriots to resume in 1776 the attack on Quebec; he knew an attack would be futile. Then there is his tactical decision in 1777 to divide the 700 Connecticut militiamen, one group being sent to Ridgefield with the objective of intercepting and harassing Tryon's British forces there and the other group, Wooster and his 200 men, harassing the 2,000 British troops from the rear. That two-way tactic succeeded in slowing the much larger British force and inflicting some casualties.

Nelson in his book on Benedict Arnold referred to David Wooster as a New Haven merchant but Wooster had had in 1775 more military experience than most other Americans serving in the War for Independence. He had had over 30 years of active military duty and with that service and the experiences of a 66 year old man, one who was still physically and mentally alert, he was a good deal more than a merchant. In the Revolutionary War he was surely an asset, but one not fully appreciated by some members of the Continental Congress and some of the officers in the Continental Army -- and some historians. But the crowd that gathered in a Danbury cemetery in the spring of 1854 to dedicate a monument to David Wooster remembered him as a resolute patriot and a man of remarkable character and sound military judgment.

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