

FRANCIS PFISTER AND JOHN MACOMB OF HOOSICK – TWO OF THE KING’S MEN  
By Corinne Eldred

The American Revolution is usually portrayed as a conflict between the British and the American Patriots. However, there was another conflict going on, a civil war of divided loyalties. Tens of thousands of Americans opposed the Revolution. They called themselves Loyalists, the Patriots called them Tories. Recent estimates suggest that half the population of New York was Loyalist; it had an aristocratic culture and was occupied throughout the revolution by the British. Not surprisingly, most British officials remained loyal to the Crown. Wealthy merchants and Anglican ministers, especially in Puritan New England tended to support the Crown also, along with French and Indian War veterans. One of those veterans was Francis Pfister of Hoosick.

Francis Von Pfister was born in Brunswick, Germany in 1740 as Franz Joseph Von Pfister. He served as a British military engineer in the 60th Royal American Regiment during the French and Indian war, arriving at Fort Niagara in the spring of 1764. There he served as Asst. Engineer to Capt. John Montresor, a military engineer and mapmaker who is credited with the design and construction of America’s first military railway at the Niagara portage in Lewiston, NY. The railway consisted of two wooden tramways leading from the dock along the Niagara River at the base of the escarpment to the top of the steep cliff. Two cradles were linked by rope over a pulley at the top, so that when one cradle moved down one tramway, the other moved up. Each cradle was capable of carrying 12-14 barrels of supplies. Colonel Pfister ran and maintained the railway as Garrison Engineer until 1774.

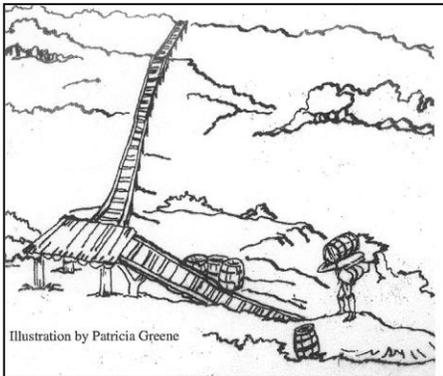


Illustration of Lewiston Railroad called “The Cradles”.

the Niagara River. His maps were carefully drawn and showed detailed information such as towns, roads, and fortifications. It seems, however, he was even more talented in acquiring wealth.

Going on half pay in 1764, he formed a partnership with John Stedman and thus was in a position, when the British army put its Niagara portage operation out to contract, to obtain the contract for himself and Stedman. He obtained major contracts for the repair of Fort Niagara and built a small sawmill, the first to operate above the great Falls. His house served as an inn for the first early sightseers at Niagara Falls. About 1770, Pfister married Ann Macomb, the daughter of Albany County Judge, John Macomb of Hoosick. It is not clear how the couple met. In 1774, Pfister left Niagara for the Hoosick Valley and settled near the Hoosick four corners. They had four children.

Prior to 1772, Pfister’s father-in-law, Macomb was able, through his legal contacts and the help of Sir William Johnson, to acquire title to five parcels of largely uncultivated and undeveloped land in the disputed Hampshire Grants between New York and Vermont. Most of the land was in Vermont, with 100 acres in White Creek, Albany County. In 1772, he moved from Albany and rented land from his son-in-law. Together, with high hopes and a lot at stake, Pfister and Macomb organized the Tory militia.

In the summer of 1776, the Albany Committee of Correspondence granted warrants to arrest those who were committed to the Tory goal. Macomb was brought before the Patriot’s “Committee of Safety” to sign a statement of confession. He refused and the Committee sent him home under armed guard while they discussed his fate a week later. After being subjects of a secret investigation, Pfister and another Loyalist, Hugh Fraser promised not to take up arms in the present war and presumably was released. Hugh Fraser owned the Mapletown Trading Post.

In those days, Committees of Correspondence were set up in cities and counties throughout the colonies in order to keep contact with the each other on events and developments within the Patriot cause. Their activities included: raising, drafting, equipping, disciplining, stationing and paying of troops,

punishment of spies, support of the poor, regulation of prices, maintaining law and order, etc. Macomb and his family continued to secretly recruit for the Loyalist cause. He and his family were exposed to every harm and danger, himself being forced to “fly into the woods,” as Patriots had orders to hang him as soon as he was apprehended. In the meanwhile, they confiscated and seized his estate. He was 60 years old in 1777 and financially ruined.

A year later, in the summer of 1777, before British General Burgoyne took possession of Fort Edward around the first of August, the British army was engaged in repairing bridges and clearing roads that the Americans had destroyed in trying to keep the enemy from gaining ground. The General's greatest source of embarrassment at this point was securing food and transportation for his army. Learning that the Americans had a large quantity of military stores, cattle and horses at Bennington, he was persuaded by Major Skene, against the advice of others, to send a party to capture them. He then dispatched his German troops under Colonel Frederik Baum toward Bennington in with instructions to “try the affections of the county,” recruit more Loyalists, and obtain a large supply of cattle, horses and carriages. When Col Baum reached Sancoick (North Hoosick) on August 14, he reported back to Burgoyne that people were flocking in hourly but wants to be armed.” Col. Pfister, with the aid of his father-in-law, John recruited 500 men, of whom 318 joined the British expedition. Most of those men were local inhabitants of Pownal, Hoosick and Pittstown.

The British, with some 800 men, well trained, were about six miles from Bennington, and the Americans with some 1500 men, untrained, and were moving out from Bennington to intercept them. The day before, a woman supposedly rode into Bennington and reported that Indians, followed by troops were approaching. General Stark, who commanded the American forces at Bennington, responded by sending an order to Colonel Warner in Manchester to march immediately with his regiment of Green Mountain Boys. Stark also rallied neighboring militia and sent out an advance guard of 200 men, to impede the progress of the enemy.

Precise numbers are difficult to ascertain, but it appears that Baum had approximately 318 Tories with him in the entrenchments on the evening of August 15, most of them probably unarmed.

The Battle of Bennington on August 16<sup>th</sup> was disastrous for the Loyalists. The Indians fled at the beginning of the conflict. In fierce heat, it lasted only two hours. Col. Baum and Col. Pfister were both mortally wounded and taken to a house a mile and a half from the battlefield. Jonathan Armstrong was a volunteer in the battle, and was said to carry Pfister part of the way on his back. He is also said to have obtained Col. Baum's sword during this encounter. Both the Brit and the German died within 48 hours.

Pfister's father-in-law, John Macomb, made his way to Canada where he served for the rest of the war as paymaster of the NY Tory Provincial Troops based in Quebec City. After the war, determined to start over once more, he decided to go to Detroit where he had family and business connections from twenty years prior. He died in 1796.



*On the evening of the battle, the dying British commander, Lt. Col. Baum (on stretcher), and a loyalist leader, Francis Pfister, are carried to a house near the battlefield. Pfister, a former British army officer, had gathered volunteers as Baum approached Bennington. In the background a column of prisoners is prodded toward Bennington.*