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THE MYTH OF RIFLEMAN TIMOTHY MURPHY

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(<http://allthingsliberty.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Mtr1-l.jpg>) Every historical researcher, and readers of history books and magazines, must constantly keep in mind the power of the written word. Whether reading for pleasure or serious study one constantly weighs the evidence to determine whether it is accurate and credible or not.

Regrettably, the written word itself attaches credibility to a statement by the mere fact it appears in print. Unless one is on guard one tends to docilely accept what appears on the page with no other evidence of its veracity than its very existence in print. It is vital to know the source of the information so one can check the facts and also so one can judge how much confidence ought to be placed on the information.

An extreme example would be the hypothetical case of George Washington's axe. "This is George Washington's axe. Due to its historical significance the axe-head and handle were replaced during the restoration process." Is it really George Washington's axe? With the head and handle both replaced how can it possibly still be George Washington's axe. Rarely however is the lack of common sense, or proper documentation, so obvious.

An example of the



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powerful influence of the written word is the legend of Timothy Murphy. Murphy is widely credited, and has been for generations, with having shot British Brigadier General Simon Fraser at the battle of Saratoga in 1777. Respected historians have accepted the Tim Murphy tale as fact based on literally nothing but that it has been repeated, in print, by others for 150 years. However, an analysis of the origins and source of the story make it very clear that the story of Murphy is not based on fact.

The basics of the story are that during the battle Tim Murphy, a rifleman serving under Colonel Daniel Morgan, was ordered by Morgan to shoot Brigadier General Simon Fraser. Depending upon which version of the story is related Murphy may have fired more than once with each shot getting ever nearer to Fraser. He possibly fired from a tree and possibly used a double barreled rifle.

An abbreviated chronology of the various accounts of the shooting of Fraser sheds light on the origins of the legend of Tim Murphy. The Saratoga Sentinel newspaper published a letter on 10 November 1835, fifty eight years after the battle, from one Ebenezer Mattoon a veteran of Saratoga. Mattoon relates that he witnessed an unnamed "elderly man, with a long hunting gun..." on the battlefield. Through a break in the powder smoke of the battle "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..."

[1](#_edn1)

(<http://en.wikipedia.org>

/wiki/File:Simon_Fraser3.jpg)

British Brigadier General
Simon Fraser

The next published account of the shooting appeared in Jephtha R. Simms' 1845 History of Schoharie County and Border Wars of New York. Sixty eight years had elapsed since the battle, and twenty seven years since Timothy Murphy's 1818 death in Schoharie County, New York. This account, as far as can be determined, marks the first time the name Timothy Murphy is connected with the shooting of Fraser. Simms writes that Daniel Morgan "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 writes that "the fact that Murphy shot Gen. Fraser, was communicated to the writer by a son of the former." However, Simms does not supply 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 book's preface Simms writes 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." The unnamed son of Timothy Murphy may have been one of these people.[2](#_edn2)

Two years later one N.C. Brooks wrote a magazine article naming Murphy and adding information about the weapon without citing a source.[3](#_edn3)

In 1853, a letter dated 28 November 1781, four years after the battle, written by British officer Joseph Graham (not to be confused with James Graham, a biographer of Daniel

Morgan) was published in the Virginia Historical Register. Joseph Graham had been taken prisoner by the Patriots and claims to have spoken with Morgan. He wrote that Morgan described the shooting of Fraser, without mentioning any rifleman's name:

"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, when I turned them to the place where he had been – pooh, he was gone!"^[4][\(#_edn4\)](#)

James Graham wrote *The Life of General Daniel Morgan of the Virginia Line of the Army of the United States* in 1856. As James Graham had married one of Morgan's great-granddaughters he had access to oral family history as well as Morgan's papers. Without referencing a source he relates that Morgan selected "twelve of his best marksmen" and that Morgan "pointed out the doomed officer." Graham wrote that Morgan "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." Timothy Murphy is not named nor is any other rifleman named.^[5][\(#_edn5\)](#)

In 1877 William L. Stone published *The Campaign of Lieut. Gen. John Burgoyne and the Expedition of Lieut. Col. Barry St. Leger*. Stone mentions the shooting of Fraser several times in this volume. He quotes a letter dated 31 October 1827, written by Samuel Woodruff, Esq., of Windsor, Connecticut. Woodruff, who apparently participated in the battle, visited the battlefield on October 17, 1827 and wrote a description of Morgan ordering "his riflemen" to specifically target General Fraser. Woodruff continued, "...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." Woodruff does not indicate a source of this information nor mention any rifleman's name.^[6][\(#_edn6\)](#)



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In the same book Stone repeats the Fraser story twice more and identifies the rifleman as Timothy Murphy. In the first instance, Stone writes that Morgan “took a few of his sharpshooters aside, among whom was the celebrated marksman Tim Murphy, men on whose precision of aim he could rely, ...” Stone, using almost the exact wording as Samuel Woodruff but inserting Murphy’s name, continued, “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.”

[7](#_edn7)

In the same volume, Stone quotes one 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.

[8](#_edn8)

Stone also discusses the Mattoon version of the shooting, and appends a footnote stating, “Still, there seems no doubt that Murphy, by the orders of Morgan, shot Fraser; see Silliman’s visit in the Appendix where he speaks of Morgan having told his friend, Hon. Richard Brent, to this effect.”[9](#_edn9)

The Appendix contains the account of Benjamin Silliman’s visit to the battlefield in 1820. It 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.”

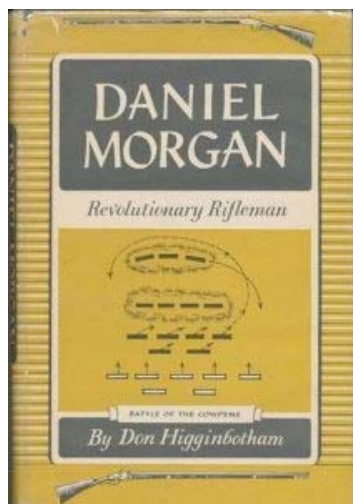
“Colonel Morgan took a few of his best riflemen aside; men in whose fidelity, and fatal precision of aim, he could repose the most perfect confidence, and said to them: ‘that gallant officer is General Fraser; I admire and respect him, but it is necessary that he should die – take your stations in that wood and do your duty.’ Within a few moments General Fraser fell, mortally wounded.”[10](#_edn10)

Incredibly, despite Stone’s assurance that Silliman’s comments in the Appendix would specifically name Timothy Murphy, it does not. Murphy is not named at all, nor is any other rifleman.

Jeptha Simms’ History of Schoharie County, apparently based on an interview with a son of Murphy an indeterminate number of years after the event, is the only account prior to 1877 to name Murphy as the rifleman who shot Fraser. However, Stone repeats it as historical fact ignoring other accounts that do not name an individual.

In 1883, Simms wrote a follow-up book, *The Frontiersmen of New York Showing Customs of the Indians, Vicissitudes of 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 retold in the now customary manner, with Simms adding two unnamed Murphy daughters plus an unnamed Murphy son as original sources.^[11][\(#_edn11\)](#)

In 1895, William L. Stone published a follow-up book of his own, *Visits to the Saratoga Battle-grounds, 1780-1880*, claiming that Murphy himself was positive he shot Fraser. He offers no evidence to support this claim.^[12][\(#_edn12\)](#)



<http://www.amazon.com/Daniel-Morgan-Revolutionary-Published-Omhundro/dp/0807813869>Noted historian Don Higginbotham, wrote the well received biography of Morgan, *Daniel Morgan, Revolutionary Rifleman*, in 1961. He describes Murphy's weapon as a double-barrel rifle. Higginbotham erroneously wrote that, "Morgan told Graham of the shooting of General Frazer by his rifleman Timothy Murphy," when in fact Graham did not mention any rifleman by name. Higginbotham quotes Graham but inexplicably inserts Murphy's name in brackets: "Says I to one of my best shots [Murphy],

says I, you get up into that there tree..."^[13][\(#_edn13\)](#)

In the 150 years since Jephtha Simms wrote his *History of Schoharie County* many, if not most, accounts of Saratoga and Revolutionary War marksmanship have included the story of Timothy Murphy. Based on nothing more than its having appeared in print so often in the past the story continues to be published. Most regrettably, it has been published by many who ought to know better.

Timothy Murphy was a real man. He was a rifleman under Morgan at Saratoga. However, the story of his shooting of Fraser, like the story of George Washington and the cherry tree, is not history. The real story of Timothy Murphy is the story of the power of the written word.

Editor's note. This article edited for length and content. For full details plus an analysis of the ballistics of long range musket and rifle fire see *The Journal of Military History*, vol. 74, No. 4, October 2010, page 1037-1045, "The Other Mystery Shot of the American Revolution: Did Timothy Murphy Kill British Brigadier General Simon Fraser at Saratoga?" by Hugh T. Harrington and Jim Jordan.

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- [1] 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, NY, Joel Munsell publisher, 1877, reprinted, New York, Da Capo Press, 1970, p. 369-74.
- [2] Jephtha R. Simms, *History of Schoharie County and Border Wars of New York*, Albany, NY, 1845, reprinted Bowie, MD, Heritage Books, 1991, p. v and 259.
- [3] N.C. Brooks, "The Fields of Stillwater and Saratoga, in Part From Original Documents," *Graham's American Monthly Magazine of Literature, Art, and Fashion*, vol. 30, issue 4 (April 1847) p. 211.
- [4] Joseph Graham, "A Recollection of the American Revolutionary War," *Virginia Historical Register*, vol. 6 (1853), p. 209-211.
- [5] James Graham, *The Life of General Daniel Morgan of the Virginia Line of the Army of the United States*, New York, Derby & Jackson, 1856, reprint, Bloomingburg, NY, Zebrowski Historical Services Publishing Company, 1993, p. 162-63.
- [6] William L. Stone, *The Campaign of Lieut. Gen. John Burgoyne and the Expedition of Lieut. Col. Barry St. Leger*, Albany, NY, Joel Munsell publisher, 1877, reprinted, New York Da Capo Press, 1970, p. 324-27.
- [7] Stone, *Campaign of Burgoyne*, p. 61-62.
- [8] Stone, *Campaign of Burgoyne*, p. 249.
- [9] Stone, *Campaign of Burgoyne*, p. 374.
- [10] Stone, *Campaign of Burgoyne*, p. 384-386.
- [11] 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, NY, George C. Riggs, Publisher, 1883, p. 126.
- [12] William L. Stone, *Visits to the Saratoga Battle-Grounds 1780-1880*, Albany, NY, 1895, reprinted, Port Washington, NY, Kennikat Press, 1970, p. 246.
- [13] Don Higginbotham, *Daniel Morgan, Revolutionary Rifleman*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1961, p. 73-74 and 170-171.