CHAPTER V

THE HILL-TOWNS IN THE REVOLUTION

THOUGH the coming of the early settlers to the Middlefield region before the date of incorporation has been traced in detail in the previous chapter, there has been left untouched one important influence which had a marked effect on the lives of all, and in general added to the hardships of pioneer life. This was the Revolutionary War. No scenes of conflict occurred in this locality. There were about a dozen clearings to be discovered when the war began. Yet, by considering the activities of the townships of which the first comers were then citizens, much of interest can be learned regarding the fortunes of both the proprietors and pioneers in the eight year struggle for freedom.

At the commencement of hostilities many of the lots in Murrayfield, Partridgefield and Worthington were still in the hands of the original proprietors, who were among the most prominent men of the province, and whose fate depended upon the attitude they took toward the revolutionary movement. The most noted of these was Sir Francis Bernard, the royal governor of the Province, who in 1762 purchased a large interest in Partridgefield. Upon his recall to England in 1769 a considerable number of his lots remained unsold.

Another pronounced loyalist was Colonel John Murray, of Rutland, who is said to have been the youngest son of the Duke of Athol in Scotland, and from whom Murrayfield apparently received its name. The other proprietors of Murrayfield, however, Colonel John Chandler and Judge Timothy Paine, of Worcester, and Colonel Abijah Willard, of Leominster, together with Colonel John Worthington, of Springfield, the chief proprietor of Worthington, were all natives of New England. Broadly educated and well versed in legal and military affairs they were efficient administrators of the various positions they held in the Provincial Government. With their mansions and

large estates they represented the nearest approach to a colonial aristocracy that Massachusetts has ever witnessed.

The crisis of their careers came in 1774 when the British Government attempted to put into operation one of the "Intolerable Acts" known as the "Regulating Act" by which the governor's council, heretofore chosen by the assembly, was to be appointed by the king. Among the appointees were the names of the proprietors just mentioned, with the exception of Chandler. As this act was a curtailment of charter rights according to the views of the patriots, the residences of these men were visited by mobs bent on securing their resignations and their allegiance to the revolutionary movement. Colonel Chandler who was active in drafting the Worcester Protest against this lawless procedure, was accorded the same treatment.

These men, through differences in natural temperament or in judgment as to the outcome of the struggle, took varied lines of action. Paine and Worthington submitting to the popular demand, resigned the king's appointment and swore allegiance to the patriot cause. Murray, Chandler and Willard fled to Boston where they received the protection of the British Army. In company with a thousand or more other Loyalists they left for Canada upon the evacuation of Boston in 1776.

Mr. Chandler's hardships, typical of the experience of the Loyalists, are graphically described in his petition to the Lords of the Treasury at London for financial assistance in February, 1779. He states that he left a beloved wife and sixteen children to the mercy of the rebels, and that "after suffering the most cruel insults, being deprived of his Liberty and threatened in the most alarming manner, unless he would Sacrifice his Loyalty to the King, renounce the Worcester Protest which he had promoted and signed, was obliged to save himself from an ignominious death, to fly from his home in November, 1774, and put himself under the protection of the King's troops . . . that he was able to collect only 832 pounds which was spent by sickness through fatigue, by voige, shipwreck and other unavoidable accidents before his arrival in England."

By the Act of 1778 these proprietors of Murrayfield with many others were banished for leaving the state and depriving it of their services. Their names, with that of Sir Francis Ber-

nard, appear on the list of "notorious conspirators" whose estates were confiscated. This act has a bearing on the settlement of Middlefield as a number of the lots in the sections formerly belonging to Murrayfield and Partridgefield were purchased by some of the early settlers at the public auction held by the state.

After the war Mr. Chandler put in a claim for 17,000 pounds, although his estates were probably worth twice that amount. This figure was so moderate that the state allowed it without question, and Mr. Chandler became known as "The Honest Refugee." His Murrayfield holdings were valued at 2,305 pounds. Denied a return to his family and his native land, he died in England in 1800. Such was the fate of many Americans who chose allegiance to the British Crown.

How these unsettled conditions affected the settlers in the frontier towns is well set out in the Murrayfield petition to the General Court of which mention has already been made. As reasons for the need of help they stated that "some of the proprietors had gone over to the Enimy"; that "soon after they got the town incorporated immediately raised the price of lands to such extravagant prices that hindered people from buying in said town," and that "people that would have been glad to have purchased them farms in town could not buy because said proprietors was not to be found, which was a great hindrance to the town's settling."

Turning now to the activities of patriots in the Middlefield region, on July 6, 1774, a congress of deputies from the Berkshire towns convened at Stockbridge to take action in support of the stand taken by the eastern leaders. Becket was represented by Nathaniel Kingsley and Peter Porter; Hartwood, or Washington, by William Spencer and Moses Ashley, and Partridgefield, by Nathan Fisk. This assembly voted that the inhabitants of the country should be advised against the consumption of British manufactures; that "the distressed circumstances of the poor in Boston and Charlestown be relieved by sending them fat cattle in the fall by such ways and means as shall hereafter be agreed upon; that licentiousness and disorder be discouraged," and that "the most prudent care be taken for the raising of sheep," for the growing of flax, and for the manufacture "of

all such cloths as shall be most useful and necessary.'' The following year when the destitute people of Boston were apportioned among the towns for support and employment, Murrayfield's quota was seventeen and Worthington's six.

It was through such meetings as the Stockbridge conference that the Revolutionary sentiment was stimulated and galvanized into action, each town co-operating effectively through its ''committee of correspondence.'' Governor Gage unwittingly aided the organization of the patriots when he called together the representatives of all the Massachusetts towns in October, 1774, to consider the general welfare. Delegates from ninety towns were present and the Middlefield region was represented by Captain Nathan Eager, of Worthington, and Jonathan Wadsworth, of Becket. Although Governor Gage seems to have repented of his action and ordered that this conference be postponed, the delegates met at Salem on the appointed day and immediately passed resolutions protesting against the newly organized royal government of the colony. Steps were taken to establish a militia, and orders were given that the taxes of the citizens should be paid only to officers chosen by them. This legislative body was truly representative of the people and naturally became the governing power of the colony throughout the war under the title of the ''Provincial Congress.''

Even at the beginning of the conflict the limited aid which the sparsely settled hill country could give to the revolutionists is brought to light in the following letter from the town of Partridgefield to the Provincial Congress, dated May 27, 1775, in explanation of their inability to pay the war tax imposed:

''This town is but new, and but few people in it, and the generality of them are people of low fortunes; and it is not long since we were at great expense (for us) in settling a minister in the Town; and as our farms are mostly new, and our lands not quick to produce a crop, we are obliged every year to buy a great part of our provision; and this year especially, as the blast and vermin destroyed a great part of our grain last year. We have no Town stock of ammunition, nor do we know how to procure it, as all the money we can get must go to purchase the necessaries of life. I am apt to think there is as many men gone or going from this Town in defense of the liberties and privileges of America as from any town in this Province, if not more, according to the number of people in this and the other towns. And we should be as free with our money as with our men, if we had it and could possibly spare it . . . .''

The apportionment of taxes and supplies for the maintenance of the army seems to have been made on the basis of population. When the Third Provincial Congress called for 13,000 coats to be provided as soon as may be, Murrayfield was called upon for seventeen; Becket, ten, and Worthington and Partridgefield, seven each. This plan in general bore heavily on the people of western Massachusetts, as the wealth of the province lay mostly in the eastern counties.

On account of the high prices of commodities the value of the supplies furnished appears very large. Worthington raised 120 pounds in 1778 to relieve the wants of the suffering soldiers. In 1779 they voted to raise 600 pounds to pay for twelve blankets and bounties for the soldiers last raised. In 1780 the demand for horses was so great that it was resolved that the town give security on the town if they cannot provide the horses at the stated price. The same year 2,130 pounds was raised for clothing; 5,000 pounds was spent for beef, and the next year 4,000 weight of beef was sent to the army. In the same way Murrayfield raised 5,000 pounds for the purchase of 3,840 pounds of beef in 1780, and in 1781 it voted to raise 8,000 pounds to purchase the town's proportion of the same commodity. In July of the same year seventy pounds of silver was raised to buy 3,044 weight of beef, and having done all that it could, the town "lay down in the furrow."

When the question of independence from Great Britain was being discussed throughout the colonies, the inhabitants of Murrayfield on June 17, 1776, made known their sentiments in no uncertain language, voting in a nearly full meeting: "That under the present circumstances of the Thirteen United Colonies, and the treatment of Great Britain toward America, we view it as necessary, and are willing, to a man, to be declared an independent State whenever the honorable Continental Congress shall judge best."

The same aggressive spirit was shown by the hill towns at the meeting of the Committees of Correspondence of Hampshire County to decide whether or not it was proper and expedient that the Court of General Sessions should be dissolved, and whether the justices should in any case act by virtue of the commissions from George III. Sentiment was divided as to the

proper course to pursue, but there was no doubt in the mind of Rev. Thomas Allen, the patriot minister of Pittsfield, who wrote to the Worthington delegates on March 7, 1776, ten days before the meeting: "I hope you will not fail of raising the Men of Worthington and going down to No. Hampton on Monday next to stop the Court, as this is a most necessary step for the Salvation of our Country. Be so good as to send word to No. 5, Murrayfield and Chesterfield, and do not wait for the people here but go forward early." The vote at this meeting was close, the more conservative valley towns desiring to continue the sessions *in statu quo*. Victory was with the hill towns, however, by a vote of forty-three to thirty-nine, four of the majority vote being cast by the Worthington delegates. The May session of the court, therefore, was convened by the authority of the people of Massachusetts.

Actual military service for the settlers in the Middlefield region as well as for those living in other parts of the province began upon the first shedding of blood at Lexington and Concord. Among the minutemen who hurried from all directions toward Boston were seventy men from Ashfield and Worthington, Captain Ferguson and thirty-six men from Murrayfield and Blandford, and Captain Watkins and others from Partridgefield. In the Murrayfield and Blandford company there were three subsequent citizens of Middlefield,—Nathan Wright, Benjamin Eggleston and James Clark.

The operations of the regular army during the war were aided from time to time by auxiliary troops raised by short enlistments to protect exposed points and to act as reserves in emergencies. In view of the hard condition of living already described, it is not to be wondered at that many of the Middlefield pioneers saw service in this manner. Not only in western Massachusetts, but throughout the colonies, the patriots generally had no clear conception of the necessity of military co-operation, and although the farmers turned out readily to defend their own province when the occasion arose, they were often unwilling to leave their crops for any length of time to help fight the British in the other provinces.

One of the first calls for short enlistment was the "Resolve for raising 5,000 men to co-operate with the Continental Troops in

Canada and New York,'' of June 25, 1776, the Hampshire men being ordered to the former, the Berkshire men to the latter locality. The number of soldiers required from the towns in the Middlefield region was: Worthington, 10; Murrayfield, 10; Becket, 5; Plantation Hartwood, 5, and Partridgefield, 5. The resolve stipulated ''That each man furnish himself with a good Firearm and Bayonet, a Hatchet or Tomahawk, a Cartouch Box, Knapsack, and Blanket, and for their encouragement readily to enter into the service of their country on this pressing exigency of affairs, there shall be paid to each non-commissioned officer and Private Soldier destined for Canada at the time of his passing muster 7 pounds, and to those destined for New York 3 pounds.''

A system of rewards and punishments seems to have been in full operation. If the required number did not volunteer, a draft was to be made on a muster of the whole militia, and any person neglecting to attend muster was fined ten pounds. The same penalty was inflicted upon any one who refused to go after being drafted, and unless the money was paid within twenty-four hours, an additional fine of three pounds was imposed.

Even with these precautions it seems that all did not go well in the Middlefield country, judging from Major Hawley's report to the Massachusetts Council, of August 5, which stated: ''Some disappointment has taken place with regard to the Murrayfield quota, too long to relate, which has caused a defect in the last mentioned company.'' This ''defect'' was probably caused by the refusal of service during the harvest season on the part of some of the drafted men, who preferred to pay their fines rather than leave the families. At any rate Murrayfield's patriotism was vindicated in 1779 when the General Court remitted its fine of 300 pounds imposed on the town in 1778 for not furnishing its full number of soldiers, on the town's petition that in 1777 it had hired five men more than their quota. With regard to the Berkshire companies, Major Hawley reported troubles of a less serious nature. Through some mistake all the canteens and kettles purchased for their use appeared at the major's house in Northampton several days after the companies, ''very uneasy and complaining'' in regard thereto, had begun to march to their destination in New York State.

Other calls for troops followed and the hill towns were gradually drained of their men. Worthington raised fifteen men in 1781 to serve for three years with forty shillings advance pay and four pounds a month. As a result, many of the women planted and harvested the crops and even ploughed their lands. At no time between 1779 and 1782 were there over ten or twelve men who attended church on Sunday. The families of the soldiers became so destitute,—not only in Worthington, but elsewhere,—that the towns were ordered by the General Court to provide for their maintenance.

The settlers in that part of Worthington which was later given to form Middlefield were well represented in the war by the family of Samuel Taylor. Of his six sons, Lewis and William served for long periods, William being probably at the battle of Bennington, while Elnathan, Heman and Daniel served shorter enlistments. Others from this section who engaged for terms of three years were Asa Benjamin, Elijah Herrick and William Rhoads, while Salah Benjamin and Silas Rhoads had shorter services.

Middlefield pioneers in the Murrayfield section were represented by the Wright brothers, Nathan, Judah and Jesse, the first two participating in the military operations at Stillwater and Saratoga. From this neighborhood also were Moses Eggleston, who enlisted for three years, besides Benjamin Eggleston, Daniel and Nathaniel Babcock, and David Bolton, who had short terms of service. John Taggart upheld the honor of the few families on Prescott's Grant. In the Becket section of Middlefield all the military service seems to have been performed by the three Mack brothers, David, Warren and Elisha who served short enlistments in local companies, while their father, Elisha, nearly fifty years of age, returned to Connecticut to serve as ensign in the 12th Regiment of state militia.

That the Middlefield region was suitable for the hiding of deserters from the army is indicated by a resolve of the General Court in 1779 that the sheriff of Hampshire County immediately repair to Murrayfield and towns adjacent to apprehend and secure any persons, soldiers in the Continental Army, which may be found without a leave of absence from their commanding officer.

The nearest battlegrounds of the war were those of Bennington, Vermont, and of Stillwater, New York, preceding the British surrender at Saratoga, these engagements taking place in the summer and autumn of 1777. The spontaneous rallying of the patriots of the surrounding country to the support of the Continental troops was a large factor in the result. Burgoyne himself pays the following tribute to his enemies in western New England in a private letter to Lord Germaine: "The Hampshire Grants in particular, a country unpeopled and almost unknown in the last war, now abounds in the most active and most rebellious race on the continent and hangs like a storm on my left." The Middlefield region, however, saw a little of the fruits of victory. Colonel Eager's barn in Worthington housed a body of Hessian prisoners from the battle of Bennington who were being marched to Boston. The previous night they had slept in the Pittsfield meetinghouse and had reached Worthington by way of Peru over the present highway which for some time afterward was called the "Burgoyne Road." A batch of prisoners from the British Army captured at Saratoga was also lodged at Chester Center Church for one night on their way to the coast.

It is related that among the curious onlookers drawn to Chester Center by this unusual event was pretty Nancy Holland, from the North End, who quite likely was an interested assistant in the local commissary corps. At any rate, there was a young Scotch captive to whom she appeared as "a phantom of delight," while she, in turn, was not averse to taking a friendly interest in the admiring stranger. The march was quickly resumed but the vision of the lass in the Hampshire highlands grew ever brighter in recollection as the prisoner approached Boston. When the band left Worcester, the Scotchman was missing. By forging a pass he had made his escape and was finding his way back to Chester Center to win the girl of his choice. It was thus that David Cross became a Middlefield pioneer, making his home, with Nancy as his wife, at the foot of Holcomb Hill on what is now an abandoned cross road from "The Den" to the present highway from Middlefield to Chester Center.

With the capture of Burgoyne the campaigns of the war were transferred to the colonies south of Massachusetts, and in these

only a few of the settlers in the Middlefield territory participated to any great extent. Toward the close of the war, however, the resumption of immigration brought as settlers many soldiers who had rendered valuable military service for other towns, and whose experience in active campaigning must have served them well in meeting the hardships of pioneer life.

Among those from other parts of Massachusetts were three Cheeseman brothers, all of whom answered the Lexington alarm, Abel and Benjamin from Braintree, and Anson, from Williamsburg. Abel also served many enlistments, taking part in the battle of Stillwater and the surrender of Burgoyne, as did also Amasa Graves, who, with Joseph Cary, also fought for Williamsburg. Thomas Durant responded to the Lexington alarm from Newton and is said to have fought at the battle of Bunker Hill. John Coates, from Lenox, served in the Massachusetts Line.

Many more soldiers came from Connecticut towns. Uriah Church, Matthew Smith, and James Dickson, were all members of the same company of minute men who answered the Lexington alarm from East Haddam. Uriah Church and John Smith were in the 1st Regiment of the Connecticut Line which fought at Germantown and Monmouth and were in winter quarters at Valley Forge. Solomon Ingham, Malachi Loveland, and others enlisted from Hebron, Ingham fighting at Bunker Hill. John Newton served for Colchester, Job Robbins for Ashford, while Barzillai Little, from Tolland, was trumpeter in the Connecticut Light Horse.

The largest and most interesting delegation of men seems to have been that from East Windsor and Windsor. Israel Bissell is believed to have been the man of this name who has been called the best rough rider of the Revolution for his achievement in carrying the news of the battle of Lexington from Watertown, Massachusetts, through Connecticut to New York City and on to Philadelphia, a distance of three hundred fifty miles, in four days. Elijah Churchill, Jonathan Ely, Simeon Booth, John Pinney and Justus Bissell all saw active service; Timothy McElwain aided the cause by contributions and was honored for his services.

Besides all these, there were many other soldiers who emigrated to the Middlefield region about this time, but who were not

vitally connected with the life of the town as they soon moved away. Among these were Benjamin Blish, Elihu Church, Daniel Spencer Emmons, Parker Fellows, Benajah and Elkanah Jones, and Bissell Phelps. It will therefore be seen that a surprisingly large proportion of the founders of the town engaged in military service in the Revolution,[1] and there are few of its citizens to-day of the older stock who cannot find among them at least one ancestor who fought to achieve the independence of our country.

[1] See War Records, Appendix E.