



## Henry Knox, the Guns of Ticonderoga, and Diligence

### Handout A: Narrative

#### BACKGROUND

As General George Washington looked out from the American lines at the British enemy occupying Boston and its harbor in the autumn of 1775, he was deeply frustrated. He desperately wanted to attack the redcoats and drive them from Boston to win the war. However, his army suffered from a shortage of gunpowder, and it had few guns to shoot anyway. The answer to his problem came when the 6-foot, 280-pound Boston bookseller, Henry Knox, volunteered to march to Fort Ticonderoga in New York and retrieve the massive artillery guns there. Most of Washington's generals laughed and thought the feat was impossible. They advised Washington not to divert precious resources for the foolhardy task. Washington, however, was an excellent judge of character. He was deeply struck by Knox's determination and accepted the twenty-five-year-old's brave offer.

#### NARRATIVE

On November 16, with winter closing in quickly on New England, Knox and his nineteen-year-old brother, William, departed with Washington's plea to move with the "utmost dispatch." The brothers and a servant rode out from Boston, headed for New York City, and then pressed up the Hudson Valley on the final leg of the journey. They reached Fort Ticonderoga on December 5, three weeks after they set out. If it was a challenging journey on horseback to reach the fort, it would be immeasurably more time-consuming and grueling to move its guns to Boston. When they arrived, they took stock of more than fifty howitzers, mortars, and field pieces. They secured assistance from locals who were willing to help them move the guns and barrels of flint and lead balls. Altogether, the load weighed more than sixty tons.

On December 9, Knox and his company were ready to begin their return trip. Knox realized that they had to purchase sleds because, as he stated, the "roads are so much gullied that it will be impossible to move a step." They decided to row boats across the length of Lake George (almost forty miles) for the first leg of their journey, and William was left in charge of the crossing. Henry rode ahead to Fort George to arrange for the sleds. The teams grunted and strained to load the massive guns on scows. Shortly after they pushed off, strong headwinds blowing across the lake impeded their progress. One of the boats foundered and sank. Incredibly, the men were able to drag the boat out of the water, patch it up, and make it seaworthy again. They spent their nights ashore, and their days driving through patches of ice on the lake. They arrived eight days later at the southern end of Lake George where they unloaded the cargo. The company waited patiently for the countryside to be covered in snow so that they could move the gun-laden sleds. They were rewarded with a white Christmas in which to set off, though the day promised difficult labor as they made their way through the three feet of snow that was rapidly accumulating.

## NARRATIVE

The convoy pulled their massive loads slowly through the village of Saratoga and into Albany. They slid back and forth across the ice that covered the frozen Hudson River without a mishap, though a temporary thaw in the ice delayed the expedition until the ice was thick enough to make a safe crossing. Wintry weather came back to upstate New York with a vengeance on January 7. Knox and his men eased the sleds onto the ice very cautiously, measuring every step and looking out for any sign of danger. With painfully slow progress, they noted with satisfaction that nearly all the guns were across. Their elation was premature, however, as the ice cracked and sent shivers of fear into the group. One 18-pound gun suddenly crashed through the ice and into the river with a resounding boom. Amazingly, the men tied ropes to the cannon, and their teams of overburdened horses strained and spent the entire day successfully pulling it out. The relieved team pushed on through the cold toward the Berkshire Mountains and their most daunting challenge on this arduous journey.

Knox led the men to drive their animals up perilously steep and narrow mountain passes through deep snow. Man and beast struggled with every breath as they trudged up the mountains. The descents, however, were even more difficult because the speeds of the extremely heavy sleds would be difficult to control. They ingeniously tied their sleds to massive trees and put chains under the runners. The progress was painstaking but steady. Some men wanted to give up and quit but were persuaded to persevere. They succeeded through diligence and devotion to fulfill their mission.

Weeks later, on January 24, 1776, Knox rode ahead from Springfield, Massachusetts, to report their success to a jubilant George Washington. The next day, the artillery arrived in Boston to greatly augment the firepower of the Continental Army. The general immediately conferred with his officers on how to break the siege of Boston. Soon, they decided to take the high ground at Dorchester Heights, much like the Americans did at Bunker Hill. Because the ground was frozen solid and impervious to digging, the Americans built timber frames filled with bales of hay for their fortifications. They even painted logs to look like cannon. Under the cover of darkness, two thousand Americans marched up the hill and erected the defenses. Most importantly, with much greater ease than any part of his journey, Knox brought up the artillery, which threatened to pound British lines as well as the Royal Navy in the harbor.

British General William Howe grasped the peril his entire force was now under and “judged it most advisable to prepare for the evacuation of the town.” On St. Patrick’s Day, March 17, the redcoats departed the city, boarding their ships and sailing to Nova Scotia. Henry Knox’s seemingly foolhardy and impossible idea had taken four months to carry out, but it succeeded against all odds. The daring expedition to recover the guns from Fort Ticonderoga and move them across more than three hundred miles was one of the most remarkable feats of the war and one of its greatest stories of perseverance and diligence.