



# JOHN STARK

Live Free or Die



## FORGOTTEN HEROES OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Nathanael Greene: The General Who Saved the Revolution

Henry Knox: Washington's Artilleryman

Francis Marion: Swamp Fox of South Carolina

Daniel Morgan: Fighting Frontiersman

John Stark: Live Free or Die



# JOHN STARK

Live Free or Die

Karl Crannell



**DEDICATION:** To Mrs. Bentley and Mrs. Fordyce, my third and sixth grade teachers, who saw potential where others saw misbehavior; and my wife, Amy, who still does.

Frontispiece: American soldiers commanded by John Stark captured this sword, drum, and cartridge box at the Battle of Bennington.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Why John Stark Should Be Remembered..... | 6  |
| <b>1</b> Young Chief.....                | 8  |
| <b>2</b> Farm and Forest.....            | 16 |
| <b>3</b> Ranger Captain.....             | 24 |
| <b>4</b> Continental Colonel.....        | 36 |
| <b>5</b> Bennington.....                 | 49 |
| <b>6</b> Revolutionary Hero .....        | 61 |
| Chronology .....                         | 72 |
| Glossary .....                           | 74 |
| Further Reading .....                    | 76 |
| Internet Resources.....                  | 77 |
| Index .....                              | 78 |

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# Why John Stark Should Be Remembered

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“It is with singular Pleasure I congratulate you and your brave militia on the Honour which you have acquir’d at the important Battle of Bennington. I feel it the More gratefully as it has eminently contributed to rescue this devoted State from the dangers with which it was surrounded.”

—New York Continental Congress delegate James Duane,  
letter to John Stark, December 16, 1777

“To John Stark . . . belongs the credit of having been the only man, during the war of independence, who, at a head of a body of militia, stormed and carried entrenchments defended by veteran troops. . . . Much of the glory of this achievement belongs exclusively to Stark, whose influence over his raw levies was miraculous, and whose skill availed itself of every possible contingency in his favor. In short, the hero of Bennington was one of the ablest military men of the Revolution.”

—Charles J. Peterson, in *The Military Heroes of the Revolution with a Narrative of the War of Independence* (1848)

“There is a peculiar kind of heroism about the character of John Stark as it is handed down to the historian. . . . It is the heroism of a strongly marked individuality—of a gentle nature covered over by a rough exterior. There is a kind of latter day-chivalry enveloping the accounts we have of him, which, in the times of tournament and spear, would have passed current as the true gold of knighthood.”

—Willard Glazier, in *Heroes of Three Wars: Comprising a Series of Biographical Sketches of the Most Distinguished Soldiers of the War of the Revolution, the War with Mexico, and the War for the Union, Who Have Contributed by Their Valor to Establish and Perpetuate the Republic of the United States* (1880)

“In this battle [Trenton] Stark was a conspicuous figure. It is said that the New Hampshire troops under him displayed great gallantry.”

—Senator Jacob H. Gallinger, address to the United States Senate  
on the acceptance of the statue of John Stark into the  
National Statuary Hall Collection, 1894

“At Bennington . . . Stark won one of the most spectacular and decisive successes of the Revolution. . . . [He] had an uncanny way of being at the critical and unexpected place to ruin British plans, first at Bunker Hill, then at Bennington, and finally at Saratoga.”

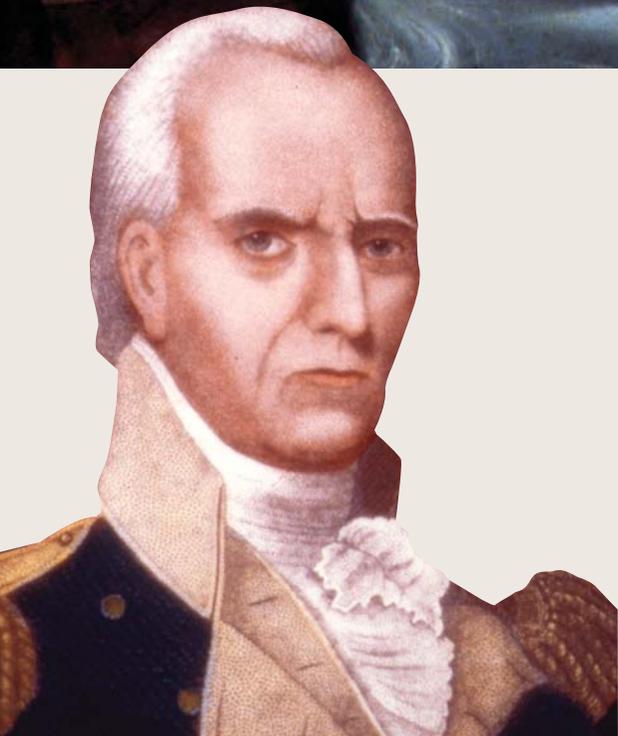
—Mark Mayo Boatner, in *Encyclopedia of the American Revolution* (1994)

“John Stark was a man of violent courage. It was said of him that, like a hunting dog, the hackles of hair on the back of his neck would stand out straight when he contemplated a fight; and like so many of the other veteran officers, fighting had been his avocation and preoccupation most of his adult years. . . . He was a born leader of men . . . always outspoken, with intuitive judgment gained from combat experience. Through the next few years of the Revolution, his services were to be of extreme and critical value.”

—Charles H. Bradford, in *Battle Road and Charlestown Heights: Lost and Won*, edited by Carl W. Mores (2003)



This 19th-century watercolor painting shows Abenaki men fishing in the Merrimack River. The Abenaki tribe lived in the area of modern-day New Hampshire and Vermont, and they often joined the French to fight English settlers in North America. As a young man, John Stark (opposite) was captured by Abenakis while on a hunting trip.



## YOUNG CHIEF

**I**n March 1752, when John Stark was 24 years old, he went on a hunting and trapping trip with his older brother, William, and two friends, David Stinson and Amos Eastman. The trip would be long and would take them to the center of the New Hampshire *province* (near present-day Rumney, New Hampshire). They traveled on foot, following rivers and streams, but they also had a canoe. When they reached their destination, they set up camp. They built shelters of hemlock branches and tree

bark in which they would sleep and store their supplies of food and ammunition. The trip was a great success. They collected many valuable furs from the animals they trapped.

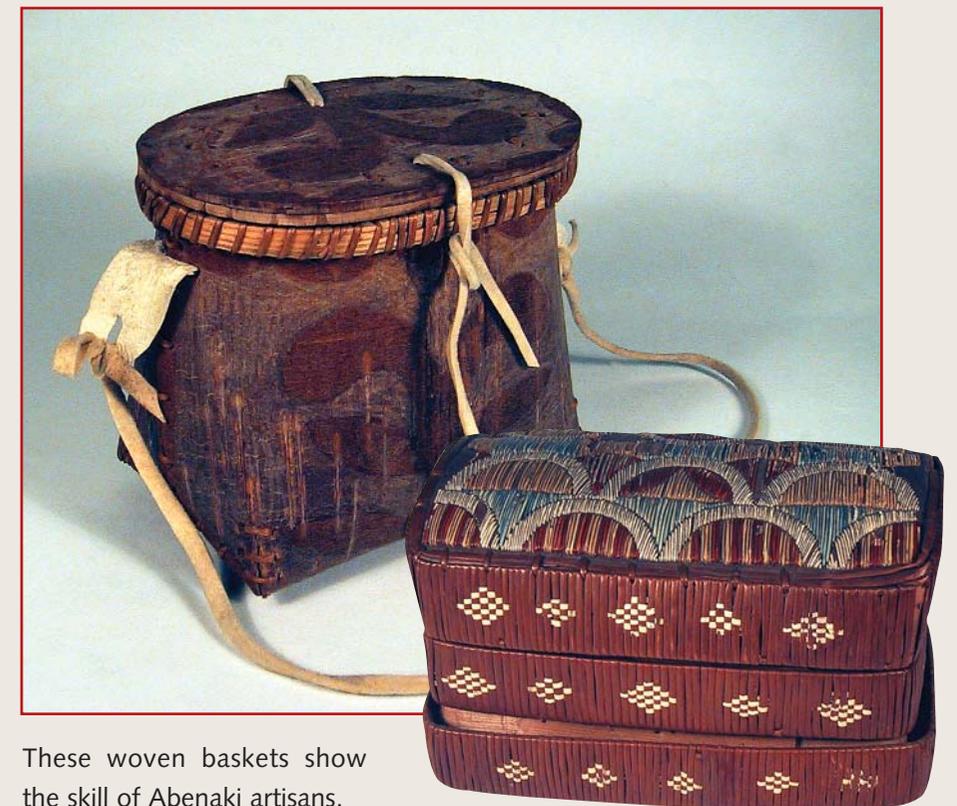
On April 27, they saw signs that another hunting party was in the area, and they were certain the other hunters were Indians. Wanting to avoid trouble, the Stark brothers, Stinson, and Eastman decided that it would be best for them to leave. The next day, they began packing up and loading their canoe for the journey home. John Stark, being the youngest member of the group, was sent to collect all the traps that had been laid out. By sunset on April 28, Stark had nearly completed his task. As he bent down to pick up a trap, he heard a sound like the hissing of a snake, then a rustling in the bushes. He looked up. Ten muskets, cocked and ready to fire, were pointed right at him. It was too late to run or reach for his musket. He was surrounded by Indians.

## PRISONER OF THE ABENAKIS

John Stark was now a prisoner of the Abenaki tribe. The leader of the group shouted questions at Stark in broken English. He asked the young man about his friends and demanded to know where their camp was. Stark knew that he could be killed at any moment, but he remained calm and defiant. He pointed in the opposite direction.

Back in camp, the other hunters discussed what they should do. Their companion had been gone too long, and

they were worried that something had happened to him. They fired their muskets into the air, hoping to hear Stark fire his musket in response. At that moment, he was two miles from camp, leading his Abenaki captors farther and farther away. Hearing the shots, the Indians knew instantly what to do. They headed for the river and climbed into their canoes. It was nighttime now, and in the darkness, they were able to float quietly down the river and past the white hunters' camp without being discovered. Landing a little below the camp, the Abenakis took up positions along the riverbank and waited in ambush for the hunters.



These woven baskets show the skill of Abenaki artisans.

By the morning of April 29, 1752, John Stark's companions were sure he had been captured or killed by the Indians they knew were nearby. They decided to search for him downriver. William Stark and Stinson would take the canoe, while Eastman would go by land, sticking close to the riverbank. Eastman had walked only a short distance when he was taken prisoner, quickly and quietly, as John Stark had been the day before. The Abenakis now had two prisoners.

Moving along the riverbank with their captives, the Abenakis soon saw the other two hunters coming toward them in their canoe. Stark's captors told him to call out to the men in the canoe and tell them to come over to his side of the river. But Stark was determined to be a difficult captive. The Abenakis spoke their own language and French, but did not understand English very well. When Stark called out to his brother and Stinson, he informed them that he and Eastman had been taken prisoner, and he told them to paddle hard for the other shore and get away as fast as they could. The Abenakis didn't realize that anything was wrong until they saw the hunters in the canoe heading for the other side of the river.

The Indians opened fire, but Stark sprang forward and struck at their muskets, trying to throw off their aim. Most of the shots missed, but one ball punched through William Stark's paddle. Another ball killed David Stinson. When the

canoe reached the other side of the river, William Stark jumped out and disappeared into the woods.

Angry Abenakis crowded around John Stark, punching and kicking him. He had cost them two valuable captives.

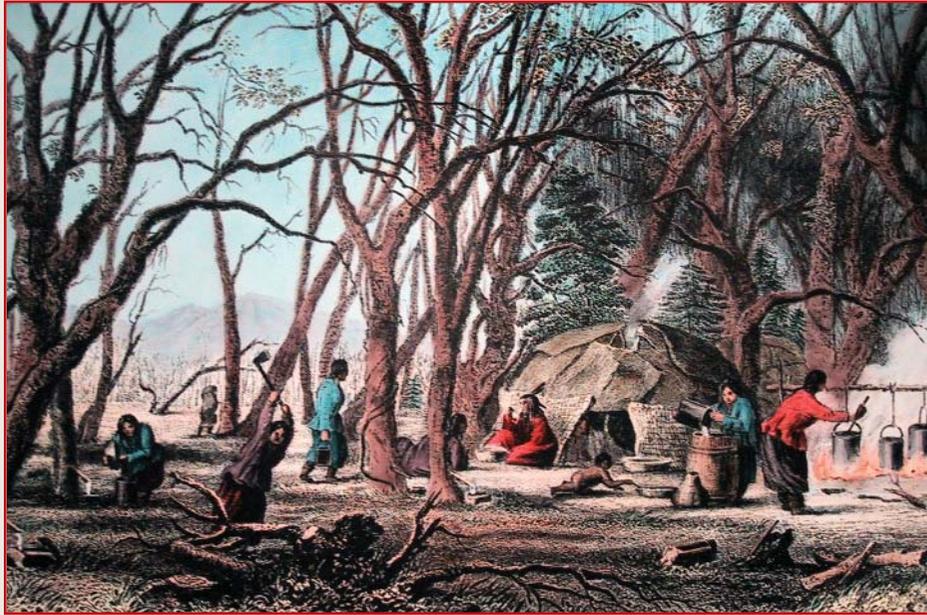
Still, the Indians had much to show for the long journey from Canada: two captives and all the furs they had found in the hunters' camp. It was time now to return home. Stark's captors had come from a village called Odanak, on the St. Francis River between Montreal and Quebec. The Abenakis and their captives arrived at Odanak on June 9.

## DEFIANT CAPTIVE

It was the custom of the Abenakis to welcome captives with a ceremony that the English called "running the gauntlet." In Odanak, the young men of the village, armed with sticks and clubs, stood facing each other in two lines. The captives were taught a little song, given a long pole to which was tied the skin of a bird or other animal, and made to run between the two lines. The Abenakis would hit them hard with their weapons. Some captives were seriously injured in these ceremonies. Stark began his run, singing his Abenaki song. After he had been struck a few times, though, he started swinging his

### —FAST FACT—

Stark gained great respect for the Abenakis during his 1752 captivity among the Indian tribe. He later stated that he had been treated more kindly by the Abenakis than he ever knew prisoners of war to be treated by so-called civilized nations.



This illustration depicts women performing various chores in an Abenaki village. In Abenaki society, farming was considered women's work, and when ordered to help tend his captors' cornfields, a defiant John Stark refused.

pole at his tormentors. By the time he got to the end of the lines, the young Abenaki men were backing away from him to keep from being hit. Stark received only a few minor injuries. The older men in the village laughed, but some of the young men didn't find the situation so humorous.

Throughout his captivity, Stark maintained his dignity. He was given a hoe and sent to work in a cornfield. Since this was considered women's work in Abenaki culture, Stark not only hoed the weeds, but cut up the corn as well. When this didn't lead to a change in jobs, he threw his hoe into the river, stating defiantly, "It is the business of [women], and not warriors, to hoe corn." The

Abenakis admired Stark's boldness and named him "Young Chief."

In July 1752, officials from the Province of Massachusetts "redeemed," or bought the freedom of, John Stark from the Abenakis. By August, he was home again in Derryfield, New Hampshire. During his nearly two months of captivity, Stark had learned a great deal about Abenaki culture and language. He had also gained important knowledge about Indian military tactics, which he would find especially useful in the war that was coming.

- Abenaki tribe, 9, 10–15, 23  
 André, John, **66**  
 Army of Observation, 40  
   *See also* Continental Army  
 Arnold, Benedict, **66**
- Battle of Bennington, 52, 54–60  
   commemoration of the, 68–70  
 Battle of Breed's Hill. *See* Battle of Bunker Hill  
 Battle of Bunker Hill, 42–47, 71  
 Battle of Lake George, 28  
 Battle of Trenton, 48  
*Battle Road and Charlestown Heights* (Bradford), 7  
 Battles of Lexington and Concord, 37, 40  
 Baum, Friedrich, **53**, 54, 55–57, 59  
 Bemis Heights, **58**  
 Bennington, Vt., 52, 54–60, 68–70  
 Blanchard, Ephraim, 26–27  
 Boatner, Mark Mayo, 7  
 Boston, Mass., 37–38, 40, 47  
   *See also* Battle of Bunker Hill  
 Bradford, Charles H., 7  
 Breed's Hill, 42–47  
 Breymann, Heinrich von, 57, 59  
 Brunswick Regiment of Dragoons, **53**, 54, 55–56, 57, 59  
 Burgoyne, John, 49–55, 57–60
- Canada, 24–25, 49, 63  
 Charlestown, Mass., 40, 42–47  
 Clinton, George, 63–64  
 Continental Army, 47–48, 54–55, 60  
   at the Battle of Bennington, 54–55, 59  
   shortage of soldiers in the, 49–51, 61, 63  
   supplies shortages in the, 39, 41, 63–68  
   *See also* individual battle names  
 Continental Congress, 47
- Dearborn, Henry, 42–43  
 Declaration of Independence, 47–48  
 Derryfield (Manchester), N.H., 15, **19**, 21, **70**  
 Duane, James, 6
- Eastman, Amos, 9–12  
*Encyclopedia of the American Revolution* (Boatner), 7
- farming, 18–20  
 First New Hampshire Regiment, 38–40, **41**, 42–47  
 Fort Edward, 27, 29, 32  
 Fort Schuyler, 61  
 Fort St. Frederic, 25  
 Fort Ticonderoga (Carillon), 28–29, 30–31, 35, 47–48, 49  
   fall of, 50–51  
 Fort William and Mary, **26**  
 Fort William Henry, 28–29, 30–32  
 France, **9**, 24–25  
   *See also* French and Indian War  
 Freeman's Farm, **58**  
 French and Indian War, 24–35  
   end of the, 35–36  
 French War. *See* French and Indian War
- Gallinger, Jacob H., 6  
 George III (King), 37, **50**  
   *See also* Great Britain  
 Glazier, Willard, 6  
 Great Britain, 24–25  
   and taxes on colonies, 36–37  
   *See also* French and Indian War
- Heath, William, 67–68  
*Heroes of Three Wars* (Glazier), 6  
 Howe, George Augustus, 32–34  
 Howe, Richard, 33  
 Howe, William, 33
- Indians. *See* Native Americans
- Jefferson, Thomas, 71  
 Johnson, William, 27–28
- Lake Champlain, 25, 29, 47–48  
 Langdon, John, **51**, 52  
 Lincoln, Benjamin, 54–55  
 “Live Free or Die” (N.H. state motto), 70  
 Londonderry, N.H., 16, 18, 20
- maps, **45**, 58  
*The Military Heroes of the Revolution* (Peterson), 6  
 muskets, 41
- Native Americans  
   Abenaki tribe, 9, 10–15, 23  
   allied with Burgoyne, 51, 55  
   in New Hampshire, 22–23

Numbers in **bold italics** refer to captions.

- See also* French and Indian War  
 Netherlands, 24  
 New Hampshire, 16–18, **19**, 20–21, 35, 51–53  
   brigade, 52–53, 54–60  
   First New Hampshire Regiment, 38–40, **41**, 42–47  
   Indian and settler interactions in, 22–23  
   Rogers' Rangers, 26–32  
   state motto, 70  
 Nichols, Eleanor (Mrs. Archibald Stark). *See* Stark, Archibald and Eleanor (parents)
- Odanak, 13  
   *See also* Abenaki tribe  
 Old French War. *See* French and Indian War
- Page, Elizabeth (Mrs. John Stark). *See* Stark, Elizabeth (Mrs. John Stark)
- Peterson, Charles J., 6  
 Poor, Enoch, 48  
 Prescott, William, **44**
- Rogers, Robert, 26–32  
 Rogers' Rangers, 26–32
- Saratoga, N.Y., 52, **58**, 60, 67  
 Seven Years' War. *See* French and Indian War  
 Skene, Philip, 54  
 smallpox, 18, 32, **34**  
 Spain, 24  
 Stamp Act (1765), 36, **37**  
 Stark, Archibald and Eleanor (parents), 16–20  
 Stark, Archibald (brother), 20  
 Stark, Caleb (son), 68  
 Stark, Elizabeth (Mrs. John Stark), 34–35  
 Stark, John  
   at the Battle of Bunker Hill, 38–40, **41**, 42–47  
   at the Battle of Trenton, 48  
   birth of, **17**, 20  
   as brigadier general in the Continental Army, 60–68  
   capture of, by Abenaki tribe, 9–15, 23  
   childhood and early life, 20–22  
   as colonel in the Continental Army, 47–48  
   death of, 71  
   grave of, **70**  
   hunting and woodsman skills of, 22–23  
   letters of, **62**, 63–64, 67–68, 69–70  
   marriage and family life, 34–35, 68  
   monument, **69**  
   and New Hampshire brigade, 52–53, 54–60  
   in New York, 61, 63–68  
   promotions of, 32, 47, 60, **62**  
   resignation of, from the Continental Army, 48  
   and rheumatism, 68  
   in Rogers' Rangers, 26–32  
   service under Lord Howe, 32–34  
   “Young Chief” nickname, 14  
 Stark, John (brother), 20  
 Stark, Samuel (brother), 20  
 Stark, Sophia (daughter), 68  
 Stark, William (brother), 9–12, 20  
 Starkstown (Dunbarton), N.H., 35  
 Stinson, David, 9–12  
 Sugar Act (1763), 36  
 Sullivan, John, **65**  
 supplies (army), 39, 41, 63–68  
   *See also* Continental Army
- taxes, 36–37  
 Ticonderoga (Carillon). *See* Fort Ticonderoga (Carillon)  
 Townshend Acts (1767), 36  
 Treaty of Paris, 68
- Warner, Seth, 59  
 Washington, George, 47, 48, **62**  
 weapons, 41  
   *See also* supplies (army)  
 Wentworth, John, **38**  
 West Point, **66**, 67
- Yorktown, Va., 67, 68  
 “Young Chief” (John Stark), 14