

Sir John Johnson's Escape: A Tale Retold

by [Tom Thacher](#)
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The legend of Sir John Johnson's role in naming Raquette Lake has been written and re-written for more than a century. Below is the earliest source I have found, from the 1891 Annual Report of the New York State Forest Commission.

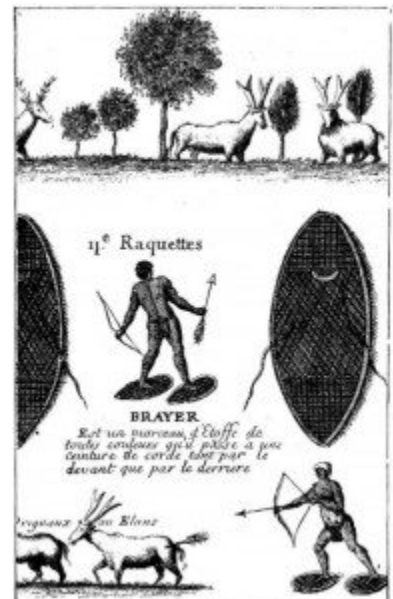
Its name is founded on a bit of history, hitherto traditional. During the War of the Revolution, a party of Indians and British soldiers, under the command of Sir John Johnson... passed through the wilderness on their way from the Mohawk Valley to Canada. It was in the winter time, and, on reaching this lake, the party was overtaken by a sudden thaw, which made further travel on snow-shoes impossible. As the Indians and soldiers did not want to carry their snow-shoes, or

raquettes, as they termed them, they piled them up and covered them over, making a large heap that remained there many years. The expedition had reached the South Inlet when the thaw set in, and it was there, on a point of land, that the pile was made... Old Mr. Woods, the pioneer settler of Raquette Lake, heard this story from the Indians themselves, and often pointed out to hunters the decaying fragments of the raquettes.

Believing that "Old Mr. Woods" refers to William Wood, I was intrigued to unravel the mysteries of this folklore. Wood was known to be close friends with local Native Americans, and the passage continues with a reference to Woods "in company with 'Honest John Plumley', Murray's celebrated guide". Wood sold his land on Indian Point to Plumley in 1859.

This folklore makes for a wonderful story, but two doubts are raised.

- 1) The passage infers that Wood saw the decaying fragments of the raquettes as late as the 1850s, about 75 years after being discarded. How would these fragments have survived so long?
- 2) Sir John Johnson actually fled Johnstown in late May, not "in the winter time". Why would snowshoes have been necessary?



Unraveling possible answers to these questions has led me to propose a new theory regarding the timeline and method of Sir John Johnson's escape.

Nowadays, the ice-out is typically never later than the first week of May, and snow cover is gone from the woods by then. However, from 1550 to 1850 a period of significant cooling, termed the Little Ice Age, occurred with three particularly cold intervals, one during the American Revolution. In David Ludlum's *Early American Winters 1604-1820*, weather records reveal five Northeast snowstorms occurred in May or June between 1773 and 1777, suggesting that using snowshoes in late May may not be a literary exaggeration.

Exaggerations of other details of Johnson's escape are quite common, however. The description offered by William Stone in his 1838 book *The Life of Joseph Brant-Thayendanegea* has been repeated so often as to take on the air of fact.

After nineteen days of severe hardship, the Baronet [Johnson] and his partisans arrived at Montreal in a pitiable condition – having encountered all of the suffering that it seemed possible for a man to endure.

This notion that Johnson's trek to Montreal took only nineteen days does not hold up under scrutiny, and Stone offers no citation. Johnson did not keep a military diary of these days in the woods. Historians have not found any primary sources written during the actual escape. Various historians have, however, pieced together the presumed route that Johnson took. The most accepted path is one proposed by Johnstown Historian J. Yates Van Antwerp in 1937.

According to Van Antwerp, Johnson's party headed northeast from Johnstown to his family's summer home, the Fish House on the Sacandaga River, then northwest along the river, passing north of Lake Pleasant and through the West Canada Lakes region to Raquette Lake. They then followed the Raquette River to Long Lake. North of Long Lake they turned northwest, crossing over to the source of the South Branch of the Grasse River, which led to the St. Lawrence and on to Montreal. The total distance is approximately 300 miles. A 19-day trip would mean they averaged almost 16 miles a day. I believe this is highly improbable.

The Continental Army averaged such a pace on the Washington-Rochambeau march from Dobbs Ferry, NY, to Yorktown, VA, in the summer and fall of 1781. I do not believe that Johnson's party snowshoeing narrow trails and bushwhacking in sections could have matched the pace of an army moving with horses and wagons over open roads.

While there are no primary sources from the escape, there are contemporary letters that shed light on the possible reason for Stone's 19-day estimate. The only direct information of the escape comes from a letter written by Sir John Johnson to his brother on January 20, 1777.

Upon my arrival at St. Regis with my party consisting of one hundred and seventy men who were almost starved and wore out for want of provisions, being nine days without anything to subsist upon but wild Onions, Roots, and the leaves of Beech Trees [A], I was received in the most friendly manner by the Indians who informed me that the rebels were still in possession of La Chine and Montreal... I proposed to them to go off immediately and attack the former Post. They

seemed very hearty, and desired that I would send to Capt. Forster at Oswegatche [Ogdensburg], for two field pieces, which had they had taken at the Cedres, which I did and in a short time received one of the field pieces with a Sergeant, one Artillery Man and three Volunteers, with which I set out after many delays [B]... I was joined by the Indians of the Lake of two Mountains, with many Canadians, but upon my arrival on the Island of Montreal, I was informed that the Rebels had abandoned both places the day before, and that the 29th Regt. had taken possession of Montreal. [C]

This portion of the letter reveals many details of Sir John Johnson's timeline. The British had retaken possession of Montreal on June 17th [C], so Johnson arrived in the city on June 18th.

Three letters serve to identify May 21st as the date of his flight from Johnstown.

- On May 18th, Johnson wrote a letter from Johnson Hall to General Philip Schuyler of the Continental Army in Albany.
- On May 19th, Col. Dayton arrived at Johnson Hall to arrest Johnson on the orders of Gen. Schuyler and found Johnson had fled into the nearby woods.
- On Wednesday, May 22nd, Dayton wrote "Sir John, with upwards of three hundred persons, several of whom are said to be armed, attempted on Tuesday morning to make his escape through the woods to Canada."

Therefore we know for certain that the entire trip from Johnstown to Montreal actually took 29 days. (May 21 – June 18)

If we work backwards from June 18th, we can estimate when he probably arrived in St. Regis, about 67 miles south of Montreal. Marching with a field piece on open roads to Montreal would have taken a minimum of four days. So the earliest Johnson could have departed St. Regis would have been June 14th.

Prior to departing St. Regis, Johnson had to regain strength from his ordeal in the woods and wait for the arrival of the field piece from Ogdensburg. It is difficult to know how long Johnson stayed in St. Regis. The request for and delivery of the field piece from 45 miles away in Ogdensburg [C] would have taken at least four days. Johnson says he "set out after many delays" after the arrival of the field piece.



If his time in St. Regis had stretched to six days, then the end of his arduous ordeal through the Adirondacks and his salvation among his Indian friends would have come on June 8th, nineteen days after departing Johnstown – perhaps the true origin of Stone's 1838 account.

Even if we accept that the trek from Johnstown to St. Regis took 19 days, we still know very little about the trip itself. How many miles per day could Johnson's party have advanced through the snow-covered forests between Johnstown and Raquette Lake? In the winter of 2006-2007, a group through-hiking the Northville-Placid Trail on snowshoes averaged five miles per day. At that rate it would have taken Johnson 14 days to reach Raquette Lake, requiring them to travel over 30 miles on each of the remaining five days to reach St. Regis.

Of course, the NPT through-hikers were not fearing a pursuing army. Snowshoe trekkers advise an average of one mile per hour when planning a winter hike. If we assume Johnson's men pushed themselves ten hours per day, at that pace the time is shortened to seven days. Even so, they then would have had to maintain a pace of over thirteen miles per day from Raquette Lake to St. Regis. While snow cover and snowshoes no longer slowed them, we also know that in the last nine days they were subsisting on wild onions, roots and leaves. [A] Could they have maintained this significantly increased pace as their strength was failing and the spring thaw yielded to mud season?

If Johnson intended to complete the trek on foot, why did he not follow the [long established Iroquois trail](#) which passes to the west of Raquette Lake and leads to the source of the Oswegatchie River?

If Johnson's party were seeking to avoid discovery, why would they create a pile of snowshoes on a prominent point upon the shores of Raquette Lake as opposed to hiding the pile further back in the forest?

What follows is pure conjecture, but does provide answers to these questions while not contradicting any of the known facts. While he may have originally intended to march to Montreal, I believe during the hazardous trek to Raquette Lake, Johnson realized it would not be possible. I think he sent word to St. Regis to send a group of Mohawks to aid his escape.

The Iroquois were noted for their use of relay runners who collectively communicated messages over one hundred miles in a day. According to William Stone in *The Life of Joseph Brant-Thayendanegea*, Brant claimed that Mohawks were sent south from St. Regis to aid in Johnson's escape. Sue Herne of the Akwesasne Museum of the St. Regis Reservation says that today's Mohawk oral history corroborates this story.

Just as Johnson appears to have communicated northward, it would appear that he intentionally created a campaign of misinformation to throw the Continental Army off his track. Col. Dayton believed Johnson was traveling west to Niagara via Oneida Lake. He based this on comments from Sir John Johnson's wife and testimony of an Oneida on May 23rd who claimed a flotilla of bateau boats were awaiting Johnson at Oneida Lake. He also received intelligence that a road had recently been marked from Johnson Hall to Fort Brewington on Oneida Lake.

I believe Mohawk runners could also have brought the news to Johnson that Gen. Schuyler's scouts had reported finding no trace of them and claimed that the trail to the north was impassible. This would have allowed Johnson time to alter his plan.

Johnson already had three Mohawk guiding his men north when they left Johnstown. However, Van Antwerp's account speaks of 25 Mohawk aiding the escape. I believe the additional Mohawk were sent south from St. Regis to construct elm bark canoes at Raquette Lake so Johnson could continue his escape by water. Switching to water transport here rather than continuing on the familiar Mohawk trail to the Oswegatchie River, Johnson saved his party another thirty miles of arduous hiking through the forest.



The Iroquois were known to primarily use elm bark canoes. In contrast with birch bark canoes, an elm bark canoe [could be built in as little as two days](#). The process is similar to building a spruce bark canoe. Given the cold weather during Johnson's escape, it was likely necessary to use boiling water to strip the bark from the trees. This slower process might have stretched the construction time to four days.

The travel times of the Iroquois using elm bark canoes on various water routes in 1656-1657 are detailed in early records of Jesuit missionaries, which indicate the Iroquois traveled an average of 45 miles per day downstream and 20 upstream.

I estimate that Johnson's party could have traveled 20 miles per day from Raquette Lake through Long Lake and the small streams and portages to the source of the Grasse River, covering this distance in approximately three days. Given their weakened physical condition, I will conservatively estimate a pace of only 35 miles per day paddling downstream on the Grasse River, arriving at St. Regis in another three days.

Therefore, by water and portages the Johnson party could have made it from Raquette Lake to St. Regis in six days. This leaves thirteen days between fleeing Johnstown and when they departed from Raquette Lake. If four days were devoted to building the canoes, a snowshoe trek pace of only eight miles per day would have been sufficient to reach Raquette Lake in nine days.

I believe the pile of snowshoes was placed on the lakeshore because that is where they departed in the elm bark canoes. The pile was covered up by the waste from the canoes' construction. After 75 years of decomposition of this waste layer, the remnants of the snowshoes were still visible to William Wood.

