

# How Americans Lost the Battle of Quebec in December 250 Years Ago

By Gerry Bowler

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In 1774, discontented Americans from 12 of the Thirteen Colonies gathered at a Continental Congress to discuss their grievances against rule from London and to consider joint action against the British government. They dispatched letters to those colonies that had not sent delegates to join them—Quebec, Saint John’s Island (now Prince Edward Island), Nova Scotia, Georgia, East Florida, and West Florida—at a second meeting the next year.

Quebec was of special concern to the rebel Americans. New Englanders, in particular, disliked the power of the Catholic Church in the province and had long memories of cross-border raids when the territory was a French holding. The fact that there was no democratic assembly in Quebec and all power lay in the hands of an appointed governor made many suspicious that the British wished to impose that model on other colonies. The rebels also resented the new borders of Quebec in the west, which seemed to prevent intrusion into native lands by expansion-minded colonists in Virginia and Pennsylvania.

Another invitation in May 1775 to support the American Revolution failed to win over many Quebecers, and the decision was taken by Congress to invade the province. In the autumn, a two-pronged attack was launched. One force under Gen. Richard Montgomery struck north via Lake Champlain aimed at Montreal. A second unit under Gen. Benedict Arnold laboured through the wilderness of Maine determined to take Quebec City.

Montgomery’s men were successful, taking several British forts guarding the route to Montreal, and on Nov. 28 entered the lightly defended town itself. They were welcomed by some English-speaking settlers and some French Canadians with Enlightenment sympathies. Montgomery was able to raise a small force of pro-American volunteers, known as the Canadian Regiment, to assist in the war against the British, but most inhabitants remained neutral or Loyalist.

The invaders under Arnold reached Quebec City on Nov. 14 but had no artillery capable of breaching the walls, so they set up camp nearby and awaited the arrival of reinforcements from Montreal. On Dec. 2, Montgomery joined forces with them. The Americans sent Gov. Guy Carleton a demand to yield up the city, but were told there would be neither surrender nor any further negotiation.

Hoping to demoralize the citizenry with threats of what might happen if there were urban battles, Montgomery tried to use an old woman to smuggle in communications and, when that failed, launched messages into the city tied to arrows. His missives spoke of “The City in Flames at this severe Season ... The Confusion, Carnage & Plunder.” He attempted to reassure Quebecers that his army meant no harm to Canadians and that their purpose was only “eradicating Tyranny & giving Liberty and Security to the oppressed Province.”

Inside the walls of Quebec City, Carleton led 1,800 men, some of them regular British troops and some Loyalist militia. They endured sniping from American sharpshooters and cannon-shot, but felt secure behind solid fortifications. Pressure grew on Montgomery to act quickly: His camp was ravaged by smallpox, and he expected to lose many of his soldiers whose period of enlistment would expire on New Year's Day. He determined then to attack the city under the cover of a snowstorm. Their target was the Lower Town, where merchants had their warehouses and docks; if that were captured, it was believed that Carleton would be under pressure from the business class to surrender.



Engraving of Gen. Richard Montgomery.  
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In the wee hours of Dec. 31, three columns of the invaders began their assault, two of them launched at different parts of the Lower Town and the other, which included the Canadian Regiment, a diversionary force. It was a disaster. Montgomery led from the front and was killed as soon as battle was joined, cut down by cannon fire; his troops retired in disarray.

Arnold was also struck down, wounded by a musket shot, and was taken to a hospital. His troops pressed on and penetrated into the city but were soon surrounded and forced to surrender. American casualties from the battle amounted to 60 killed, over 370 prisoners taken, and 426 wounded; the defenders had six killed and 19 wounded.

Despite the defeat, the American army maintained its hold on Montreal and continued the siege of Quebec City. Carleton was content to await the spring and reinforcements from Britain. When these arrived, they relieved the siege and forced the Americans to abandon Montreal and retreat south.

Canada had been saved, but in a war that lasted until 1783, the British would lose the 13 rebellious colonies.