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**“THAT EVER LOYAL ISLAND”: LOYALISM AND THE COMING OF THE
AMERICAN REVOLUTION ON STATEN ISLAND, NEW YORK**

by

PHILLIP PAPAS

**A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in History in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York**

2003

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Abstract

**“THAT EVER LOYAL ISLAND”: LOYALISM AND THE COMING OF THE
AMERICAN REVOLUTION ON STATEN ISLAND, NEW YORK**

by

Phillip Papas

Advisor: Professor Carol Berkin

This dissertation traces the factors that made Staten Island, New York, an overwhelming stronghold of Loyalism as the American Revolution began and the experiences, under British occupation, that eroded this Loyalism.

Staten Islanders refused to fully participate in the colonial resistance movement. Instead, they preferred reconciliation. It was only when threatened with the use of military force and economic sanctions by Whigs in New York and New Jersey that Staten Islanders reluctantly complied with the Whig cause. Yet, while seemingly in compliance with the Whigs, Staten Islanders' actions demonstrated that strong Loyalist sentiments remained.

This study also explores the impact of Staten Island's Loyalism on the Whigs' plans to defend New York City and eastern New Jersey from a potential British invasion

during the summer of 1776. Any successful defense of New York City and its environs required the Whigs to secure Staten Island. Continental soldiers and New Jersey Whig militia units were dispatched to secure the Island. The actions taken to secure Staten Island heightened the residents' animosities toward the Whigs.

The British eventually captured Staten Island in early July 1776 and it remained under British occupation until December 1783. The nearly 99 percent of Staten Islanders who were Loyalists initially viewed the British troops as liberators. However, wartime experiences would lead many of them to a change of heart.

Recently, historians have treated the American Revolution as a civil war in the southern colonies, ignoring the extreme partisan warfare that occurred in the North. Yet, Staten Islanders' wartime experiences demonstrate that atrocities such as those committed in the backcountry of the southern colonies also occurred in northern communities. Loyalists and Hessians stationed on the Island frequently made forays into New Jersey, plundering Whig farms and taking prisoners. New Jersey Whigs retaliated by raiding Loyalist farms and businesses on Staten Island. Whig vigilantes also committed brutal acts of violence against Staten Islanders. In addition, the Island's residents suffered daily abuse from their British occupiers. Through an examination of Staten Islanders' wartime experiences, this study extends the notion of the Revolution as civil war beyond the South.

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The completion of this dissertation would have been impossible without the encouragement and valuable assistance of family, friends, and colleagues. I am especially thankful to my mentor Professor Carol Berkin whose patient guidance, valuable suggestions, and constructive criticism helped me to clarify my arguments, reexamine my assumptions, and improve the quality of my work. Professor Berkin has been a constant source of encouragement and enthusiasm. Her kind words and steadfast support always lifted my spirits and inspired me to see this dissertation through to its completion. To her I owe an enormous debt of gratitude.

In addition, my special thanks go to the members of my dissertation committee. Professors Eli Faber, Jacob Judd, and Jonathan D. Sassi carefully read the dissertation and offered suggestions for its improvement. My work has benefited considerably from their extensive knowledge of early American history.

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Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada, the New York Public Library, the New Dorp, Richmondtown, and Saint George branches of the New York Public Library on Staten Island, the Saint John Public Library in Saint John, New Brunswick, Canada, the Mina Rees Library at the CUNY Graduate Center, the Jacqueline G. Wexler Library at Hunter College, the Library of the College of Staten Island, and the Kenneth C. Mackay Library at Union County (New Jersey) College, Cranford Campus. Special thanks go to Katherine Hilder of the Harriet Irving Library at the University of New Brunswick (Canada), Patricia M. Salmon, Curator of History at the Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences, and to Elisabeth Sommer, Director of Research and Interpretation at the Staten Island Historical Society's Richmondtown Restoration. Thanks also to the Conference House Association Board of Directors, especially Madalen Bertolini, President. Dr. John Dungan of Omaha, Nebraska, shared with me his extensive research into the genealogy of the Dongan family. For that I am most grateful. Thanks must go to Hugh Powell, a volunteer at the Staten Island Historical Society Library, not only for his conversation but also for sharing with me his extensive knowledge of Staten Island's history. I was especially fortunate to work with Carlotta De Filo, Librarian of the Staten Island Historical Society Library and Archives. Her kindness, diligent assistance, accommodating manner, cheerful enthusiasm, and shared admiration for Staten Island's past always made my visits to the library and archives a great joy. The access she gave me to the Staten Island Historical Society archives and the remarkable patience she displayed as I meticulously went through each collection will always be greatly appreciated.

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Table 1

POPULATION OF STATEN ISLAND, NEW YORK, 1698-1800

<u>Year</u>	<u>Total Population</u>
1698	727
1703	504
1712	1, 279
1723	1, 506
1731	1, 817
1737	1, 889
1746	2, 073
1749	2, 154
1756	2, 132
1771	2, 847
1786	3, 152
1790	3, 835
1800	4, 564

Sources: Evarts B. Greene and Virginia D. Harrington, eds., *American Population Before the Federal Census of 1790* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1966), 92-105; Kenneth T. Jackson, ed., *The Encyclopedia of New York City* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 923.

Table 2

POPULATION OF STATEN ISLAND, NEW YORK, BY RACE, 1698-1800

Year	# of Whites	# of Blacks
1698	654	73
1703	407	97
1712	N/A	N/A
1723	1, 251	255
1731	1, 513	304
1737	1, 540	349
1746	1, 691	382
1749	1, 745	409
1756	1, 667	465
1771	2, 253	594
1786	2, 459	693
1790	2, 949	886*
1800	3, 806	758**

* Includes 127 free blacks.

** Includes 83 free blacks.

Sources: Evarts B. Greene and Virginia D. Harrington, eds., *American Population Before the Federal Census of 1790* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1966), 92-105; Vivienne L. Kruger, "Born to Run: The Slave Family in Early New York, 1626 to 1827" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1985), 924; Ira Rosenwaike, *Population History of New York City* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1972), 32.

Table 3

**BLACKS AS A PERCENTAGE OF THE TOTAL POPULATION OF STATEN
ISLAND, NEW YORK, 1698-1800**

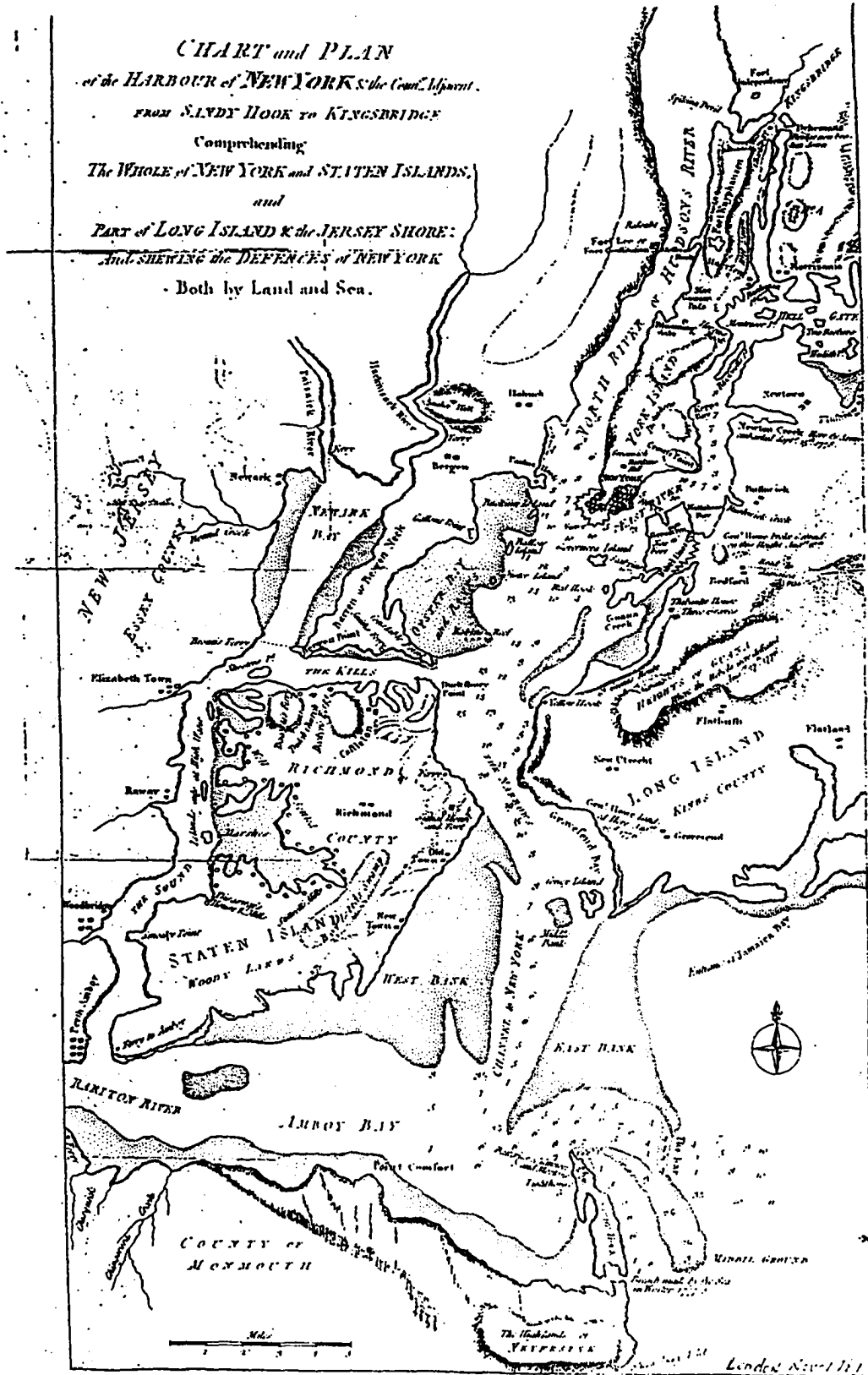
Year	Total Population	% Blacks
1698	727	10.0
1703	504	19.2
1712	1, 279	N/A
1723	1, 506	16.9
1731	1, 817	16.7
1737	1, 889	18.5
1746	2, 073	18.4
1749	2, 154	19.0
1756	2, 132	21.8
1771	2, 847	20.9
1786	3, 152	22.0
1790	3, 835	23.1*
1800	4, 564	16.6**

* 3.3% were free blacks.

** 1.8% were free blacks.

Sources: Evarts B. Greene and Virginia D. Harrington, eds., *American Population Before the Federal Census of 1790* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1966), 92-105; Kenneth T. Jackson, ed., *The Encyclopedia of New York City* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 921-923.

CHART and PLAN
of the HARBOUR of NEW YORK & the Cont. Adjacent.
FROM SLIDY HOOK TO KINGSBRIDGE
Comprehending
The WHOLE of NEW YORK and STATEN ISLANDS,
and
PART of LONG ISLAND & the JERSEY SHORE:
And SHEWING the DEFENCES of NEW YORK
Both by Land and Sea.



INTRODUCTION

By 1775, Alexander McDonald was deeply disturbed by “the unhappy State of America.”¹ Although he had initially been content to leave the debates over colonial rights to others, the fifty-year-old McDonald became alarmed by the increasingly vocal and sometimes violent protests against British imperial policies taking place in communities throughout America. For McDonald, the colonies seemed to be heading to “the very point of Commencing Rebellion,” an act that threatened to undermine the peace and stability he had valued and enjoyed while living with his family on Staten Island, New York.² No longer able to sit idly by while “madness prevails all over America” and “King & Country were reviled, & their Laws treated with Contempt,” Alexander McDonald decided to do whatever he could to defend “the Authority of the Parent State.”³

Many of his neighbors shared Alexander McDonald’s views. In fact, almost 99 percent of Staten Islanders chose to remain loyal to the Crown during the American

¹ Captain Alexander McDonald to Walter and Thomas Buchannon, 4 November 1775, *The Letter-Book of Captain Alexander McDonald of the Royal Highland Emigrants, 1775-1779* (New York: New York Historical Society Collections, 1882), 215.

² Captain Alexander McDonald to General Sir William Howe, no date, *Ibid*, 275. Staten Island, which is approximately 13.9 miles long and 7.3 miles at its widest part, containing 35 miles of shoreline and 57.1 square miles or about 36,000 acres, is located ten miles southwest of New York City at the confluence of the Hudson, Passaic, and Raritan Rivers. It is surrounded by New York Bay in the east, Newark Bay and the Kill van Kull in the north, Raritan Bay in the south, and the Arthur Kill in the west. The Narrows, a strait about 2.5 miles wide at the entrance to New York harbor, separates the Island from what is today the Borough of Brooklyn on western Long Island. For Staten Island’s physical dimensions see Charles W. Leng and William T. Davis, *Staten Island and Its People: A History, 1609-1929*, 3 vols. (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, Inc., 1930), 1: 3. Staten Island was organized into Richmond County in 1683.

³ Quoted in Christopher Moore, *The Loyalists: Revolution, Exile, Settlement* (Toronto, Ontario, Canada: McClelland and Stewart, 1984), 22; Captain Alexander McDonald to General Sir William Howe, no date, in *The Letter-Book of Captain Alexander McDonald*, 275.

Revolution. Loyalism was therefore a communal experience that was unique and important to Staten Island. Examining that experience is the subject of this dissertation. It analyzes how these key factors: Staten Island's geographic proximity to New York City and eastern New Jersey; its yeoman society and expanding commercial agrarian economy; the deferential nature of its political culture; its strategic location at the entrance to New York harbor; the active promotion and defense of Anglicanism by its Anglican clerics; a history that involved the encampment of large numbers of British troops; and concerns over the protection of persons and property from perceived Whig abuses contributed to the decision made by a vast majority of Staten Islanders to remain loyal. Each of these factors sets the scene for understanding Loyalism on Staten Island in terms of local considerations and the lived history of its residents.

Using Staten Island as a case study, the dissertation enables me to explore and clarify several questions in the historiography of the Revolution in general, and of the Loyalists in particular. First, Loyalism was a logical and self-interested choice that was equally as progressive as the Whig cause. Secondly, the Loyalists represented a real source of potential support for Britain and, therefore, a real counterweight to the opposition movement. And finally, the war's progress and its effect on the population of the middle states reveals that the Revolution was as much a civil war in the North as it was a contest between British regulars and Continental troops.

The attention to these issues places it within the revisionist historiography of the American Revolution and Loyalism. The earliest characterization of Loyalism arose from the highly nationalistic spirit following independence. In this patriotic literature, the Loyalists were portrayed as villains in the revolutionary conflict. Indeed, the Loyalists

were either ignored or depicted as a small group of corrupted reactionaries who blindly opposed the enlightened thought of the Whigs.⁴ During the first two decades of the twentieth century, however, the Loyalists were rescued from historical oblivion. Some scholars abandoned the intense nationalism of the previous century and gave the Loyalist experience an honest reappraisal.⁵ At the same time, a group of historians began to take a regional approach to the concentrations of Loyalists. The result was a proliferation of studies that looked at the Loyalist issue on a state-by-state perspective.⁶

With the emergence of the Progressive school of historiography following the 1909 publication of Carl L. Becker's *History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 1760-1776*, scholars delved into the social profile of the Loyalists. The Progressive interpretation viewed class struggle as the most important characteristic of early American politics. Thus, Progressive scholars generally believed that the Loyalists were comprised exclusively of wealthy merchants, large landowners, professionals, Anglican clerics, and royal officials who did not support independence from Britain either because their positions in society were directly dependent on the British government or because they feared the consequences of class antagonisms that a war and independence might

⁴ See George Bancroft, *History of the United States from the Discovery of the American Continent*, 10 vols. (Boston: C. C. Little and J. Brown, 1842-1874). For an exception to this earlier interpretation see Lorenzo Sabine, *Biographical Sketches of the American Revolution*, 2 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1864).

⁵ See Moses Coit Tyler, "The Party of the Loyalists in the American Revolution," *American Historical Review* 1 (1895), 24-45; Claude H. Van Tyne, *The Loyalists in the American Revolution* (New York: MacMillan, 1902).

⁶ Alexander C. Flick, *Loyalism in New York During the American Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1901); James H. Stark, *The Loyalists of Massachusetts and the Other Side of the American Revolution* (Boston: W. B. Clarke, 1907); Isaac S. Harrell, *Loyalism in Virginia: Chapters in the Economic History of the Revolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1926); E. Alfred Jones, *The Loyalists of New Jersey: Their Memorials, Petitions, Claims* (Newark, NJ: The New Jersey Historical Society, 1927); Robert O. De Mond, *The Loyalists of North Carolina During the Revolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1940); Robert W. Barnwell, "Loyalism in South Carolina, 1765-1785" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1941).

unleash.⁷ The Progressive interpretation was challenged by historians who concluded that the Loyalists were a heterogeneous group that not only included the lawyers, merchants, Anglican clerics, royal officials, and landed gentlemen who comprised its leadership, but also the yeoman farmers, skilled artisans, laborers, apprentices, shopkeepers, schoolteachers, and their wives and families, who were members of the rank-and-file.⁸

William H. Nelson's *The American Tory*, published in 1962, was an important work in the field of Loyalist studies. Nelson maintained that the Whig leadership's ability to formulate a coherent argument in favor of independence and republicanism provided the energy necessary to drive the Revolution. Therefore, the Whigs displayed a "commonness of purpose" that was lacking among the Loyalists. Consequently, Nelson concluded that Loyalist ideas failed to reach a large number of Americans, and thus failed to shape public opinion.⁹ Others, notably Robert McCluer Calhoun, followed Nelson's lead and found no direct connection between ideology and Loyalist mobilization.¹⁰ By the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, historians of the Loyalist experience began to argue that Loyalists from different social classes and regions shared a common ideology.

⁷ Carl L. Becker, *The History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 1760-1776* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1909). See also J. Franklin Jameson, *The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1926), 13-19.

⁸ Ruth M. Keesey, "Loyalism in Bergen County, New Jersey," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd ser., 18 (1961): 558 (herein cited as *WMQ*); William H. Nelson, *The American Tory* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1961), chap. 5; North Callahan, *Royal Raiders: The Tories of the American Revolution* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), 36; Wallace Brown, *The King's Friends: The Composition and Motives of the American Loyalist Claimants* (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 1965) and *The Good Americans: The Loyalists in the American Revolution* (New York: William Morrow, 1969), chap. 3; Robert McCluer Calhoun, *The Loyalists in Revolutionary America, 1760-1781* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich, 1973), chap. 5.

⁹ Nelson, *The American Tory*, 12.

¹⁰ Calhoun, *The Loyalists in Revolutionary America*, 505.

This common Loyalist ideology promoted a strong commitment to the supremacy of Parliament, affection for the empire, and a fear that revolution would destroy political and social stability and lead to anarchy.¹¹

Historian Bernard Bailyn once challenged his colleagues to “find an equal humanity in all the participants, the winner and losers” of the Revolution.¹² During the 1970s, scholars began to place a new emphasis on the Loyalists and their personal experiences. As a result, the Loyalists emerged as tragic figures caught in a vortex of events over which they had no control. Although these studies relied on the experiences of the Loyalist elite, they nevertheless captured the dilemmas faced by many Americans who remained loyal.¹³

By the early 1980s, historians began to reevaluate the methods and interpretations used in earlier state studies of Loyalism, focusing more attention on the personal thoughts, political ideologies, and individual actions of the Loyalists.¹⁴ At the same time,

¹¹ Ann Gorman Condon, “Marching to a Different Drummer: The Political Philosophy of the American Loyalists” in Esmond Wright, ed., *Red, White, and True Blue: The Loyalists in the Revolution* (New York: AMS Press, 1976), 1, 18; Janice Potter, *The Liberty We Seek: Loyalist Ideology in Colonial New York and Massachusetts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), vii.

¹² Bernard Bailyn, “The Central Themes of the American Revolution: An Interpretation” in Stephen G. Kurtz and James H. Hutson, eds., *Essays on the American Revolution* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1973), 15.

¹³ For the shift to a more sympathetic and personal treatment of the Loyalist experience see Leslie F.S. Upton, *The Loyal-Whig: William Smith of New York and Quebec* (Toronto, Ontario, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1969); Mary Beth Norton, *The British-Americans: The Loyalist Exiles in England, 1774-1789* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1972); Bernard Bailyn, *The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974); Carol Berkin, *Jonathon Sewall: Odyssey of an American Loyalist* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974); Elizabeth P. McCaughey, *From Loyalist to Founding Father: The Political Odyssey of William Samuel Johnson* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

¹⁴ Rick J. Ashton, “The Loyalist Experience: New York, 1763-1789” (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1973); Dennis P. Ryan, *New Jersey Loyalists* (Trenton, NJ: The New Jersey Historical Commission, 1975); Harold B. Hancock, *The Loyalists of Revolutionary Delaware* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1976); Philip Ranlet, *The New York Loyalists* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1986); Robert S. Lambert, *South Carolina Loyalists in the American*

several studies emerged that delved into the revolutionary experience in the South. These studies treated Loyalism as a local phenomenon. Historians of the southern theater explained Loyalist motivation and behavior in that region through the concept of localism.¹⁵

In recent years, scholars have treated the Revolution as a civil war. With few exceptions, however, the focus of their studies has been on southern communities.¹⁶ Yet, the extreme episodes of partisan warfare found in the communities of the middle states, for example, reveal that the Revolution was as much a civil war in the North – a fact often overlooked by historians.¹⁷

Revolution (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1987); Anne M. Ousterhut, *A State Divided: Opposition in Pennsylvania to the American Revolution* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1987).

¹⁵ Adele Hast, *Loyalism in Revolutionary Virginia: The Norfolk Area and the Eastern Shore* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1982); Ronald Hoffman, Thad W. Tate, and Peter J. Albert, eds., *An Uncivil War: The Southern Backcountry During the American Revolution* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1985); Albert H. Tillson, Jr., “The Localist Roots of Backcountry Loyalism: An Examination of Popular Political Culture in Virginia’s New River Valley” *Journal of Southern History* 54 (1988), 387-404 (herein cited as *JSH*); Keith Mason, “Localism, Evangelicalism, and Loyalism: The Sources of Discontent in the Revolutionary Chesapeake” *JSH* 56 (1990), 23-54; Rebecca Starr, “Little Bermuda:” Loyalism on Daufuskie Island, South Carolina, 1775-1783” in Robert M. Calhoun, Timothy M. Barnes, and George A. Rawlyk, eds., *Loyalists and Community in North America* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 55-63; Edward J. Cashin, *The King’s Ranger: Thomas Brown and the American Revolution on the Southern Frontier* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1999).

¹⁶ For studies that treat the southern theater of the Revolution as a *civil war* see Hoffman, et al., *An Uncivil War*; Lambert, *South Carolina Loyalists in the American Revolution*; Jerome J. Nadelhaft, *The Disorders of War: The Revolution in South Carolina* (Orono, ME: University of Maine at Orono Press, 1981); John S. Pancake, *1777: The Year of the Hangman* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1977) and *This Destructive War: The British Campaign in the Carolinas, 1780-1782* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1985); Walter Edgar, *Partisans and Redcoats: The Southern Conflict that Turned the Tide of the American Revolution* (New York: William Morrow, 2001). For the exceptions see Keesey, “Loyalism in Bergen County, New Jersey”; Bruce G. Merritt, “Loyalism and Social Conflict in Revolutionary Deerfield, Massachusetts,” *Journal of American History* 57 (1970), 277-289; Joseph S. Tiedemann, “Response to Revolution: Queens County, New York, During the Era of the American Revolution” (Ph.D. diss., The City University of New York, 1977). Paul H. Smith, *Loyalists and Redcoats: A Study in British Revolutionary Policy* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1964) looks at the Loyalist military experience in both the northern and southern theaters of the war.

¹⁷ Two recent studies of “partisan warfare” in the areas surrounding New York City are Michael S. Adelberg, “A Combination to Trample All Law Underfoot: The Association for Retaliation and the American Revolution in Monmouth County” *New Jersey History* 115 (1997), 3-35; Mark V. Kwasny, *Washington’s Partisan War, 1775-1783* (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 1996).

My study of Loyalism on Staten Island, New York, addresses many of these issues. It draws on the insights of those historians who examine Loyalism in its local contexts. It also draws on the recognition, arising from this emphasis on localism, that the Revolution was a civil war as well as a war for independence. This study brings these insights to bear on northern localities and extends the notion of the Revolution as civil war beyond the South.

The dissertation is divided into five chapters and includes an epilogue. Each of the first four chapters analyzes one variable that played a critical role in creating Loyalist sentiment on Staten Island. Chapter 5 discusses how in the summer of 1776 the Island's Loyalists assisted the British in occupying Staten Island and establishing it as a base for future military operations against New York City and its surrounding countryside.

In Chapter 1, "An Island in a Sea of Faith: Religious Affiliation and Loyalist Sentiment on Staten Island," I discuss the historical development of the Anglican, Dutch Reformed, French Huguenot, Moravian, and Presbyterian congregations on the Island. This chapter will describe the successful efforts made by Staten Island's Anglican clerics to solidify the Church's privileged position and to expand its membership within the community at the expense of the Island's dissenting congregations. Through their efforts, Staten Island's Anglican clerics influenced residents of other faiths as well. It will also examine the impact of intra- and interdenominational factionalism on political loyalties during the Revolution.

In Chapter 2, "Neither Poverty nor Riches": The Socioeconomic Structure of Revolutionary Staten Island," I describe the development of Staten Island into a fairly prosperous, economically stable society of middle class farmers who were inclined to

favor moderation rather than radicalism in political affairs. I also challenge the problematic assumption made by local historians that Staten Islanders lived in economic isolation. The Island's geographic proximity to New York City and to the commercial centers of eastern New Jersey linked Staten Island to the transatlantic market economy, and exposed its farmers to finished goods that they did not produce for themselves. Moreover, the chapter will delve into the Island's history as a haven for clandestine trade, and discuss how the lack of an independent, radicalized artisan class contributed to Staten Island's moderate position vis-à-vis the colonial resistance movement and independence.

Chapter 3, "An Unfriendly Disposition Towards the Liberties of America": Staten Island's Response to the Colonial Resistance Movement," examines the reasons why Staten Islanders did not participate in the colonial resistance movement. It focuses on how decades of deference conditioned the Island's residents to defer judgment on political issues to a small group of prominent men who favored reconciliation with Britain. It also discusses the ways in which Staten Islanders resisted the methods used by New York and New Jersey's Whigs to coerce them into joining the movement against British imperial policies. The actions taken by local Whig committees in New York and New Jersey as well as by the Continental Congress convinced many Staten Islanders that it was the Whigs and not the British who posed the greatest threat to their community's political and social stability, to its material prosperity, and to their individual liberties.

In Chapter 4, "As the Tempest Approaches": Staten Island and the Whig Defense of New York City and Eastern New Jersey," I examine the Whig plans to defend New York City and its environs against a possible British invasion. The chapter will outline the defensive preparations in and around New York City undertaken by Whig

commanders from Major General Charles Lee to General George Washington during the spring and summer of 1776 and examine the impact of Staten Island's Loyalism on those preparations. It will also discuss how Whig plans to secure Staten Island against a British landing resulted in further alienating its residents from the cause of Independence.

Chapter 5, "Our Inveterate Enemies": Staten Islanders and the Arrival of the British Fleet at New York," explores Staten Island's pivotal role in British plans for the capture of New York City in 1776. The chapter will discuss how the Island's location at the entrance to New York harbor and the strong Loyalism of its residents appealed to the British military and examines the logistical advantages that Staten Island afforded to the King's army and navy. It also discusses the Island's previous history with an encamped British army during the French and Indian War (1754-1763) and describes how that experience fostered amicable relations between Staten Islanders and the British military. Finally, I will look at how Staten Island's Loyalists collaborated with the British to secure the Island as a permanent staging area from which future British military operations could be launched.

Although the experiences of Staten Island's Loyalists were replicated in other areas, Staten Island presents a unique case. While Loyalism in some localities of New York's Hudson River Valley has been explained as arising out of conflicts between landless, oppressed tenants yearning for land and their wealthy landlords, or as in the case of the southern Regulators from economic and political animosities between the small farmers of the backcountry and the planter elite of the South's tidewater regions, Loyalism on Staten Island was rooted in the community's experience of social stability brought about by decades of deferential politics, the influence of the Anglican Church, a

population comprised of middle class farmers who had long been settled on their lands, and the development of transatlantic commercial connections that enhanced the Island's economic prosperity and which colonial boycotts and a war with Britain threatened to sever. In essence, the communal experience of Staten Island Loyalism sets it apart from other locales that have been studied.

An examination of Loyalism on Staten Island has implications beyond the confines of local community studies. It not only reminds us of the importance of the local environment in which the ordinary American lived but also enables us to view how similarities in vastly different regions come to the fore when doing community studies. It also allows us to ask questions about the dynamics of New York City's political culture during the Revolution and about the complex relationship the city had with its surrounding countryside. The threat to the security of New York City and to eastern New Jersey posed by Staten Island's Loyalists also opens up a new line of inquiry into the nature of the relationship between the Whig governments of New York and New Jersey. The study of Loyalism on Staten Island may also prompt new questions about military-civilian relations in areas occupied by the British and Continental armies and provide historians with a new perspective from which they might begin to investigate the northern theater of the Revolution as a civil war. Finally, it allows for a better understanding of, and an appreciation for, the choices individuals and entire communities had to make when confronted by the events of the Revolution.

CHAPTER ONE

An Island in a Sea of Faith: Religious Affiliation and Loyalist Sentiment on Staten Island

“On Staten Island . . . [a] loyalist bastion in southern New York,” writes historian Philip Ranlet, “Anglicanism was . . . important.”¹ By the Revolution, individuals and families of Dutch, English, French, Scottish, Irish, and African descent had migrated to Staten Island creating a community that was ethnically, culturally, and religiously diverse. Even though most of the migrants came voluntarily in search of cheap, fertile land, some were brought as servants and slaves.² Associated with the Island’s ethnically diverse population was the proliferation of religions: Anglican (Church of England), Dutch Reformed, Huguenot (French Reformed), Presbyterian (English Reformed), and Moravian.³ Despite this diversity, the Anglican Church exercised social and political control over Staten Island by the late colonial period. The influence of the Island’s Anglican clergy – their relationship with Staten Islanders of all denominations, their

¹ Ranlet, *The New York Loyalists*, 71.

² By 1771, Staten Island’s population numbered 2,847 persons. Edward Countryman, *A People in Revolution: The American Revolution and Political Society in New York, 1760-1790* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 24, makes the point that during the first half of the eighteenth century the yearly growth rate of Staten Island’s population was 1.9 percent, while that of the entire colony of New York was 3.2 percent. Field Horne, *A Social-Historical Context of the Voorlezer’s House at Richmond Town, Staten Island, New York: A Guide for Interpretation* (Saratoga Springs, NY: Public History and Museum Services, 1986), 18, maintains that the Island’s ethnic composition was approximately 38 percent Dutch, 21 percent English, Scottish, or Irish, 17 percent French, and 24 percent of African descent.

³ For a general discussion of religion on Staten Island during the colonial period see Richard M. Bayles, *History of Richmond County, Staten Island, New York: From Its Discovery to the Present Time* (New York: L. E. Preston and Company, 1887), chap. 8; John J. Clute, *Annals of Staten Island: From Its Discovery to the Present Time* (New York: Press of Charles Vogt 1877), appendix I; Leng and Davis, *Staten Island and Its People*, 1: chaps. 4, 5, 13; Dorothy Valentine Smith, *Staten Island: Gateway to New York* (Philadelphia: Chilton Book Company, 1970), 50. By the Revolution, Methodist circuit riders led by the Reverend Francis Asbury were just beginning to preach on Staten Island. Except for Israel Disosway, Peter Van Pelt, and Hezekiah Wright, the Methodists did not have many spokesmen to advance their cause on the Island. Methodists would have to wait until after the Revolution to see their numbers grow. In 1787, the Woodrow Methodist Church was built on the south shore. It is considered the first Methodist church on Staten Island.

successful efforts at expanding the Church, their attitude toward government and authority, and their deferential view of society is important to an understanding of the development of Loyalist sentiment on Staten Island during the Revolution.

In 1693, Anglican zealots led by Governor Benjamin Fletcher sought to create a clearly defined Anglican establishment in New York.⁴ Their wish, however, was partially granted by the Dissenter-dominated New York Assembly. The Ministry Act of 1693 established tax-supported Anglican parishes in the counties of New York, Queens, Westchester, and Richmond on Staten Island and instructed the freeholders in each parish to support a “good sufficient Protestant Minister.”⁵ The vagueness with which the Ministry Act provided for the selection of a minister led to several disputes between Anglican provincial officials who believed that the term “good sufficient Protestant Minister” meant Anglican ministers and Dissenters who broadly interpreted the clause to mean *any* Protestant minister.⁶

The attempt to strengthen the Anglican Church’s established position in polyglot New York was assisted by its missionary arm, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG). During the first half of the eighteenth century, the SPG sent several missionaries to America. According to historian Carl Bridenbaugh, most of the missionaries were sent to the middle colonies where religious pluralism had “reduced

⁴ Two leaders in the movement to establish the Anglican Church in New York were Caleb Heathcote, the Lord of Scarsdale Manor in Westchester County, and Lewis Morris, the proprietor of the estate known as “Morrisania” also in Westchester County.

⁵ The Ministry Act of 1693 is reprinted in Edward T. Corwin, ed., *Ecclesiastical Records of the State of New York*, 7 vols. (Albany, NY: J. B. Lyon, State Printer, 1901-1916), 2: 1042-1043.

⁶ One such dispute occurred in the town of Jamaica in Queens County where the predominantly Presbyterian population had been supporting a Presbyterian minister since the 1660s.

the Church of England to the status of a sect.”⁷ Anglicans believed that an active missionary presence would enable the Church to become a dominant religious force in America.

On Staten Island, the establishment of an Anglican parish was delayed for lack of a permanent minister. Beginning in 1702, SPG-sponsored itinerant missionaries such as the Reverends John Brooke of Perth Amboy, New Jersey, John Talbot of Burlington, New Jersey, and John Sharpe, the chaplain of the British fort in Manhattan served the religious needs of Anglican Staten Islanders.⁸ But until a permanent minister was sent to Staten Island, the Church’s situation there could not begin to improve.⁹

The Reverend Aeneas Mackenzie, a native of Aberdeen, Scotland, was assigned to the Island in 1704 and continued in his mission until his death in 1723.¹⁰ Mackenzie was praised as a “pious, sober, learned, and laborious man” who worked well with others.¹¹ In November 1705, he reported that Staten Island’s English residents “made up

⁷ Carl Bridenbaugh, *Mitre and Sceptre: Transatlantic Faiths, Ideas, Personalities, and Politics: 1689-1775* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 119.

⁸ Reverend John Talbot to Reverend George Keith, 20 October 1705, in *Collections of the Protestant Episcopal Historical Society For the Year 1851*. 2 vols. (New York: The Protestant Episcopal Historical Society, 1851), 1: 56. See also Reverend Charles S. Burch, “History of Saint Andrew’s Church, Richmond, Staten Island,” *The Grafton Magazine of History and Genealogy* 1 (December, 1908), 2.

⁹ This was the opinion held by the Reverend William Vesey of Trinity Church in Manhattan and other Anglican leaders in New York. See *A Summery Account of the State of the Church in the Province of New York, As It was Laid Before the Clergy, convened 5 October 1704, At New York, By the Appointment His Excellency, Edward, Lord Cornbury, and Colonel Francis Nicholson*, in E. B. O’Callaghan, ed., *Documentary History of the State of New York*. 4 vols. (Albany, NY: Weed, Parsons Printers, 1849-1850), 3: 116 (herein cited as *DHNY*).

¹⁰ Mackenzie was educated at the Universities of Aberdeen and Edinburgh in Scotland. See C. F. Pascoe, *Two Hundred Years of the SPG: A Historical Account of the SPG, 1701-1900*. 2 vols. (London, England: Published by the Society, 1901), 1: 856; Frederick L. Weis, *The Colonial Clergy of the Middle Colonies: New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, 1628-1776* (Worcester, MA: The American Antiquarian Society, 1957), 266.

¹¹ Caleb Heathcote to the SPG, 9 November 1705, *DHNY*, 3: 119. Lewis Morris described Mackenzie as a “Man of good Learning and of a admirable temper . . . capable of the greatest

one part of the three of the inhabitants, two parts of the last being Dutch and French.”¹²

In addition, Mackenzie stressed that an Anglican Church building was desperately needed because communicants had “no convenient place for public worship.” The Island’s French “have a minister of their own,” he wrote, “and have built him a church wherein they allow me to preach in the afternoons.”¹³ Mackenzie preached every Sunday afternoon at the French Church for seven years.

In 1712, Mackenzie informed the SPG that “because of the charitable contribution of several gentlemen,” a church had been finally built for the congregation. Saint Andrew’s Church in Richmondtown opened for services that summer.¹⁴ It was a “pretty

performances.” See Lewis Morris to John Chamberlayne, September 1707, in Eugene R. Sheridan, ed., *The Papers of Lewis Morris* 3 vols. (Newark, NJ: The New Jersey Historical Society, 1991), 1: 58.

¹² Reverend Aeneas Mackenzie to the SPG, 8 November 1705, in Burch, “History of Saint Andrew’s Church,” 3. In 1679, Jasper Danckaerts, a Dutch sectarian of the Labadist persuasion, traveled through Staten Island and recorded: “There are now about a hundred families on the Island, of which the English constitute the least portion, and the Dutch and French . . . the greater portion.” See Jasper Danckaerts, *Journal of Jasper Danckaerts, 1679-1680*. Edited by Bartlett B. James and J. Franklin Jameson. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1913), 70. English settlement of Staten Island began after the Dutch surrender of New Netherland in 1664. Some of the early English residents, such as Captain Christopher Billopp, were given land grants on the Island as a reward for their political or military service to the Crown. However, we have very little knowledge of subsequent English immigration.

¹³ *Ibid.* The French Church, which was built in 1698, was located at Fresh Kill (present day Greenridge).

¹⁴ In June 1709, Mackenzie wrote: “Ever since I came upon the Island they [Anglican residents] have been talking of building a church but could not agree among themselves where to build till of late, I have got them to condescend upon a place as near the center of the county as could possibly be found with any conveniency, where we have already begun to build and laid the foundation for a small church. The method we have fallen upon to build is this: There are twelve undertakers, of which I was obliged to be one myself . . . that have bound ourselves by bond to masons and carpenters to find all material necessary for carrying on the work and to pay for the workmanship, and have bound ourselves mutually to each other to bear an equal share in defraying of the charges.” See Reverend Aeneas Mackenzie to the SPG, 13 June 1709, in William T. Davis, Charles W. Leng, and Royden Woodward Vosburgh, eds., *The Church of St. Andrew, Richmond, Staten Island: Its History, Vital Records, and Gravestone Inscriptions* (Staten Island, NY: The Staten Island Historical Society), 49. Besides Mackenzie, the other benefactors of Saint Andrew’s were: Joseph Arrowsmith, Nathaniel Britton, Sr., Ellis Duxbury, Thomas Farmar, Augustine Graham, Lambert Garretson, John Morgan, Alexander Stuart, William Tillyer, and Caleb Heathcote. In 1713, Queen Anne granted Saint Andrew’s a charter that confirmed the Reverend Mackenzie as parish minister and named two churchwardens (Thomas Farmar and Augustine Graham) and eight vestrymen (Joseph Arrowsmith, Nathaniel Britton, Sr., Lambert Garretson, Richard Merrill, John Morgan, Alexander Stuart, Ephraim Taylor, and William Tillyer). See Burch, “History of Saint Andrew’s Church,” 5. Saint

handsome church,” a thrilled Mackenzie wrote, “built of stone.” The Reverend William Harrison, Mackenzie’s successor, described the church as “clean and much better contrived than most here.”¹⁵ Ellis Duxbury, a three-term assemblyman from Staten Island and a Common Pleas Judge, assisted Mackenzie in organizing the congregation and in obtaining the necessary funds for the church’s construction. In 1718, he not only bequeathed a valuable 200-acre tract of land on Staten Island’s northeastern shore to the parish for use as a glebe but also £100 New York Currency for the purchase of a church door and the construction of a vestry room and porch.¹⁶

The Anglican mission on Staten Island was made difficult by the proliferation of non-English languages. In his first report to the SPG in November 1705, Mackenzie had asked the Society to send him Prayer Books in both Dutch and French since “the few I had have gained some of them already to a juster Opinion of our Form of Worship.” He also urged the Society to support the establishment of a school where Dutch and French children could be taught English as well as the Anglican catechism. “The greatest disadvantage to the Church in this Island is the want of an English school,” Mackenzie argued, “for the children have no education, but what they have from their parents’

Andrew’s was built on land deeded to the parish by William Tillyer and his wife Mary. A transcript of the Tillyer deed can be found in the Saint Andrew’s Church Collection, Box 1, Folder 1, SIHS.

¹⁵ The Reverend William Harrison’s Report to the SPG, 1724, Transcript, Charles W. Leng Collection, Box 2, Folder 60B, SIAS.

¹⁶ The Duxbury Glebe was located near the Watering Place (in the vicinity of present day Tompkinsville). Ellis Duxbury’s will, dated 5 May 1718, is reprinted in Charlotte Megill Hix, ed., *Staten Island Wills and Letters of Administration: Richmond County, 1670-1800* (Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, 1993), 61-62. See also Burch, “History of Saint Andrew’s Church,” 11; Davis, et al., eds., *The Church of St. Andrew*, 69.

language and principles.” If the Society addressed this need, Mackenzie predicted the formation of “numerous and regular congregations in a few years time.”¹⁷

In June 1709, Mackenzie notified the SPG that two schools had been opened on Staten Island.¹⁸ Between 1709 and 1776, SPG-sponsored English schools on Staten Island enrolled Anglican and non-Anglican children, boys and girls, white and black. Even though the Society paid the salaries of the schoolmasters, parents were often asked to pay a small tuition, which went toward the upkeep of the school. Poor white children and slaves were admitted for free. The schools taught the fundamentals in reading, writing, and arithmetic, as well as spelling and psalmody.¹⁹ However, because religious indoctrination was the main objective of these schools, instruction in the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer comprised the core of the curriculum. As historian John Calam points out “the predominant task was to teach children the three R’s together with religious and social conformity.”²⁰

¹⁷ Reverend Aeneas Mackenzie to the SPG, 8 November 1705, in Burch, “History of Saint Andrew’s Church,” 3.

¹⁸ Reverend Aeneas Mackenzie to the SPG, 13 June 1709, in Davis, et al., eds., *The Church of St. Andrew*, 50. Burch, “History of Saint Andrew’s,” 3, writes that in 1707 the “Venerable Society pledged £30 a year for two schoolmasters and £20 for a third.”

¹⁹ Burch, “History of Saint Andrew’s,” 4. See also Jean Paul Jordan, “The Anglican Establishment in Colonial New York, 1693-1783” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1971), 168. In 1742, the SPG informed Andrew Wright that among his duties as one of the Society’s schoolmasters on Staten Island was the instruction of “the poor whites, and black Children also, if any such are brought to him, gratis.” See Davis, et al., eds., *The Church of St. Andrew*, 22. When the SPG neglected to pay its schoolmasters in 1710 forcing them to quit their posts, Mackenzie reiterated his belief that without English schools “the youth are incapable of any spiritual instruction.” “There’s such a diversity of Languages on this Island,” a persistent Mackenzie continued, “that except they [Staten Island’s children] be taught English their conformity to the Church can’t be expected.” See Reverend Aeneas Mackenzie to the SPG, 28 July 1710, in Davis, et al., eds., *The Church of St. Andrew*, 52.

²⁰ John Calam, *Parsons and Pedagogues: The SPG Adventure in American Education* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), 104.

By the Revolution, the SPG had employed thirteen schoolmasters on Staten Island.²¹ Adam Brown, who taught on the “South side . . . where there is a mixture of almost all nations under heaven,” was one of the most popular.²² In one year, he taught as many as thirty-five children. “I teach them the use of the Common Prayer,” he wrote, “so that they can joyne with the Congregation in the Service.”²³ Twenty-four of these children eventually received instruction in the Anglican catechism from the Reverend Mackenzie.²⁴ When Brown moved away from the Island in 1715, Charles Taylor replaced him. For most of his twenty-eight years as a teacher on Staten Island, enrollment in Taylor’s classes was consistently at or above forty students.²⁵ In addition to providing his students with a formal education, Taylor taught them the “Church Catechism” and encouraged them to “join in Publick Worship.”²⁶ Andrew Wright, who taught on the Island from 1743 to 1749, regularly brought his students to Saint Andrew’s for catechism lectures. He was frequently commended for his refusal to back down to

²¹ Nelson R. Burr, “The Episcopal Church and the Dutch in Colonial New York and New Jersey, 1664-1784,” *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 19 (1950), 107 (herein cited as *HMPEC*).

²² Reverend Aeneas Mackenzie to the SPG, 28 July 1710, in Davis, et al., eds., *The Church of St. Andrew*, 51.

²³ Quoted in Randall H. Balmer, *A Perfect Babel of Confusion: Dutch Religion and English Culture in the Middle Colonies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 88.

²⁴ William Webb Kemp, *The Support of Schools in Colonial New York by the Society For the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1913), 165.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 166-167.

²⁶ David Humphreys, *Historical Account of the Incorporated Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts* (London, England: Joseph Downing, Printer, 1730), 219.

pressure from English Dissenters who wanted him to teach the Presbyterian catechism to his students.²⁷

Mackenzie's educational program was a huge success. He found that absent an affordable alternative, many parents who wanted their children to obtain an education were willing to take advantage of the formal instruction offered by the SPG-sponsored English schools, even if it meant exposing them to Anglican doctrine. In 1711, he wrote: "The French [and] some of the Dutch allow their Children to be taught the Church Catechism."²⁸ In 1712, several Anglican residents sent a testimonial to the SPG praising Mackenzie's work. They stressed that when he first arrived on Staten Island there were only a few inhabitants "who knew anything of our excellent Liturgy and form of worship, and many knew little more of any religion than the common notion of a Deity, and as their ignorance was great, so was their practice irregular." But because of Mackenzie's "splendid labors" and unceasing commitment to education, "our church increases, a considerable reformation is wrought, and something of the face of Christianity is to be seen among us."²⁹ By 1741, approximately one-third to one-half of the students enrolled in Staten Island's SPG-sponsored schools came from Dissenter families.³⁰

The Island's Anglicans also supported efforts at the education and conversion of slaves. For instance, it was reported that Charles Taylor operated "a Night School for the Instruction of the Negroes" who "cannot be spared from their Work during the Day

²⁷ Ronald W. Howard, "Education and Ethnicity in Colonial New York, 1664-1763: A Study in the Transmission of Culture in Early America" (Ph.D. diss., The University of Tennessee, 1978), 449.

²⁸ Reverend Aeneas Mackenzie to the SPG, 4 May 1711, in Davis, et al., eds., *The Church of St. Andrew*, 52.

²⁹ The testimonial is quoted in Burch, "History of Saint Andrew's Church," 13.

³⁰ Kemp, *The Support of Schools*, 167.

time.”³¹ The Reverend Harrison reported to the SPG that he “teaches the Negroes after service is ended and the congregation is gone home.”³² In 1744, the Reverend Jonathan Arnold informed the Society that he had baptized ten slaves and was “preparing still more for that sacrament.”³³ Even though the Reverend Richard Charlton recorded only nine slave baptisms in his thirty years as rector of Saint Andrew’s, he worked closely with two schoolmasters, Nicholas Barrington and Thomas Price, to provide religious and secular instruction to slaves.³⁴ When Price died of smallpox in 1760, Charlton lamented: “The want of his [Price’s] assistance for the present season will be a loss . . . especially [to] the Negroes.”³⁵

The effort to win converts to the Anglican Church bore the most immediate results among Staten Island’s French Huguenots.³⁶ The Huguenot minister, the Reverend

³¹ Humphreys, *Historical Account*, 219.

³² Quoted in Burch, “The History of Saint Andrew’s,” 13. Reverend Harrison also reported that several slaves were among those he had baptized.

³³ *Ibid*

³⁴ The Reverend Charlton was a native of Ireland and a graduate of Trinity College in Dublin. Prior to his ministry at Saint Andrew’s, Charlton had served from 1733 to 1747 as the assistant rector at Trinity Church in New York City and ran its Catechetical School. At the Trinity school he taught many slaves who were brought to him by their masters. For the Reverend Charlton’s career see Morgan Dix, *A History of the Parish of Trinity Church in the City of New York* 2 vols. (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1898-1901), 1: 210, 243-244; Davis, et al., eds., *The Church of St. Andrew*, 36-39; Burch, “History of Saint Andrew’s,” 14-17; *New-York Gazette and Weekly Mercury*, 13 October 1777. For Charlton’s work with slaves see Kemp, *The Support of Schools*, 170. Graham Russell Hodges, *Root and Branch: African Americans in New York and East Jersey, 1613-1863* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 86, writes that “seventy black students attended Charlton’s school, and fifteen to twenty baptisms occurred annually.” Nicholas Barrington, who was employed at the SPG-school in Richmondtown, frequently taught as many as twenty slaves in one year. To supplement his £10 salary as schoolmaster, Barrington served as the clerk of Saint Andrew’s. He eventually quit his post on the Island and opened a private school in New York City. For Barrington’s career as schoolmaster on Staten Island see Calam, *Parsons and Pedagogues*, 107.

³⁵ Quoted in Kemp, *The Support of Schools*, 171.

³⁶ A few Huguenot families had come to Staten Island as early as the 1660s. However, Huguenots began to arrive in larger numbers following King Louis XIV’s revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, which had guaranteed French Protestants limited freedom of worship in Catholic France. Most of them

David de Bonrepos, came to Staten Island in 1694 from New Rochelle, New York, and was a supporter of the SPG's educational program.³⁷ In addition to encouraging French parents to send their children to the Society's schools, he established a close working relationship with the Reverend Mackenzie and then with Mackenzie's successor at Saint Andrew's, the Reverend William Harrison.³⁸ It was Bonrepos who allowed Mackenzie to use the French Church for services until Saint Andrew's had been built.³⁹ Moreover, when the aging Huguenot minister decided to cut back on his workload in the 1720s, he asked the Reverend Harrison to occasionally fill in for him at the French Church.

came either directly from France or from Britain. Some Huguenot families also came from New Rochelle, New York, and from Long Island. By 1695, thirty-six Huguenot families had settled on the Island. They concentrated mainly near the center of the Island in the areas of Fresh Kill (present day Greenridge), Richmondtown, and Stony Brook (in the vicinity of present day New Dorp and Oakwood). By the early eighteenth century, some Huguenots had purchased farms on Staten Island's south shore in places such as Great Kills, Prince's Bay, and the aptly named, Huguenot. Even though they earned their livelihood primarily from diversified farming, many Huguenots possessed skills in weaving and carpentry, which helped supplement their agricultural incomes. By 1698, they had organized a congregation and had built a church at Fresh Kill on land deeded to the congregation by John Belleville. For a general discussion of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes and its affect on the Huguenots see Jon Butler, *The Huguenots in America: A Refugee People in New World Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), chap. 1; Louis Mettam, "Louis XIV and the Huguenots," *History Today* 35 (1985), 15-21 (herein cited as *HT*). A contemporary description of Staten Island's Huguenot community can be found in the Reverend John Miller, "A Description of the Province and City of New York with Plans of the City and Several Forts As They Existed in the Year 1695" in Cornell Jaray, ed., *Historical Chronicles of New Amsterdam, Colonial New York and Early Long Island First Series* (Port Washington, NY: Ira J. Friedman, Inc., 1968), 37. The Belleville deed is reprinted in Paul B. Taylor, *John Belleville, the Huguenot, his Descendants* (Kettering, OH: Belleville Family Association, 1973), 6-7.

³⁷ Butler, *The Huguenots in America*, 169.

³⁸ The Reverend Harrison succeeded Mackenzie at Saint Andrew's Church after the latter's death in 1723. Before taking over at Saint Andrew's, Harrison served as an SPG missionary to the towns of Hopewell and Maidenhead in New Jersey. For a discussion of the Reverend Harrison's career see Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 56-57; Weis, *The Colonial Clergy of the Middle Colonies*, 234; Burch, "History of Saint Andrew's Church," 8; Davis, et al., eds., *The Church of St. Andrew*, 31-33.

³⁹ Bonrepos also attended some of Mackenzie's services. Reverend Aeneas Mackenzie to the SPG, 8 November 1705, in Burch, "History of Saint Andrew's," 3. See also Jordan, "The Anglican Establishment in Colonial New York," 207-208.

Bonrepos also encouraged his congregants to attend Harrison's Sunday services at Saint Andrew's.⁴⁰

Harrison's dedication and hard work won over many Huguenots to Anglicanism. In 1733, Bonrepos notified the SPG that several of his congregants regularly attended services at Saint Andrew's and received "Instruction" in the Anglican catechism from the Reverend Harrison.⁴¹ Following Bonrepos's death in 1734, a majority of the members of the French congregation decided to permanently close their church and become members of Saint Andrew's. In 1735, the Elders of the French congregation informed the SPG of their decision. "We now are most of us," they wrote, "joined and united to the English congregation."⁴² In 1742, the Reverend Jonathan Arnold, who had succeeded Harrison at Saint Andrew's, praised his predecessor's work and reported that Staten Island's Huguenots had "almost all conformed."⁴³

In his classic eighteenth century study *The History of the Province of New York*, William Smith, Jr., indicated that most of Staten Island's French residents attended Saint Andrew's. "The inhabitants [of Staten Island] are principally Dutch and French," he wrote, "the latter resort to an Episcopal [Anglican] church in Richmond Town."⁴⁴ One indicator of the growing French presence within Saint Andrew's was the number of vestrymen who came from the French community. Between 1720 and 1740, for example,

⁴⁰ Butler, *The Huguenots in America*, 191-192.

⁴¹ Reverend David de Bonrepos to the SPG, 16 October 1733, Transcript, Charles W. Leng Collection, Box 2, Folder 60B, SIAS.

⁴² The Elders and Members of the French Congregation to the SPG, 1735, Transcript, Ibid, SIAS.

⁴³ Quoted in Jordan, "The Anglican Establishment in Colonial New York," 209.

⁴⁴ William Smith, Jr., *The History of the Province of New York*. Edited by Michael Kammen. 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 1: 220.

members of the Britton, Dubois, Duchene, Gano, Guyon, Latourette, Micheau, and Perine families served in the vestry. By the Revolution, French names outnumbered those of English origin in the church's list of communicants.⁴⁵

In 1715, Mackenzie reported that several Dutch were among the non-English residents he had baptized that year.⁴⁶ Even though some of the Dutch had converted to Anglicanism during Mackenzie's ministry, several families remained affiliated with the Dutch Reformed congregation.⁴⁷ In 1716, this congregation built the North Side Reformed Church at Decker's Ferry (now Port Richmond).⁴⁸ One year later, they were

⁴⁵ Davis, et al., eds., *The Church of St. Andrew*, 131-132. In a list of subscribers for the salary of the Reverend John H. Rowland dated 10 April 1787, French names also outnumber those of English origin. See Clute, *Annals of Staten Island*, 257, 396, 424-425.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴⁷ The earliest Dutch attempts to establish permanent settlements on Staten Island occurred under the patroonships of David Pietersz de Vries and Cornelis Melyn. However, during the 1640s and 1650s local Raritan Indians destroyed the settlements established by these two men. Following the end of hostilities with the Indians, Dutch looking for fertile lands to farm found Staten Island an attractive place to settle. Unlike the French and English migrations, the Dutch migration was mostly internal. Many of the Dutch who settled on Staten Island were second generation who came from Long Island or Manhattan. After 1690, many second-generation Dutch living in these areas found it difficult to secure land on which to establish a farm. In addition, some had been supporters of Leisler's Rebellion (1689-1691) and sought refuge on the Island from provincial authorities. The Dutch initially settled near Richmondtown but by the early eighteenth century many had purchased and settled on lands along Staten Island's northern and western shorelines, where their farms faced the Arthur Kill, the Kill van Kull, and the Upper New York Bay. For the Dutch influence on Staten Island see Morton Wagman, "Staten Island Roots: The Dutch Heritage," *Staten Island Historian*, 2nd ser., 3 (1985), 10-12 (herein cited as *SIH*). For the patroons see Theodora Dubois and Dorothy Valentine Smith, *Staten Island Patroons* (Staten Island, NY: The Staten Island Historical Society, 1961); John D. O' Hallaran, "The Patroons of Pavonia and Staten Island," *SIH* 1st ser., 14 (1953), 11-12; Loring McMillen, "David Pietersz de Vries and the First Settlement of Staten Island," *SIH* 1st ser., 2 (1939), 25-27. For a contemporary account of the early attempts at Dutch settlement on the Island see David Pietersz de Vries, "Voyages From Holland to America, A. D. 1632 to 1644" in Cornell Jaray, ed., *Historic Chronicles of New Amsterdam, Colonial New York and Early Long Island* (Port Washington, NY: Ira J. Friedman, Inc., 1968), 80, 83, 85. See also *Melyn Papers, 1640-1699* (New York: New York Historical Society, 1914). For a discussion of Dutch-Indian relations in New Netherland and the destruction of the early Dutch settlements on Staten Island see Alan W. Trelease, *Indian Affairs in Colonial New York: The Seventeenth Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1960), chaps. 1, 2. For a discussion of Leisler's Rebellion and its impact on internal Dutch migration see Balmer, *A Perfect Babel of Confusion*, viii.

⁴⁸ For a brief history of the congregation see Cornelius Vander Naald, "History of the Reformed Church on Staten Island," *SIH* 1st ser., 16 (1955), 1-5. See also Henry Delavan Frost, "The Church on Staten Island" in *Tercentenary Studies, 1928: Reformed Church in America, A Record of Beginnings*.

joined by a group of Huguenots who had left the French Church because of the Reverend Bonrepos's conciliatory stance toward Anglicanism.⁴⁹ In 1718, with the help of the influential pietist Guiliam Bertholf of Hackensack, New Jersey, the congregation secured the services of Cornelius Van Santvoord as its permanent minister.⁵⁰

Van Santvoord was an acquaintance of the Reverend Theodore J. Frelinghuysen, who was the controversial minister of the Reformed Churches in the Raritan Valley of New Jersey. During the 1720s, Frelinghuysen led several revivals throughout New Jersey spreading a message of godly living and the achievement of salvation through personal conversion. Moreover, he was a vocal advocate for the creation of an ecclesiastical body to examine and ordain Dutch Reformed ministers in America.⁵¹ Van

Compiled by the Tercentenary Committee on Research and Publication. (New York: Published by the Church, 1928), 89-90; Leng and Davis, *Staten Island and Its People*, 1: 435.

⁴⁹ Butler, *The Huguenots in America*, 192, also notes that some of the Huguenots who joined the Dutch Reformed congregation did so because of marriage. See also Frost, "The Church on Staten Island," 90; Leng and Davis, *Staten Island and Its People*, 1: 437.

⁵⁰ Prior to the arrival of the Reverend Van Santvoord, itinerant ministers and its resident voorlezer, Hendrick Crusier, served the Dutch Reformed congregation. For a discussion of the duties of the Dutch voorlezer see Loring McMillen, "The Voorlezer," *SIH* 1st ser., 8 (1946), 17-19, 22. The Reverend Van Santvoord was graduated from the University of Leyden in the Netherlands where he had been a student of the highly respected theologian Johannes Marck. His intelligence and devout pietism brought him to the attention of Guiliam Bertholf, who was known as the "itinerating apostle of New Jersey." It was Bertholf who recommended Van Santvoord for the vacant Staten Island pulpit. For discussions of the life and career of the Reverend Guiliam Bertholf see Howard G. Hegeman, "Colonial New Jersey's First Domine: Part I," *De Halve Maen* 43 (1969), 9-10 and "Colonial New Jersey's First Domine: Part II," *De Halve Maen* 44 (1970), 17-18; Firth Haring Fabend, *Zion on the Hudson: Dutch New York and New Jersey in the Age of Revivals* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 14-17; Edward T. Corwin, *A Manual of the Reformed Church in America: 1628-1902* (New York: Board of Publication of the Reformed Church in America, 1902), 317-318; Douglas G. Jacobsen, *Unprov'd Experiment: Religious Pluralism in Colonial New Jersey* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishers, 1991), 92-101. For the Reverend Cornelius Van Santvoord see Corwin, *A Manual of the Reformed Church*, 851-852; William B. Sprague, *Annals of the American Reformed Dutch Pulpit; Or Commemorative Notices of Distinguished Clergymen of that Denomination in the United States from its Commencement to the Close of the Year Eighteen Hundred and Fifty-five* (New York: Carter, 1869), 6-7; Weis, *The Colonial Clergy of the Middle Colonies*, 334. Vander Naald, "History of the Reformed Church on Staten Island," 3, makes the point that Van Santvoord was called by the congregation in 1717.

⁵¹ The Reverend Frelinghuysen was born in 1691 in Lingden, Germany, and attended the University of Lingden, where he became exposed to German pietism. In 1715, he was ordained in Westphalia, Germany, and five years later answered the call to serve the Reformed churches in the Raritan Valley of

Santvoord strongly defended Frelinghuysen and often invited him to preach at the North Side Reformed Church.⁵²

Frelinghuysen's revivals were a harbinger of the Great Awakening.⁵³ The Awakening was comprised of a series of evangelical revivals that swept across the colonies like a religious firestorm from the 1730s to about 1745. The course and development of the Great Awakening led to schisms within the major religious denominations in America. The Anglican, Dutch Reformed, Congregationalist, and Presbyterian Churches saw many of their congregations split into two rival groups: evangelical "New Lights" and traditional "Old Lights".⁵⁴

Two leaders of the Awakening, the Presbyterian Gilbert Tennent of New Brunswick, New Jersey, and the Anglican George Whitefield of England, led revivals on Staten Island.⁵⁵ According to Martin E. Lodge, Tennent had his "earliest startling success

New Jersey. For a discussion of Frelinghuysen's life and career see Corwin, *A Manual of the Reformed Church*, 472-477; Jacobsen, *An Unprov'd Experiment*, 75-83; James Tanis, *Dutch Calvinistic Pietism in the Middle Colonies: A Study of the Life and Theology of Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen* (The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967); Weis, *The Colonial Clergy of the Middle Colonies*, 221.

⁵² Frelinghuysen's visits to Staten Island attracted listeners from all over the region, often filling the small North Side Reformed Church to beyond capacity. See Tanis, *Dutch Calvinistic Pietism*, 42.

⁵³ F. J. Schrag, "Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen, The Father of American Pietism," *Church History* 14 (1945), 201-216, makes a similar argument. See also Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven*, 131-132. For the opposite view see Herman Harmelink, III, "Another Look at Frelinghuysen and His 'Awakening,'" *Church History* 37 (1968), 423-438; M. Eugene Osterhaven, "The Experimental Theology of Early Dutch Calvinism," *Reformed Review* 27 (1974), 186-192.

⁵⁴ For a discussion of the Great Awakening see Charles H. Maxson, *The Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1920); Martin E. Lodge, "The Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1964); Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven*, chap. 5.

⁵⁵ On the life and career of the Reverend Gilbert Tennent see Milton J. Coalter, Jr., *Gilbert Tennent, Son of Thunder: A Case Study of Continental Pietism's Impact on the First Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986); Janet F. Fishburn, "Gilbert Tennent, Established Dissenter," *CH* 63 (1994), 31-49. For an excellent discussion of the Reverend George Whitefield see Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1991).

at revivalism” on Staten Island during the late 1720s.⁵⁶ He and another New Light, the Reverend John Cross of Basking Ridge, New Jersey, led several revivals on the Island.⁵⁷ In May 1740, the Reverend George Whitefield, the most charismatic of the New Lights, held a revival meeting on Staten Island in which he denounced ministers and laypersons who had not experienced the grace of God through a personal conversion. His visit was such a success that he decided to return to Staten Island later that year. In November 1740, Whitefield preached on the Island to a crowd of “about 3 or 400 People.”⁵⁸

The messages that emanated from the evangelical revivals of the Great Awakening empowered ordinary Americans to challenge political and ecclesiastical authority. The Awakening caused a kindred democratic spirit and indirectly added to the development of anti-establishment political ideas in America. “One of the beliefs that sustained the preachers and congregations of the Awakening,” wrote historian Robert McCluer Calhoun, “was the expectation that ecstatic revival and conversion would fuse the people of America into a new fellowship of pious, joyful, self-disciplined, self-sacrificing, and democratic people.”⁵⁹

One of the loudest critics of the religious ferment that was taking place during the Great Awakening was the Reverend Jonathan Arnold, a Staten Island Anglican

⁵⁶ Lodge, “The Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies,” 140.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 190. See also Reverend Gilbert Tennent to Reverend George Whitefield, 25 April 1741, in Luke Tyerman, *The Life of the Reverend George Whitefield, B.A., Of Pembroke College, Oxford*. 2 vols. (New York: Anson D. F. Randolph, 1877), 1: 477.

⁵⁸ Quoted in Leng and Davis, *Staten Island and Its People*, 1: 444-445. See also Tyerman, *The Life of the Reverend George Whitefield*, 1: 433.

⁵⁹ Calhoun, *The Loyalists in Revolutionary America*, 111. For the Great Awakening’s impact on political culture in colonial America see Jonathan Clark, “The American Revolution: A War of Religion?,” *HT* 39 (1989), 10-16. See also Timothy D. Hall, *Contested Boundaries: Itinerancy and the Reshaping of the Colonial American Religious World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994).

minister.⁶⁰ In 1742, Arnold informed the SPG that the “followers of Mr. Whitefield and Tennent have been numerous and for a while zealous.”⁶¹ Although he was concerned about the potential influence that New Lights such as Tennent and Cross might have on his congregation, Arnold saw Whitefield as the greater threat to the Anglican Church and to the established social and religious hierarchy. Thus, he set out to discredit the charismatic minister.

Arnold often compared Whitefield to the Devil and accused him of deceiving his listeners.⁶² He warned Anglicans that Whitefield and his followers sought to undermine “the Order of Men” and to “dissolve the Hierarchy of the Church of England, to confound the Establishment, and pull down the Bishops and Clergy.”⁶³ In an article published in the January 22, 1745 edition of the *New-York Gazette and Weekly Post-Boy*, Arnold charged Whitefield with preaching “erroneous Doctrines” and of “sowing Discord and Causing Divisions in Churches.”⁶⁴ He also attacked the egalitarianism promoted by Whitefield and other New Lights. Instead, Arnold emphasized acceptance of societal inequities and deference to the established religious, political, and social order.

⁶⁰ The Reverend Arnold was a native of Haddam, Connecticut, and a graduate of Yale College. In 1725, he succeeded the Reverend Samuel Johnson as the minister of the Congregational Church in West Haven, Connecticut, following Johnson’s conversion to Anglicanism. In 1736, Arnold followed in Johnson’s footsteps and was ordained a minister in the Anglican Church. For three years he worked as an SPG missionary in the region around New Haven, Connecticut. In 1739, he accepted the call to replace the Reverend William Harrison at Saint Andrew’s on Staten Island following the latter’s death. Arnold remained at Saint Andrew’s until his dismissal in 1745. Two years later, he became the minister of the Fredericksburg parish in Albermarle County, Virginia. Arnold served the Fredericksburg parish until his death in 1751. See Davis, et al., eds., *The Church of St. Andrew*, 34-35; Weis, *The Colonial Clergy of the Middle Colonies*, 171.

⁶¹ Reverend Jonathan Arnold to the SPG, 10 November 1742, Transcript, Charles W. Leng Collection, Box 2, Folder 60B, SILAS.

⁶² *New-York Gazette*, 15-22 January 1740.

⁶³ Ibid

⁶⁴ *New-York Gazette and Weekly Post-Boy*, 21 January 1745.

Influential Anglicans such as the Reverends Edward Vaughan of Elizabethtown, New Jersey, and William Skinner of Perth Amboy, New Jersey, often praised Arnold's efforts to the SPG.⁶⁵

The Great Awakening's divisive tendencies had a profound impact on Staten Island's Dutch Reformed and Presbyterian congregations.⁶⁶ Old Lights within these congregations lashed out against the enthusiasm and factionalism produced by the revivals. Jonathan Arnold corroborated the Awakening's divisive impact on Staten Island's Dissenters: "The followers of Mr. Whitefield and Tennent . . . are much divided among themselves, [and] confounded by their own irregular doctrines and practices."⁶⁷ He was happy to see that many of the disgruntled found refuge in the Anglican Church. In 1743, Arnold informed the SPG that the number of Anglicans on Staten Island had increased to 540, while the number of Dissenters had decreased to about 1000.⁶⁸ The next year he reported that his congregation continued to grow as "many of the Dutch" were joining the Church.⁶⁹ Thus, the Great Awakening was a major religious and social

⁶⁵ Jordan, "The Anglican Establishment in Colonial New York," 270.

⁶⁶ A small Presbyterian congregation (English Reformed) had existed on Staten Island since at least 1717. The earliest Presbyterian meetinghouse on the Island was built at Stony Brook (in the vicinity of present day New Dorp and Oakwood) on land deeded to the congregation by Jacques Cortelyou, who was the son of the former Surveyor General of New York under Governor Francis Lovelace. The deed was dated 13 May 1729 and acknowledged on September 27, 1743. For a brief discussion of the early history of Staten Island's Presbyterians see Loring McMillen, "The First Presbyterian Church, Staten Island, 1717-1776-1808: Part I," *Chronicles of Staten Island* 1 (1985), 1-7 (herein cited as *COSI*) and "The First Presbyterian Church, Staten Island, 1717-1776-1808: Part II," *COSI* 1 (1985-1986), 9, 14-15. According to McMillen, several of the parties involved in the deed were members of the Dutch Reformed denomination.

⁶⁷ Reverend Jonathan Arnold to the SPG, 10 November 1742, Transcript, Charles W. Leng Collection, Box 2, Folder 60B, SILAS.

⁶⁸ Jordan, "The Anglican Establishment in Colonial New York," 270.

⁶⁹ Quoted in *Ibid*, 209. See also Burch, "History of Saint Andrew's," 13. In April 1745, Arnold was forced to resign by the churchwardens and vestry who accused him of abandoning his daily duties to the parish during his pursuit of Whitefield, the unauthorized cutting and selling of timber for his own profit

event whose overall effect on Staten Island's religious landscape was to fracture the Dissenters and to strengthen Anglicanism.

In 1742, the Dutch Reformed congregation was further weakened by the departure of the Reverend Van Santvoord for Schenectady, New York. The poor, fractured state of the congregation was reflected in its prolonged inability to secure a new permanent minister. In 1757, however, the remaining members joined with the Dutch Reformed congregation in Bergen, New Jersey, to secure the services of the Reverend William Jackson. As a teen, Jackson had caught the attention of two well-known pietists: John Frelinghuysen of Raritan, New Jersey, who was the son of the Reverend Theodore J. Frelinghuysen, and John Henry Goetschius of Bergen County, New Jersey. Jackson's apprenticeship under these two men pushed him into the New Light camp known in the Dutch Reformed Church as the Coetus group.⁷⁰ Young, intelligent, and charismatic,

from the Duxbury Glebe, and for other unspecified actions. See Jordan, "The Anglican Establishment in Colonial New York," 270.

⁷⁰ For a discussion of the life and career of the Reverend William Jackson see Bayles, *History of Richmond County*, 356; Corwin, *A Manual of the Reformed Church*, 540; Frost, "The Church on Staten Island," 92-93; Daniel Van Winkle, *Old Bergen: History and Reminiscences* (Jersey City, NJ: J. W. Harrison, 1902), 171-174. The Reverend Van Santvoord, who was Jackson's predecessor, was also a supporter of the Coetus group. The Awakening split the Dutch Reformed Church into two rival religious factions: the Conferentie (Old Lights) and the Coetus (New Lights). The members of the Conferentie group were committed to maintaining traditional ties with the Classis of Amsterdam, the governing body of the Dutch Church in the Netherlands and of accommodation with the Anglicans. The more progressive Coetus faction was revivalist in its theological outlook, called for the creation of an ecclesiastical body to ordain ministers in America, promoted the establishment of an American theological academy to educate and train future ministers, and supported closer religious and political ties with the Presbyterian Church. The conflict between Coetus and Conferentie became heated in the decade preceding the Revolution and in many ways shaped the political choices of the Dutch Reformed in New York and New Jersey. In general, the Dutch who favored the Conferentie remained loyal to the Crown, while members of the Coetus became Whigs and supported Independence. For a discussion of the Coetus-Conferentie split in the Dutch Reformed Church see Adrian C. Leiby, "The Coetus-Conferentie Controversy: Part I—Events Up to the Time the Conferentie was Formed, 1755," *De Halve Maen* 38 (1963), 11-13 and "The Coetus-Conferentie Controversy: Part II—The Conferentie Faction is Overthrown, 1771," *De Halve Maen* 39 (1964), 13-14. See also Gerald F. De Jong, *The Dutch Reformed Church in the American Colonies* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1978), chap. 11. For the co-relation between the Coetus-Conferentie split and political affiliation during the Revolution see James Tanis, "The Dutch Reformed Church and the American Revolution: Part I," *De Halve Maen* 52 (1977), 1-2, 15 and "The Dutch Reformed Church and the American Revolution: Part II," *De Halve Maen* 52 (1977), 1-2, 12-13, 19.

Jackson gained a reputation as an orator “second only to Whitefield.”⁷¹ He electrified audiences with his direct, politically charged sermons. His services at Bergen and on Staten Island often attracted large crowds of listeners from the surrounding communities. In Jackson, the remnants of Staten Island’s Dutch Reformed congregation had found someone that they could rally around and who was not afraid to challenge the growing power of the Anglicans.

By the late colonial period, Anglicans were not only in control of the Island’s religious affairs but also its politics. The competition for political leadership on Staten Island had shifted from parity among the denominations to complete domination by the Anglicans. For example, of the six Staten Islanders who served in the New York Assembly from 1750 to 1775, five were Anglicans and one, Henry Holland, was a member of the Dutch Reformed Church who was elected to the Assembly in 1761 with the full support of the Reverend Richard Charlton, an Anglican minister.⁷² “Mr. Holland has pleased to declare to some Gentlemen in N. [New] York,” wrote Charlton to his close friend James Duane, “that if I had not assisted him he would have failed in his former Election.” The Anglican clergyman admitted to Duane that he had influenced “more votes than I chuse to mention.”⁷³ Holland thanked Charlton and the members of Saint

⁷¹ Corwin, *A Manual of the Reformed Church*, 540.

⁷² Henry Holland was a native of Albany, New York, where he had become a successful merchant. In the late 1740s, he relocated to New York City and purchased a large tract of land on the north shore of Staten Island. Holland’s estate was called the *Morning Star*.

⁷³ Reverend Richard Charlton to James Duane, 12 February 1768, James Duane Papers, 1680-1853, Reel 1, NYHS.

Andrew's for their "successful exertions" on his behalf by donating a bell and two silver collection plates to the church.⁷⁴

The Reverend Richard Charlton was an "esteemed and respected" member of the community who was well known for his advocacy of a more direct role for the Church in American domestic affairs. Indeed, his "Attachment to the Constitution, in Church and State" were unquestioned.⁷⁵ Charlton preached deference to God, King, and one's social "betters" and saw the causes of America's discontent being sown in the Dissenter churches. He was a close acquaintance of the Reverend Thomas Bradbury Chandler of Elizabethtown, New Jersey, who was the vocal leader of the movement to establish an Anglican episcopate in America.⁷⁶ Charlton also participated in several conventions held by the Anglican clergy of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut where the issue of an American episcopate was frequently discussed.⁷⁷ In 1771, he joined with other Anglican clergymen in an address to Lord Hillsborough, the British Secretary of State for the Colonies, which warned: "The Church must inevitably decrease in the Colonies, if Bishops are not sent . . . and the Dissenters will in time gain an entire Ascendancy."⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Clute, *Annals of Staten Island*, 264.

⁷⁵ *New-York Gazette and Weekly Mercury*, 13 October 1777.

⁷⁶ In 1747, Charlton had recommended Chandler to the vestry of Saint John's Church in Elizabethtown, New Jersey, as a replacement for the deceased Reverend Edward Vaughan. See Samuel A. Clark, *The History of St. John's Church, Elizabeth Town, New Jersey, From the Year 1703 to the Present Time* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1857), 57-60. For a discussion of the Anglican movement to create an American episcopate see Arthur L. Cross, *The Anglican Episcopate and the American Colonies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1902); Nancy L. Rhoden, *Revolutionary Anglicanism: The Colonial Church of England during the American Revolution* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), chap. 3.

⁷⁷ Jordan, "The Anglican Establishment in Colonial New York," 437. See also Walter H. Stowe, ed., "The Seabury Minutes of the New York Clergy Conventions of 1766 and 1767," *HMPEC* 10 (1941), 124-162.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 441.

Staten Island's Anglican congregation continued to grow during Charlton's ministry. In 1766, he welcomed several new members to Saint Andrew's, including three Dutch families.⁷⁹ Four years later, Charlton reported to the SPG that fifty new pews were added to Saint Andrew's and that the church edifice was enlarged to 80 x 40 feet in order to accommodate the growing congregation.⁸⁰

The expansion of Anglicanism on the Island produced intense animosities from Dutch and English Dissenters. In an effort to more effectively challenge Anglican political and social hegemony over Staten Island, the Reverend William Jackson oversaw the unification of the dwindling Dutch Reformed and Presbyterian congregations. In 1769, the Dutch Reformed congregation assisted the Presbyterians in moving their meetinghouse from Stony Brook (in the vicinity of present day New Dorp and Oakwood) to Richmondtown.⁸¹ Jackson agreed to serve the new united Reformed congregation as its minister. A second meetinghouse was eventually built on Staten Island's southwestern shore.⁸² But, despite the united opposition of Staten Island's Dissenters, the Anglican Church continued as the dominant political and religious force in the community.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 217.

⁸⁰ Reverend Richard Charlton to the SPG, 4 October 1770, Transcript, Charles W. Leng Collection, Box 2, Folder 60B, SIIAS. See also Burch, "History of Saint Andrew's," 14; Davis, et al., eds., *The Church of St. Andrew*, 38.

⁸¹ McMillen, "The First Presbyterian Church, Staten Island . . . Part I," 4. This church became known as the United Reformed Church of Richmondtown.

⁸² Ibid, 7. See also McMillen, "The First Presbyterian Church, Staten Island . . . Part II," 9. McMillen explains that in the minutes of the New York Presbytery for 1775 and 1776 there is mentioned an "East Church" and a "West Church" on Staten Island. The "East Church" very likely refers to the United Reformed Church at Richmondtown, while the "West Church" was the small meetinghouse that was built on the southwest shore of the Island (Westfield) near the present day sections of Rossville and Woodrow. In addition to the Reverend Jackson, several itinerant ministers whose last names are listed in the Presbytery's minutes served Staten Island's Presbyterians. These ministers were Roe, Horton, Eckley, Richards, and Simon. It is entirely possible that the Horton referred to in the Presbytery's minutes was the Reverend Azariah Horton of Chatham, New Jersey.

By the early 1770s, local religious issues became inseparable from the growing political split between Britain and her colonies. The Island's small but vocal group of Dutch and English Dissenters not only attacked the Anglican Church as a monolithic obstacle to their political and social advancement on Staten Island but also criticized British taxation as misguided and tyrannical. From his pulpits in New Jersey and on the Island, the Reverend Jackson assured his listeners that resistance to British imperial policies was righteous and justified in the eyes of God. He also denounced the King, Parliament, and the Anglican clergy for seeking to undermine religious and political liberty in America.⁸³ Anglican schoolmaster Tunis Egbert recalled that the "great uneasiness" over British imperial measures was "mostly Occasioned by the Decenters."⁸⁴ In 1776, British Lieutenant Loftus Cliffe of the Forty-Sixth Regiment of Foot wrote that from what he had heard and witnessed on the Island, "the Republican principles of the Dissenters [had] done more mischief, or at least as much as the Ambition of their few intoxicated Leaders." He also described a conversation he had had with one Dissenter who told him that he "knew of no King but the King Jehova."⁸⁵ In 1780, Captain August Eberhardt von Dinklage, a Hessian officer, told a friend that a Staten Islander had explained to him that one of the main causes of the rebellion was the Dissenter "priesthood which hoped to have great advantage from it, for if the English government were abolished then the Episcopal Church should no longer impose its parish system on

⁸³ Leonard Lundin, *Cockpit of the Revolution: The War for Independence in New Jersey* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1940), 100-101; Van Winkle, *Old Bergen*, 173-174.

⁸⁴ Quoted in Ranlet, *The New York Loyalists*, 71.

⁸⁵ Lieutenant Loftus Cliffe to Unknown, 8 July 1776, Transcript, Military Collection, American Revolution, Box 1, Folder 2, SIHS.

the local community churches.”⁸⁶ The Reverend Charlton compared the Dissenters’ attacks on the British government and the Anglican clergy to a “virus . . . that may be productive of a Gangrene.”⁸⁷

Any discussion of the religious landscape of Staten Island on the eve of the Revolution would not be complete without mentioning the Moravians or United Brethren. By 1762, the Island’s Moravians had grown in number through intermarriage and immigration and had organized a congregation. One year later, the Reverend Hector Gambold was assigned to the congregation and a church was built at New Dorp.⁸⁸

While the Moravian Church pursued an official policy of neutrality during the revolutionary struggle, the reality of the conflict was such that individual Brethren were often forced to take sides simply out of self-preservation. In an effort to protect their personal interests, it was common for many Brethren to side with the dominant political authority in the communities wherein they resided.⁸⁹

Staten Island’s Brethren desperately tried to avoid taking sides, but they could not escape the reality of their situation. There seems to have been long standing tensions between the Brethren and the Island’s Reformed congregants. During the 1768 Assembly elections, for example, the Reverend Gambold recorded in the Moravian Congregation Diary that the “low Dutch minister” [Reverend William Jackson] strongly

⁸⁶ Quoted in Rodney Atwood, *The Hessians: Mercenaries from Hessen-Kassel in the American Revolution* (Cambridge, England, Cambridge University Press, 1980), 160.

⁸⁷ Reverend Richard Charlton to the SPG, 6 April 1770, Transcript, Charles W. Leng Collection, Box 2, Folder 60B, SIIAS.

⁸⁸ Clute, *Annals of Staten Island*, 256-259, 275-277; Harry E. Stocker, *A History of the Moravian Church in New York City* (New York: Published by the author, 1922), 108-109.

⁸⁹ I am indebted to Elisabeth Sommer, Director of Research and Historical Interpretation at the Staten Island Historical Society’s Richmondtown Restoration, for information about the Moravian Church and its stance in relation to war in general, and the Revolution in particular.

opposed the candidacy of Aaron Cortelyou because he was a member of the Brethren.⁹⁰ Although the Brethren were theologically similar to the Reformed congregations, the episcopal structure of their church and their reputation for being soft on Anglicanism brought them disdain from these Dissenter groups.⁹¹ The tactics that were used by the Whigs of New York and New Jersey to compel allegiance from Staten Islanders first to colonial resistance and then to the cause of independence eventually put extreme pressure on the neutral Brethren. Because members of the united Reformed congregations dominated the Whig movement on Staten Island, it is not surprising that the Brethren had some anxieties over what to expect in an independent America where the Whigs would be in control of the government.

Once hostilities between Britain and America had commenced, the course pursued by the Island's Brethren took them from neutrality to Loyalism. For instance, Brethren were among Staten Islanders accused in 1775 and 1776 of defying New York's Whigs by trading with several British warships moored in New York harbor. In addition, the Richmond County Committee of Safety, which was chaired by Christian Jacobson, a well-respected member of the Moravian community, was notorious for its soft treatment of accused Loyalists. Even though Moravian religious doctrine forbid Brethren from taking up arms, exception was sometimes made in cases of self-defense. For example, it is entirely possible that the stress of Whig raids from New Jersey during the Revolution prompted Brethren such as Richard Conner and Aaron Cortelyou to serve in the local Loyalist militia that defended Staten Island.

⁹⁰ Moravian Congregation Diary, 10 May 1768. Thank you to Elisabeth Sommer for bringing this document to my attention.

⁹¹ For this information I am again indebted to Elisabeth Sommer. See Jordan, "The Anglican Establishment in Colonial New York," 428, 471.

The effect of religion on individual political loyalties during the Revolution caused dissention in some Staten Island families. For example, the Loyalist John M. Mersereau was an active member of Anglican Saint Andrew's Church, while his Whig cousins Joshua III, John, Jacob, and Cornelius Mersereau and Joshua III's son John L., remained affiliated with the North Side Reformed Church.⁹² The merchant Andrew Van Tuyl had assimilated into English culture by Anglicizing his name and joining the Anglican Church. His affiliation with Anglicanism contributed to his Loyalist sympathies. However, the members of his family who attended Dutch Reformed services on the Island and in Somerset County, New Jersey, actively supported independence.⁹³

By the Revolution, Anglicanism dominated the religious and political scene of Staten Island, leaving a residual resentment among the Dutch and English Dissenters who struggled with problems of factionalism, dwindling membership, and the loss of social and political status in the community. The discourse of the Revolution was partly driven by religion, which helped to shape the allegiance of many Americans. Staten Islanders who were not affiliated with either the Dutch Reformed or Presbyterian congregations, to which the Island's Whigs belonged, feared the consequences of a new political and social order that would result from a Whig victory in the Revolution. For example, Anglicans

⁹² On the Loyalist John M. Mersereau see Loring McMillen, "An Island Saga: The Mersereau Family, Part V," *COSI* 1 (1990-1991), 202. When the British forces under the command of General Sir William Howe landed on Staten Island in July 1776, Joshua III, John, Jacob, and John La Grange Mersereau fled to Newark, New Jersey.

⁹³ R. L. Van Tuyl and Jan N. A. Groenendijk, *A Van Tuyl Chronicle: 650 Years in the History of a Dutch-American Family* (Decorah, IA: Anundsen Publishing Company, 1996), 169, 174. Andrew Van Tuyl was born Andreis Van Tuyl. He spent his childhood and adolescent years on his father Otto's north shore farm. His mother was Catherine Van Buskirk of Bergen County, New Jersey. Van Tuyl was one of several Dutch merchants who assimilated into English culture by Anglicizing their names and joining the Anglican Church.

stood to lose not only their privileged status under the British Empire but also the political and social hegemony they had established over Staten Island. The Moravians, who also faced an uncertain future in an independent America and the Dutch Reformed who had either broken from their Church during the Great Awakening or who had been Anglicized through prolonged contact with English culture and participation in the SPG's educational program, joined with the Anglicans in remaining loyal to the Crown. Although the strength of Anglicanism was important in shaping Staten Island Loyalism, it was not the sole factor however. Rather, the strong Loyalist sentiments of Staten Islanders must also be discussed in the context of the development of Staten Island's society and economy.

CHAPTER TWO

“Neither Poverty nor Riches”: The Socioeconomic Structure of Revolutionary Staten Island

In 1877, local historian John J. Clute put forth an interpretation of Staten Island's response to the Revolution that has gone largely unchallenged.¹ According to Clute, eighteenth century Staten Island was “an isolated community” where “the political questions of the day” were rarely discussed. “The people [of Staten Island],” Clute maintained, had “little intercourse with the world around them and . . . comparatively little interest in matters not of a strictly local character.”² However, recent studies of Staten Island's colonial trade patterns have brought the Clute interpretation into question.³ Even though eighteenth century Staten Islanders produced their own food, clothing, and shelter, they were also engaged in a system of commercial agriculture that linked them to the transatlantic market economy. Staten Islanders sent commodities to merchants in New York City and in Perth Amboy, Elizabethtown (now Elizabeth), and Woodbridge in eastern New Jersey, acquiring domestically produced and British finished goods in return. Under the British Empire, Staten Island had developed a fairly prosperous, stable agricultural society in which its residents became accustomed to a certain level of material comfort. By the Revolution, the community's economic and

¹ See Michael Rosenfeld, “Staten Island Historians and the Arcadian Myth” in Michael Rosenfeld and Charles La Cerra, eds., *Community, Continuity, and Change: New Perspectives on Staten Island History* (New York: Pace University Press, 1999), 33-41.

² Clute, *Annals of Staten Island*, 82. For a similar interpretation see Smith, *Staten Island: Gateway to New York*, 49-50.

³ For recent studies that discuss Staten Island's colonial trade patterns see Sherene Baugher, “Trade Networks: Colonial and Federal Period (1680-1815),” *Proceedings of the Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences* 34 (1989), 33-37 (herein cited as *PSIIAS*); Robert W. Venables, “A Historical Overview of Staten Island's Trade Patterns,” *PSIIAS* 34 (1989), 1-24; Sherene Baugher and Robert W. Venables, “Ceramics as Indicators of Status and Class in Eighteenth Century New York” in Suzanne M. Spencer-Wood, ed., *Consumer Choice in Historical Archaeology* (New York: Plenum Press, 1987), 31-53.

social stability and the desire to maintain their standard of living became important priorities that influenced many Staten Islanders to oppose independence and to actively support the Crown.

Eighteenth century Staten Island society was largely middle class. In 1776, British Lieutenant Loftus Cliffe described the Island as a community of “neither poverty nor riches.”⁴ Most Staten Islanders were property owners whose families had been settled on their lands for generations. One report indicated that less than 5 percent of Staten Islanders were property-less tenants.⁵ By the Revolution, the majority of landholdings on Staten Island averaged between 80 and 275 acres. The only notable exception was Christopher Billopp’s 1,600-acre south shore estate known as Bentley Manor.⁶

Staten Islanders cultivated fields with grains such as wheat, corn, rye, barley, and buckwheat. In addition, they grew beans, potatoes, turnips, cucumbers, melons, pumpkins, squash, onions, grapes, blackberries and mulberries, and different varieties of

⁴ Lieutenant Loftus Cliffe to Unknown, 8 July 1776, Transcript, Military Collection, American Revolution, Box 1, Folder 2, SIHS. Countryman, *A People in Revolution*, 106, writes Staten Island was a community where the residents were “prosperous but where the rich were not enormously wealthy” and where “fortunes [were] based not on trade, debts outstanding, great holdings, tenancy, or slavery but rather on rising land values, closeness to market, and the beginnings of urbanization.”

⁵ See *New-York Daily Advertiser*, 15 January 1791.

⁶ Two large manorial estates had been created on Staten Island: the 5,100-acre Cassiltowne Manor belonging to Governor Thomas Dongan and the Billopp family’s 1,600-acre Bentley Manor. Neither Governor Dongan nor his heirs held the Cassiltowne Manor completely intact. By the Revolution, much of the estate had been divided and subdivided several times through inheritance and sale, leaving only a number of smaller farms in its wake. The reduction of the Dongan landholdings left the Billopps as the largest landowners on the Island. The Billopp family held Bentley Manor until the close of the Revolution. A complete discussion of the creation of Cassiltowne Manor can be found in William E. McGinn, “John Palmer, Thomas Dongan, and the Manor of Cassiltowne,” *SIH 1st ser.*, 29 (1968), 9-13. For the creation of Bentley Manor see William T. Davis, *The Conference/Billopp House* (Staten Island, NY: The Staten Island Historical Society, 1926), 50-51, 79-83; Field Home, *The Conference House Revisited: A History of the Billopp Manor House* (Staten Island, NY: The Conference House Association, 1990), 1-11.

nuts. Staten Islanders also maintained orchards of apple, peach, apricot, plum, pear, and cherry trees. In 1777, Johann Conrad Dohla, a Hessian private, described the Island's soil as "good and fertile." The residents of Staten Island were able to "plant potatoes . . . and grow pumpkins, melons, beans, pickles, onions, apricots, and other garden produce in abundance," he noted, because "the ground was so rich."⁷ A Hessian officer wrote to a friend that Staten Island's "climate and soil are without exception, the loveliest, healthiest, and most agreeable on the face of the globe . . . a person, were he so disposed, could easily lay here the foundations of a great fortune for his progeny should he invest a reasonable sum in land."⁸

A composite sketch of the typical Staten Island farm could be obtained from contemporary real estate advertisements. Most farms were located near a waterway or road and contained a house, barn, and other buildings constructed from wood, stone, or both. Wooden fences separated fields from orchards, gardens, meadows, woodlands, and pasture.⁹ For example, the 105-acre north shore farm belonging to Lawrence Roome included "a large stone house" with four fireplaces and a "large barn." The farm also had

⁷ Bruce E. Burgoyne, ed., *A Hessian Diary of the American Revolution* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 35.

⁸ Lieutenant Johann Heinrich to August Ludwig Schlozer, 18 September 1776, in William L. Stone, ed, *Letters of Brunswick and Hessian Officers During the American Revolution* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970), 194.

⁹ "Most of the houses [on Staten Island] are wooden," remarked the natural scientist Peter Kalm in 1748, "however some are built of stone." See Peter Kalm, *Travels into North America*. Edited and Translated by John Reinhold Forster (Barrie, MA: The Imprint Society, 1972), 124. Private Dohla noted in his diary that Staten Island's "houses and buildings were well and beautifully constructed of hardwood and brick, have many rooms and comfortable chambers, and on all sides of the house there are doors and entryways. Their rooms are tastefully trimmed or wainscoted, and all are painted or covered with paper or tapestry. Their parlors do not have stoves, but fireplaces, because they believe too much heat in the room is very unhealthy, and they always open the doors and windows, even in cold weather." See Burgoyne, ed., *A Hessian Diary*, 36. Many house on the Island were built in the Dutch-cottage style architecture that dominated in New York and parts of eastern New Jersey.

a “good Orchard . . . with about 300 fruit trees of different sorts,” a “good stone well,” and a “fine brook of running water.”¹⁰ A notice in the *New-York Journal or General Advertiser* for Helemus Vreeland’s 135-acre farm highlighted its “60 Acres of Woodland” and “20 Acres of Meadow.” In addition, the farm contained a “good Stone dwelling House,” a “sufficiency of Fences, an orchard of “grafted and other Fruit,” easy access to the “fine Fishing and Oystering” of the Kill van Kull, and land that was “well watered and good for Grain or Pasture.”¹¹ Anthony Bird’s 148-acre homestead, which “bounded upon the bay” and “commanded a fine prospect of Hudson’s River, New-York, Long-Island and the Jersies,” consisted of a “framed house, with 5 rooms on the first floor, and 4 on the upper, and all necessary out-houses.” As an added attraction, the property featured a garden and “two fine Orchards, . . . planted with the best of fruit trees, such as apricots, peaches, English Cherries, Apples, and pears.”¹²

Staten Islanders set aside a section of their lands as meadow for the grazing of animals and grass for hay. The executors of Jonathan Lewis’s estate advertised that his farm contained “a sufficient quantity of fresh (or English) and salt meadow, to keep a good Stock of Cattle.”¹³ In the majority of wills, bequests of either salt or fresh meadows or both are mentioned. Richard Merrill, for instance, left to his daughter Else “a plantation of 80 acres of land and 10 acres of meadow.”¹⁴ Even though Simon Simonson divided his “salt meadows in equal shares” between his three sons Isaac, John, and

¹⁰ *New-York Gazette and Weekly Post-Boy*, 21 February 1765.

¹¹ *New-York Journal or General Advertiser*, 20 December 1770.

¹² *New-York Gazette and Weekly Mercury*, 15 August 1774.

¹³ *New-York Gazette*, 4 March 1765.

¹⁴ Will of Richard Merrill, dated 2 February 1756, in Hix, ed., *Wills and Letters of Administration*, 118.

Jeremiah, he bequeathed to his eldest son Isaac an extra four acres of fresh meadow.¹⁵ One Hessian soldier exclaimed that Staten Island had “the best meadows” on which animals roamed freely. “Oxen, cattle, sheep, and swine are plentiful,” he noted, “and seldom or never enter a stall during the entire year.” The Island “also has many horses, which run free on the meadows . . . [and] are tame.”¹⁶ In June 1777, the English traveler Nicholas Cresswell commented that Staten Islanders “produce . . . live stock, of which in times of peace they raise immense quantities.”¹⁷ Livestock and horses served many purposes from providing Staten Islanders with food and transportation to draft labor and an extra source of income.

Staten Island’s households consisted of parents and their children as well as servants and slaves. The introduction of indentured servitude and slavery on Staten Island was the direct result of the residents’ need for assistance with the clearing of their lands for cultivation and then for fieldworkers during the planting and harvest seasons. Governor Thomas Dongan of New York employed twelve slaves and two indentured servants on his sprawling Staten Island estate.¹⁸ Walter Dongan, the governor’s nephew, advertised in the *New-York Gazette* for the capture of his indentured Irish servant who had runaway. He described the servant as a “short, thick, well fed young fellow” in his

¹⁵ Will of Simon Simonson, dated 6 August 1776, in *Ibid*, 152.

¹⁶ Burgoyne, ed., *A Hessian Diary*, 36. Staten Islanders were also known for raising fast, tame horses.

¹⁷ Lincoln MacVeagh, ed., *The Journal of Nicholas Cresswell, 1774-1777* (New York: The Dial Press, 1924), 243.

¹⁸ A lease agreement for the Dongan estate included twelve slaves and “one white man servant John Read and his wife, during their term of service.” See Richmond County Public Records, Early Liber Records, 1680-1750s, Box 341, Folder 4, SIHS.

late teens or early twenties.¹⁹ Isaac Lakeman [Lakerman] worked as an indentured servant for Stephen Wood, a carpenter and tanner who lived in Richmondtown.²⁰ By the Revolution, however, slavery became the main form of servile labor on the Island.

The development of commercial agriculture during the first half of the eighteenth century required extensive amounts of manual labor and made Staten Islanders more dependent on slaves.²¹ It has been estimated that between 1701 and 1774 more than 7,000 slaves were brought to the New York-New Jersey area from Africa and the West Indies. Slaves arrived in the region through the ports of New York City and Perth Amboy, New Jersey.²² Given Staten Island's proximity to these ports, it is very likely that Staten Islanders participated in the slave auctions held on their wharves.²³

Thus, slavery was a common and visible institution on Staten Island. Between 1698 and 1790, slaves formed anywhere from 10 percent to 23 percent of the Island's

¹⁹ *New York Gazette*, 26 June 1727.

²⁰ Harlow McMillen, "Richmondton: The First 160 Years, Part VI: The Residents of Richmondton – The Tradesmen," *SIH* 1st ser., 23 (1962), 2.

²¹ For a general discussion of slavery on Staten Island in the colonial and revolutionary periods see Clute, *Annals of Staten Island*, 70-71, 76, 513; Ira K. Morris, *Morris's Memorial History of Staten Island* 2 vols. (New York: Memorial Publishing Company, 1898-1900), 1: chap. 6; Ronald David Jackson and Evelyn E. Jackson, eds., *African American History in Staten Island: Slave Holding Families and their Slaves, Raw Notes* (Staten Island, NY: The Staten Island Historical Society, 1995); Ronald David Jackson, "The Freedom Seekers: Staten Island's Runaway Slaves," *SIH* 2nd ser., 14 (1996), 1-12, 16; Edgar J. McManus, *A History of Negro Slavery in New York* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1966), 42, 45; Hodges, *Root and Branch*, 104, 164.

²² At least 6,800 slaves arrived through the port of New York between 1701 and 1774. Another 290 arrived through Perth Amboy, New Jersey, between 1740 and 1757. See James A. Lydon, "New York and the Slave Trade, 1700 to 1774," *WMQ* 3rd ser., 35 (1978), 387, 393; Hodges, *Root and Branch*, 105. Cathy Matson, *Merchants and Empire: Trading in Colonial New York* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 203, writes that by the Revolution New York City's merchants "could make the dubious claim of having imported or smuggled at least 3,000 slaves."

²³ In addition to acquiring slaves from overseas, Staten Islanders participated in the domestic slave trade. For example, ferryman and shipwright John Mersereau advertised in the *New-York Gazette and Weekly-Post-Boy*, 8 January 1761 that his slave Hank had formerly belonged to two residents of Tappan in Bergen County, New Jersey.

population.²⁴ Using figures from the 1755 slave census, historian Edgar J. McManus concluded that the ratio of slaves to masters on Staten Island was approximately 88 to 37.²⁵ The typical Staten Islander owned from 1 to 3 slaves, while the Island's more affluent residents owned between 5 and 10.²⁶ These figures are very much in line with the findings of Vivienne L. Kruger and Graham Russell Hodges in their respective studies of slavery in New York City and its surrounding countryside. In her study of slavery in New York City, Kruger concluded: "the average New York master owned only two or three slaves."²⁷ Hodges, on the other hand asserted that in the rural counties of eastern New Jersey there were "usually no more than three blacks per farm."²⁸

Newcomers took notice of the substantial number of slaves on Staten Island. Philipp Waldeck, the chaplain of a Hessian regiment, made a notation in his diary: "The settlers [of Staten Island] do not have farm or home duties as they all seem to have

²⁴ In 1698, there were 73 slaves on Staten Island. By 1749, the number of slaves had increased to 409 and by 1771 Staten Island was home to 594 slaves. See Horne, *A Social-Historical Context of the Voorlezer's House*, 18; Hodges, *Root and Branch*, 104; Vivienne L. Kruger, "Born to Run: The Slave Family in Early New York, 1626-1827" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1985), 91, 131; McManus, *A History of Negro Slavery in New York*, 42; Evarts B. Greene and Virginia D. Harrington, eds., *American Population Before the Federal Census of 1790* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1966), 93, 100, 102. One resident remembered that during the Revolution there were five free African-Americans residing on the Island. See Charles E. Anthon, ed., "Anthon's Notes," *PSIIAS* (1929-1930), 142.

²⁵ McManus, *A History of Negro Slavery in New York*, 45.

²⁶ See Jackson, "The Freedom Seekers," 1-2. Some of the Island's largest slaveholders were Governor Thomas Dongan whose estate included twelve slaves; Colonel Thomas Dongan, the governor's grandnephew, who owned ten slaves according to the 1755 census; Reverend Richard Charlton held eight slaves. The 1790 census indicated that Gozen Ryers, a resident of Decker's Ferry (now Port Richmond), owned seven slaves. He was the largest slaveholder on Staten Island during the post-revolutionary years. See Richmond County Public Records Collection, Early Liber Records, 1680-1750s, Box 341, Folder 4, SIHS; Kruger, "Born to Run," 150; Jackson and Jackson, eds., *African American History in Staten Island*, 12-14; Loring McMillen, "Gozen Ryers: Part II," *COSI* 1 (1987), 57.

²⁷ Kruger, "Born to Run," 93.

²⁸ Hodges, *Root and Branch*, 75.

Negroes for that work.”²⁹ Staten Islanders “have many blacks, which they call Negroes,” wrote Johann Conrad Dohla, “these are slaves and are bought and sold like cattle for a lifetime. They receive nothing but uncooked food and bad clothing of rough cloth, or woolen items, and beatings with clubs or even with iron rods.”³⁰

Slaves comprised a flexible labor force. They performed a variety of tasks from domestic chores to fieldwork and artisan trades. An advertisement in the *New-York Gazette* promoting the sale of several items from Jonathan Lewis’s estate listed “two Negroe Men, one of them understands House-Work . . . and both are used to farming business.”³¹ In 1767, ferryman John Watson advertised the sale of a “Negro Fellow, can be well recommended as a Coachman and Hostler, and a sober honest young Wench, can be recommended as a good Cook.”³² In an inventory of the moveable property belonging to farmer-ferryman William Douglass were listed a “Negro Boy near Sixteen years old, an exceedingly handy boy” and a “Negro Wench, about twenty-seven years old, an excellent cook, washes and irons well, and is used to all sorts of housework.”³³ Isaac Doty, who managed the Billopp Ferry on the southern end of Staten Island (now Tottenville), advertised the sale of a “Negro man between the age of twenty and thirty years . . . understands the farming business, is handy about a house, and used to attending

²⁹ Gertrude L. Calhoun, ed., “Excerpts from Philipp Waldeck’s Diary of the American Revolution,” *Proceedings of the Union County Historical Society of Union County, New Jersey* 2 (1923-1924), 142.

³⁰ Burgoyne, ed., *A Hessian Diary*, 35-36.

³¹ *New-York Gazette*, 4 March 1765.

³² *New-York Mercury*, 16 February 1767.

³³ *New-York Journal or General Advertiser*, 5 April 1770.

a ferry boat, which . . . he has been chiefly employed at for four or five years.”³⁴ Jack, a slave who had escaped from Jacob Mersereau, was described as a “Weaver by trade.”³⁵

Slaves, when not immediately needed by their owners, were hired out for profit. In January 1775, north shore resident Adrian Bancker wrote to his brother Evert, a prominent New York City merchant, that he was confident he could hire out Evert’s slave named Dick to a tavern owner on the Island.³⁶ Farmer-tailor Barent Dupuy often hired out a slave named Tom to his neighbors.³⁷

In addition to their agricultural pursuits, many Staten Islanders possessed a skill in a specialized craft. On Staten Island, wrote British Lieutenant Loftus Cliffe, “each house has a good farm and every man a trade.”³⁸ Wills and inventories provide us with evidence of the diversified economic activities pursued by Staten Islanders. For example, among the items listed in farmer Daniel Crocheron’s household inventory were “some carpenters tools.”³⁹ South shore farmer John Dubois owned a set of blacksmith’s tools.⁴⁰ In his will, farmer Johanis Garrison bequeathed “a Negro slave” and “carpenter tools” to each of his sons.⁴¹ Moreover, many Staten Islanders were active in the fishing and oyster

³⁴ *New-York Gazette and Weekly Mercury*, 21 February 1774.

³⁵ *New-York Gazette and Weekly Post-Boy*, 6 June 1757.

³⁶ Adrian Bancker to Evert Bancker, 25 January 1775, Bancker Family Papers, Correspondence 1775-1787, Folder 1, NYHS.

³⁷ Account Book of Barent Dupuy, Dupuy Collection, Box 1, Folder 21, SIHS. In addition to Tom, Dupuy owned a female named Phebe. See Jackson and Jackson, eds., *African American History in Staten Island*, 27.

³⁸ Lieutenant Loftus Cliffe to Unknown, 8 July 1776, Transcript, Military Collection, American Revolution, Box 1, Folder 2, SIHS.

³⁹ Inventory of the estate of Daniel Crocheron, Dupuy Collection, Box 1, Folder 21, SIHS.

⁴⁰ Inventory of the estate of John Dubois, Dubois Collection, Box 1, Folder 1, SIHS.

⁴¹ Will of Johanis Garrison, 13 April 1764, in Hix, ed., *Wills and Letters of Administration*, 66-67.

trades.⁴² Chaplain Philipp Waldeck observed: “The haul of fish on the sand banks of Staten Island and the Raritan Bay is most remarkable.” He added that fishing was the “occupation of the smaller landowners” and was a trade in which they earned “much money.”⁴³ Most of the fish caught by Staten Islanders was sold in the fish markets of New York City and eastern New Jersey.⁴⁴

Timber from Staten Island’s forests was marketed in local urban centers for use as building material and fuel.⁴⁵ The residents of New York City, for instance, obtained much of their cordwood from Staten Island.⁴⁶ The Island’s proximity to active commercial centers and the richness of its woodlands led to the creation of a shipbuilding industry. At least two shipyards operated on Staten Island. In 1739, Joshua Mersereau II

⁴² Staten Island was perfectly located for the fishing and oyster trades. The waters that surround the Island were teeming with blackfish, bluefish, flounders, striped bass, shad, croakers, herring, crabs, tomcod, weakfish, oysters, and clams. The Raritan Bay, which lies off Staten Island’s southern coast contained large natural oyster beds: the Great Beds and the Chingarora Bed. Staten Islanders gathered large quantities of oysters not only from the Raritan Bay but also from the Arthur Kill and from the Kill van Kull. The large sized oysters gathered from the Raritan Bay were in great demand by consumers in New York City and in local urban markets in eastern New Jersey. For a general discussion of the marine life off the coast of Staten Island see Clyde L. Mackenzie, *The Fisheries of the Raritan Bay* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 17-19. On the fishing and oyster trades associated with Staten Island see Leng and Davis, *Staten Island and Its People*, 1: 119, 631, 733; Charles L. Sachs, *Made on Staten Island: Agriculture, Industry, and Suburban Living in the City* (Staten Island, NY: The Staten Island Historical Society, 1988), 17, 20, 27; Burton A. Kollmer, “The Yesterday of the Oysterman,” *SIH* 1st ser., 3 (1940), 17, 19-24; Bonnie J. McCay, “The Pirates of Piscary: Ethnohistory of Illegal Fishing in New Jersey,” *Ethnohistory* 31 (1984), 17-37.

⁴³ Calhoun, ed., “Excerpts from Philipp Waldeck’s Diary,” 142.

⁴⁴ Oysters and fish were a main source of protein for Staten Islanders. Mackenzie, *The Fisheries of the Raritan Bay*, 23-26. “One need only to visit the fish market of New York,” wrote the Hessian Chaplain Phillip Waldeck, “to see what great variety” of fish that Staten Islanders catch. See Calhoun, ed., “Excerpts from Philipp Waldeck’s Diary,” 142.

⁴⁵ Forests of red and white oak, red cedar, chestnut, locust, hickory, white ash, and walnut trees marked the Island’s physical landscape. One Staten Islander recalled that the Island was “as well timbered as any part of America.” See Anthon, ed., “Anthon’s Notes,” 158.

⁴⁶ William S. Sachs and Ari Hoogenboom, *The Enterprising Colonials: Society on the Eve of the Revolution* (Chicago: Argonaut, Inc., Publishers, 1965), 132.

established one of these facilities on property facing the Kill van Kull. His son John with the assistance of other family members later operated this shipyard. The shipwright Richard Lawrence of Decker's Ferry (now Port Richmond), who became infamous during the Revolution for giving assistance to the British, owned the Island's other shipyard.⁴⁷

By the Revolution, Staten Islanders were in the process of making the transition from subsistence farming to a market economy. Although they continued to rely on household production and a system of local exchange for their basic needs, Staten Islanders had become integrated into the transatlantic commercial network surrounding New York City. Allan Kulikoff, in his analysis of the rise of agrarian capitalism in colonial America remarks: "American farmers clearly lived within a dynamically growing capitalist world economy that encompassed the entire North Atlantic rim. Nearly all of them participated more or less in commodity markets, to procure money to pay taxes and buy imported manufactured goods."⁴⁸ The success of this transition for Staten Islanders rested on the effectiveness of the Island's milling operations and the ease with which their produce could be transported to nearby urban markets. Staten Island's creeks, such as the Fresh Kills, which reached into the interior sections of the Island, its roads and paths, and its ferries and mills, facilitated the shipment of produce to the urban

⁴⁷ See Sachs, *Made on Staten Island*, 33; Loring McMillen, "An Island Saga: The Mersereau Family: Part II," *COSI* 1 (1989-1990), 156.

⁴⁸ Allan Kulikoff, "The Transition to Capitalism in Rural America," *WMQ* 3rd ser., 46 (1989), 128-129. See also Kulikoff's *The Agrarian Origins of American Capitalism* (Charlottesville, VA: The University Press of Virginia, 1992), chap. 1. Richard L. Bushman, "Markets and Composite Farms in Early America," *WMQ* 3rd ser., 55 (1998), 351-374, makes a similar argument.

markets of New York City and eastern New Jersey and thereby helped to smooth the transition to a market economy.⁴⁹

Milling became a key commercial activity on Staten Island.⁵⁰ Mills processed timber, grains, and fruits into commodities such as cut boards, flour, and cider, which could be easily transported and sold. As historian Sung Bok Kim explains: milling was important to the farming communities of early America because “without a sawmill . . . it is very difficult, if not impossible, to build a residential house, barn, and outhouses, and without a gristmill, both subsistence and commercial farming were easily liable to fail.”⁵¹ Most of Staten Island’s mills were small enterprises, operated by one or two residents who profited from serving the farmers living in the community. Two notable Island gristmills were located at Richmondtown in the center of the Island. They were Bedell’s Mill, which was operated by Joseph Bedell and then his son John, and Wood’s Mill, which was operated by John and Joseph Wood.⁵² Paul Micheau, Jr. leased his “grist mill on Fresh Kills,” which had “two run of stones, [was] in good repair, and constant at

⁴⁹ For a discussion of the economic benefits of Staten Island’s physical geography see Roswell S. Coles, “Some Effects of Physical Geography on the Culture of Staten Island,” *SIH* 1st ser., 5 (1942), 2, 6-7, 14.

⁵⁰ For a discussion of Staten Island’s mills see Loring McMillen, “Old Mills of Staten Island,” *SIH* 1st ser., 10 (1949), 1-4, 9, 15-16 and his “Dongan’s Mills,” *SIH* 1st ser., 1 (1938), 25-27, 31. See also Harlow McMillen, “Richmondton: The First 160 Years, Part VII: The Residents of Richmondton – The Millers,” *SIH* 1st ser., 23 (1962), 14-16; Leng and Davis, *Staten Island and Its People*, 2: 610; Sachs, *Made on Staten Island*, 18.

⁵¹ Sung Bok Kim, *Landlord and Tenant in Colonial New York: Manorial Society, 1664-1776* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), 165. David Freeman Hawke, *Everyday Life in Early America* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988), 147, writes that “every community that fronted on a fast-running stream did all it could to lure a miller into its midst . . . his presence could mean the difference between a subsistence existence and prosperity. Without him all grain had to be ground by hand and few farmers could produce enough surplus flour by that process to send to market.”

⁵² McMillen, “Richmondton: The First 160 Years, Part VII: The Residents of Richmondton – The Millers,” 14. Another notable eighteenth century Staten Island mill was Daniel Lake’s Mill located in New Dorp.

country work.” More importantly, the mill was “very convenient to the City [New York], being about three hours sail” and its location on the Fresh Kills enabled “a boat at all times [to] lay along side [the] millers house.”⁵³ A notice in the *New-York Gazette and Weekly Mercury* announced the reopening of the “newly repaired” gristmills on the “west end of Staten-Island,” which belonged to Cornelius Dissosway. Those who were “inclined to favor the mills with their custom,” the notice read, “may send their wheat by any boat that is convenient, and have it ground at the usual price, and returned again as soon as possible.”⁵⁴

Many of the Island’s roads and paths terminated at a ferry landing.⁵⁵ Ferry landings served as important departure points for people and produce from Staten Island. Ferries were privately operated commercial enterprises that provided service to New York, Long Island, and New Jersey.⁵⁶ For example, Watson’s Ferry, which was operated by John Watson, carried passengers and cargo from the Watering Place (in the vicinity of present day Tompkinsville) on Staten Island’s northeastern shore to New York City. Watson’s Ferry was described in the *New-York Mercury* as “the best” ferry on Staten Island because its “Boats can go and come from New York with most Winds, and but one Tide to encounter with, which is of great Ease to the Passengers.”⁵⁷ Some of the other

⁵³ *New-York Daily Advertiser*, 19 March 1795. In the *American Minerva*, 16 February 1796, this mill was advertised as “being very convenient for the merchandising of flour, as well as for country business.”

⁵⁴ *New-York Gazette and Weekly Mercury*, 16 March 1772.

⁵⁵ For a discussion of Staten Island’s early road network see Leng and Davis, *Staten Island and Its People*, 1: 141; Herbert B. Reed, “The Early Staten Island Roads,” *SIH* 1st ser., 26 (1965), 17-21.

⁵⁶ Some of Staten Island’s ferries worked in conjunction with one of the various stagecoach lines that ran from New York to Philadelphia. One of those stagecoach lines was operated by Joseph Richards and ran from Watson’s Ferry on the north shore to Billopp’s Ferry on the south shore.

⁵⁷ *New-York Mercury*, 16 February 1767.

successful ferries that operated from Staten Island were Decker's Ferry, Cole's Ferry, Corsen's Ferry, Billopp's Ferry, Doyle's Ferry, Schuyler's Ferry, Van Tuyl's Ferry, Ryerson's Ferry, Simonson's Ferry, and the New Blazing Star and Morning Star Ferries.⁵⁸

These ferries and the roadways that led to them became prime locations for taverns and inns that profited from the commercial traffic. At establishments such as Alexander Stuart's Inn at Stony Brook (in the vicinity of present day New Dorp and Oakwood), the Rose and Crown Tavern on the King's Highway (now Richmond and Amboy Roads) in New Dorp, the Black Horse Tavern located on New Dorp Lane also in New Dorp, the King's Arms Tavern and Roemer's Tavern at Decker's Ferry (now Port Richmond), the Ferry Tavern at the southern end of the King's Highway in what is today Tottenville, which was operated by the Billopp family, Watson's Tavern, which was associated with Watson's Ferry, and the New Blazing Star Tavern in Smoking Point (now Rossville) weary travelers stopped for a meal and to rest before continuing on their

⁵⁸ For a discussion and full listing of Staten Island's colonial ferries see Kenneth Scott, "The Colonial Ferries of Staten Island," *PSIIAS* 14 (1951), 45-68 and "The Colonial Ferries of Staten Island: Part II," *PSIIAS* 15 (1952), 9-31. Isaac Decker operated Decker's Ferry, which provided service to Paulus Hook (now Jersey City) in New Jersey and to New York City. Cole's Ferry, in what is today the vicinity of Stapleton, was operated by Abraham Cole and provided service from Staten Island to New York City and western Long Island. Jacob Corsen ferried goods and passengers between the Island's northwestern shore and to Bergen Point, New Jersey. Billopp's Ferry was owned by the Billopp family, but managed by Isaac Doty. It ran from the southern end of the Island to Perth Amboy, New Jersey. Darby Doyle ran a ferry located near the Watering Place on the Island's northeastern shore. Adoniah Schuyler ran a ferry service from what is today Howland Hook on Staten Island's western shore to Elizabethtown Point in New Jersey. Otto Van Tuyl's ferry ran from his property on the north shore (now included within the grounds of Sailor's Snug Harbor) to New York City. Ryerson's Ferry was located on the Island's north shore in what is today the section known as New Brighton. Isaac Simonson's ferry was located "near the Narrows" in what is today the vicinity of Rosebank. The brothers John Mersereau and Joshua Mersereau III operated the New Blazing Star and Morning Star Ferries. The New Blazing Star Ferry was located at Smoking Point (now Rossville) and carried stagecoaches and cargo across the Arthur Kill to landings in the area of New Jersey known as Old Blazing Star (in the vicinity of present day Carteret and Rahway). The Morning Star Ferry was located on the Island's northwestern shore and ran between Staten Island and Paulus Hook, New Jersey. The Mersereaus also operated the "Flying Machine," which was a stagecoach service known for its speed and efficiency in carrying travelers and goods between New York City and Philadelphia.

journeys and local residents heard the latest news.⁵⁹ Cole's Tavern, which was located in Richmondtown and until 1765 was operated by Richard Cole, was described as "the most noted Tavern in the County."⁶⁰ A public notice in the *New-York Gazette and Weekly Post-Boy* announced that at the "tavern John Watson & Hannah Jones now keep . . . All Gentlemen and others that travel that Way, may depend on good Entertainment for themselves."⁶¹ At the King's Arms Tavern operated by Isaac Decker, customers could find not only "the best of liquors, eatables, and lodgings" but also "everything that the market of New-York affords."⁶² The rates charged by taverns and inns on Staten Island were "very Dear" wrote one traveler who spent "at least 7 shillings-6 pence" for "a traveling Days Expences."⁶³ Thus, tavern keeping was a lucrative commercial enterprise for those Staten Islanders engaged in it.

The emerging market economy also assumed an important role in the urbanization of towns on Staten Island. By the Revolution, population clusters and small commercial centers had developed at Richmondtown and Decker's Ferry. "In the middle of the Island lies a small city named Richmond," a Hessian noted, "and on the far side, on the

⁵⁹ For a listing of Staten Island's colonial taverns and inns see Ira K. Morris, "The Old Hotels of Staten Island," *Proceedings of the Natural Science Association of Staten Island* 14 (1893), 52-58. See also Harlow McMillen, "Richmondtown Prior to 1837 - Innkeepers and Merchants," *SIH* 1st ser., 24 (1963), 12-15. Because it was a commercial hub and the location of the county seat, Richmondtown had several taverns throughout its colonial and revolutionary history. For example, Dr. Thomas Frost, a physician and the Island's High Sheriff, purchased Cole's Tavern in Richmondtown. During the Revolution it was known as Frost's Tavern. Another tavern operating in Richmondtown at the time of the Revolution was Wilson's Tavern (operated by John Wilson).

⁶⁰ *New-York Gazette*, 25 February 1765.

⁶¹ *New-York Gazette and Weekly Post-Boy*, 18 September 1752.

⁶² *New-York Gazette and Weekly Mercury*, 16 May 1774.

⁶³ Journal of Warren Johnson, 29 June 1760-3 July 1761, in Milton W. Hamilton, ed., *The Papers of Sir William Johnson* 14 vols. (Albany, NY: The University of the State of New York, 1921-1965), 13: 184.

Kills River, there is also a small place with a steeple and a small church named Decker's Ferry. With these exceptions, no village or settlement such as we have is to be found."⁶⁴ Richmondtown, the county seat, which one British officer described as "containing about 10 or 12 Houses," was located not only at a nexus of roads near the center of the Island but also close to several inland waterways dominated by the Fresh Kills creek.⁶⁵ Its location helped Richmondtown to develop into Staten Island's main political and commercial hub. Decker's Ferry, on the Kill van Kull, was a major distribution center for produce and became the focal point for trade along the Island's north shore.

Most of the produce, livestock, and fish from Staten Island ended up in the markets and merchants' warehouses of New York City and of Perth Amboy, Elizabethtown, and Woodbridge in eastern New Jersey. However, it was local merchants who were the key links between the Island's farmers and the urban marketplaces. Merchants such as John Simonson of Decker's Ferry, Benjamin Micheau and John Bedell of Fresh Kill and Richmondtown, and Winant Winants and his son Daniel of Westfield played an important role in the Island's trade networks. These men acted as middlemen, buying and selling a variety of goods and providing local residents with basic commercial services. Their stores served as places where farmers brought their commodities to be sold or exchanged for finished goods. In addition, some of these merchants carried goods to and from Staten Island. For example, Winant Winants owned the sloop *Anne and Elizabeth*, which was captained by his son Peter. The *Anne and Elizabeth* often sailed

⁶⁴ Burgoyne, ed., *A Hessian Diary*, 35.

⁶⁵ Lieutenant Loftus Cliffe to Unknown, 8 July 1776, Transcript, Military Collection, American Revolution, Box 1, Folder 2.

from Perth Amboy, New Jersey, carrying produce from Staten Island and eastern New Jersey to various markets.⁶⁶

Although Staten Island's goods were shipped either by ferry or in a vessel owned by a local merchant, some residents preferred to use their own boats. For example, the farmer-tailor Barent Dupuy owned a small boat in which he took his surpluses to New York City. Sometimes he carried his neighbors' goods as well, charging them a fee of forty shillings.⁶⁷ Richard Harris owned a boat in which he was capable of "carrying between 6 and 7 Cord" of wood to market.⁶⁸

The Island's proximity to New York City and to the commercial centers of eastern New Jersey exposed residents to a variety of finished goods and commodities from England, Ireland, Continental Europe, the West Indies, Africa, the southern colonies, New England, central New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. According to Robert W. Venables, the residents of Staten Island had easy "access to the goods coming into Manhattan."⁶⁹ Staten Islanders readily purchased clocks, chocolate, mahogany furniture, mirrors, tea, textiles and fine linens, molasses, salt, sugar, tobacco, wine and rum, pewter and delftware, fine china, jewelry, fashionable pottery, books, gravestones, gunpowder and shot, nails, and shingles.⁷⁰ The consumer items listed in eighteenth century probate

⁶⁶ James H. Levitt, *For Want of Trade: Shipping and the New Jersey Ports, 1680-1783*, (Newark, NJ: The New Jersey Historical Society, 1981), 1.

⁶⁷ Account Book of Barent Dupuy, Dupuy Collection, Box 1, Folder 21, SIHS.

⁶⁸ *New-York Gazette and Weekly Mercury*, 17 February 1772.

⁶⁹ Venables, "A Historical Overview of Staten Island's Trade Networks," 12.

⁷⁰ Baugher and Venables, "Ceramics as Indicators of Status and Class," 34, indicate that the bulk of the redware and stoneware used by Staten Islanders in their kitchens came from New Jersey and Pennsylvania. "Even though Staten Island had clay deposits that could have been used for redware and stoneware," they write, "there were no known eighteenth century potters on Staten Island." The pottery used by Staten Islanders was emblazoned with decorations similar to those found on pottery in Philadelphia

records not only reveal Staten Islanders' consumption habits but also dispel the perception that the Island was an isolated community dominated by agrarian simplicity. For example, John Gifford, a mariner, bequeathed to his daughter Mary Dubois two mahogany tables, a feather bed, a bedstead and a variety of linens, a mahogany bureau and a black walnut bureau, a pint silver cup and a silver tea tray, and six silver spoons.⁷¹ A household inventory of farmer Samuel Smith's estate listed a sled, cupboard, dining table, tea table, pine table, three chests, five large silver spoons and five tea spoons, an assortment of bed furniture and linens, andirons, a silver tea canister, four pewter platters and fourteen pewter plates, a silver mug and several silver candlesticks, a looking-glass, two Windsor-style chairs and fifteen "common" chairs, a pair of leather saddle bags, and an assortment of cream ware.⁷² Among the items John Morgan left to his wife was his collection of "library books."⁷³ Peter Houseman, who identified himself as a "yeoman," bequeathed to his children several silver watches and buckles and three gold rings.⁷⁴

Many Staten Islanders established direct commercial ties to merchants in New York, New Jersey, and overseas. For example, Joshua Mersereau purchased sugar from

and in Perth Amboy, New Jersey. The authors acknowledge that because no record exists of a potter on the Island, it does not preclude the possibility that a Staten Islander performed this trade on a part-time basis to earn extra income and copied the designs popular in the area. See also Venables, "A Historical Overview of Staten Island's Trade Networks," 10; Levitt, *For Want of Trade*, 40.

⁷¹ Will of John Gifford, 1776, in Hix, ed., *Wills and Letters of Administration*, 68-69. Gifford captained the ship *New Hope*, which was owned by the firm Samuel Broome and Company of New York City.

⁷² Inventory of Samuel Smith's Estate, Simonson Collection, Box 1, Folder 2, SIHS.

⁷³ Will of John Morgan, 14 July 1770, in Hix, ed., *Wills and Letters of Administration*, 125. For a discussion of the book trade in eighteenth century America see Ned C. Landsman, *From Colonials to Provincials: American Thought and Culture, 1680-1760* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 42-43. On the ownership and cost of books see Jackson Turner Main, *The Social Structure of Revolutionary America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965), 253-261.

⁷⁴ Will of Peter Houseman, December 1783, *Ibid*, 82-83.

the New York City firm of Ten Eyck and Seaman, silk bombazine from Abraham Brinckerhoff, and chocolate from Benjamin Rapalje.⁷⁵ His brother, John, transacted business with Samuel and Benjamin Parker of Perth Amboy, New Jersey.⁷⁶ Alexander McDonald dealt with such New York City merchants as Thomas and Walter Buchannon, Henry Cuyler, William McAdam, William Rhinelander, and Thomas Stephenson.⁷⁷ From the London merchant John Ogilvie he purchased sugar, tea, and black satin.⁷⁸ “I would be much Obliged to you for sending me a Box of the Very best Green Tea & three or four hundred weights of Good loaf Sugar the one half Single & the other double refined” wrote McDonald to Ogilvie in January 1777. He also ordered a “piece of Black Sattin for a Neglishee & petticoat for my wife who is a pretty lusty Woman.”⁷⁹ McDonald acquired cases of Madeira and Malmasea wine and Citron from his brother-in-law Pedro de Mendonzo, who was a Portuguese merchant.⁸⁰

Although some residents of Staten Island did business with wealthy merchants engaged in large-scale trade, many Staten Islanders purchased sundry goods from itinerant peddlers. One of those peddlers was Robert Greg who sold items door-to-door on the Island beginning in the early 1750s. Greg “frequently brought incidental items

⁷⁵ Account Ledger of Joshua Mersereau (c. 1769-1773), Mersereau Collection, Box 1, Folder 1, SIHS.

⁷⁶ Account Ledger of John Mersereau, Genealogical Vertical Files, Mersereau Folder, SIHS.

⁷⁷ Account Records of Alexander McDonald, Rutherford Papers, Box 4, Folder 1, NYHS.

⁷⁸ Captain Alexander McDonald to John Ogilvie, 24 April 1776; McDonald to Ogilvie, 20 December 1777; McDonald to Mrs. Fernandez, 20 December 1777, in *Letter-Book of Captain Alexander McDonald*, 266-268, 383, 386.

⁷⁹ Captain Alexander McDonald to John Ogilvie, 19 January 1777, *Ibid*, 318.

⁸⁰ Alexander McDonald to Pedro de Mendonzo, 11 January 1777, *Ibid*, 313-314.

from Manhattan to Staten Island,” writes Venables, and sold them for “a few pence and a few shillings at a time.”⁸¹

Historical archaeology has added to our understanding of the consumer habits of eighteenth century Staten Islanders. In a series of studies conducted by archaeologist Sherene Baugher, artifacts from four locations on Staten Island were compared to those from three sites in New York City. The consumer items unearthed on Staten Island were “comparable in quantity, fashion, and value” to those discovered at the New York City sites. Baugher argued that the Island was “far from being an isolated outpost.” Instead, the archaeological evidence demonstrated that it was a “sophisticated and wealthy rural area able to provide a market for the same imported and domestic articles sought by well-to-do and middle class residents” of New York City. The consumer habits of Staten Island’s residents “were not sensitive to isolated geography.”⁸² Staten Islanders were very likely active participants in the emerging consumer revolution of the eighteenth century.⁸³

The consumer items recovered at Bentley Manor, the south shore estate of Staten Island’s wealthiest family, the Billopps, reflected the lifestyle of country gentry: Nottingham stoneware and tea cups, an imported Rhenish delft bowl, porcelain serving bowls, an English delft bowl and tea pot, and olive green “wine” bottles. Artifacts found near the home of the farmer-weaver Edward Perine in present day Dongan Hills consisted

⁸¹ Venables, “A Historical Overview of Staten Island’s Trade Networks,” 12. According to Venables, Greg sold a large amount of rum “in half-gallons or small pint and half-pint quantities.” In addition, he often sold items to slaves.

⁸² Baugher, “Trade Networks: Colonial and Federal Period,” 33, 37.

⁸³ On the emergence of a consumer revolution in the eighteenth century see T. H. Breen, “Baubles of Britain:” The American and British Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century,” *Past and Present* 119 (1988), 73-104; Carole Shammas, *The Pre-Industrial Consumer in England and America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

of imported white salt-glazed stoneware dishes and Nottingham cups, porcelain tea sets, English delftware plates, bowls, mugs, and chamber pots, and domestically manufactured redware mixing bowls, pans, and baking dishes. Finally, at the present site of the Voorlezer's house in Richmondtown, which had once been the home of the Dutch voorlezer Hendrick Cruser but by the Revolution was the residence of the farmer-cooper Jacob Rezeau, excavations discovered several imported English delft- and creamware dishes, plain washbowls and chamber pots, pearl ware, and porcelain tea sets.⁸⁴

The consumer goods listed in Staten Island probate records and the artifacts unearthed by historical archaeologists not only point to the development of a commercially oriented economy but also to a pattern of genteel emulation by middle class Staten Islanders. In his study *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, and Cities*, historian Richard L. Bushman writes that in eighteenth century America "even . . . among the inventories of ordinary people of modest estates can be found looking glasses, punch bowls, and tea services." He concludes that by acquiring these and similar consumer items "common people brought a few tokens of gentility into their lives."⁸⁵

⁸⁴ For a list and description of each artifact recovered in the excavations conducted by Sherene Baugher on Staten Island see the Trade Networks Files at the Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences. For a more detailed look at the artifacts unearthed at the Voorlezer's house site in Richmondtown see Sherene Baugher, et al., *The Archaeological Investigation of the Voorlezer's House Site, Staten Island, New York* (Staten Island, NY: The Staten Island Historical Society, 1985). In addition to the Perines, other owners of the Perine House were the Billiou, Stillwell, and Holmes families. For a history of the Perine House see Charles G. Hine, *The Story and Documentary History of the Perine House, Dongan Hills, Staten Island* (Staten Island, NY: The Staten Island Antiquarian Society, 1915). Another excellent archaeological study of a colonial Staten Island site is Sherene Baugher-Perlin, "The Prall Site: A Case Study in Historical Archeology" (Ph.D. diss., State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1978).

⁸⁵ Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, and Cities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1992), 28. This sense of gentility was also reflected in the number of Staten Islanders who termed themselves "gentlemen" in their wills. By the Revolution, approximately twenty-five percent of Staten Islanders who wrote a will described themselves as "gentlemen".

Even though most of the consumer goods that Staten Islanders purchased passed through the legal apparatus set up by the English Navigation Acts, some were obtained through clandestine channels.⁸⁶ Staten Island was a haven for smugglers. “I have been told by respectable commercial gentlemen who were in business at New York before the Revolution,” wrote Charles E. Anthon, an early local historian, “that it was a common every day affair to smuggle contraband goods ashore, at many places on Staten Island.” Smuggling was “entirely in harmony with the will” of Staten Islanders, continued Anthon, who “considered that in proportion to their success they would profit by the lowness of the prices . . . In that way, much of the tea, gin, china, and sundry dry-goods, came from Holland; other goods came from St. Eustatius.”⁸⁷ Smugglers took advantage of Staten Island’s many creeks, coves, inlets, and marshes. To avoid detection by the customs authorities, ships’ captains involved in illicit trade unloaded cargo along Staten Island’s shoreline at night and with the aid of some residents hid the goods throughout the Island. Although Staten Islanders purchased some of this contraband, it was usually transported to remote areas of New Jersey. The goods were then smuggled into New York City from points in New Jersey along the Hudson River.

While Staten Island made the transition to a commercially oriented agricultural economy, Staten Islanders continued to share services, exchange goods, borrow tools and equipment, loan money and assist each other with fieldwork or personal matters. It was this system of mutual exchange and cooperation that enabled the community to function on a daily basis. John Simonson, a leading merchant who was also skilled as a carpenter and cordwainer, conducted his business in cash transactions or bartered for produce. For

⁸⁶ For a discussion of smuggling see Matson, *Merchants and Empire*, 203-214.

⁸⁷ Anthon, ed., “Anthon’s Notes,” 154-155.

example, he accepted £4.10s worth of beef from Albert Speer, Jr. in payment for two coffins.⁸⁸ In 1777, Alexander McDonald thanked his neighbor Terence Reilly for looking after the needs of his wife and family. “The account that Mrs. McDonald gives me of your friendship & attachment to her in my Absence lays me under the greatest obligation to you,” he wrote, “and you may depend upon it I shall not be wanting to return your Civilities.”⁸⁹ Henry Perine, a weaver, often provided neighbors and family members with woven cloth in exchange for produce.⁹⁰ Thus, as in other communities in America, Staten Islanders had developed close, personal ties with their neighbors.

By the Revolution, intermarriage within Staten Island’s small population created several closely related families. For example, the Crocheron family genealogy reveals patterns of intermarriage with the Bodines, Bogaerts, Deckers, Dupuys, Joneses, Lakermans, Mersereaus, Poillions, Simonsons, and Veghtes.⁹¹ The practice of intermarriage in a community such as Staten Island was important because it established familial ties, reinforced social positions, and allowed families to join and easily control their resources.

Intermarriage enabled some Staten Island families to obtain useful commercial and political contacts. These families were linked through marital bonds to a wider network of social elite in New York and New Jersey. The Billopps, for instance, were

⁸⁸ See Dorothy Valentine Smith, “John Simonson’s Account Book,” *SIH* 1st ser. 9 (1948), 20-21.

⁸⁹ Captain Alexander McDonald to Thomas Reilly, 25 January 1777, in *Letter-Book of Captain Alexander McDonald*, 322. For a discussion of the friendship between McDonald and Terence Reilly see Loring McMillen, “Terence Reilly, 1746-1805: Schoolmaster and Storekeeper, Part I,” *COSI* 1 (1986), 38 and “Terence Reilly, 1746-1805: Schoolmaster and Storekeeper, Part II,” *COSI* 1 (1986), 43-44.

⁹⁰ Writing and Account Book of Edward and Henry Perine (c. 1751-1795), Perine Collection, Box 1, Folder 3, SIHS.

⁹¹ Charlotte Megill Hix, *The Crocheron Family of Staten Island, New York* (Garden City, NY: Published by the author, 1979).

intermarried with the influential Seaman family of Staten Island as well as the Farmars, Leonards, Nicklesons, and Skinners who were members of a powerful coterie of New Jersey landowners and merchants known as the “Perth Amboy Group”. In addition, members of the Billopps were interrelated with the Rosses of New Brunswick, New Jersey, the Stelles of Piscataway, New Jersey, the Moores of Long Island, and the Willetts of New York City and Long Island.⁹² The Dongans had familial connections to the Brittons and Charltons of Staten Island, the Floyds and Moores of Long Island, the La Granges of New Brunswick, New Jersey, and the Townleys of Elizabethtown, New Jersey.⁹³ The Seaman family was related to the Billopps and Micheaus of Staten Island, the Kortrights and Motts of Long Island, and the Zabriskies of Hackensack, New Jersey. Moreover, Benjamin Seaman’s granddaughter Catherine married Henry Brockholst Livingston, the son of William Livingston of New Jersey.⁹⁴ In 1776, Ambrose Serle, the

⁹² For example, the Loyalist Christopher Billopp’s mother Sarah was the daughter of Captain Samuel Leonard, a leading merchant and one of the original city aldermen of Perth Amboy, New Jersey. Billopp was twice married; his first wife, Frances, was a member of the Willetts of New York City and his second wife, Jane, was the daughter of Benjamin Seaman, the prominent Staten Island jurist and assemblyman. His brother Jasper married Susannah Skinner, the daughter of Brigadier General Cortlandt Skinner of Perth Amboy, New Jersey, who commanded the Loyalist New Jersey Volunteers during the Revolution. Moreover, his great-aunt, Mary Billopp, had married sometime after 1702 the Reverend John Brooke of Perth Amboy, New Jersey. Unfortunately, he drowned at sea in 1707. She then married the Reverend William Skinner also of Perth Amboy, but died childless in 1725. The Reverend Skinner later married Elizabeth Van Cortlandt of Westchester County, New York. They were the parents of five children, including Brigadier General Cortlandt Skinner, who was their eldest son. See Charles Farmar Billopp, *A History of Thomas and Anne Billopp Farmar and Some of their Descendants in America* (New York: The Grafton Press, Genealogical Publishers, 1908); Marjorie Johnson, *Christopher Billopp Family Genealogy: Captain Christopher Billopp and His Descendants and the Allied Farmar Family* (Staten Island, NY: The Conference House Association, 1991); William A. Whitehead, *Contributions to the Early History of Perth Amboy and Adjoining Country* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1856), 53, 92-120.

⁹³ Thomas P. Dongan, *John Dongan of Dublin: An Elizabethan Gentleman and His Family* (Baltimore: Gateway Press, Inc., 1996). I would like to thank Dr. John Dungan of Omaha, Nebraska for providing me with additional genealogical information on the Dongan family.

⁹⁴ Benjamin Seaman’s father-in-law was Adam Mott, Jr., who migrated to Staten Island from Hempstead, Long Island, and served as the Richmond County Clerk (1728-1738) and as an assemblyman (1737-1739). Mary Thomas Seaman, *The Seaman Family in America As Descended From Captain John Seaman of Hempstead, Long Island* (New York: T.A. Wright, Inc., 1928), 14, 16-17, 56, 78-80, 103; Charles L. Sachs, “Treasure Chest of Family History,” *Seaport* (1992), 48-49.

secretary to British Admiral Richard Lord Howe, observed that on Staten Island “the silly Pride of Family prevails [as in] other places; only with this Difference, that it is more ridiculous here than any where.”⁹⁵ One Staten Islander indicated that by the late colonial period a few families “pretty much governed the Island.”⁹⁶ The personal and professional associations some Staten Islanders forged through their familial connections not only furthered their fortunes but also brought them political patronage, solidified their status among the social elite, and helped to create an intricate web of local political deference that served to maintain order on Staten Island.⁹⁷

The way in which Staten Islanders responded to the colonial resistance movement was also influenced by the Island’s middle class agrarianism. At the forefront of the outcry over British taxation in the years preceding the Revolution were groups of urban laborers and tradesmen known as the Sons of Liberty or the Liberty Boys. As historian Philip Foner writes: “It was the Sons of Liberty, especially its mechanic and artisan component, supplemented by allies such as laborers and seaman, who pushed the struggle

⁹⁵ Edward H. Tatum, Jr., ed., *The American Journal of Ambrose Serle, Secretary to Lord Howe, 1776-1778* (San Marino, CA: The Huntington Library, 1940), 48.

⁹⁶ Anthon, ed., “Anthon’s Notes,” 133.

⁹⁷ For an example of a Staten Islander who furthered his fortunes and solidified his status among the social elite through familial connections see Alexander McDonald whose wife Susannah (Meyer) McDonald was related on her mother’s side to the powerful Livingstons of New York. From his home at Decker’s Ferry (now Port Richmond) on Staten Island, McDonald maintained contacts with the Livingstons living in New York City and developed commercial ties not only with many of the city’s wealthy merchants but also with merchants in London and Glasgow as well. Moreover, his sister who lived in England was married to the wealthy Portuguese wine merchant Pedro de Mendonzo who very likely introduced McDonald to European commercial circles. On Susannah (Meyer) McDonald’s family background see Loring McMillen, “Captain Alexander McDonald: Part I,” *COSI* 1 (1986), 46. See also Moore, *The Loyalists: Revolution, Exile, Settlement*, 19-20; Captain Alexander McDonald to Dr. William Hagar, 19 January 1777, *Letter-Book of Captain Alexander McDonald*, 319. On the practice of deference in colonial America see Edmund S. Morgan, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1988), 174-208; Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1992), 63-65; Countryman, *A People in Revolution*, 108; Calhoun, *The Loyalists in Revolutionary America*, 107.

forward . . . and provided the apparatus and manpower for the transition from resistance to independence.”⁹⁸ New York City’s Sons, led by John Lamb, Isaac Sears, Joseph Allicocke, and Alexander McDougall, were the most volatile and effective resistance group in America.⁹⁹ Their vocal and sometimes violent protests in defense of colonial rights galvanized opposition to British imperial policies not only in New York City but also in many of the surrounding communities. In February 1766, the New York City Sons sent a circular letter to communities in neighboring colonies urging them to organize their own chapters. The response was overwhelming. From Huntington on Long Island to Freehold in New Jersey and in communities throughout America, local Sons of Liberty chapters were organized. The coordination of this resistance network ultimately came from New York City.¹⁰⁰

In New Jersey, the most active Sons of Liberty chapters were located in its eastern counties of Essex, Middlesex, Monmouth, and Somerset. The organizations in Elizabethtown, Woodbridge, Piscataway, and Middletown, were especially vocal and quickly responded to the New York City Sons’ circular letter. According to historian Larry R. Gerlach, the New Jersey Sons were “at first an amorphous group which caused

⁹⁸ Philip Foner, *Labor and the American Revolution* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976), 45.

⁹⁹ Joseph S. Tiedemann, *Reluctant Revolutionaries: New York City and the Road to Independence, 1763-1776* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 72, mentions “that scholars debate when that band of radicals, who gathered around Isaac Sears and John Lamb, and who clandestinely orchestrated popular resistance to the Stamp Act, had come into being.” Roger J. Champagne, “Liberty Boys and Mechanics of New York City, 1764-1774,” *Labor History* 8 (1967), 117, writes that it is “uncertain when precisely the Sons of Liberty came into existence. In New York City as elsewhere the name was common property by the fall of 1765.”

¹⁰⁰ Pauline Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution: Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Britain, 1765-1776* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1972), chap. 4; Champagne, “Liberty Boys and Mechanics of New York City,” 115; Tiedemann, *Reluctant Revolutionaries*, 93.

scarcely a ripple in provincial political waters but eventually became potent manipulators of public opinion and action.”¹⁰¹

Despite the proximity of Staten Islanders to volatile Sons of Liberty groups in New York City and eastern New Jersey, there is no evidence to indicate that a local chapter was ever organized on the Island. Independent artisans, mechanics, and day laborers comprised the backbone of the Sons of Liberty in many communities but were not numerous on Staten Island and did not comprise an important, separate class. Perhaps 10 percent or less of the Island’s population made their primary living as tradesmen. Most Staten Islanders were middle class farmers who engaged in a specialized craft on a part-time basis in order to supplement their agricultural incomes. Staten Island lacked the large, radical element that provided the rank-and-file membership of the Sons of Liberty and which formed the core of colonial protests against the provincial establishment and British imperial policies.

The Island’s middle class farmers were more inclined to pursue a course of moderation rather than radicalism in political affairs. Unlike several neighboring communities, Staten Island did not experience tumultuous protests against British taxation. The pre-revolutionary riots and protests led by the Sons of Liberty did not sit well with most Staten Islanders. Alexander McDonald, for instance, was appalled by “the Merciless, cruel, ignorant, and misled Rabble” who agitated against the policies of the British government. In the years leading up to the Revolution, McDonald recalled, “all America had broken out in open Violence and Rebellion” as “the People [became] more violent and Insolent.” There seemed to be “Nothing but Committees & Liberty

¹⁰¹ Larry R. Gerlach, *Prologue to Independence: New Jersey and the Coming of the American Revolution* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1976), 129.

Poles” everywhere.¹⁰² One Staten Island farmer told a Hessian officer that the Island’s residents had no complaints against the British government. In fact, he blamed the revolutionary conflict on “the people in the cities . . . who had not enough to do and wanted to be great lords and get rich quickly, especially the merchants [and] lawyers” who “roused the rabble” to overthrow British rule.¹⁰³ Staten Islanders were more concerned with the maintenance of the social and economic status quo, not political protest.

On the eve of the Revolution, Staten Island was a tranquil, fairly prosperous, predominantly middle class, agricultural community. In addition, the Island was not the isolated community often depicted in local histories. Even though Staten Islanders relied on household production and the mutual exchange of goods and services to keep the community functioning on a daily basis, they were also actively engaged in an emerging market economy that connected them to the transatlantic commercial world. Staten Island’s geographic proximity to New York City and to the smaller commercial centers of eastern New Jersey enabled its residents to purchase domestically manufactured and imported British goods that they did not produce for themselves. Material prosperity and the absence of a large, independent radicalized artisan class fostered an economic conservatism that eventually contributed to the Staten Islanders’ tepid reaction toward colonial resistance and the Revolution.

¹⁰² Captain Alexander McDonald to Lord Jeffrey Amherst, August 1777, in *The Letter-Book of Captain Alexander McDonald*, 354, 356.

¹⁰³ Quoted in Atwood, *The Hessians*, 160.

CHAPTER THREE

“An Unfriendly Disposition Towards the Liberties of America”: Staten Island’s Response to the Colonial Resistance Movement

Although the colonial resistance movement had been gaining momentum in America since passage of the Stamp Act in the spring of 1765, the residents of Staten Island chose to refrain from actively participating in the protests against British taxation. Instead, they peacefully carried on with their daily activities and deferred judgment on political matters to a small group of prominent community leaders who favored reconciliation. While neighboring communities experienced outbursts of mob violence in the name of American liberties, Staten Islanders continued to enjoy social stability and the benefits of a prosperous local economy. However, the decision of the Continental Congress in the autumn of 1774 to enact a policy of non-intercourse and non-exportation threatened to disrupt the Island’s stability and to undermine its material prosperity. In fact, the measures taken by the Whigs not only cut off Staten Island’s access to local markets, but also prevented its residents from acquiring the British merchandise they craved. Seeking to thwart the designs of the Whigs, Staten Islanders often paid lip service to these measures and fell back upon smuggling, which had a long tradition on the Island. The events of 1775 convinced Staten Islanders that reconciliation was a delusion and that New York’s Whigs were leading the colony down the road to rebellion. As the specter of war hung over New York, the residents of Staten Island awaited the arrival of the King’s army, and with it the opportunity to preserve the social and economic stability of their community.

In the spring of 1774, Parliament enacted the Coercive Acts to punish the inhabitants of Massachusetts for the Boston Tea Party the previous December. The Boston Committee of Correspondence quickly responded by calling for a colonies-wide suspension of trade with Britain until the Acts were repealed. Boston's sister committee in New York City, the Committee of Fifty-One, which was dominated by moderate merchants did not favor this idea. As an alternative the New Yorkers suggested: "a Congress of Deputies from the Colonies in general . . . ought to be assembled without delay, and some unanimous resolution formed in this fatal emergency, not only respecting your deplorable circumstances, but for the security of our common rights."¹

By the end of July 1774, twelve colonies had selected delegations to the proposed Continental Congress, set to meet in Philadelphia during the first week of September. On July 28, after a bitter struggle with New York City's radical leadership, moderates John Alsop, James Duane, John Jay, Philip Livingston, and Isaac Low were elected by the Committee of Fifty-One to represent the city and county of New York at the Congress. The next day, the committee requested that New York's other counties either select a delegation of their own or alternately give their approval to the city's slate of delegates.²

Staten Islanders chose to remain aloof from the resistance movement and ignored the committee's request. James Duane, writing from Philadelphia, to Peter Van Schaack on September 2 reported: "Mr. Boerum is arriv'd from King's. He says there will be a

¹ Committee of Fifty-One to the Boston Committee of Correspondence, 23 May 1774; Committee of Fifty-One to the Boston Committee of Correspondence, 7 June 1774; in Peter Force, ed., *American Archives: A Documentary History of the United States*. Fourth Series. 6 vols. (Washington, DC: Published under authority of an Act of Congress, 1837-1846), 1: 297-298, 303 (herein cited as *Am. Arch.*).

² Election Returns of the New York City Delegates, July 1774; Committee of Fifty-One to the Committees, or Treasurer of the Different Counties, 29 July 1774, *Ibid.*, 1: 319-322.

meeting in Queen's. Of Richmond, I hear Nothing."³ On September 19, the Committee of Fifty-One again asked the Staten Islanders to send delegates "to represent them in the general Congress now sitting at Philadelphia, or to signify their acquiescence in those already assembled there for the Province of New York."⁴ Again, there was no reply from the Island, which never sent a delegation to the First Continental Congress.

The delegates who assembled in Philadelphia the first week of September demonstrated their support for Massachusetts. Along these lines, they adopted the *Suffolk Resolves*, which were presented to the Congress by Samuel Adams. The *Resolves* called on the colonists to withhold payment of taxes, halt all commercial contacts with Britain, agree to the non-consumption of British goods, and to "acquaint themselves with the art of war." The Congress also unanimously adopted a non-importation, non-exportation, and non-consumption agreement known as the *Continental Association* and called for the formation of local Committees of Observation to oversee its enforcement. In one of its final acts, the Congress rejected, albeit by a close vote, Pennsylvania conservative Joseph Galloway's conciliatory *Plan of Union*. Adherence to Congress's actions, especially the Association, would become a litmus test for colonial resistance and any colonists who opposed its provisions would be labeled as enemies of American liberty.⁵

When the New York Assembly convened in January 1775, the focus of its session was, understandably, the measures taken by the Continental Congress. The Assembly's

³ James Duane to Peter Van Schaack, 2 September [i.e. October], 1774, in Paul H. Smith, ed., *Letters of Delegates to Congress, 1774-1789*. 26 vols. (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1976-2000), 1: 136 (herein cited as *LODC*).

⁴ Isaac Low to the Committee of Fifty-One, 17 September 1774, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 1: 326.

⁵ On the origin and adoption of the *Suffolk Resolves* see John C. Miller, *Sam Adams: Pioneer in Propaganda* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1936), 323-324. For an excellent study of the Continental Congress see Jerrilyn Greene Marston, *King and Congress: The Transfer of Political Legitimacy, 1774-1776* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987).

Loyalists, who were led by James De Lancey of New York City, and John De Lancey, Frederick Philipse, and Isaac Wilkins of Westchester County, sought to repudiate Congress and to leave matters up to the colony's legally constituted Assembly. The Whigs, on the other hand, led by Peter R. Livingston, Abraham Ten Broeck, and Philip Schuyler, all of Albany County, supported the congressional measures and favored New York's participation in the proposed Second Continental Congress.⁶

The Island's representatives to the assembly – Christopher Billopp and his father-in-law Benjamin Seaman – were allied with the De Lancey group. By 1775, Staten Island politics were firmly in the hands of these two men. Both opposed the measures of the Continental Congress on the grounds that it was an extralegal governing body whose actions usurped the power of the constitutionally elected assemblies of the colonies. Appearing before the Royal Claims Commissioners in 1784, British General Thomas Sterling testified that as a member of the New York Assembly, Billopp “opposed every measure brought forward there in favor of the Congress” and “took a great deal of pains to prevent the County [Richmond County] he represented from joining their Measures.” Sterling emphasized that Billopp “exerted himself with success in keeping the Inhabitants of the Island quiet till the Arrival of the British Troops under General Howe” in early July of 1776. Echoing Sterling's testimony was British General James Robertson who asserted that Billopp “did everything in his power to prevent Rebellion” on the Island.⁷

⁶ Becker, *The History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 175-176*. For a discussion of membership in the De Lancey (Loyalist) and Livingston (Whig) factions in the Assembly see Roger J. Champagne, “Family Politics versus Constitutional Principles: The New York Assembly Elections of 1768 and 1769,” *WMQ* 3rd ser., 20 (1963), 58; and Patricia U. Bonomi, *A Factious People: Politics and Society in Colonial New York*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), 277.

⁷ Loyalist Claim of Christopher Billopp, Staten Island Loyalist Collection, Box 1, Folder 1, SIHS. Billopp was described as a “most firm Zealous Loyalist.” See Joseph Chew to Edward Winslow, 19 April

One Staten Islander described Billopp as an “exceedingly proud” individual who “regarded his own opinion superior to that of others.”⁸ This attitude was reflective of a belief in a strict hierarchical order where deference in all things was paid to one’s social “betters”. Seaman, on the other hand, had expressed some sympathy for the colonial grievances against Britain, going so far as to contend that the “Constitution of Britain at the best of Times, was not properly extended” to America and that “the People of America had not the Liberties of the Parent-State.” Yet, he believed the grievances between America and Britain should be resolved through the “popular Assemblies,” not by the Continental Congress, which he viewed as an illegal governing body.⁹ Thus, as a member of the “General Assembly of New York . . . [Seaman] evinced his attachment to the British by a steady opposition to the Measures of the Congress during the struggles which took place previous to the Civil Commotions.”¹⁰

When Abraham Ten Broeck of Albany County moved that the Assembly should “take into consideration the Proceedings of the Continental Congress held in the City of Philadelphia, in the months of September and October last,” Billopp and Seaman voted with the Loyalist De Lancey faction to reject the motion. Both men voted against thanking the colony’s delegates for their service in the Continental Congress and opposed a motion to acknowledge the “Merchants and Inhabitants” of New York for their

1784, Edward Winslow Papers, 1695-1877, Reel 153, vol. 3, doc. 78, Loyalist Collection, Harriet Irving Library, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada.

⁸ Quoted in Morris, *Memorial History of Staten Island*, 1: 140.

⁹ Tatum, Jr., ed., *The American Journal of Ambrose Serle*, 153.

¹⁰ Loyalist Claim of Benjamin Seaman, Staten Island Loyalist Collection, Box 1, Folder 1, SIHS. While a member of the New York Assembly, Seaman served on its Standing Committee of Correspondence. See the Order for the appointment of a Standing Committee of Correspondence and Inquiry, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 1: 1324.

“repeated, disinterested, publick-spirited, and patriotick conduct, in declining the importation or receiving” of British goods and “for their firm adherence to the Association.” The two men also joined the majority and balked at sending delegates to represent New York at the upcoming Second Continental Congress scheduled to convene in Philadelphia in May.¹¹

Across the Hudson River in New Jersey, the General Assembly had endorsed over the vocal protests of prominent Loyalists such as Governor William Franklin, the illegitimate son of Benjamin Franklin, and Cortlandt Skinner, the Attorney General and Speaker of the General Assembly, the measures of the First Continental Congress. The New Jersey General Assembly’s approval of Congress’s program encouraged local Committees of Observation throughout the colony to begin enforcing the Association. Among the most active committees were those in the eastern counties of Essex, Middlesex, and Monmouth. The committees in each of these counties worked closely with New York City’s Committee of Sixty to apprehend violators. “The spirit and thoroughness with which the Jersey Associators went about their work,” wrote historian Larry R. Gerlach is “evidenced by the fact that no one, regardless of his rank, wealth, or prominence, was considered above their scrutiny and immune from sanctions and reprisals.” In New Jersey, then, enforcement of Congress’s program was carried out with close vigilance.¹²

¹¹ Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Colony of New York, January-April, 1775, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 1: 1286-1287, 1289-1290. See also Harlow McMillen, “Green, and Red, and a Little Blue: The Story of Staten Island in the American Revolution,” *SIH* 1st ser., 32 (1975-1976), 4.

¹² Gerlach, *Prologue to Independence*, 243-250. The eastern New Jersey counties of Essex, Middlesex, and Monmouth front Staten Island. The main centers of resistance activities in these areas were Elizabethtown in Essex, New Brunswick and Woodbridge in Middlesex, and Freehold in Monmouth. Today, Elizabeth is located in Union County, which was carved out of Essex in 1854.

Staten Islanders, on the other hand, gave a less than enthusiastic reception to the Continental Congress's program and especially to its key measure – the Association. It is likely that the Island's opposition to the Association stemmed from the commercial-agrarian orientation of its economy. Like farmers in other parts of New York, Staten Islanders objected to a policy of non-intercourse and non-consumption not only because it threatened to cut off their access to British manufactured goods and specie, but also the removal of British goods from the colonial market meant an increase in the prices of domestically produced items. Once the Association went into effect, Staten Islanders evaded its provisions by turning to smuggling. Through illicit trade, the Island's residents not only continued to acquire British goods and specie, but they also undermined the Association.

One of the Association's key provisions was *Article Ten*, which established that after "the first day of February" 1775 any ships carrying British "Goods and Merchandises" should be turned away from American ports "without breaking any of the packages thereof."¹³ The first real test of the Association in New York came on February 2, 1775, when the vessel *James*, captained by a man named Watson, arrived from Glasgow, Scotland, and docked at a wharf in lower Manhattan. New York City's Committee of Sixty, which was created to enforce the Association, immediately called a meeting to deal with the *James* and decided to order the vessel out of the port without breaking its cargo. Watson moved his ship out into the bay, but returned on February 9 escorted by the HMS *Kingfisher*, a British naval vessel. After two days of heated protests

¹³ On the Continental Congress's creation of the Association see *Am. Arch.*, IV, 1: 915. For Article Ten see *Am. Arch.*, IV, 1: 1203.

led by several members of the Committee of Sixty, the *James* left New York with its cargo onboard.¹⁴

Although the *James* had sailed out of the port of New York, it may not have left the harbor without unloading some of its goods. Reports began to circulate among the communities along the New Jersey coast opposite Staten Island that before quitting the area, Captain Watson had stopped at the Island and with the help of several residents unloaded some of the ship's goods. Given the Island's history as a smuggler's haven, these reports were probably credible. In Elizabethtown (now Elizabeth), Essex County, New Jersey, the Committee of Observation was appalled at the news. Likewise, the committee in Woodbridge, Middlesex County, New Jersey, was incensed when it discovered that a large group of Staten Islanders "daringly attempted by force to prevent a Ship's [the *James*] returning to Europe, which arrived with Goods after the first day of February."¹⁵

On February 8, anger at the Island's apparent involvement with the *James* exploded into violence when James Johnson, a Staten Island oysterman, was attacked by a mob of Elizabethtown Whigs as he tried to sell his oysters in the town's marketplace. The Loyalist editor James Rivington described the attack in the March 2 edition of his paper the *Royal Gazette*. According to Rivington, Johnson was attacked "for no other crime than because some people of that ever loyal Island [Staten Island] were supposed to

¹⁴ Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Colonial Merchants and the American Revolution* (New York: Frederick Unger Publishing Company, 1918), 490; Tiedemann, *Reluctant Revolutionaries*, 205. See also *Am. Arch.*, IV, 1: 1243-1244.

¹⁵ For the Elizabethtown, New Jersey, Committee of Observation's reaction to the alleged involvement of Staten Islanders with the *James* see *Rivington's Royal Gazette*, 2 March 1775, quoted in *New Jersey Archives*, 1st ser., 42 vols. (Trenton, NJ: New Jersey State Library, Archives and History Bureau, 1880-1949), 31: 75 (herein cited as *NJA*). For the Woodbridge, New Jersey, Committee of Observation's response see *Am. Arch.*, IV, 1: 1249.

have been ready to assist in landing some goods from Captain Watson's Scotch ship." The attack began when a large crowd seized Johnson's small boat and cargo of oysters. The boat was "dragged ashore, and his oysters distributed to the hungry vagabonds." At "about four o'clock . . . the mob discharged the poor oysterman" and then "proceeded to abuse all the people in the town [Elizabethtown] who were known to be well-affected to the Constitution." The primary instigator, according to Rivington, was Jonathan Hampton, a justice of the peace in Essex County, New Jersey, member of the Sons of Liberty, and chairman of Elizabethtown's Committee of Observation.¹⁶

Several weeks later, evidence surfaced that indicated Rivington's initial version of the attack was somewhat exaggerated and based in part on false testimonies. Although aimed at sending a message to the Staten Islanders that their indifference toward colonial resistance would no longer be tolerated, some of Elizabethtown's Whig elite, including the well-respected lawyer Elias Boudinot and the jurist John Blanchard, criticized the attack on Johnson as too violent.¹⁷ Hampton, in trying to clear his name, issued several public statements charging that the accusations made against him were "false and malicious." Even though he held the defense of American liberties in "high regard," Hampton stated that he "never entertained the most distant thoughts of supporting them otherwise than in a legal and constitutional way, well knowing that true liberty consists in the power of doing whatever the laws permit." In the end, James Johnson exonerated

¹⁶ For James Rivington's version of the attack on James Johnson see *Ibid*, 75-76. See also Theodore Thayer, *As We Were: The Story of Old Elizabethtown* (Elizabeth, NJ: The Grassmann Publishing Company, Inc., 1964), 102-103.

¹⁷ Thayer, *As We Were*, 103. Elias Boudinot was a lawyer who served as the Commissary of Prisoners for the Continental army during the Revolution. John Blanchard was a well-respected jurist from Elizabethtown.

Hampton when he revealed that the judge had not been one of his attackers, but instead had led a group of townspeople who came to his defense.¹⁸

Crowd action and mob violence – whether spontaneous or organized by Whig leaders – was very often relied upon to enforce colonial resistance on the local level. The outbursts of violence connected with many of these mass demonstrations shocked the Whig leadership, which was mostly comprised of well-to-do merchants and other members of the middle class. These men were sometimes torn between initiating the demonstrations in an attempt to gain broad popular support and controlling the violent impulses that these demonstrations often unleashed. According to historian Dirk Hoerder, because the Whig leaders comprised a “hesitant leadership, “radical” toward Great Britain, “conservative” about concepts of internal social relations and deference” they often “baffled or gagged” mobs that seemed to be getting too violent for their taste.¹⁹ The response of some of Elizabethtown’s Whig leaders to the violence against James Johnson illustrates this point. While the attack may or may not have been instigated by Jonathan Hampton, once it had grown too violent, it is entirely probable that Hampton, Boudinot, Blanchard and other leaders of the Elizabethtown Whigs interceded on Johnson’s behalf and brought the demonstration under control.²⁰

Staten Island was also linked to a controversial smuggling scheme involving the ship known as the *Beulah*. On February 17, 1775, the *Beulah*, which belonged to the New York City Quaker merchants John and Robert Murray and was loaded with European

¹⁸ Jonathan Hampton quoted in *NJA*, 1st ser., 31: 93 – 95.

¹⁹ Dirk Hoerder, “Boston Leaders and Boston Crowds, 1765-1776” in Alfred F. Young, ed., *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1976), 240.

²⁰ Thayer, *As We Were*, 103.

goods, was prevented from entering New York harbor by a patrol boat commanded by the New York Whig Isaac Sears. For three days, the *Beulah* sat anchored off Sandy Hook, New Jersey, as the Murrays tried to convince New York City's Committee of Sixty to allow her to enter the port area. Even as they negotiated with the New Yorkers, the Murrays attempted to circumvent the Association by secretly landing a part of the ship's cargo at Staten Island and Elizabethtown, New Jersey. But their plan was discovered, prompting an investigation by the Elizabethtown Committee of Observation.²¹

On March 10, Jonathan Hampton wrote to New York City's Committee of Sixty describing the results of Elizabethtown's investigation. "It appears . . . that a Boat belonging to this Town did, last Monday morning, sail from New-York to Sandy Hook," wrote Hampton, "on Tuesday evening she returned here" and "we believe it was the Boat seen to be hovering about the *Beulah*." Apparently, this boat, which belonged to Isaac Woodruff of Elizabethtown, was leased to fellow Elizabethtown resident Captain Samuel Lee, who used it to take "Mr. John Murray out of the Ship, and that Goods from said Ship were landed by the Said Boat at Staten-Island." Hampton concluded the letter by stressing that his committee was very sure of "making more important discoveries on Staten-Island, where we think the Goods were undoubtedly landed, at the East Ends, or in the Kills."²²

²¹ Charles Monaghan, *The Murrays of Murray Hill* (Brooklyn, NY: Urban History Press, 1998), 51-52.

²² Jonathan Hampton to the Committee of Observation of New York, 10 March 1775, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 2: 144.

Because of Staten Island's long history of smuggling, the Elizabethtown Committee immediately assumed that Staten Islanders were involved in the illicit operation and that the Island was used as a safe harbor for the goods unloaded from the *Beulah*. The *Beulah* affair ended on March 13 when Samuel Lee confessed that he had rented the boat from Isaac Woodruff who had no knowledge of the operation, and then along with John Murray, Ichabod Barnet, John Graham, and Samuel Reed, unloaded goods from the *Beulah* and transported them to Barnet's store in Elizabethtown.²³ That very same day, John Murray appeared before New York City's Committee of Sixty and corroborated Lee's story. In a deposition, Murray admitted that he and the others transferred part of the *Beulah*'s cargo to the rented boat and then "proceeded . . . for Elizabeth-Town, but stopped at Staten-Island, where they all went on shore." How long the five men stayed on the Island and whether any Staten Islanders had assisted them was not revealed. Murray then stated that the goods were taken from Staten Island to Elizabethtown where they were "put into Mr. Ichabod Barnet's store."²⁴ The Murrays eventually apologized for any wrongdoing in the affair. They also agreed to reship the goods that were unloaded from the *Beulah* and to donate a sum of money to repair a hospital in Elizabethtown.²⁵

These incidents illustrate Staten Island's both real and perceived disregard for the Association and several Committees of Observation in New Jersey adopted policies of

²³ Ibid, 144 – 145. According to Charles Monaghan, Ichabod Barnet was "Robert Murray's son-in-law and manager of the Murray store in Elizabeth;" John Graham was "a clerk and partner with John Murray in his New York store;" Samuel Reed was a "nephew of Robert and John who also worked for them." See Monaghan, *The Murrays of Murray Hill*, 52.

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Monaghan, *The Murrays of Murray Hill*, 58. For another discussion of the *Beulah* Affair see Tiedemann, *Reluctant Revolutionaries*, 205-206.

economic coercion to force Staten Islanders to comply with its provisions. On February 13, 1775, the Elizabethtown committee condemned the residents of Staten Island for displaying “an unfriendly disposition towards the Liberties of America” by neglecting “to join the General Association proposed by the Continental Congress.” The committee then announced a ban on “all trade, commerce, dealings, and intercourse whatsoever with the inhabitants of said Island, until they shall join in the General Association.” One week later, committeemen in Woodbridge, New Jersey, unanimously agreed that because the actions of many Staten Islanders “have justly incurred the displeasure of all the friends of liberty, we think it a duty incumbent on us to publish our dislike of such hostile measures, and suspend all trade, dealings, and intercourse with them till they join the Association.” In late March or early April, the local committee in Dover, located in Monmouth County, New Jersey, announced that Peter Waglom, a Staten Islander, had carried “a quantity of India tea” to the town and “exposed the same to sale, contrary to, and in violation of the agreement and Association of the Continental Congress.” The committee condemned Waglom as a “publick enemy” and called on “every friend to his country (in this town) not to have any dealings with him.”²⁶

During its January 1775 session, the New York Assembly had voted against sending delegates to represent the colony at the Second Continental Congress. In early March, New York City’s Committee of Sixty decided to circumvent the Assembly’s

²⁶ For the Elizabethtown, New Jersey, Committee of Observation’s public condemnation and interdiction of Staten Island, 13 February 1775 see *Am. Arch.*, IV, 1: 1234-1235; *New York Journal*, 16 February 1775, in *NJA*, 1st ser., 31: 61-62. For the Woodbridge, New Jersey, Committee of Observation’s interdiction of Staten Island, 20 February 1775 see *Am. Arch.*, IV, 1: 1249. The announcement concerning Peter Woglum by the Dover, New Jersey, Committee of Observation is taken from the *New York Journal*, 6 April 1775, in *NJA*, 1st ser., 31: 105.

decision. It called on each county to send deputies to a Provincial Convention on April 20 to select delegates to represent New York at the new Congress.²⁷

On April 11, a mass meeting was held on Staten Island to decide “upon the Question [of] Whether [to] nominate Deputies to concert with other Deputies in New York, about the Choice of Delegates for the ensuing Congress.”²⁸ At the meeting, Christopher Billopp, who as a member of the Assembly opposed sending delegates to the Continental Congress, convinced the Staten Islanders in attendance to refrain from participating in the Provincial Convention. “When it was proposed in 1775 – to the people in General to send Delegates to Congress (the Assembly having previously refused to do so),” wrote British General Thomas Sterling in 1784, Billopp “attended the County Meeting and there carried the point to the great majority against the designs of Congress.”²⁹ Following the vote, the Reverend Richard Charlton of Saint Andrew’s Anglican Church praised his fellow Staten Islanders for standing up to the schemes of “a few Republican malevolent Spirits.”³⁰ Once again, Staten Island had defied the colonial resistance movement.

The Provincial Convention met in New York City on April 20, but absent were deputies from five counties: Charlotte, Cumberland, Gloucester, Tryon, and Richmond on Staten Island. Those who attended the Convention, however, elected twelve delegates to represent the colony at the upcoming Second Continental Congress. The Convention

²⁷ Committee of Sixty Nominations for the New York Provincial Convention, 6 March 1775, *Ibid.*, IV, 2: 138-139.

²⁸ *New-York Gazette and Weekly Mercury*, 17 April 1775. See also *Am. Arch.*, IV, 2: 313.

²⁹ Loyalist Claim of Christopher Billopp, Staten Island Loyalist Collection, Box 1, Folder 1, SIHS.

³⁰ Quoted in Ranlet, *The New York Loyalists*, 71.

adjourned on April 22. The following day New York City received the alarming news that on April 19 an armed conflict between American farmers and British regulars had occurred near the towns of Lexington and Concord in the Massachusetts countryside.³¹

The military confrontation in Massachusetts inflamed tempers throughout America. In New York City, it caused a wave of protests and mob violence, which was led by the Sons of Liberty. Thomas Jones, a Loyalist justice of the Supreme Court from Oyster Bay, in Queens County, described the scene in the city. “On Sunday morning the 23d of April, a confused account arrived from Boston, of a skirmish at Lexington between a detachment of the Kings troops, and a party of the rebel army,” Jones wrote,

the republicans instantly took the alarm; they had wished for it for a long time, [and] they received the news with avidity, . . . Isaac Sears, John Lamb and Donald Campbell . . . paraded the town with drums beating and colours flying, (attended by a mob of Negroes, boys, sailors, and pick pockets) inviting all mankind to take up arms in defense of the “injured rights and liberties of America.”³²

The protesters broke into the arsenal in lower Manhattan near City Hall and removed several weapons. Judge Jones recalled: “1,000 stand of arms” were taken out and “delivered . . . to the rabble, to be used as the demagogues of rebellion should direct.” For one week, New York City was gripped in frenzy. “The whole city,” wrote Jones, “became one continued scene of riot, tumult, and confusion . . . troops were enlisted for

³¹ Bernard Mason, *The Road to Independence: The Revolutionary Movement in New York, 1773-1777* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1966), 44, 178-179. See also Alexander C. Flick, ed., *The American Revolution in New York: Its Political, Social, and Economic Significance* (New York: New York State Department of Education, Division of Archives and History, 1926), 49.

³² Thomas Jones, *History of New York During the Revolutionary War and of the Leading Events in the Other Colonies at that Period*. Edited by Edward Floyd De Lancey. 2 vols. (New York: The New York Historical Society, 1879), 1: 39.

the service of rebellion, the Loyalists threatened with the gallows, and the property of the Crown plundered and seized upon wherever it could be found.”³³

As armed mobs roamed New York’s streets, the provincial government led by Lieutenant Governor Cadwallader Colden, an ardent Loyalist, who had assumed the duties of New York’s governor while Governor William Tryon was away in Britain, turned to the Governor’s Council and various others for advice on how to handle the situation. Although several officials suggested that the protests be met with force, the fact that there were only one hundred British troops in the city and that the local militia was comprised of men sympathetic to, or associated with, the Sons of Liberty, made it impossible to quell the disorders through the use of arms. Others feared that any government action against the protests might cause the violence to spread to other areas of the colony.³⁴ “The minds of the people in the city were kept in constant agitation, by Riots,” Colden reported in early May 1775, to William Legge, Lord Dartmouth, who served as the British Colonial Secretary. He continued:

The friends of order and Government saw no power either in the exertion of the Magistrates, or the feeble aid that could be afforded by the very small body of Troops quartered in the city to protect their persons and property from violence and destruction . . . The people were assembled, and that scene of disorder and violence begun, which has entirely prostrated the Powers of Government, and produced an association by which this Province has solemnly united with the others in resisting the Acts of Parliament.³⁵

In effect, Royal authority had collapsed in New York.

³³ Ibid, 40.

³⁴ Becker, *The History of Political Parties in the Province of New York*, 193; Mason, *The Road to Independence*, 75-77. The one hundred British troops stationed in New York City were from the Royal Irish Regiment.

³⁵ Cadwallader Colden to Lord Dartmouth, 3 May 1775, in *NYCD*, 8: 571.

Seizing upon the opportunity, New York City's Committee of Sixty immediately set out to take charge of the situation. But, in order to do so, it needed to expand its governmental authority beyond the enforcement of the Association, which it was originally chosen to do. Along these lines, the committee recommended that a new committee comprised of one hundred members be chosen (elections were held on May 1) and that it be given full authority to govern the city. It also called on each county to elect delegates to a Provincial Congress to convene on May 22. The purpose of the Congress would be to function as the new governing body of the colony. On April 29, the New York Committee of Sixty distributed for the approval of "all the Counties in the Province," an agreement known as the *General Association*, in which signers pledged their support for the measures of the Continental Congress and those of the proposed Provincial Congress.³⁶

Like other New Yorkers, the residents of Staten Island were stunned at the outbreak of hostilities in Massachusetts. The armed conflict at Lexington and Concord and the mob violence it precipitated in New York City and other communities left Staten Islanders scrambling to find an appropriate course of action to pursue at this important juncture in the imperial crisis. The Reverend Richard Charlton, the Anglican minister, was alarmed and dismayed at the unfolding events, and hoped for "a Speedy suppression to insulting Mobs, and a restoration of Loyalty and obedience to our Parent State."³⁷ Alexander McDonald was distressed by how "the Spirit of Rebellion & treason [were] blasing every where. The People constantly exercising themselves to Arms, Liberty

³⁶ See *Am. Arch.*, IV, 2: 400, 427-428, 437, 459, 471; *Calendar of Historical Manuscripts Relating to the War of the Revolution*. 2 vols. (Albany, NY: Weed & Parsons, Company, 1868), 1: 3-4.

³⁷ Quoted in Ranlet, *The New York Loyalists*, 71.

Poles erected Allmost at every Mile.”³⁸ To the New York City merchants Walter and Thomas Buchannon, he wrote: “The affairs of America are far from being settled and it is as hard to know how Matters will turn out . . . I’ll cut short and say No more on this Subject, but that I wish to god a Mode of reconciliation between Great Britain & her Colonies Consistent with the dignity and Grandeur of Great Britain as well as the interest & happiness of America.”³⁹ Christopher Billopp and Benjamin Seaman joined twelve of their fellow Loyalist assemblymen in a message to General Thomas Gage, the British Commander-in-Chief, which called for a ceasefire as a pretext to the negotiation of an amicable reconciliation.⁴⁰

On May 1, with Seaman in the chair, Staten Islanders held a meeting at Richmondtown to discuss the “present exigency [of] affairs.” They decided to heed the

³⁸ Captain Alexander McDonald to General Sir William Howe, no date, *Letter-Book of Captain Alexander McDonald*, 275.

³⁹ Captain Alexander McDonald to Walter and Thomas Buchannon, 4 November 1775, *Ibid*, 217. In January 1776, McDonald wrote to the London merchant John Ogilvie: “The Authors of this unhappy disaster you have among you In England. The pretty speeches that has been made in the house of Lords the time of the Stamp Act and other Gentlemen well known, out of and in the house of Commons, are alone the Authors of this unnatural Rebellion, which I am very much afraid will terminate in the destruction of Great Brittain and the Colonies god forbid it should be the Case.” See Captain Alexander McDonald to John Ogilvie, 2 January 1776, *Letter-Book of Captain Alexander McDonald*, 233.

⁴⁰ Members of the New York Assembly to General Thomas Gage, 5 May 1775, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 2: 513. In addition to Billopp and Seaman, the others who signed the ceasefire message were: Frederick Philipse, John Cruger, Jacob Walton, David Kissam, Pierre Van Cortlandt, Simon Boerum, John Cove, James Jauncey, John Rapalje, Samuel Gale, Zebulon Williams, and Samuel Wells. “We have long seen, with the greatest anxiety, the progress of the unhappy contest between Great Britain and the Colonies,” the message stated, “and as we have ardently wished for a cordial reconciliation, so we have, to the utmost of our power, endeavoured to pursue the means of attaining so desirable an end.” But, they lamented, “while we were looking up to this object, encouraged to hope for the attainment of it by the assurances we had that a spirit of reconciliation was prevailing in the Mother Country, we were extremely alarmed at the late melancholy transactions in the Province of Massachusetts-Bay, ending in actual bloodshed.” The message reiterated that the “immediate effect” of Lexington and Concord “was a general agitation in the minds of the people here,” which had led them to begin “associating and arming . . . themselves in a state of defense.” Alarmed by the violence that “must inevitably follow the prosecution of hostile measures, and . . . of an unnatural civil war,” they pleaded with General Gage to “immediately order a cessation of further hostilities, until His Majesty can be apprised of the situation of the American colonies.” In October 1775, General Sir William Howe replaced General Thomas Gage as Commander-in-Chief.

advice of New York City's Committee of Sixty by electing a delegation to the proposed Provincial Congress. Announcing that "the Distressed and alarming state of the Colonies" made the holding of a Provincial Congress necessary, the freeholders unanimously elected "Messrs. Paul Micheau, John Journey [Journey], Aaron Cortelyou, Richard Conner, and Richard Lawrence or the major part of them" to represent the Island "at the next Provincial Congress intended to be held in the City of New York on the 22d day of May instant."⁴¹

This sudden turnaround was likely caused by the fact that the Whigs in New York and New Jersey threatened Staten Islanders with force. "This Island 'till the last week generally opposed the choosing a committee, or having any Thing to do with the Congress," wrote the Reverend Hector Gambold of the Moravian Church to Nathaniel Seidel of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania,

But when they saw that an armed Force was daily expected to compel them to submit to the Acts lately Passed, which render Liberty, Property, and even Life in a great Measure precarious, They unanimously chose One, viz. Mr. Arthur [Aaron] Cortelyou, Richard Conner & 3 more whom you do not know.⁴²

Thus, Staten Islanders felt forced against their will to participate in the Provincial Congress.

The men who comprised the Island's delegation to the Provincial Congress were well-respected local figures known for their moderate-to-conservative political views. Of this group, all but Richard Lawrence had some link to either Christopher Billopp or Benjamin Seaman. Paul Micheau, Jr., the County Clerk, was a vocal supporter of

⁴¹ *Calendar of Manuscripts*, 1: 42. For a discussion of this meeting see McMillen, "Green, and Red, and a Little Blue," 18.

⁴² Reverend Hector Gambold to Nathaniel Seidel, 10 May 1775. I wish to thank Elisabeth Sommer of the Staten Island Historical Society for bringing this letter to my attention.

reconciliation and was Benjamin Seaman's son-in-law. His father, Paul Micheau, Sr., was a close friend of Thomas Farmar Billopp, Christopher Billopp's father. Aaron Cortelyou was the father-in-law of Benjamin Seaman's son Richard and was a descendent of Jacques Cortelyou, the former Surveyor General of New York under Governor Francis Lovelace. He supported reconciliation, signed the Loyalist Oath of July 1776, and during the Revolution provided the British army with logistics and information. Richard Conner was a native of Ireland and an active member of the Moravian community who served as a captain in the Third Company of Christopher Billopp's Loyalist Battalion of Staten Island Militia. Richard Lawrence, a shipwright from Decker's Ferry (now Port Richmond), became widely known for his Loyalist leanings. Shortly after the British army's arrival on Staten Island in July of 1776, General Sir William Howe appointed Lawrence to the position of Master Carpenter of the Island's shipyards and gave him orders to seize Whig-owned timber, vessels, and naval stores, which he carried out with great enthusiasm. John Journeay, another advocate of reconciliation, was an acquaintance of Benjamin Seaman's and an active member of Saint Andrew's Anglican Church.⁴³

Once represented in the Provincial Congress, many Staten Islanders desperately hoped that it would do everything it could to try to prevent the rebellion from spreading

⁴³ Clute, *Annals of Staten Island*, 140-141, 148, 170, 303-304, 357-358, 363, 396. On Richard Conner see Oscar T. Conner, *The Genealogy of the Descendants of Richard Conner, Born in Ireland in 1723* (Ridgewood, NJ: Published by the author, 1987), 11. On Aaron Cortelyou see John Van Zandt Cortelyou, *The Cortelyou Genealogy: A Record of Jaques Corteljou and Many of His Descendants* (Lincoln, NE: Press of Brown Printing Service, 1942), 113-120; Sabine, *Biographical Sketches of Loyalists*, 2: 500. On Paul Micheau, Jr. see Leng and Davis, *A History of Staten Island and Its People*, 2: 165, 201; Seaman, *The Seaman Family in America*, 79. Micheau was married to Benjamin Seaman's daughter Mary. On Richard Lawrence see Gregory Palmer, *Biographical Sketches of Loyalists of the American Revolution*. (Westport, CT: Meckler Publishing, 1984), 479; Sabine, *Biographical Sketches of Loyalists*, 2: 6. On John Journeay see Palmer, *Biographical Sketches of Loyalists of the American Revolution*, 447. Given the composition of the Island's delegation, it is very likely that Christopher Billopp and Benjamin Seaman had a hand in its selection.

to New York. In this sense, they shared the same feelings as Loyalists from other areas of the colony who were just as disturbed by the events of April 19 as they were. However, the breakdown of Royal government in New York left Loyalists with few options to check the colony's Whigs. They, therefore, were forced to accept the reality of the Provincial Congress and to find a way to work for reconciliation through that governing body. "Many conservatives and loyalists," wrote historian Carl L. Becker, hoped "that the Provincial Congress would lead New York out of revolution rather than into it, some of the loyalist deputies in fact . . . working sincerely to that end."⁴⁴ Thus, Staten Island's Provincial congressmen tried their best to stem the rising tide of revolution in New York by working through Congress.

Almost immediately, the Island's Provincial congressmen rejected Whig attempts to use the Provincial Congress to strengthen the resistance movement. They cast the only votes against a motion put forth by Isaac Low, a delegate from New York City, which stressed "that implicit obedience ought to be paid to every recommendation of the Continental Congress for the general regulation of the Associated Colonies" and that "all matters relative to the internal police of this Colony" should be given to the Provincial Congress. On June 2, the Staten Island delegation voted for a resolution presented by conservative Benjamin Kissam, a lawyer from New York City, calling for "a reconciliation between Great Britain and these Colonies on constitutional principles" and for the appointment of a committee "to prepare a plan of such accommodation."⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Becker, *The History of Political Parties in the Province of New York*, 207.

⁴⁵ See *Am. Arch.*, IV, 2: 1244, 1271. The Provincial Congress convened on May 22 with all of Staten Island's delegates in attendance except Richard Lawrence, who arrived on June 1.

In a move initiated by the Whigs, the Provincial Congress, which was now “acting with all the confidence and authority of a legal Government,” requested that its members sign the *General Association*, which was issued in late April by New York City’s Committee of Sixty. Moreover, each county was ordered to create “committees and also sub-committees . . . to tender the said Association” to its residents as well as to “carry into execution the resolutions of the Continental and this Provincial Congress.” The county committees were instructed to return by July 15 a list of the names of those residents “who shall neglect or refuse to sign” the General Association.⁴⁶

At the July 17 meeting of the Elizabethtown Committee of Observation, Jonathan Hampton informed the committeemen that he had “received a letter from Mr. Richard Lawrence, a Delegate of Richmond County, for the Provincial Congress of the Colony of New York” that stated the residents of Staten Island “had, *in general* signed the association recommended by the Committee of New York.” The Elizabethtown Committee of Observation therefore lifted its five-month old ban on trade with the Island.⁴⁷ It is very likely that the policy of economic coercion adopted by the Elizabethtown Whigs had forced the recalcitrant Staten Islanders to comply with the Whig cause. In November 1775, Alexander McDonald told a friend that the residents of Staten Island had been “forced to Sign an association with [the] Rebels.”⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Becker, *The History of Political Parties in the Province of New York*, 212-213, 215; Flick, *The American Revolution in New York*, 317-318; Mason, *The Road to Independence*, 63. For the General Association of New York see *Am. Arch.*, IV, 2: 471. See also Cadwallader Colden to Lord Dartmouth, 7 June 1775, in *NYCD*, 8: 580.

⁴⁷ *New-York Gazette and Weekly Mercury*, 20 July 1775.

⁴⁸ Captain Alexander McDonald to John Ogilvie, 3 November 1775, *Letter-Book of Captain Alexander McDonald*, 213.

While the Staten Islanders' acceptance of the General Association seemed to signal their compliance with the Whig cause, Staten Island's Provincial congressmen worked throughout the summer of 1775 to undermine the increasingly belligerent attitude of New York's Whigs and to steer the Provincial Congress toward achieving reconciliation with Britain. When arms and ammunition were stolen from the Royal storehouse located in Turtle Bay, on Manhattan's east side, in early June, the Island's Provincial congressmen voted for the creation of a committee to investigate the theft and recover the stolen military stores for the British. On June 20, the men voted against lending £2000 Continental Currency to "Messrs. Van Vleeck and Kip, at five per cent, for the term of two years, . . . to enable them to manufacture saltpeter" for gunpowder. The Staten Islanders also opposed various proposals in support of war including: calling for the dismantling of the Royal cannon at Fort George in lower Manhattan (now Battery Park) and its removal to the fortifications being constructed on the Highlands overlooking the Hudson River, the granting of pay raises to members of Captain John Lamb's Company of Artillery, and for giving the Provincial Congress the power to nominate and appoint "any Field-Officer or Officers" for "the Regiment of Green Mountain Boys."⁴⁹

In late August, several delegates became concerned that information from their proceedings was being leaked, either intentionally or unintentionally, to the British. "The success of measures necessary to be adopted and pursued by this Congress may, in many instances, depend on their being kept secret until their execution," James Beekman of New York City informed the Provincial Congress. He added that the public good would be best served if "intelligence received by this Congress should also be kept secret." On

⁴⁹ Proceedings of the New York Provincial Congress, beginning 22 May 1775, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 2: 1286, 1288-1290, 1308; 3: 541-542, 568, 570.

August 23, the Staten Island delegation voted against Beekman's motion to adopt an oath of secrecy.⁵⁰

A serious issue facing the New York Provincial Congress was the presence of British warships in New York harbor. In late February 1775, Lieutenant Governor Colden wrote to Vice Admiral Samuel Graves, the commander of Britain's North American squadron, requesting that a large warship be sent immediately to New York to bolster the Royal government, reinforce the small number of troops in the city, and give protection and confidence to the Loyalists in the area.⁵¹ By late May, the 64-gun HMS *Asia* joined the smaller HMS *Kingfisher*, which had been in New York harbor since the agitation over the *Beulah* in early February. Although the *Asia* arrived too late to prevent the collapse of New York's Royal government, the presence of two British warships hovering off the coast of lower Manhattan served to intimidate the city's residents and to spread the fear of an impending British invasion. As historian Bruce Bliven, Jr. asserts: "The city was highly vulnerable to fire, as all its residents were constantly aware, a firebomb or two could start a conflagration that might burn New York to the ground."⁵²

This predicament was made more acute by the fact that New York City was defenseless. It had sent almost all of its available gunpowder reserves to Boston for use by the Continental troops besieging that city. Without an adequate supply of gunpowder,

⁵⁰ On James Beekman's proposal for an oath of secrecy to be taken by the delegates, 23 August 1775, see *Ibid.*, 3: 547-548.

⁵¹ Cadwallader Colden to Vice Admiral Samuel Graves, 20 February 1775, in William Bell Clark and William J. Morgan, eds., *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*. 10 vols. (Washington, DC: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1968-1996), 3: 100-101 (herein cited as *NDAR*). The HMS *Asia* arrived in New York on May 26, 1775.

⁵² Bruce Bliven, Jr., *Under the Guns, New York: 1775-1776* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1972), 6.

the cannon at the Battery in Fort George would be rendered useless in the event of either a naval bombardment or a full-scale military invasion.

Fully aware of the seriousness of the situation, the Provincial Congress authorized the continued sale of fresh provisions to the British vessels in the harbor. However, Congress also tried its best to regulate this trade. On May 27, for instance, the New York City merchant Abraham Lott, who served as the official victualler for the British ships in the harbor, was given permission by the Provincial Congress to supply the *Asia* with fresh provisions “for her own use and consumption only.”⁵³ He was also required to make regular reports to Congress detailing, “the Species & Quantities supplied” to the ship. Furthermore, Congress stressed that only “persons employed by Treasurer Lott” were permitted to “deliver the provisions . . . every other Inhabitant is prohibited any intercourse with the *Asia* nor is she [to be] supplied with anything but thro’ Mr. Lott or his order.”⁵⁴ If it were discovered that the officers and crews of the warships were purchasing provisions from New Yorkers other than those authorized by the Provincial Congress, then this trade would be halted.

The diligent procedures laid out by the Provincial Congress for the supplying of the British warships was done in order to make sure that these provisions did not end up with the King’s army and navy in Boston. The British forces in the Massachusetts capital faced major logistical problems, which stemmed from their reliance on locally procured supplies. When the war began, the countryside around Boston was firmly in the hands of local Whig committees. These committees took steps to stop the flow of local supplies

⁵³ Abraham Lott to the New York Provincial Congress, 27 May 1775, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 2: 846.

⁵⁴ John McKesson to Richard Sharp, 25 January 1776, in *NDAR*, 3: 978.

from reaching the British troops in the city. Adding to the British army's logistical problems was the fact that Whig committees in the other colonies also did their best to cut off the amount of supplies destined for Boston.⁵⁵

The residents of Staten Island, however, often evaded the efforts of New York City's Committee of One Hundred to prevent provisions from reaching the British in Boston. On May 14, for example, the committee publicly announced that it "strongly suspected that the *Man-of-War* now in this Harbour [the HMS *Kingfisher*] is supplied from some part of the Jerseys and Staten Island, with Provisions and other necessaries, with intent to ship the same to Boston for the use of the Army and Navy." Lacking the necessary naval presence to enforce the boycott, the committee sent letters to "the neighbouring Committees" and "to such persons as they shall think necessary, requesting them to use all possible means for preventing the same."⁵⁶

Even though the Committee of One Hundred and the New York Provincial Congress took steps to prevent the flow of provisions from New York City to the British at Boston, supplies still got through. In mid-August, General George Washington, the Commander-in-Chief of the Continental army, wrote to the New York Provincial Congress: "a vessel cleared lately out of New York, for St. Croix, with fresh provisions

⁵⁵ For the logistical problems faced by the British army at Boston see R. Arthur Bowler, "Logistics and Operations in the American Revolution" in Don Higginbotham, ed., *Reconsiderations on the Revolutionary War: Selected Essays* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978), 62-64 and Bowler's *Logistics and the Failure of the British Army in America, 1775-1783* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 41-46, 53-55, 60-65, 95-96; David Syrett, *The Royal Navy in American Waters, 1775-1783* (Brookfield, VT: Gower Publishing Company, 1989), 2-3. For the efforts to block all provisions from New York to the British in Boston see Tiedemann, *Reluctant Revolutionaries*, 200-201. The British military will encounter similar logistical problems during its occupation of Philadelphia between 1777 and 1778. Whig control of much of the Philadelphia countryside left the British forces occupying that city without a reliable source of supplies. See Ira D. Gruber, *The Howe Brothers and the American Revolution* (New York: Atheneum Press, 1972), 242.

⁵⁶ See Proceedings of the New York Committee of One Hundred, 14 May 1775, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 2: 533.

and other articles, has just gone into Boston, instead of pursuing her voyage to the West-Indies.”⁵⁷ This information prompted Congress to immediately prohibit the exportation of “Cattle, Sheep, Poultry, or Live Stock of any kind, except Horses.” In early September, it resolved to punish anyone found guilty of violating its non-exportation order. Any person found guilty for the first time of “attempting . . . to furnish the Ministerial Army or Navy with Provisions or other necessaries, . . . shall be disarmed, and forfeit double the value of the Provisions or other necessaries so furnished.” Violators would also be jailed for up to three months at their own expense or until they paid the forfeiture. Repeat offenders faced banishment from the colony “for the term of Seven years from the time of such second conviction.”⁵⁸

The penalties imposed by the Provincial Congress for violators of its non-exportation order and the subsequent enactment of *Article Four* of the Continental Association on September 10, which prevented the export of “any merchandise or commodity whatsoever to Great Britain, Ireland, or the West Indies” led many New Yorkers to stop trading with the British ships in the harbor.⁵⁹ It did little to deter Staten Islanders however.

Several residents of Staten Island eluded authorities and continued to smuggle provisions to the British ships. But unlike the smuggling of goods such as rum or

⁵⁷ General George Washington to the New York Provincial Congress, 8 August 1775, in W. W. Abbott, Philander D. Chase, and Dorothy Twohig, eds., *The Papers of George Washington*. Revolutionary War Series. 12 vols. (Charlottesville, VA: The University Press of Virginia, 1985-2002), 1: 274 (herein cited as *GWPRWS*).

⁵⁸ See *Am. Arch.*, IV, 3: 537, 573-574. For a discussion of the efforts made by some New York merchants to circumvent the Continental Association as well as the attempt by New York’s Whigs to prevent the supplying of the British in Boston see Judith L. Van Buskirk, *Generous Enemies: Patriots and Loyalists in Revolutionary New York* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 108-112.

⁵⁹ For the Continental Association see *Ibid.*, 1: 1203.

molasses carried out by the Bostonians in the years before the war, which acted to undermine British trade, the smuggling undertaken by Staten Islanders was mutually beneficial to themselves and the British. The Island provided the British with an outlet for their manufactured goods and fresh supplies for their troops and naval personnel, while Staten Island merchants such as John Bedell, Benjamin Mischeau, and others prospered from the sale of smuggled British goods.⁶⁰ In addition, British gold went a long way in an economy that was short on hard money and had become increasingly dependent on devalued paper currency.

Reports indicated that Staten Islanders who continued to supply produce and livestock to the British ships in the harbor did so with the knowledge that the provisions would be transshipped to the King's army in Boston. On September 2, the Provincial Congress received a letter from David Burger of New York City in which he complained of "sundry persons in Richmond County" who continued to supply livestock to the British transports. "I take this opportunity," Burger wrote, "from the regard that I have for the cause of American freedom, to acquaint you that there is a set of . . . people that live on Staten Island, who, for the sake of a little gain, would sell their and the County's privileges, as appears by their selling to the Troops, which they have done last Tuesday, . . . hogs, sheep, geese, ducks, and fowls, to go on board the ship that lies now in the North River [Hudson River], to go to Boston." He added that many Staten Islanders were "determined to continue thus in letting them [British troops] have such stock as they want, as far as they are able to supply them, and will spare no pains to provide for them." The concerned New Yorker then named names: "Mr. Cubberly [Isaac Cubberly] is to let

⁶⁰ Loyalist Claim of John Bedell and Benjamin Mischeau, Staten Island Loyalist Collection, Box 1, Folder 1, SIHS.

them have some stock. As he is not willing to bring them up himself, for fear of being discovered in so doing, . . . they are to call for them, and he will let them have as far as he can spare. Last Tuesday they had the abovementioned stock from John Van Pelt, Cornelius Martin [Martino], Benjamin Martin [Martino], John Keteltas, Jacob Barregar, and Mary Barregar.”⁶¹

The New York Committee of Safety, sitting for the adjourned Provincial Congress, was disturbed by this news. It seemed that many Staten Islanders were consciously aiding and abetting the British military not only in New York but also in Boston. Thus, the New York Committee of Safety referred the matter to the Richmond County Committee of Safety and launched its own investigation into the allegations.

While the Richmond County Committee of Safety moved slowly in its investigation, the New York Committee of Safety’s own inquiry led it to John Wetherhead, a native of Britain, leading merchant in New York City, and known Loyalist. Apparently, he and a British officer had been on Staten Island and purchased large quantities of livestock and produce from the residents. On September 17, in response to its inquiries, Wetherhead wrote to the Committee of Safety from aboard the *Asia* where he had gone several months earlier to escape, as he put it, “the perpetual Insults and Menaces” of revolutionary mobs in the city. He admitted to having been on Staten Island “along with the Captain of the transport” and to being “present when the Captain purchased some stock from two or three persons.” But he stopped short of revealing the Staten Islanders’ identities or whether “the stock or any part of it was intended for Boston” or even “if it is gone thither.” Then, with a bit of sarcasm,

⁶¹ David Burger to the New York Provincial Congress, 1 September 1775, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 3: 624-625.

Wetherhead hinted that the Staten Islanders and their livestock were responsible for saving New York City from destruction. “For my part, I thought myself happy, and do still think so,” he wrote, “that the stock was procured, as it in some measure tended to quiet the minds of the [British] officers, who were highly exasperated at the town’s people stopping the fresh beef, . . . so much that some steps [were] like to have been taken that would have been very fatal to numbers in the City.”⁶² No other evidence exists to show if the investigations into this matter were taken any further.

In early October, the New York Provincial Congress announced that “for the sake of liberty” and because “the duration of the power of all persons, entrusted with high authority, should be limited to a short period,” it would end its session on November 14. It also ordered the county committees to hold elections for delegates to a Second Provincial Congress, which was scheduled to convene from November 14, 1775, “until the Second Tuesday in May next.” By November 14, however, the Second Provincial Congress was forced to adjourn because it had failed to achieve the necessary quorum of delegates to hold proceedings.⁶³

For several weeks Congress was plagued by the lack of a quorum, which made it unable to do much beyond going about the daily formalities of calling the roll and reading and addressing the mail. From aboard the British merchant ship *Duchess of Gordon*, moored in the harbor, where he had gone in late October, the exiled governor of New York, William Tryon, optimistically wrote to Lord Dartmouth: “The rage of the

⁶² John Wetherhead to the New York Committee of Safety, 17 September 1775, *Ibid.*, 724-725. For the threats against John Wetherhead’s family and property see Catherine S. Crary, ed., *The Price of Loyalty: Tory Writings from the Revolutionary Era* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1973), 44-47.

⁶³ See *Am. Arch.*, IV, 3: 800.

populace in this province for Committees and Congresses seems to have greatly abated, several Counties have refused to send Delegates to the provincial Congress, and they have not been able to make a house, as they call it, since the late Dissolution.”⁶⁴ This situation arose because the delegations from Charlotte, Cumberland, Gloucester, and Tryon counties were late arriving in the city, and more seriously, because two counties had either refused to hold an election (Richmond) or had held an election but voted not to send delegates at all to Congress (Queens).⁶⁵

In late November 1775, news reached the Second Provincial Congress that Staten Island (Richmond County) was remaining firm in its refusal to hold an election for delegates. On November 24, Robert Benson, Congress’s secretary, was ordered to “draught a Letter to the Representatives of the County of Richmond, in the late Provincial Congress” demanding an explanation for the Island’s inaction.⁶⁶ “A report prevails that the people of your County will not send members to represent them in Provincial Congress,” wrote Benson, “I am directed by the members present to inform you of this, and to request that you will inform them, as soon as you possibly can, of the state of your County relative to the choice of Deputies to represent them in the ensuing Congress.”⁶⁷

On December 1, Paul Mischeau, Jr. replied to Benson’s letter. Mischeau wrote that after the close of the last Congress, he immediately returned to Staten Island and

⁶⁴ William Tryon to Lord Dartmouth, 6 December 1775, in *NYCD*, 8: 646. On the day that Tryon wrote this letter to the Colonial Secretary, the Second New York Provincial Congress achieved a quorum and began to hold regular proceedings.

⁶⁵ Bliven, Jr., *Under the Guns*, 61-62; Mason, *The Road to Independence*, 115; Tiedemann, *Reluctant Revolutionaries*, 235.

⁶⁶ Proceedings of the New York Provincial Congress, 24 November 1775, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 3: 1754.

⁶⁷ Robert Benson to the Richmond County Committee of Correspondence, 24 November 1775, *Ibid.*

informed the Richmond County Committee of Safety “that the Congress was dissolved” and that it “had ordered the Committees in each County to convene the people to elect deputies” to a new Congress. He then stated that “a meeting of the [Richmond County] Committee was called . . . and not a majority appearing, those that did appear, concluded they were not empowered to act.” No other steps were taken to fix a date for an election. Micheau recommended that Congress write to the committee directly to learn their reasons for not calling an election and concluded by hoping “that the present Congress may endeavour to keep tranquility and good order in our Province, and make peace with our Mother Country.”⁶⁸

The New York Provincial Congress was infuriated with the Staten Islanders’ defiant attitude. By continuing to trade with the British ships in the harbor, Staten Islanders materially enabled the British presence in the area and at the same time undermined Whig efforts to promote a unified front. On December 2, 1775, Congress sent a strongly worded letter to the Richmond County Committee of Safety ordering its members to “cause an election to be held, without delay, for Congress.” If the committee delayed in calling for an election, Congress warned: “rest assured, gentlemen, that the neighboring Colonies will not remain inactive Spectators, if you show a disposition to depart from the Continental Union.”⁶⁹

On December 15, Staten Islanders voted against sending a delegation to the Second Provincial Congress. The Richmond County Committee of Safety explained that Staten Islanders had agreed to send delegates to the previous Congress with the hope of

⁶⁸ Paul Micheau, Jr. to Robert Benson, 1 December 1775, *Ibid*, 3: 1755, 4: 149.

⁶⁹ New York Provincial Congress to the Richmond County Committee, 2 December 1775, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 3: 1762-1764.

obtaining “the so much desired point in our view, namely, a reconciliation with Great Britain.” However, they were disappointed with Congress’s actions, which had the potential instead to provoke “a war with Great Britain” that would disrupt the Island’s “particular situation.” By mid-December, Staten Islanders had given up hope that reconciliation could be achieved and indicated an unwillingness to participate in a government whose policies and actions were leading New York down the road to rebellion and possibly independence.⁷⁰

The response from the Provincial Congress was swift and direct. On December 21, 1775, its Committee of Safety announced that because Staten Island was “guilty of a breach of the General Association and of an open contempt of the authority of this Congress, as effectually representing a majority of the inhabitants of this Colony,” stronger measures needed to be taken against the Island. As a result, it ordered the Richmond County Committee of Safety to make “a list of the names of those who oppose” participation in the Congress so that “the delinquents against the common cause . . . may be ascertained.” This list was to be forwarded to Congress within fifteen days or the entire Island risked being labeled delinquent. Those deemed to be delinquents were to be “entirely put out of the protection of this Congress” and their names “printed and dispersed in handbills and inserted in all the newspapers of the Colony.” It was then decided that: “all friendly and commercial intercourse between the said persons so put respectively out of the protection of this Congress, and the other inhabitants of this Colony, ought to be, and the same, as far as can be effected by the recommendation of

⁷⁰ Richmond County Committee to Nathaniel Woodhull, President of the New York Provincial Congress, 15 December 1775, *Ibid*, 4: 428.

this Congress, hereby is and shall continue to be totally *interdicted*, until further orders of this Congress, or the Committee of Publick Safety.”⁷¹

In late December 1775, the Provincial Congress wrote to New York’s Continental congressmen asking them to bring the Loyalist problem facing New York City to Congress’s attention. The New York Provincial Congress recognized the importance of controlling the Loyalists in and around the city but because British warships were lying off the coast of lower Manhattan, it believed more aggressive measures against the area’s Loyalists would bring “a firing upon the City,” or prompt the build up of a naval blockade that would deny “the inhabitants of this City . . . the necessaries of life.” Although the prevailing opinion was that all Loyalist activities “ought, . . . to be quelled” because of their potential danger to the Whig cause, the immediate threat to the city posed by the British warships prevented the use of “any of the inhabitants of this Colony, and particularly of this City” for that purpose. The New York Provincial Congress declared that if the “Continental Congress shall rise without having made any determination on the above subject” it would empower its Committee of Safety to “write to the Committees of the neighbouring Colonies [New Jersey and Connecticut] respectively,” for assistance in this matter.⁷²

⁷¹ See *Am. Arch.*, IV, 4: 372, 434–435; *New-York Journal*, 28 December 1775. Staten Island was not the only area that the Provincial Congress was worried about. The Committee of Safety also used the threat of economic interdiction against Queens County. In Queens, residents voted against sending delegates to the Congress during the November elections. Although Queens was also a problem for New York’s Whigs, unlike Staten Island, it could best be categorized as neutral. According to Joseph S. Tiedemann, “the facts do not appear to sustain” the long held view that Queens was a Loyalist stronghold. Instead, the situation in Queens resulted from a complex combination of local factors: a large number of “politically unaligned farmers who saw little in 1775 that was attractive in either the Whig or Tory positions;” the religious neutrality of the county’s substantial Quaker population; and to the activities of a small group of “politically astute” Loyalists. See Tiedemann, “Response to Revolution: Queens County, New York, During the Era of the American Revolution,” chap. 3.

⁷² New York Provincial Congress to the New York Delegates, 21 December 1775, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 4: 435–436.

When the pivotal year 1776 began, Staten Island had not produced a list of its “delinquents.” On the morning of January 12, Christian Jacobson appeared before the Provincial Congress’s twelve-member Committee of Safety. Jacobson was a leader in the Moravian congregation, the owner of a large, prosperous farm in the New Dorp section of the Island, and chairman of the Richmond County Committee of Safety.⁷³ To the astonishment of some of the members of the New York Committee of Safety, he reported that “a majority of the Inhabitants of Richmond County were not averse, but friendly to the measures of the Congress.” Following Jacobson’s testimony, committeeman Abraham Brasher of New York City described a chance meeting he had had with Richard Lawrence, a former Provincial congressman from the Island, who told him that Staten Islanders “would very speedily elect Deputies to represent them in Provincial Congress.” Brasher, therefore, thought it best that Lawrence convey this information to the New York Committee of Safety in person.⁷⁴

On the afternoon of January 12, Lawrence testified before the New York Committee of Safety that the residents of Staten Island had a change of opinion and were now willing to hold an election for delegates.⁷⁵ What could have caused this sudden change by Staten Islanders? It is likely that economic coercion or the threat of it was what provoked Staten Islanders to submit to the Provincial Congress’s demands.

Nonetheless, the Committee of Safety remained cautious and announced that the information obtained from Jacobson and Lawrence would be turned over to the

⁷³ Anthon, ed., “Anthon’s Notes,” 87-89, 109; Bayles, *History of Richmond County*, 426.

⁷⁴ Proceedings of the New York Committee of Safety, 12 January 1776, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 4: 1040.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*

Continental Congress, which was in the process of investigating the situation. Taking a cautious approach toward Staten Island was a wise decision. Staten Islanders had a long history of evading the Association and of paying lip service to the resistance movement by joining it only when convenient for them to do so. Thus, because of the Island's questionable history, the New York Committee of Safety gave it until January 22 to hold an election for the Provincial Congress and to submit the names of all "delinquents," or face immediate economic sanctions.⁷⁶

In a letter received by the New York Committee of Safety on January 23, too late to prevent the economic sanctions from going into effect however, the Richmond County Committee Safety reported that on January 19 the freeholders were "convened . . . in order to elect two Members to represent this County [Richmond] in Provincial Congress; accordingly a poll was opened for that purpose *without any opposition*, at the close of which it appeared by a majority, that Messrs. Adrian Bancker and Richard Lawrence were duly elected to represent this County in Provincial Congress." The committeemen added that they hoped the choice of Bancker, who was the brother of Evert Bancker, a leading merchant from New York City and Provincial congressman, and Lawrence, "will be agreeable to the rest of that body."⁷⁷

The New York Committee of Safety quickly notified the Continental Congress of the election and asked "whether they may admit [the] Two Delegates from Staten Island

⁷⁶ Ibid

⁷⁷ Richmond County Committee of Correspondence to the New York Committee of Safety, 19 January 1776, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 4: 1069-1070. The members of the local committee who signed the letter were: George Barnes, Joseph Christopher, Daniel Corsen, Moses Dupuy, Christian Jacobson, David Latourette, Lambert Merrill, Peter Mersereau, Henry Perine, and John Tyson. Evert Bancker, Adrian's brother, served as a delegate to the Provincial Congress representing the city and county of New York.

chosen since the Interdict was laid on that Island.”⁷⁸ On February 8, 1776, Congress recommended that the New York Provincial Congress “take such measures” to admit the Staten Islanders and to revoke the economic sanctions on the Island based on whether or not “the said Deputies and major part of the inhabitants . . . shall subscribe [to] the association entered into by that Colony.”⁷⁹ Bancker and Lawrence reported that they had signed the General Association and that a majority of Staten Islanders had also done so.⁸⁰ However, Congress demanded that the two men provide evidence to substantiate their claim. Until then, they would be barred from taking their seats. “We . . . request your immediate attendance,” the New York Provincial Congress wrote to the Island’s congressmen-elect, “and that you bring with you such proofs of a majority of the inhabitants of your County having subscribed to the General Association as will enable you to take your seats.”⁸¹ The New York Provincial Congress was not going to allow the Island’s congressmen-elect to merely proclaim that Staten Islanders had conformed to the Whig cause. Bancker and Lawrence eventually provided Congress with the evidence that

⁷⁸ Excerpt from Richard Smith’s Diary, 5 February 1776, in *LODC*, 3: 204.

⁷⁹ New York Delegates to the New York Committee of Safety, 11 February 1776, in *LODC*, 3: 231; *Am. Arch.*, IV, 5: 264. See also Clute, *Annals of Staten Island*, 173-174. The Continental Congress declared that “the inhabitants of Richmond County, in the Colony of New York, having refused to send Deputies to represent them in Provincial Convention, and otherwise manifested their enmity and opposition to the system and measures adopted for preserving the liberties of America; and as a just punishment for their inimical conduct, the inhabitants of that Colony having been prohibited by the Convention from all intercourse and dealings with the inhabitants of the said county did afterwards, without any opposition, elect Deputies to represent them in Provincial Convention; but as the proceedings against them had been submitted to the consideration of Congress, it was apprehended Deputies would not be received until the sense of Congress should be communicated.”

⁸⁰ Adrian Bancker and Richard Lawrence to Robert Benson, 17 February 1776, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 5: 283. See also the Secretaries of the New York Provincial Congress to Adrian Bancker and Richard Lawrence, 19 February 1776, *Amer. Arch.*, IV, 5: 283-284. The delegates assured the New York Provincial Congress that seven-eighths of Staten Island’s residents had also signed the General Association.

⁸¹ The New York Provincial Congress to Adrian Bancker and Richard Lawrence, 19 February 1776, *Ibid.*, 283-284.

it had requested. By late February, the two men took their seats in Congress and began to actively participate in its sessions.⁸²

If left on their own, it is very likely that the Staten Islanders would never have held an election. The decision by the Island's residents to finally send delegates to the new Provincial Congress was a purely practical one based on the threat of economic coercion and should not be taken as a reflection of any sudden upsurge of radicalism on Staten Island. For evidence that a majority of Staten Islanders continued to hold Loyalist sympathies we need to look no further than the results of the New York Assembly elections held in February 1776 and to the Whigs' military preparations for the defense of New York City.

In early January, still aboard the British merchant ship *Duchess of Gordon* in New York harbor, Governor Tryon issued an order dissolving the New York Assembly and calling on the counties to elect representatives to a new Assembly, which was to convene in mid-February.⁸³ The exiled governor and other New York Loyalists were determined to counter the actions of the Provincial Congress by reviving the Assembly and placing the colony's affairs in its hands. "I have much reason to suspect that the tories have it in contemplation to steal a march upon us, if they can, in respect of a New Assembly," wrote Alexander Hamilton to John Jay in December 1775. He added:

The motives for it, at this time, are probably these: It is hoped the attention of the people being engaged with their new institutions, Congresses, Committees and the like; they will think the assembly of little importance, and will not exert themselves as they ought to do, whereby the tories may have an opportunity to elect their own creatures. Or at least it is expected the people may be thrown into divisions and ferments, injurious to present

⁸² McMillen, "Green, and Red, and a Little Blue," 24.

⁸³ *Am. Arch.*, IV, 4: 542, 1020.

measures. The Tories will be no doubt very artful and intriguing, and it behooves us to be very vigilant and cautious.⁸⁴

According to Tryon's biographer Paul David Nelson, the exiled governor genuinely believed "the voters would elect a majority of persons loyal to the empire and that the entire process of government disintegration could be reversed."⁸⁵ But as it turned out, he grossly underestimated the strength of New York's Whigs.

On Election Day, the Whigs rallied their supporters and won twenty-four of twenty-eight seats. Of the four Loyalists elected, two, Christopher Billopp and Benjamin Seaman, were from Staten Island.⁸⁶ "Only Richmond, of all the counties, chose, indeed dared to choose," wrote local historian Harlow McMillen, "loyalist representatives and none of, the other persuasion."⁸⁷ Faced with the embarrassing prospect that the supporters of colonial resistance would dominate the new Assembly, Tryon prorogued it for a month after its first meeting on February 14; however, this temporary measure ultimately became permanent, and the Assembly never met again.⁸⁸

By the end of 1775, the British were eager to strike a blow against New England. But launching a military operation from Boston into the New England countryside was too risky since the British had little or no support outside of the city. British military strategists thus decided on placing a stranglehold on the New Englanders by marching an

⁸⁴ Alexander Hamilton to John Jay, 31 December 1775, in Harold C. Syrett, ed., *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*. 27 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961-1987), 1: 179.

⁸⁵ Paul David Nelson, *William Tryon and the Course of Empire: A Life in British Imperial Service* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 139.

⁸⁶ Mason, *The Road to Independence*, 130, 131n.78. John Alsop of New York City and Oliver De Lancey of Westchester were the other Loyalists elected to the Assembly.

⁸⁷ McMillen, "Green, and Red, and a Little Blue," 23.

⁸⁸ Nelson, *William Tryon and the Course of Empire*, 139; Becker, *The History of Political Parties in the Province of New York*, 242-243; Mason, *The Road to Independence*, 131-133.

army into northern New York from Canada and by capturing New York City where it was believed British naval superiority could control the Hudson River Valley and logistical and military assistance could be easily obtained, if needed, from the Loyalists in the surrounding areas. As historian Joseph S. Tiedemann points out, the British military and its supporters recognized that “New York’s significance” lay with its “central location . . . physically splitting the thirteen colonies in half, and [with] the province’s convenient overland route to Canada.” By controlling New York City and the Hudson River Valley, the British could prevent “the southern colonies from aiding New England.”⁸⁹ The New Jersey Loyalist Cortlandt Skinner “confirmed former Opinions, that, if we keep Possession of New York and Hudson’s River, we shall effectively divide the Colonies, and prevent them from succoring each other,” Ambrose Serle noted in his journal.⁹⁰ If successful, the British high command believed this operation could effectively isolate New England and bring a quick end to the rebellion.

In order to successfully defend New York, the local Whigs had to develop a plan to control the Loyalists in and around the city. One area of primary concern was Staten Island. The Island’s strategic location at the entrance to New York harbor and the Loyalist sympathies displayed by its residents made it a potential problem for Whig defenders. From February to June 1776, Continental troops and New Jersey Whig militia units were sent to guard the Island’s coast, fortify its heights, remove livestock, confiscate weapons, and arrest known or suspected Loyalists. These measures added to the lingering resentment Staten Islanders felt towards the Whigs’ use of economic coercion to force them to comply with the resistance movement. Thus, the Whigs were

⁸⁹ Tiedemann, *Reluctant Revolutionaries*, 210.

⁹⁰ Tatum, ed., *The Military Journal of Ambrose Serle*, 48.

viewed by the residents of Staten Island not as the promoters of the cause of liberty, but of oppression.

For Staten Islanders who wished to maintain their community's social order and material prosperity, joining the Whigs was an option few felt was worth taking. The Island's residents looked on with fear and trepidation as public disorder, outbursts of violence, and the destruction of property associated with colonial resistance seemed to be spreading throughout the colonies. They tried their best to avoid such a situation in their own community and to work for a peaceful resolution to the growing imperial crisis. Furthermore, the actions taken by the Continental and Provincial Congresses and by local Whig committees in New York and New Jersey convinced Staten Islanders that it was not the British but the Whigs who posed the greatest threat to their community's social stability and material prosperity and to their individual liberties. The Continental Association and the strict enforcement of its provisions; the New York Provincial Congress's attempts to shutdown local trade with the British ships in New York harbor and its growing belligerent attitude; the use of economic coercion to force compliance to the Whig cause; and the Continental Congress's eventual military intervention against Staten Island embittered many residents and solidified their support for the Crown.

CHAPTER FOUR

“As the Tempest Approaches”: Staten Island and the Whig Defense of New York City and Eastern New Jersey

As the year 1776 opened, Continental forces under the command of General George Washington had positioned themselves on the heights overlooking Boston, effectively besieging the city and the ten thousand British troops within it. Yet, even as Washington directed the military operations at Boston, his thoughts were on New York City. Persistent rumors that the British were planning to make New York City their next target of operations preoccupied Washington and his staff. Given its location at the entrance to New York harbor and its proximity to Long Island and to the New Jersey coastline, Staten Island possessed a valuable strategic position. Indeed, the Island could very well be considered the key to the entire region surrounding the city. Any successful Whig plan for the defense of New York City, therefore, had to include securing Staten Island. The Whigs used Continental regulars, New Jersey militia, and various laws designed to secure Staten Island, remove its livestock, disarm its residents, and control its Loyalists. However, the presence of Whig occupying forces on Staten Island heightened animosities toward the colonial resistance movement. As a result, many Staten Islanders eagerly awaited the arrival of the British army, which they did not view as the menacing tool of a tyrannical King and corrupt ministry but as an army of liberation.

By January 1776, the frequency of reports warning that the British army intended to abandon Boston when the weather became warmer alarmed Washington and his subordinates. The Continental army's Commander-in-Chief had been contemplating for

several months the possibility of New York City becoming the next British objective. After all, it made perfect strategic sense. The city was once the headquarters of the British army in North America; it was strategically located at the mouth of the Hudson River; its harbor was relatively clear of ice during the winter months; and unlike Boston or Philadelphia, large pockets of Loyalist support dominated New York City's countryside.

While Boston may have been the ideological soul of the colonial resistance movement, New York City was its strategic heart. Whig military leaders understood that if the British were to capture and secure New York City and retain control of the St. Lawrence River Valley, their powerful navy would make it possible to move troops freely up and down the Lake Champlain-Hudson River corridor. This maneuver could effectively drive a wedge between the colonies and squeeze New England into submission.

Anticipating a British attack on New York City, Washington wrote to John Hancock, the president of the Continental Congress, for advice. On January 4, he informed Hancock and Congress that he was receiving daily reports of a British fleet preparing to sail from Boston and asked:

Whether It would not be consistent with prudence, to have some of the Jersey Troops thrown into New York, to prevent an evil, which may be almost irremediable, should It happen: I mean the landing of [British] Troops at that place, or upon Long Island near it.¹

However, confronted with the possibility of an immediate British descent on New York, Washington did not wait for Congress's reply. Instead, he ordered Major General

¹ General George Washington to John Hancock, 4 January 1776, *GWPRWS*, 3: 19-20.

Charles Lee, his most experienced staff officer, to go to the city to oversee its defenses, which were for the most part nonexistent.

Charles Lee was the son of a British colonel and the youngest of seven children. As a young adult, he received both a military and formal education. Lee began serving in his father's regiment in 1747, saw active duty during the French and Indian War and continued in military service after the war as a soldier of fortune in Russia, Poland, and Turkey. Educated in England, France, and Switzerland and fluent in several languages, Lee was considered the most intellectually accomplished officer on Washington's staff.² Yet he was sloppy in appearance and vulgar and crude in his behavior. Tall and bone-thin, this lifelong bachelor and avid dog lover was described by many of his contemporaries as a scholar and military genius who was prone to mood swings. The Congregationalist Reverend Jeremy Belknap of Boston, Massachusetts, described Lee as "a perfect original, a good scholar and soldier, and an odd genius; full of fire and passion, but little good manner, a great sloven, wretchedly profane, and a great admirer of dogs."³ A keen observer of human character, Abigail Adams matter-of-factly said of Lee: "The Elegance of his pen far exceeds that of his person."⁴

Despite his eccentricities, it was not surprising that Lee was chosen by Washington to plan New York City's defense. Even though he had not personally

² For discussions of Charles Lee's life and career see John R. Alden, *General Charles Lee: Traitor or Patriot?* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1951); John Shy, "Charles Lee: The Soldier as Radical" in George A. Billias, ed., *George Washington's Generals* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1967), 22-53.

³ Quoted in Richard M. Ketchum, *The Winter Soldiers* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1973), 200.

⁴ Abigail Adams to John Adams, 16 July 1775, in L. H. Butterfield, Marc Friedlaender, Mary-Jo Kline, eds., *The Book of Abigail and John: Selected Letters of the Adams Family, 1762-1784* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 100.

inspected the city, Lee already reached the same conclusion as Washington regarding New York's weak defensive condition. As early as December 1775, he recommended to the Continental Congress that because of New York's strategic location it was important for the city to be "strongly garrisoned."⁵ Yet, Congress did nothing to remedy the situation. On January 3, 1776, Lee wrote to Robert Morris, a Continental congressman from Pennsylvania, admonishing Congress's failure to properly address New York's defense. "The circumstances of New York render me uneasy almost to distraction," he told Morris,

For Heaven's sake why have you [Congress] not fortify'd and garrison'd that City with a strong force from Connecticut, Jersey and Pennsylvania? For if the enemy once take the post there, we cannot paint to our imagination the magnitude of the calamities which must flow to the Continent from our amazing negligence on this article – No time, not a single instant is to be lost. For the love of God and mankind inculcate the necessity of the measure, urge and press the immediate execution.⁶

Lee could not comprehend Congress's obstinacy in dealing with the problem of securing New York City. Thus, he decided to formulate a plan of his own, which he immediately brought to Washington's attention.

In a letter to Washington dated January 5, 1776, Lee pointed out that if the defense of New York was left up to Congress, the city and the war for that matter were as good as lost. He then outlined for Washington his plan for New York City's defense. Lee proposed to occupy the city and its surrounding countryside, erect fortifications at strategic locations in its immediate vicinity, and to arrest, disarm, and banish staunch Loyalists. In order to effectively carry out this plan, Lee recommended that Washington

⁵ Major General Charles Lee to Richard Henry Lee, 12 December 1775, *The Lee Papers*, 3 vols. (New York: New York Historical Society Collections, 1871), 1: 229.

⁶ Major General Charles Lee to Robert Morris, 3 January 1776, *Ibid*, 233.

give him the authority to recruit “a body of volunteers” from Connecticut which, he explained, could work with “the Jersey Regiment under the Command of Lord Stirling [William Alexander], now at Elizabethtown” to “effect the security of New York, and the expulsion or suppression” of the Loyalists in the region. To ease any doubts Washington may have had concerning his power to approve and implement such a plan, Lee reassured him “Congress have given you authority to take any step . . . which you shall think necessary for the public service, but if they have not given you expressly and literally authority with respect to the city of New York, I am confident that any measure you think right to plan and put in execution will be approved of.”⁷

Although Washington saw the merits of Lee’s proposal, he wanted to ascertain Congress’s opinion of any possible decision on his part to order Continental troops to New York City. By coincidence, John Adams, a delegate to Congress, was in Watertown, Massachusetts. Washington wasted no time in contacting Adams. On the same day that he received Lee’s proposal, Washington took the opportunity to write to Adams asking his opinion on the subject.⁸ Placing his personal interest aside Adams, a native son of Massachusetts, promptly replied on January 6 that he believed that the defense of New York was “expedient . . . and even necessary to be done by Some Authority or other.” He continued:

That it is within the Limits of your Excellencys Command, is in my Mind, perfectly clear. Your Commission constitutes you Commander “of all the Forces now raised or to be raised, . . . and are vested with full Power and Authority to act as you shall think for the good and well fare of the service

⁷ Major General Charles Lee to General George Washington, 5 January 1776, *Ibid*, 234-236.

⁸ Alden, *General Charles Lee*, 96.

. . . That [New] York is within your Command as much as the Massachusetts cannot bear a Question.⁹

Adams concluded by giving his endorsement to Lee's plan. With Adams's full support, Washington ordered Lee to New York City.¹⁰

Lee started out from Boston on January 8 and reached New Haven, Connecticut by the middle of January. At New Haven he found two militia regiments, a total of 1,500 men, courtesy of Connecticut's Governor Jonathan Trumbull, awaiting him.¹¹ News of Lee's impending arrival caused alarm in New York City. On January 21, the New York Committee of Safety, aware of the danger to the city posed by two large British warships – the HMS *Asia* and the HMS *Phoenix* – moored in the harbor, wrote to Lee that they were doing all in their power to deal with the present situation. They warned the general that his arrival “with a considerable body of forces” would very likely give the appearance of an invasion, thus causing panic and provoking a bombardment of the city. The New York Committee of Safety requested that Lee remain with his forces in Connecticut and await their further instructions.¹²

Lee responded by reassuring the New Yorkers that he did not seek to provoke “active Hostilities against the Men of War” anchored in the harbor. “The motive of . . . General Washington for [sending] me,” Lee informed the New York Committee of

⁹ John Adams to General George Washington, 6 January 1776, *GWPRWS*, 3: 36-38.

¹⁰ See Instructions to Major General Charles Lee from General George Washington, 8 January 1776, *Ibid.*, 53-54. On January 3, however, unbeknownst to Washington, Lee, and Adams, the Continental Congress moved to address New York City's defense when it ordered Colonel Nathaniel Heard of Woodbridge, New Jersey, to march five hundred men to Queens County in western Long Island and arrest suspected Loyalists there.

¹¹ Alden, *General Charles Lee*, 96-97.

¹² New York Committee of Safety to Major General Charles Lee, 21 January 1776, *The Lee Papers*, 1: 242-244.

Safety, “was solely to prevent the enemy from taking post in your City, or lodging themselves in Long Island, which we have the greatest reason to think is their design.”¹³

Delayed at Stamford, Connecticut, because of a recurring case of gout, Lee finally set out for New York City in late January. Before he left, Lee received news from Washington that a British fleet under the command of General Sir Henry Clinton had sailed from Boston “upon some expedition – some say he has between 4 & 500 men – others, part of Two Regiments.” Washington guessed that the fleet’s “destination must be South of this [Boston], & very probably for New York.”¹⁴

On February 4, Lee arrived in New York with a small number of Connecticut troops and began to prepare the city’s defenses. However, he immediately found himself in the middle of a tense situation. The cause for concern was the appearance off Sandy Hook, New Jersey, of the 20-gun frigate HMS *Mercury*, with General Clinton on board. The *Mercury* was accompanied by two transports carrying British troops. This was the British fleet that Washington had warned Lee had sailed from Boston. As the ships entered New York harbor, panic ensued. Residents of the city, fearing the commencement of hostilities, scrambled to find a way out of New York. “This City is in Terror and Confusion,” wrote Governor Tryon to William Legge, Lord Dartmouth.¹⁵ “The alarm and confusion in this city, . . . was truly distressing,” commented a New York resident, “occasioned chiefly by the unexpected arrival of General Clinton, in the

¹³ Major General Charles Lee to the New York Committee of Safety, 23 January 1776, *Ibid*, 256-258.

¹⁴ General George Washington to Major General Charles Lee, 23 January 1776, *GWPRWS*, 3: 171. This small British fleet, which sailed from Boston on January 20, was headed to the Carolinas.

¹⁵ Governor William Tryon to the Earl of Dartmouth, 8 February 1776, *NYCD*, 8: 667.

Mercury frigate, and two other vessels, a ship with troops and a brig from Boston.”¹⁶

Clinton, however, announced that he had come to New York not to attack the city, but to pay a visit to his friend Governor Tryon who was still on board the *Duchess of Gordon* where he had taken refuge in October 1775. He also made it clear that he was ordered by General Sir William Howe to proceed to the Carolinas.¹⁷

Although Clinton’s announcement somewhat eased tensions in New York, Whig military and political leaders were alert to the possibility that Clinton was deceiving them. “I shou’d apprise You that General Clinton arriv’d almost at the same instant with myself,” Lee wrote to Washington on February 5, “he says it is merely a visit to his Friend Tryon – if it is really so it is the most whimsical piece of civility I ever heard of.”¹⁸ Clinton’s arrival in New York was very likely a strategic maneuver by the British high command designed to reconnoiter the area, obtain intelligence, and measure the strength of the city’s defenses. Considerable information, as well as some personnel and supplies, were exchanged between the *Mercury* and the warships already in the harbor. Moreover, Clinton, who had practically grown up in New York while his father Admiral George Clinton served as governor of the province from 1743 to 1753, held audiences

¹⁶ See *Am. Arch.*, IV, 4: 1153.

¹⁷ Alden, *General Charles Lee*, 98. See also Bruce Bliven, Jr., *Under the Guns: New York, 1775 – 1776* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1972), 122; Major General Charles Lee to Governor Jonathan Trumbull, 7 February 1776, *The Lee Papers*, 1: 277; General Sir William Howe to the Earl of Dartmouth, 16 January 1776, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 4: 700. “Instructions . . . were delivered to me by Sir William Howe on the 6th of January,” remembered Clinton after the war, “and as soon as the ships could be got ready I embarked in the *Mercury*, frigate, and sailed from Boston on the 20th, in company with two transports and a store-ship having on board the light companies of the Fourth and Forty-fourth Regiments and a few officers for a corps intended to be raised among the Highland emigrants in North Carolina. It had been part of my instructions to call at the different ports in my way to the southward, that I might have an opportunity of picking up pilots, consulting governors and other officers of government, and collecting intelligence.” See Sir Henry Clinton, *The American Rebellion: Sir Henry Clinton’s Narrative of His Campaigns, 1775 – 1782*. Edited by William B. Willcox. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1954), 24.

¹⁸ Major General Charles Lee to General George Washington, 5 February 1776, *The Lee Papers*, 1: 271.

with local Loyalists who suddenly gained a measure of confidence with the appearance of the general and his forces in the area.¹⁹

Lee and the local Whig leadership were now confronted with a serious situation. The geography of New York coupled with a mostly loyalist countryside would prove far more burdensome for the Whigs than the situation they faced around Boston. New York's numerous islands and waterways favored the British and their powerful navy. Without a navy of their own to speak of, Whig leaders decided to construct defensive fortifications not only in New York itself but also at several key water approaches to the city such as Brooklyn Heights in western Long Island, Paulus Hook (now Jersey City) in New Jersey, and at Horn's Hook in northeastern Manhattan, which overlooks the treacherous stretch of water known as Hell Gate. "Our Regiment is now Stationed on Long Island," wrote Colonel William Douglas of the Sixth Regiment of Connecticut Continentals, "we shall soon begin a fortification on this side that will Command the East River and the town [New York City]. The troops in the City are fortifying in one of the Streets that will Comand the old fort if the enemy Should git Possession of it, and are pulling Down the Rear of the fort . . . we have [also] begun another fort near Hell Gate."²⁰ It was estimated that five thousand troops would be needed in order for this plan to be effective. The New York Committee of Safety immediately called out three regiments of militia, while Lee secured a regiment from Connecticut and ordered Colonel William Alexander, who was known to his contemporaries as Lord Stirling because of his

¹⁹ Bliven, Jr., *Under the Guns*, 122. Clinton also served in the New York militia.

²⁰ Colonel William Douglas to Hannah Douglas, no date, in "Letters Written During the Revolutionary War by Colonel William Douglas to His Wife Covering the Period July 19, 1775, to December 5, 1776" *New York Historical Society Quarterly* 13 (1929), 37.

claim to a disputed Scottish peerage, to march with the First Battalion of New Jersey Continentals from Elizabethtown to New York.²¹

The increased activity of the British ships in New York harbor seemed to indicate to the Whigs that an invasion of the city was imminent. While defensive preparations were slowly underway on Long Island, Paulus Hook, and on Manhattan, the Whigs left Staten Island exposed to a possible British landing. This oversight could prove costly in the future, since it was very likely that in the event of an attack on New York City, the British would take advantage of the strong Loyalist views held by many Staten Islanders to procure the provisions – wood, fresh drinking water, produce, and livestock – needed to sustain an invading army. The New York Committee of Safety quickly brought this oversight to Lee’s attention.

On February 10, the New York Committee of Safety sent two of its members, Nathaniel Woodhull of Suffolk County, who was a brigadier general in the New York militia, and the lawyer and jurist John Sloss Hobart, also of Suffolk County, to apprise Lee of the situation concerning Staten Island and its lack of defensive fortifications, especially at the Narrows. As one Continental officer remarked: “It will be in vain for us to expect to keep the Shipping [British warships] out of North River [Hudson River] unless we can fortify at the narrows.”²² Following their meeting with the general, the two men reported to the Committee that Lee was more concerned with securing the Island’s

²¹ Colonel William Alexander, Lord Stirling to Major General Charles Lee, 4 February 1776, *The Lee Papers*, 271; Major General Charles Lee to General George Washington, 5 February 1776, *The Lee Papers*, 1: 272. See also Alan Valentine, *Lord Stirling* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 169-170. Hell Gate is a stretch of water about one and a half miles wide where powerful currents race into the East River from the Long Island Sound. Compounding the difficulties of navigating the Hell Gate were its riptides, undercurrents, whirlpools, and rock-strewn bottom.

²² Colonel William Douglas to Hannah Douglas, no date, “Letters Written During the Revolutionary War,” 37. The “North River” refers to the Hudson River, which empties into the Upper New York Bay.

livestock than with fortifying its heights, which overlooked the entrance to New York harbor. Although he thought, “the stock [livestock] on Staten-Island ought to be protected,” Lee couldn’t decide between “driving them [livestock] off, or placing a guard there.” The general decided to leave the issue up to the Committee but stressed that he would “give any aid in his power, to carry into execution any measure [the Committee] thought necessary.”²³

After a lengthy deliberation in which the New York Committee of Safety considered “the state of Staten-Island and the report of Brigadier General Woodhull and Mr. Hobart,” it was decided “that the most prudent step” was to ask New Jersey for help in securing the Island’s livestock in the likelihood of a British landing.²⁴ In a letter to the Provincial Congress of New Jersey dated February 10, the New York Committee of Safety wrote that after consulting with Major General Lee, “we are fully convinced that the live-stock on Staten-Island should be immediately taken care of.” Moreover, the Committee stressed that although Clinton had publicly claimed he was on a visit to Governor Tryon, the fact that the general arrived with a number of “troops, which we have good reason to believe are only a part of the 600 that embarked with him at Boston, renders it highly probable that some lodgment of troops was intended to be made in or near this city [New York].” Thus, since no troops could be spared from the entrenchments on Manhattan and Long Island, the New York Committee of Safety asked their neighbors across the Hudson in New Jersey to order Colonel Nathaniel Heard of Woodbridge and his regiment of New Jersey militia “to secure the live-stock of . . .

²³ New York Committee of Safety Proceedings, 10 February 1776, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 4: 1120.

²⁴ *Ibid*

[Staten] Island from depredation . . . by guarding it on the Island till we have opportunity to determine on the expediency of removing it.”²⁵

The situation became even more urgent when, on February 11, Colonel Abraham Lott of the New York militia reported to the Committee: “the *Mercury*, ship of war, with two transports under her convoy, are . . . anchored near Staten Island.” He added that information obtained from “a person near Kill van Kull” led him to conclude, “that the ship of war and transports will commit depredations on the stock there.”²⁶ The New York Whigs asked the Committee of Observation in Elizabethtown, New Jersey, for assistance in securing the Island’s livestock. Although they had asked the Provincial Congress of New Jersey to send Colonel Heard’s regiment to Staten Island, the New Yorkers feared that he “will come too late to prevent any attempt that may be made to take off the stock.” Therefore, they pleaded with the Elizabethtown Committee “to dispatch a part of your Militia to such parts of the Island where it is most likely any attempts of that kind may be made, to guard the Island until the said vessels are gone off, or Colonel Heard can arrive to their relief.”²⁷

The New Jersey Whig government, however, quickly answered the New Yorkers’ call for assistance. It “cheerfully” dispatched “Colonel Heard with a detachment of 700

²⁵ New York Committee of Safety to the Provincial Congress of New Jersey, 10 February 1776, *Ibid*, 1120-1121.

²⁶ Testimony of Colonel Abraham Lott before the New York Committee of Safety, *NDAR*, 3: 1215.

²⁷ New York Committee of Safety to the Elizabeth Town Committee of Observation, 11 February 1776, *Am. Arch.*, 4: 1123; *New-York Gazette and Weekly Mercury*, 19 February 1776. It was estimated that Clinton’s fleet, which had moored close to the shore near Staten Island’s Watering Place, contained two hundred Marines.

men . . . to march immediately to Staten-Island, to secure it from depredators.”²⁸ Heard was also given specific orders “to prevent the enemy from landing on said Island, and carrying off livestock and provisions.”²⁹

Nathaniel Heard was the ideal person to carry out such a mission. He and his men had just returned from a successful expedition into Queens County where they had disarmed and arrested several suspected Loyalists.³⁰ But because of political wrangling over the fate of his prisoners, Heard’s arrival on Staten Island was delayed for a few days. Meanwhile, Brigadier General William Livingston quickly mobilized three hundred members of the New Jersey militia stationed at Elizabethtown and dispatched them to the Island in order to protect the livestock there and gather intelligence.³¹

On February 12, the unsuspecting residents of Staten Island awoke to the sight of several detachments of Livingston’s New Jersey militia patrolling their shoreline and roadways. Heard arrived four days later and began to deploy his troops throughout the Island, placing guards at several key intersections and ferry crossings. However, before he could finish the deployment Heard was informed that the *Mercury* and the two transports had weighed anchor, sailed through the Narrows, and cleared Sandy Hook.³²

²⁸ Provincial Congress of New Jersey to Pierre Van Cortlandt, 12 February 1776, *Am. Arch.*, 5: 263. Colonel Heard led “a detachment of volunteers, consisting of 300 of the militia of the county of Middlesex, 300 of the militia of the county of Essex, and 100 of the militia of the county of Somerset.” *Extracts From the Journal of Proceedings of the Provincial Congress of New Jersey, 1775-1776* (Woodbury, NJ: Joseph Sailor, Printer, 1835), 163-164 (herein cited as *PCNJ*).

²⁹ *PCNJ*, 163.

³⁰ See Tiedemann, “Response to Revolution,” 121-124.

³¹ *New-York Gazette*, 19 February 1776; Reverend Edwin F. Hatfield, *History of Elizabeth, New Jersey: Including the Early History of Union County* (New York: Carlton and Lanahan, 1868), 427.

³² Bliven, Jr., *Under the Guns*, 148. See also *New-York Gazette and Weekly Mercury*, 19 February 1776.

The danger of a British landing on Staten Island had, for the moment, dissipated. Yet, the Island's vulnerability to a British landing and the Loyalist leanings of several prominent residents remained persistent problems that needed to be addressed.

Added to this was the reaction of ordinary residents. Staten Islanders resented the presence of New Jersey troops on their farmlands, beaches, hilltops, and roadways. This situation was worsened by the fact that Colonel Heard commanded the operation. It is very likely that Staten Islanders had heard the complaints of abuse and disorderly conduct against the colonel and his troops emanating from Queens County and feared that the same fate awaited them.³³ Moreover, Staten Islanders disliked the use of New Jersey troops to secure the Island. They viewed the New York Provincial Congress's decision to rely on militia from a neighboring colony as a sign of disrespect. The Island's residents were also outraged that the Provincial Congress had never informed them of its plans.

On February 17, Staten Island's Provincial congressmen-elect – Adrian Bancker and Richard Lawrence – rebuked the New York Provincial Congress for its handling of the Heard affair. “Colonel Heard’s coming on the Island with a large body of men, to call the people to account for their inimical conduct towards the resolves of Congress,” Bancker and Lawrence wrote, “will be rather a hurt than otherwise” to the “general cause,” which they claimed was “gaining ground” on Staten Island. The two men

³³ For a discussion of the reports of abuse and disorderly conduct associated with Colonel Nathaniel Heard's expedition to disarm the Loyalist residents of Queens County, New York, see Tiedemann, “Response to Revolution,” 123-124.

recommended that “the proceedings of the Jersey forces” be brought to an end, so as to “quiet the minds of the people.”³⁴

In its response, the New York Provincial Congress explained that the reason it had ordered the New Jersey troops to the Island was because “it was apprehended that General Clinton, on his departure, would attempt a landing on Staten Island, for the purpose of making depredations, and carrying off the stock for the use of the Ministerial Army and Navy.” It then added: “The inhabitants of Richmond County may rest assured that those troops from New-Jersey were intended for no other purpose whatsoever.”³⁵

Meanwhile, as Heard awaited further instructions from the New York Provincial Congress, he and his men were exposed to a barrage of insults and threats as well as numerous reports of actions taken by Staten Islanders aimed at undermining the Whig cause. Several Staten Islanders threatened to “kill any of the troops that should come . . . to disarm them,” Heard wrote to the New York Provincial Congress, while others exclaimed that they “have supplied the barges with live-stock.”³⁶

Disgusted by the Staten Islanders’ disregard for the Whig cause, the colonel decided to take matters into his own hands by arresting four suspected Loyalists – Minah Burger, Richard Conner, Isaac Decker, and Abraham Harris. Decker, a ferryman and innkeeper, was accused of supplying General Clinton’s transports, opposing the election of delegates to the Provincial Congress, speaking against the proceedings of the

³⁴ Adrian Bancker and Richard Lawrence to Robert Benson, 17 February 1776, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 5: 283.

³⁵ The New York Provincial Congress to Adrian Bancker and Richard Lawrence, 19 February 1776, *Am. Arch.*, 5: 283-284.

³⁶ Colonel Nathaniel Heard to the New York Provincial Congress, 16 February 1776, *Am. Arch.*, 4: 1163.

Continental and Provincial Congresses, and of ferrying Loyalist Cortlandt Skinner, the Attorney General of New Jersey and former Speaker of the New Jersey General Assembly, to the safety of the ship *Duchess of Gordon* moored in New York harbor, where he joined New York's Governor Tryon. The charges brought against Abraham Harris, who was a neighbor and close acquaintance of Isaac Decker and the Loyalist Alexander McDonald, stemmed from his publicly "drinking damnation to Independency, and for having said he enlisted thirty men in Egg-Harbour [New Jersey] for King and Country." Of the others, farmer-mason Minah Burger and the prominent Moravian and former Provincial congressman Richard Conner, the charges of Loyalism were vague.³⁷ These arrests were very likely orchestrated to send a message to Staten Islanders that their loyalist sympathies would no longer be tolerated. All four detainees were taken under guard to Elizabethtown, New Jersey, where they were turned over to Robert Ogden, the chairman of the Elizabethtown Committee of Observation, who promptly ordered them placed in the town's jail.³⁸

If the arrests were intended to intimidate the Island's residents, they had the opposite effect. Alexander McDonald, in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where he was recruiting for the Royal Highland Emigrants, believed that Heard's actions would serve to solidify

³⁷ Richmond County Committee to the New York Provincial Congress, 7 March 1776, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 5: 102-103. Later their Loyalism would become more evident. Isaac Decker served as captain of the Loyalist Staten Island Troop, a cavalry regiment; Abraham Harris was a close friend of Alexander McDonald and served under Richard Conner in the Third Company of Loyalist Christopher Billopp's Corp of Staten Island Militia. He may have been helping to recruit troops at Egg Harbor, New Jersey, for McDonald's Royal Highland Emigrants. In a letter to his wife, McDonald writes: "If A.H. could bring me one hundred Clever Loyal Subjects I would provide for him handsomely but if he cannot join me Let him be looking and Ingeaging as many as he Can." See Captain Alexander McDonald to Susannah McDonald, March 28, 1776, *The Letter-Book of Captain Alexander McDonald*, 261. Minah Burger joined the others as a signer of the Loyalist Oath administered to the Island's residents by Governor Tryon on July 8, 1776.

³⁸ Robert Ogden to the New York Provincial Congress, 22 February 1776, *Ibid.*, 309. In mid-February 1776, Robert Ogden replaced Jonathan Hampton as the chairman of the Elizabeth Town Committee of Observation. Stephen Crane succeeded Ogden to that post in March.

the Loyalist sentiments of his fellow Staten Islanders and persuade those who were leaning toward neutrality to defend the Crown. "I am happy to hear the people of the Jerseys, . . . are forcing the people of . . . Staten island to swear to abide by the Laws of the Congress, or to give up their Arms, and be made prisoners," McDonald wrote to his wife Susannah. "This I hope will Serve to open the peoples Eyes," he continued, "to Shew them what Slaves they will be, if ever they had the misfortune, to come under the Yoke of such tyrants."³⁹

When news of the arrests reached the New York Provincial Congress, a protest was lodged with the Elizabethtown Committee of Observation. "Complaint has been made to us," wrote the Provincial Congress,

That Isaac Decker, Abraham Harris, and Minne [Minah] Burger, inhabitants of Richmond County, are confined in jail under the direction of your Committee, . . . and that Richard Conner, Esq., is bound under a penalty to appear before your Committee. We know not by whose directions they were apprehended.

The Provincial Congress pointed out that in New York, "all persons charged with any conduct inimical to the United Colonies, or transgressing any resolves, rules, or regulations of the Continental or Provincial Congress" were to be remanded to "the County Committee of the County in which such delinquents reside." The New Yorkers asked Ogden to turn over the Staten Islanders and any evidence he had obtained against them to the Richmond County Committee of Safety, under whose jurisdiction the men were to be tried.⁴⁰

³⁹ Captain Alexander McDonald to Susannah McDonald, 22 February 1776, *Letter-Book of Captain Alexander McDonald*, 250.

⁴⁰ The New York Provincial Congress to the Committee of Elizabeth Town, 21 February 1776, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 5: 293.

Ogden promptly remanded the four men to the custody of the Richmond County Committee of Safety, which scheduled the men to be tried on March 7. The trial, however, was a farce. For the most part, the witnesses called to testify against the accused were family, friends, and neighbors who either failed to show up when called to come forward or proclaimed their ignorance in the matter. It is highly probable that these witnesses shared the same Loyalist convictions as the men on trial. Moreover, witness intimidation may have also been at work. For example, Joshua Mersereau III, a Whig lawyer and jurist, was to testify against Isaac Decker, but when called upon to do so, he suddenly hesitated and “would not give his evidence.” On March 8, Hendrick Garrison, wrote to the New York Provincial Congress complaining about the “insufferable abuse” the local committee had allowed him to endure “while under examination” during the trial. He continued: “Cornelius Martino, Richard Conner, and John Burbank were suffered by the committee to abuse your complainant, . . . by calling him an informer, cut-throat, dirty rascal, dirty dog, liar, . . . [and] threatening what they would do if they had him out of doors.” In the end, the charges against Burger, Conner, Decker, and Harris were dropped and they were released.⁴¹

The events surrounding the trial of the four suspected Staten Island Loyalists are reminiscent of the failures of the British investigation into the attack and burning of the Royal revenue cutter *Gaspee* in June 1772 by some of the residents of Pawtucket, Rhode Island. In the *Gaspee* affair, British investigators were able to discover the identities of several of the culprits but because there was a lack of witnesses who came forward to

⁴¹ Richmond County Committee to the New York Provincial Congress, 7 March 1776, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 5: 102-103; Hendrick Garrison to the New York Provincial Congress, 8 March 1776, *Ibid.*, 136-137. Even though the charges were dropped against Abraham Harris, he was taken into custody by the local sheriff, Dr. Thomas Frost, for failure to pay off his debts. He was placed in the county jail at Richmondtown.

testify, the investigators could not establish their guilt. It is entirely possible that Heard believed a conviction of the four suspected Loyalists would be near impossible to achieve on Staten Island. He therefore sent them to Elizabethtown where they were more apt to be convicted if tried by that town's Whig-dominated Committee of Observation. Thus, the Whigs received a taste of their own tactics on Staten Island, as they were unable to mount a successful case against the four suspected Loyalists using local witnesses in front of the local committee of safety.

On February 19, Colonel Heard withdrew to Elizabethtown without further incident. However, a detachment of New Jersey militia remained on the Island. Under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Edward Thomas, these troops guarded the coast and kept watch for any signs that Clinton's departure was a feint.

Although Heard and most of the New Jersey militia were gone, they were not forgotten. Staten Islanders felt humiliated and deceived by the way the Provincial Congress, and especially Colonel Heard, had treated them. The colonel's "Tory hunt" further embittered and alienated Staten Islanders from the Whig cause. The strained relationship between the Island's residents and local Whigs worsened in the months ahead as the threat of a full-scale British invasion of New York City was moving closer to becoming reality.

Meanwhile, Major General Lee's plans to fortify the city were just beginning to take shape when, in late February, the Continental Congress ordered him to South Carolina. He was given command of the newly created Southern Department and was ordered to begin preparations for the defense of Charleston. On March 7, Lee departed New York City for his new command and was succeeded by William Alexander, Lord

Stirling, who had recently been promoted by the Continental Congress to the rank of brigadier general.⁴² While on his way to Charleston, Lee stopped at Philadelphia and met with Congress's Committee of War. He updated the committee on the situation in New York City and took the opportunity to warn them of the danger to Whig plans posed by the Loyalists on Staten Island.⁴³

On March 14, the Committee of War presented Lee's observations and recommendations to Congress. In what was known as *The Report on the Defense of New York*, the general advised Congress that "the defense and security of New York . . . will be fruitless unless some precautions are taken with respect to the professed enemies of American liberty" on Staten Island. "The bonds they have given [to the British] are too ridiculous to be mentioned," he continued, "the Association they have signed they consider as forced upon them and, consequently, null." For Lee, the solution was simple: "the inhabitants of Staten Island should, without loss of time, be disarmed, and their arms delivered to some regiment already raised, but unfurnished with muskets." If this did not solicit conformity from Staten Islanders, Lee suggested that it might be "prudent to secure their children as hostages."⁴⁴

Although the New York Provincial Congress eventually carried out a resolution passed by the Continental Congress that ordered the disarming of all suspected Loyalists,

⁴² In addition to giving Lee command of the Southern Department of the Continental Army, Congress turned over command of the Middle Department, which was responsible for Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania, to General Philip Schuyler. Brigadier Generals William Alexander, Lord Stirling, and William Thompson were appointed Schuyler's immediate subordinates. Alan Valentine, *Lord Stirling*, 169-170; Kwasny, *Washington's Partisan War*, 38. See also Don R. Gerlach, *Proud Patriot: Philip Schuyler and the War of Independence, 1775-1783* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 116; John Hancock to Colonel William Alexander, Lord Stirling, 1 March 1776, *LDCC*, 378.

⁴³ Alden, *General Charles Lee*, 110; McMillen, "Green, and Red, and a Little Blue," 24.

⁴⁴ See Report on the Defense of New York, March 1776, *The Lee Papers*, 1: 354-357.

Lee's recommendation to hold the children of Staten Island hostage as a guarantee against any further loyalist behavior by their parents was never acted upon.⁴⁵ This threat, however, was not an entirely new one to Staten Islanders. Apparently, it had been used against Alexander McDonald. In September 1775, McDonald wrote from Halifax, Nova Scotia, to Major John Small of the Royal Highland Emigrants that he had feared for the safety of his young wife Susannah and their four children on Staten Island. He expressed his desire to see Susannah leave the Island rather than have "the Rebels . . . Lay hold of her and the children, and keep them by way of hostages, 'till they can get me in their hands."⁴⁶ Although never acted upon, the suggestion of using the children of Staten Island as pawns in an attempt to control their parents' behavior was used by the Island's Loyalists as propaganda to convince many Staten Islanders that behind Whig cries for liberty lay, in the words of Alexander McDonald, "a Diabolical thirst for independence" by a group of "wicked Leaders, who never had the Least regard for the happiness, and Liberty, of the Country."⁴⁷

With Lee in South Carolina, immediate responsibility for the defense of New York City now rested in the hands of Brigadier General William Alexander, Lord Stirling, who despite a reputation for hard-drinking, was viewed by many of his fellow officers and members of the Continental Congress as an intelligent, energetic, and effective military commander. When confirming his promotion to brigadier general, John Hancock wrote to Stirling that Congress had been impressed by his "Zeal and Attachment

⁴⁵ Becker, *The History of Political Parties in the Province of New York*, 262; Mason, *The Road to Independence*, 144.

⁴⁶ Captain Alexander McDonald to Major John Small, 15 September 1775, *Letter-Book of Captain Alexander McDonald*, 212.

⁴⁷ Captain Alexander MacDonalld to Susannah McDonald, 22 February 1776, *Ibid*, 251.

to the American Cause.”⁴⁸ Writing to Washington on February 19, Lee stressed his pleasure in working with Stirling on the defense of New York. “Ld [Lord] Stirling is a great acquisition,” wrote the general, “he is a most zealous active and accurate Officer.”⁴⁹ In a letter to Hancock, Lee expressed full confidence in leaving Stirling in command of the city. “I am in very little pain about the execution of what we have concerted,” he wrote, “as it is committed to the hand of Lord Stirling, who shews much intelligence and activity.”⁵⁰ In contrast to the frequently contemptuous Lee, military officers and politicians found Stirling easy to work with.

William Alexander, a prestigious merchant and landowner, was born and raised in New York City. He inherited a considerable estate in Somerset County, New Jersey, from his father James, who served as the Surveyor General of East New Jersey. During the start of the French and Indian War, William Alexander served as the private secretary and military aide to Governor William Shirley of Massachusetts. In 1756, he traveled with Shirley to Britain where he defended the Massachusetts governor against charges of misappropriating military funds. While in Britain, Alexander also made a case to succeed to the disputed title of the Sixth Earl of Stirling. But the House of Lords disallowed his claim. After his return to America, Alexander, now affectionately known as Lord Stirling by his friends, settled on his sprawling lands in Basking Ridge, New Jersey, where he built a large mansion and lived a life of leisure, luxury, and free-spending that eventually brought him great financial difficulties. He married Sarah

⁴⁸ John Hancock to Colonel William Alexander, Lord Stirling, 1 March 1776, *LDCC*, 378.

⁴⁹ Major General Charles Lee to General George Washington, 19 February 1776, *The Lee Papers*, 1: 309.

⁵⁰ Major General Charles Lee to John Hancock, 5 March 1776, *Ibid*, 347-348.

Livingston, the sister of William Livingston and befriended New Jersey's Royal Governor William Franklin, who appointed him to the Governor's Council, where he served from 1758 to 1775. However, Alexander shocked Franklin and other Royal officials in New Jersey when he accepted a colonelcy in the Whig militia of Somerset County. According to historian Larry R. Gerlach, "it is not known whether Alexander's actions resulted from resentment for having been rebuffed in his claim to the title of Earl of Stirling, a desire to escape the financial quagmire in which he seemed inextricably mired, anger over the *de facto* censure recently administered by the [Governor's] Council for his dispute with business rival Samuel Ogden, or the need to satisfy his obsession for fame and prestige."⁵¹ On November 7, 1775, Alexander was commissioned a colonel in the First New Jersey Continental Regiment and won distinction in January 1776 when he led one hundred men from Elizabethtown in capturing the merchant ship *Blue Mountain Valley* off Sandy Hook, New Jersey, which was laden with supplies destined for the British in Boston. Alexander's achievements and dedication to the Whig cause led to his promotion to brigadier general in early March 1776.⁵²

Stirling did his best to continue the defensive preparations begun by Lee. But as he surveyed the situation in and around New York, the general realized that a couple of deficiencies had to be addressed in order for the city to be properly defended. First, a better working relationship between the military and local civil authorities had to be established in order to prevent Loyalist collaboration with the British. Like his

⁵¹ Gerlach, *Prologue to Independence*, 285-286.

⁵² For discussions of William Alexander, Lord Stirling's life and career see Mark M. Boatner III, ed., *Encyclopedia of the American Revolution* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1966), 16-17; Paul David Nelson, *William Alexander, Lord Stirling* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1987); Valentine, *Lord Stirling*; Lundin, *Cockpit of the Revolution*, 21-24, 87-90; Gerlach, *Prologue to Independence*, 285-286.

predecessor, Stirling believed that effective control of the Loyalists was pivotal to accomplishing a successful defense of New York City. The second problem to be addressed was the dearth of troops and skilled engineers, as well as a shortage of arms, artillery, and gunpowder, which had delayed the completion of New York's fortifications.⁵³

Much of the general's time was spent writing dispatches to Washington at Boston, to Major General Philip Schuyler, commander of the Middle Department, at Albany, to the Continental Congress, and to the Whig governments in neighboring Connecticut and New Jersey in which he described the grave situation facing the army at New York City and pleaded for reinforcements.⁵⁴ "It will require at least eight thousand men to put this place in any posture of defense by the month of May," Stirling wrote on March 10 to Schuyler.⁵⁵ Even though Congress agreed to send him the eight thousand troops he said he needed, Stirling knew that raising and equipping such a force would be difficult. In a letter to Washington, he gave an honest assessment of Congress's offer: "Congress . . . have resolved that Eight Thousand men be Ordered for the Defense of this Colony, But as I know the Incomplete State of most of the Regiments ordered for this Service . . . I am Sure that not one half of them will be here and fit for Service these four or five weeks."⁵⁶

⁵³ Valentine, *Lord Stirling*, 168; Alden, *General Charles Lee*, 102.

⁵⁴ Nelson, *William Alexander, Lord Stirling*, 73.

⁵⁵ Brigadier General William Alexander, Lord Stirling to Major General Philip Schuyler, 10 March 1776, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 5: 174.

⁵⁶ John Hancock to Brigadier General William Alexander, Lord Stirling, 15 March 1776, *LDCC*, 3: 378-379; Brigadier General William Alexander, Lord Stirling to General George Washington, 17 March 1776, *GWPRWS*, 3: 480.

In his attempt to enlist militia for the defense of New York City, Stirling ran into some difficulties with Whig political leaders in New York and New Jersey. After learning about Stirling's difficulties with the New York Whig government, John Hancock wrote: "As the Tempest approaches and threatens to burst upon Them, I flatter myself the Convention of New York will strain every Nerve in speedily raising and arming the four Battalions, ordered to be raised there for the Defence of their Colony."⁵⁷ As for New Jersey, its Whig political leaders were worried that if their militia were sent to New York it would leave the province defenseless in the event of a British invasion. Stirling answered their concerns by declaring that he and the Continental Congress were working to ensure New Jersey is properly defended.⁵⁸

While his military superiors and local Whig political officials mulled over Stirling's requests, the general moved forward with fortifying New York City and strengthening the defenses on Brooklyn Heights in King's County, Long Island. In order to solidify political support for his plans, Stirling informed Hancock that he had asked the New York Provincial Congress to appoint a committee to "confer with me on the necessary measures for the defense of this city."⁵⁹ To speed the work on the fortifications, he recommended to the committee that all able-bodied males, including slaves and indentured servants, living in the city and in King's County be called on to assist the troops. On March 14, the Provincial Congress unanimously approved the suggestion. Stirling thus ordered all the male inhabitants of New York City to promptly

⁵⁷ John Hancock to Brigadier General William Alexander, Lord Stirling, 15 March 1776, *LDCC*, 3: 379.

⁵⁸ Nelson, *William Alexander, Lord Stirling*, 76.

⁵⁹ Brigadier General William Alexander, Lord Stirling to John Hancock, 14 March 1776, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 5: 217.

report to him for fatigue duty. The Provincial Congress issued the same orders to the King's County Committee of Safety, where all able-bodied male inhabitants of the county were to report "with . . . their spades, pick-axes, and hoes" to Colonel Jonathan Ward of the Twenty-First Regiment of Massachusetts Continentals.⁶⁰

On March 20, Stirling wrote to Major General Schuyler that the troops were hard at work on the fortifications. "In these works," he happily stated, "we are assisted every day by about one thousand of the inhabitants of the city who have turned out, on this occasion, with great alacrity – the inhabitants and the Negroes taking their turn of duty regularly."⁶¹ According to Stirling's biographer Alan Valentine, by late March this joint effort "had almost completed the building of Fort Washington over-looking the Hudson, of Fort Lee on the New Jersey shore, or smaller works elsewhere in New York, and of a line of fortified entrenchments on Long Island between Wallabout and Gowanus Creek."⁶² Given the limited number of men and resources he had available to him, Stirling made remarkable progress toward fortifying New York City and its immediate surroundings.

Stirling found the Loyalist problem in and around New York City especially troublesome. He worked closely with Lee, while the general was still in command in the city, to control Loyalist activities and to overturn the New York Provincial Congress's long-standing policy of allowing limited contact and provisioning of the British ships in

⁶⁰ See *Ibid*, 217-219, 381-383.

⁶¹ Brigadier General William Alexander, Lord Stirling to Major General Philip Schuyler, 20 March 1776, *Ibid*, 436.

⁶² Valentine, *Lord Stirling*, 173.

New York harbor.⁶³ Both men rightfully believed that more than provisions were being supplied to the British. Valuable military intelligence was also making its way to the enemy.

Whereas Lee sought to ignore New York's civil authorities and worked to reverse the New York Provincial Congress's policy regarding the provisioning of the British ships, Stirling preferred to compromise on this issue. He was not willing to allow petty prejudices and political squabbling to interfere with the important task of strengthening New York City's defenses. On March 8, Stirling met with a committee appointed by the New York Provincial Congress to discuss the points of contention between the civil and military authorities. He informed the committee that he understood their fear that cutting off provisions to the British ships may provoke a blockade or bombardment of the city. But Stirling also argued that it was important to the overall defense of New York to prevent valuable intelligence concerning Loyalist strength, Whig troop movements, and the progress being made on the fortifications from reaching the enemy. In the end, the general agreed to a compromise in which officially authorized boats and crews would be allowed to deliver a limited number of goods or "necessities" to the ships. Furthermore, no member of a crew was to board any of the ships nor was the owner of a provision boat to hire extra crewmembers without official approval from the proper military authorities.⁶⁴

While it may have been easy to monitor the provisions being sent to the British ships from New York City, controlling the flow of supplies from New Jersey and Staten

⁶³ Alden, *General Charles Lee*, 99.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* See also Bliven, Jr., *Under the Guns*, 186; *Am. Arch.*, IV, 5: 354.

Island without an adequate naval force was an entirely different story. Being from the area, Stirling knew that the Loyalists living in New Jersey and on Staten Island were especially troublesome. As early as January 1776, Stirling had informed the New York Whig government: “the enemies to American liberty are busy on Staten-Island, and . . . some dangerous movements are now going on among them.” He then offered:

My situation here [Elizabethtown, New Jersey] renders it convenient to me to disarm them, or take and secure such as may be thought worthy of so much notice. When it is intimated to me that such a measure is necessary, it will be executed.⁶⁵

Now, two months later, Stirling was still determined to try to bring Loyalist activities in New Jersey and on Staten Island to an end.

In early March, Lee gave Stirling authorization to devise a plan to effectively block all traffic from New Jersey and Staten Island to the British vessels in the harbor. On March 2, Stirling wrote to Samuel Tucker, the president of the Provincial Congress of New Jersey, asking him to do whatever he could to halt “all communication . . . between any part of the Province of New-Jersey and Staten-Island, on the one part, and the Men-of-War which now are, or hereafter may be, within Sandy-Hook, or any ship or vessel that has any connection with them.”⁶⁶

Both Lee and Stirling agreed that the best way to block all contact between Staten Islanders and the British ships would be to have Tucker order “about four hundred Minute-men from New-Jersey” to garrison the Island. Stirling suggested, and Lee concurred, that the bulk of the New Jersey troops should be stationed on the heights and

⁶⁵ Stirling’s headquarters was located at Elizabeth Town, New Jersey. See Colonel William Alexander, Lord Stirling to the New York Committee of Safety, 12 January 1776, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 4: 655.

⁶⁶ Brigadier General William Alexander, Lord Stirling to Samuel Tucker, 2 March 1776, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 5: 132 – 133.

along the coast “near the watering place,” which was on Staten Island’s northeastern shore facing the Upper New York Bay. They believed that from this location, the troops could prevent the British “from receiving wood, water, provision, or any refreshment whatever” from the Staten Islanders; keep a watch out over the Atlantic for “every arrival of ships, or motion of the Men-of-War that may happen;” and also “effectually guard the Kills.” Stirling also argued that the troops could be used to suppress loyalist sentiment on the Island.⁶⁷

Although the Provincial Congress of New Jersey saw the merits in Stirling’s proposals, it could not provide him with everything he had wanted. While the New Jersey Whig government halted all shipping to and from its ports, it did not comply with Stirling’s request for troops for Staten Island. When pressed to explain their reasons for refusing the troop requisition, the New Jersey Whig government replied that it did not have enough men to spare for duty on Staten Island because it was still in the process of attempting to fill the ranks of its militia. Discouraged, Stirling could do nothing except read reports of how Staten Islanders were in daily contact with the British ships in New York harbor.⁶⁸

On March 9, Lieutenant Stephen Moylan, who was one of Washington’s aide-de-camps, informed Stirling that as a result of the Continental army’s successful capture of Dorchester Heights overlooking Boston, General Sir William Howe, who commanded the British forces in Boston, had begun to embark his army. Washington believed that Howe would make an immediate descent on New York City. If, in fact, the British fleet sailed

⁶⁷ Ibid; Nelson, *William Alexander, Lord Stirling*, 73.

⁶⁸ Brigadier General William Alexander, Lord Stirling to the New Jersey Provincial Congress, 20 February 1776, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 4: 1597; *PCNJ*, 181-182; Nelson, *William Alexander, Lord Stirling*, 73.

for New York City, Moylan informed Stirling he could “expect a large reinforcement from [this] Army, and in all probability, the main body will soon follow.” But in the meantime, Moylan wrote that Washington expected his commander at New York to do his utmost to continue to prepare the city’s defenses. “The fate of America depends upon this campaign,” declared Moylan, “and the success of this campaign will a good deal depend upon your exerting yourselves with vigour upon this occasion.”⁶⁹

Over the next several days, Stirling received dispatches from Washington confirming the British preparations to abandon Boston and urging a quick completion of New York City’s defenses. Even Hancock warned him “whatever may be the designs of General Howe, it appears . . . more than probable that the Ministry will make an effort to gain possession of New York.”⁷⁰ On March 19, Washington wrote to Stirling: “I have the pleasure to inform you, that on the morning of the 17 Instant General Howe with his Army abandon’d the Town of Boston without destroying It, an event of much importance and which must be heard with great satisfaction, . . . that we are now in full possession.” He added:

Where they Intend to make a descent next, is altogether unknown, but supposing New York to be an Object of much importance & to be in their view, I must recommend your most strenuous and active exertions in preparing to prevent any designs or Attempts they may have against It – I have detached the Riflemen & Five Batallions from hence to your Assistance, which will be followed by others as circumstances will allow – These with what forces you have & can Assemble If there shou’d be an

⁶⁹ Lieutenant Stephen Moylan to Brigadier General William Alexander, Lord Stirling, 9 March 1776, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 5: 374. In October 1775, General Sir William Howe succeeded General Thomas Gage as commander of the British army in Boston. Howe was formally named Commander-in-Chief of the British army in North America in April 1776.

⁷⁰ John Hancock to Brigadier General William Alexander, Lord Stirling, 15 March 1776, *Ibid.*, 400.

occasion, I trust will be sufficient to hinder the Enemy from possessing the City or making a Lodgement 'till the main body of this Army can arrive.⁷¹

The British army boarded several warships in Boston harbor and sailed for Halifax, Nova Scotia, where Howe awaited reinforcements and supplies for the much-anticipated invasion of New York City.

As reports of a British descent on New York City increased with each passing day, securing Staten Island and controlling its Loyalists became an important objective for the Whigs. Throughout the month of March, Stirling closely monitored the activities of Staten Island's residents. When he received intelligence that John James Boyd, a farmer living on the Island's north shore, had made "expressions injurious to the country, and in favour of Ministerial tyranny," Stirling ordered Captain John Warner of the New York militia to arrest Boyd and "bring him before the Provincial Congress, or Committee of Safety, with such evidence as he had against him." After reviewing the evidence, the New York Provincial Congress dismissed the case against Boyd because "he is so unimportant and insignificant a person in the community, as not to deserve the expense or trouble of apprehending him without further testimony of some overt acts inimical to the American Colonies." Although it ordered Boyd released, the Provincial Congress directed the military authorities to continue to monitor his activities and to inform them of "any future ill behaviour."⁷²

On March 9, Adrian Bancker, one of Staten Island's Provincial congressmen, requested that "a little powder, . . . be sent to some prudent person or persons" on the

⁷¹ General George Washington to Brigadier General William Alexander, Lord Stirling, 19 March 1776, *GWPRWS*, 3: 497-498.

⁷² Brigadier General William Alexander, Lord Stirling to Captain John Warner, 14 March 1776, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 5: 222; John James Boyd to the New York Committee of Safety, 20 March 1776, *Ibid.*, 438; Proceedings of the New York Provincial Congress, 14 March 1776, *Ibid.*, 383.

Island “for the defence of the friends to liberty and their country there.” However, Bancker’s request was denied because Staten Island had not organized its militia “agreeable to the regulations of the Continental and this Provincial Congress.” The local committee was therefore ordered to divide the Island “into beats or districts, and take proper measures that the Militia of your County be formed as soon as possible.”⁷³ By late March, the Staten Island militia had finally been organized according to the specifications laid out by the New York Provincial Congress. Yet, no evidence exists to indicate whether the militia ever received the extra gunpowder.⁷⁴ Although there was a shortage of gunpowder for the Continental troops amassing in New York City, it is very likely that the Island’s dubious political support for the Whig cause influenced the Provincial Congress’s decision to withhold the gunpowder. Many Staten Islanders would not forget this obvious sign of mistrust.

In addition to the Staten Islanders’ failure to properly organize their militia, the New York Whig government was still concerned over the exposure of the Island’s livestock to a British landing party. On March 27, the New York Committee of Safety recommended that in the event the British fleet is sighted off Sandy Hook, the residents of Staten Island should arrange for the immediate removal of their livestock to New Jersey.⁷⁵ Three days later, the Committee notified the members of the Richmond County Committee of Safety of its plans. “The Ministerial Army and Navy having been obliged

⁷³ New York Provincial Congress to the Committee of Richmond County, 9 March 1776, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 5: 361.

⁷⁴ McMillen, “Green, and Red, and a Little Blue,” 25; Bliven, Jr., *Under the Guns*, 202-203; Christian Jacobson to the New York Committee of Safety, 27 March 1776, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 5: 1408; Adrian Bancker to the New York Committee of Safety, 10 April 1776, 844.

⁷⁵ Proceedings of the New York Committee of Safety, 27 March 1776, *Am. Arch.*, IV: 1417.

to desert Boston, and much in want of fresh provisions,” wrote the New York Committee of Safety, “we are under great apprehensions they may come this way, and make, or attempt to make, depredations on the stock in your Island.” They continued:

We are anxious for the preservation of the stock on your Island. The best method we can devise is, for the owners to procure places for their stock in Jersey. We therefore earnestly recommend to you to advise or direct the inhabitants of your County to provide proper places in New-Jersey for the reception of their live stock, and on the approach of an enemy, or any proper notification of danger, to give directions to remove all the live stock in the said County, (horses, working-oxen, milch-cows, and such as are within a month of calving, excepted) to such places as they shall have so provided.

The Committee added a stern warning to the Staten Islanders that their failure to remove the livestock would result in the use of “Continental forces” from New Jersey to “prevent the Ministerial Troops from having any benefit of it.”⁷⁶

The New York Committee of Safety made securing Staten Island’s livestock a major priority. It ordered Adrian Bancker to arrange with the Island’s primary shipbuilders – John Mersereau and Richard Lawrence – for the construction of “two large flat-bottomed Scows, at the most reasonable rate, that the stock may the readily be removed.”⁷⁷ But Lawrence, who was one of Staten Island’s Provincial congressmen, opposed the idea and succeeded in delaying the construction of the vessels. He argued that because the Island “was already supplied with fourteen good Flatts, or Scows, which are fully sufficient for the removal of the Stock,” the construction of two new vessels would constitute “an unnecessary expense” for the Provincial Congress “at present.”⁷⁸

⁷⁶ New York Committee of Safety to the Committee of Richmond County, 30 March 1776, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 5: 1417.

⁷⁷ See Proceedings of the New York Committee of Safety, 27 March 1776, *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Richard Lawrence to the New York Committee of Safety, 3 April 1776, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 5: 1426.

Lawrence's argument against the construction of the scows seems altruistic on the surface, given the fact that he had much to gain financially from the proposal. Yet, his future actions as a Loyalist collaborator suggest that his argument against the measure was very likely a subtle attempt to undermine the Whig cause.

On March 20, Brigadier General William Thompson of Pennsylvania arrived in New York City and because of his senior rank, replaced Stirling, who returned to New Jersey to assist with the planning of that province's defenses. Stirling immediately began to plan and supervise the construction of fortifications at Elizabethtown, Paulus Hook, and Perth Amboy in New Jersey. Moreover, he made preparations to secure Staten Island, which was just as crucial to New Jersey's defense as it was to New York's.⁷⁹

The New Jersey Whig government, which was urged by Stirling, Thompson, and the Continental Congress to hasten the mobilization of its militia for duty in New York City and on Staten Island, resolved to raise three battalions and to send them to New York under the command of Brigadier Generals Philemon Dickinson of Trenton and William Livingston of Elizabethtown.⁸⁰ After conferring with the New Jersey Committee of Safety, Stirling wrote to Livingston outlining his plans for securing Staten Island. On March 24, he ordered Livingston to post troops at key locations along the New Jersey shoreline opposite Staten Island and to fortify the Island's heights. "I think it highly Necessary," Stirling wrote, to possess some Commanding height on Staten Island; the

⁷⁹ Kwasny, *Washington's Partisan War*, 43; Nelson, *William Alexander, Lord Stirling*, 77; Valentine, *Lord Stirling*, 173.

⁸⁰ See Resolves of the New Jersey Committee of Safety, 26 March 1776, in *Selections from the Correspondence of the Executive of New Jersey: From 1776 to 1786* (Newark, NJ: Newark Daily Advertiser, 1848), 4-6; Excerpt from Richard Smith's Diary, March 28, 1776, *LDCC*, 1: 458.

Men employed in these works will be in the most proper places to Guard the province.”

He continued:

I should think the Militia of the Counties of Bergen, Essex, & Middlesex would be Sufficient if only one Third of them were employed weekly on the busyness, the Militia of the Interior Counties ought to be sent forward to New York as soon as possible; and you may be Assured that as soon as they Can be Spared from Thence, they will be sent over again into New Jersey; or to Staten Island for the purpose before Mentioned.

Moreover, Livingston was to inform either Stirling or Thompson of when he was going to send his troops to the Island so that Colonel Rufus Putnam of Massachusetts, the army's Chief Engineer and the cousin of Major General Israel Putnam, could be sent on ahead of him to “Mark out the Necessary grounds to be fortified.”⁸¹

By early April, however, Stirling's plans to secure Staten Island had not gone as well as he had hoped. John Jay, one of New York's delegates to the Continental Congress, wrote to Colonel Alexander McDougall of New York in late March expressing consternation over the loyalist behavior of the Staten Islanders. “It is suspected that certain People on Staten Island,” he wrote, “daily afford Supplies to the Enemy.” He then added:

Ought not the watering Place to be guarded and would not the Troops, which might be designed for that Purpose be useful in other Respects. I should think your Army sufficiently numerous to admit of such a Detachment.⁸²

Apparently, the New Jersey militia was slow to arrive on the Island. Thus, Whigs such as Stirling and Jay were frustrated in their desire to have Staten Island quickly secured.

⁸¹ Brigadier General William Alexander, Lord Stirling to Brigadier General William Livingston, 24 March 1776, in Carl E. Prince and Dennis P. Ryan, eds., *The Papers of William Livingston* 4 vols. (Trenton, NJ: The New Jersey Historical Society, 1979-1987), 1: 44-45.

⁸² John Jay to Alexander McDougall, 21 March 1776, in Richard B. Morris, ed., *John Jay: The Making of a Revolutionary, Unpublished Papers, 1745-1780*. 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1975), 1: 241.

On April 1, Brigadier General William Heath, who had replaced Thompson in late March when the latter was assigned to the Canadian theater, reiterated to Livingston the importance of fortifying Staten Island. Writing to Livingston from New York City, Heath explained that in his estimation “the defence of this post in a very great Measure depends upon our being well possessed of Staten Island and some proper posts on the New Jersey side.” To assist Livingston in carrying out Stirling’s plans to secure the Island, Heath determined that it was best to redirect the three battalions of New Jersey militia already mobilized and marching to New York City under Brigadier General Dickinson to “halt at New Ark, Elizabeth Town, Raway, Woodbridge, & Amboy” in New Jersey where they were to await further instructions.⁸³

Feeling a sense of urgency, Stirling decided to oversee the military preparations on Staten Island. On the same day that Heath issued orders to redirect Dickinson’s three New Jersey battalions to towns along the New Jersey coast opposite Staten Island, Stirling reported to Washington on the state of the defensive preparations in New York City and its surrounding countryside. With five regiments of Continental riflemen having arrived from Boston to join militia units already in New York, Stirling wrote that he believed the Whigs had “little to fear from General Howe, should he attempt anything in this quarter.” But he warned Washington that the area’s one weakness remained Staten Island. The Island “is still open to their invasion,” he wrote, “and I should be glad we were so possessed of it that we could prevent their making any lodgment in it.” Desirous of having Whig troops occupy Staten Island and fortify its all-important heights, Stirling notified Washington that he was going to ask Heath’s permission to go to the Island and

⁸³ Brigadier General William Heath to Brigadier General William Livingston, 1 April 1776, *Ibid*, 46.

“set the Militia of New-Jersey at work on it.”⁸⁴ However, before his plans could get underway, New York received a new commander.

On April 3, Major General Israel Putnam of Connecticut arrived from Boston. Putnam, who was known as “Old Put,” was a rough, battle hardened veteran of the French and Indian War who was second in rank only to Washington in the Continental army. He brought to his new command a no nonsense style of leadership that made an immediate impact on military personnel and civilians alike. With about seven thousand troops under his command, Putnam continued to work toward completing the city’s defenses. He also boldly occupied Nutten Island (now Governor’s Island) located off the southern coast of Manhattan as well as Red Hook on Long Island, and ordered the construction of fortifications on Staten Island.⁸⁵

The task of securing and fortifying Staten Island fell to three companies of Continental riflemen from Virginia and Maryland who were to receive their orders from Lord Stirling. Sergeant Henry Bedinger, a member of Captain Hugh Stephenson’s company of Virginia riflemen, wrote in his journal that on April 4, his unit was:

Ordered to March, accordingly we set off and Crossed the North River [Hudson River] . . . Captain Williams’s [Otho Holland Williams] Company was Left at Powles [Paulus] Hook ferry and the other two Companies Marched on to a Village called Bergen about Ten Miles from the Ferry where we halted about Two Hours until Lord Stirling came up to us with the Company that was left at the Ferry, Thence Marched Together to the Ferry that leads over to Staten Island and Crossed with Two Companies. Captain [Moses] Rawling’s Company was left at the Ferry,

⁸⁴ Brigadier General William Alexander, Lord Stirling to General George Washington, 1 April 1776, *GWPRWS*, 4: 13-14.

⁸⁵ Bliven, Jr., *Under the Guns*, 211-212; Malcolm Decker, *Brink of Revolution: New York in Crisis, 1765-1776* (New York: Argosy Antiquarian LTD, 1964), 230; Henry P. Johnston, *The Campaign of 1776 around New York and Brooklyn* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1971), 66-67; Major General Israel Putnam to John Hancock, 7 April 1776, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 5: 811.

and stationed along Down the water. The other two Companies were stationed Down on the Island.

Several riflemen were posted near the Watering Place to guard its natural springs, which were used by British naval commanders to re-supply their vessels with fresh drinking water. Others were positioned on the Island's heights and along its coast. Once the troops were successfully embarked on Staten Island, Stirling traveled to Perth Amboy, New Jersey, where he was to oversee the town's defenses. Although preoccupied with New Jersey's defense, Stirling often returned to Staten Island to check on the condition of the troops stationed there.⁸⁶

On April 6, Putnam received information that the 20-gun British warship HMS *Savage* and the HMS *James*, the pilot boat for the HMS *Phoenix*, had sailed through the Narrows and anchored off Staten Island's north shore. It is very likely that Putnam interpreted this maneuver as preliminary to a larger British invasion. The Island's history of collaborating with the British and the already high state of alert in and around New York City added to the general's sense of urgency. Putnam immediately dashed off a note to Captain Hugh Stephenson who was commanding the riflemen on Staten Island. The general ordered Stephenson to begin to "scour the shores" for possible collaborators in anticipation of a British landing.⁸⁷

In the early morning of April 7, Easter Sunday, under the cover of a thick fog, the two British ships slowly moved closer to Staten Island's shoreline and moored near the

⁸⁶ Sergeant Henry Bedinger was a grain merchant living in Shepherdstown, Virginia when the Revolution began. Danske Dandridge, ed., *Historic Shepherdstown* (Charlottesville, VA: The University Press of Virginia, 1910), 134-135; Brigadier General William Alexander, Lord Stirling to Colonel Elias Dayton, 9 April 1776, in "Letters of William Alexander, Lord Stirling" *Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society* 60 (1942), 172.

⁸⁷ Major General Israel Putnam to John Hancock, 7 April 1776, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 5: 811. These riflemen joined a company that had been ordered to the Island on April 4th by Lord Stirling.

Watering Place. Running low on drinking water, they sent two landing boats to fill up casks from the natural springs located on that part of the Island. Stephenson reported to Putnam the next day that he had “received intelligence” concerning the British activities and “prepared to attack them.” He led a detachment of troops to capture the British but the *Savage* was forewarned of his approach and fired “a signal gun” for the landing party to retreat. This, Stephenson explained, they did “under cover of a brisk and almost constant fire from the *Savage*.” Not to be deterred by the heavy cannon and musket fire coming from the British warship, Stephenson pressed on with the attack. After four hours the skirmish ended when the *Savage* pulled away from the shoreline leaving behind ten members of the landing party.⁸⁸

Although it was brief, and had little strategic importance, the skirmish at the Watering Place signaled a new phase in the war for all New Yorkers. That evening, Putnam wrote to Hancock: “Hostilities are now commenced in this Province.”⁸⁹ The next day, he ordered: “all communication, between the Ministerial fleet and shore, . . . immediately stopped” and announced that provisions “should no longer be furnished” to the British ships. In addition, all vessels that sailed from New York City or from anywhere in the surrounding region had to obtain a pass from the military authorities. “Any inhabitant, or others, who shall be taken, that have been on board, or near any of the ships, or going on board,” warned Putnam, “will be considered enemies, and treated

⁸⁸ Captain Hugh Stephenson to Major General Israel Putnam, 8 April 1776, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 5: 820-821. For a discussion of the April 7th skirmish see McMillen, “Green, and Red, and a Little Blue,” 7; Bliven, Jr., *Under the Guns*, 210-211.

⁸⁹ Major General Israel Putnam to John Hancock, 7 April 1776, *Ibid*, 811.

accordingly.”⁹⁰ But Putnam’s order never gained the full support of the Provincial Congress, which was still frightened by the prospect of a British bombardment or blockade of the city.

That Staten Islanders were continuing to make contact with the British ships in New York harbor was indicated by the arrest of Darby Doyle, who operated a ferry from his property near the Watering Place. Doyle was taken into custody by Captain Stephenson shortly after the skirmish on Easter Sunday and charged with “selling provisions to, and holding correspondence with the enemy.” Doyle was sent to New York City where he was detained in the city’s jail. On April 19, Francis Child, the Deputy Sheriff of New York, appeared before the New York Committee of Safety and asked their advice on what to do with the prisoner. The Committee responded that since “Doyle was taken by military order” Child should ask the military authorities.⁹¹ No evidence exists to indicate whether the case against Doyle went any further.

The month of April saw a heavy concentration of Whig forces on Staten Island. Writing to Governor Tryon on April 8, Andrew Elliot, the former collector of the port of New York reported: “The Rifle Men are all over Staten Island, . . . by the best accounts I can get there is about 1100, of the Jersey men, likewise on Staten Island, or at Amboy.” He then added that the “the Number gone, to the above places, may be about 1800 Men.”⁹² Staten Islander John Wandel recalled that some of the soldiers “were billeted

⁹⁰ Vessels sailing from New York were required to leave from Beekman’s Slip in lower Manhattan. See General Orders for New York, 8 April 1776, *NDAR*, 4: 722-723.

⁹¹ See Proceedings of the New York Committee of Public Safety, 19 April 1776, *Ibid*, 1455.

⁹² Andrew Elliot to Governor William Tryon, 8 April 1776, *Ibid*, 724.

among the farmers on the North shore,” while others “were stationed at the Narrows.”⁹³

In his journal, Bedinger wrote: “the men were Biled out Into several Houses by 10, & 8, & 5, etc.”⁹⁴

The Whig troops that occupied Staten Island settled into their positions on the Island’s heights and at several strategic places along its shoreline. Describing Staten Island to his sister Elie in Frederick County, Maryland, Captain Otho Holland Williams, of Colonel Thomas Price’s Company of Maryland riflemen, wrote that it was “one of the most Beautiful Islands you ever Saw.” He added that Staten Island’s “great heights . . . afford a Delightful prospect, but those beautiful prospects are not the only advantage of the Hills many of which are natural fortifications.”⁹⁵ While military preparations had begun in earnest, Captain Stephenson ordered detachments of his Whig troops to march throughout Staten Island to apprehend and disarm suspected Loyalists. On April 9, Bedinger made a notation in his diary: “More Tories have Been Sent for and brought before the Captain.”⁹⁶

Alexander McDonald, the chief recruiter for the Loyalist Royal Highland Emigrants, was one of the most wanted Loyalists on Staten Island. His activities as a recruiter for the British military so enraged local Whigs “in New York and thereabouts” that they “pronounced a Sentence of death on me,” he told the New York City merchants Thomas and Walter Buchannon. McDonald added that he “would not offer such violence to my honour and Conscience as to falsify my oath of fidelity and allegiance and

⁹³ Anthon, ed., “Anthon’s Notes,” 158.

⁹⁴ See Dandridge, ed., *Historic Shepherdstown*, 135.

⁹⁵ Captain Otho Holland Williams to Elie Williams, 11 April 1776, *NDAR*, 4: 770.

⁹⁶ See Dandridge, ed., *Historic Shepherdstown*, 139.

. . . [join] in a Cause of which I always entertained a bad Opinion and always believed, and does now, that it will terminate in the destruction of the Authors of it.”⁹⁷ One of those Whigs who “pronounced a Sentence of death” on McDonald was his neighbor Joshua Mersereau III, who McDonald referred to as the “Most infamous & Notorious Rebel in all the Country.”⁹⁸ “My neighbor Mersereaux,” he wrote to Major John Small of the Royal Highland Emigrants, “has contrived . . . to skin me alive when he catches me.”⁹⁹

By the spring of 1776 McDonald was safely away in Halifax, Nova Scotia. However, his family and his farm on Staten Island were at the mercy of the Whig troops. On one occasion, his wife Susannah and their children were harassed by “a parcel of fellows [who] went to my house with more than Savage rudeness, rummaged the house as they pretended for arms, swore they would have me dead or alive, and frightened her [Susannah] out of her Senses.”¹⁰⁰ Susannah also suffered “a vast many insults & abuses As far as words & Language & Quartering the Villains [Whigs] in her house could do,” wrote McDonald. Yet, she still “behaved with an Uncommon degree of Courage & even went so far as when they [Whigs] cursed the King she cursed the Congress to their

⁹⁷ Captain Alexander McDonald to Thomas and Walter Buchannon, 4 November 1775, *The Letter-Book of Captain Alexander McDonald*, 216.

⁹⁸ Captain Alexander McDonald to Governor William Tryon, 26 November 1776, *Ibid*, 297.

⁹⁹ Captain Alexander McDonald to Major John Small, 15 September 1775, *Ibid*, 212.

¹⁰⁰ Captain Alexander McDonald to Thomas and Walter Buchannon, 4 November 1775, *Ibid*, 216-217. Three members of the New York Provincial Congress with a military escort also searched McDonald’s home looking for “the papers & to seize the person (if to be found) . . . who is to be a Captain in . . . a Battalion.” See John McKesson to George Clinton, 14 June 1775, in Hugh Hastings, ed., *Public Papers of George Clinton, First Governor of New York, 1777-1795-1801-1804*. 10 vols. (Albany, NY: State of New York, 1899-1914), 1: 203.

faces.”¹⁰¹ Similar confrontations between Whig troops and Staten Islanders were repeated throughout the Island.

Ever since the skirmish at the Watering Place, Major General Putnam had contemplated reinforcing the Whig troops on Staten Island. On April 12, he ordered a brigade from New Jersey under the command of Lord Stirling to march to the Island in order to assist the troops already there in completing the fortifications. Before embarking his troops for Staten Island, however, Stirling asked the New York Committee of Safety to notify the Richmond County Committee of Safety of his impending arrival. He also directed the New York Whig government to inform the Staten Islanders that he was “under a necessity of quartering” his troops in “the farm-houses there until the season of the year will admit of their being encamped.” By doing so, Stirling explained that the Island’s residents would be better prepared “to receive the troops in the manner most convenient to themselves.” He added:

They may be assured that my best endeavours will be used to render the residence of the troops among them as little burdensome as possible; and this I hope will be the easier effected, as house-room is the only article that will be required; everything else they may stand in need of will be punctually paid for.¹⁰²

It is very likely that Stirling was trying to avoid a repeat of the tense situation occasioned by Colonel Heard’s unexpected arrival on the Island back in February, an event which hardened Staten Islanders’ negative opinion of the Whigs.

¹⁰¹ Captain Alexander McDonald to Pedro de Mendonzo, 11 January 1777, *Letter-Book of Captain Alexander McDonald*, 313.

¹⁰² Brigadier General William Alexander, Lord Stirling to the New York Committee of Safety, 12 April 1776, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 5: 1439.

The New York Committee of Safety immediately acted on Stirling's request and notified the Staten Islanders of the general's impending arrival. It asked the Richmond County Committee of Safety "to prepare empty Farm-houses where they may be had; and where those cannot be had, that they prepare quarters and places . . . in Dwelling-houses." To prevent an escalation of animosities between the Staten Islanders and the Whig troops, the Richmond County Committee of Safety was asked to "use their influence with the inhabitants to consider the soldiers as their countrymen and fellow-citizens, employed in the defence of the liberties of their country in general, and of the inhabitants of Richmond County in particular, and to endeavour to accommodate them accordingly"¹⁰³

On April 16, Christian Jacobson, the chairman of the Richmond County Committee of Safety replied to the New York Committee's request. He assured them that "nothing on our part shall be neglected in quartering the troops under the command of Lord Stirling, so far as circumstance and ability will admit of" and added that the members of the local committee had agreed to "exert our influence with the inhabitants, to give them [troops] all possible assistance." Yet Jacobson closed the letter with a bitter denunciation of the way the Whigs had treated Staten Islanders in the past. It seems he wanted to remind the New York Committee of Safety that if the Whig authorities expected cooperation from the Island's residents, they would have to begin showing some respect for their persons and property. "We have before experienced the severity of persons in power, . . . [who were] fond of exerting it," Jacobson wrote, "and on slight

¹⁰³ New York Committee of Safety to the Richmond County Committee, 12 April 1776, *Ibid.*

information, have taken upon them to carry inhabitants out of this County into another Government for trial, which we wish might be prevented.”¹⁰⁴

As an example of what he perceived to be the mistreatment of Staten Islanders, Jacobson referred to the recent arrest of Darby Doyle who “was . . . apprehended, and sent to New-York – we know not by what authority.” Although Doyle “may be an offender, and deserving of punishment,” Jacobson wrote, “yet we cannot approve of such conduct in taking him out of the County.” The Richmond County chairman then took the opportunity to address the charge that his committee favored suspected Loyalists and challenged the New Yorkers to investigate its proceedings for any misconduct. “We have reason to believe that something has been alleged against this Committee and their proceedings,” he wrote, “if so, we are ready to be examined.”¹⁰⁵

Although an investigation of the Richmond County Committee of Safety was never undertaken, its conduct came under suspicion once again in early May. On May 6, William Dunn, a farmer, apprehended Dr. Thomas Frost, a physician who owned a tavern in Richmondtown and served as the Island’s High Sheriff, and accused him of sending information to the British ships. Frost was detained in the county jail at Richmondtown. The next day, Jacobson called a meeting of the local committee “in order to hear the accusation which the said Dunn had to allege against the said Thomas Frost.” But when Dunn was sent for, he feared for his safety and “refused to comply . . . unless the Committee would send a proper guard to guard him.” Even though Jacobson promised “no person [would] molest him,” Dunn replied that he “did not choose to trust” the

¹⁰⁴ Christian Jacobson to the New York Committee of Safety, 16 April 1776, *Ibid*, 955-956.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*

chairman and “would not appear without a guard.” In order to expedite the situation, Jacobson agreed to send Captain William Scoby, a member of the Richmond County militia and the county’s Deputy Sheriff to escort Dunn.¹⁰⁶

With Scoby at his side, Dunn appeared before the Richmond County Committee of Safety and was asked by Jacobson “what reason he had for apprehending and taking Thomas Frost, and putting him in jail, and by what authority he made himself master of the jail, by taking the key of said jail into his custody.” A defiant Dunn replied that he “would give no reason, enter no complaint, nor come to trial before this Committee” and added that he “had sent to Amboy [Whig-occupied Perth Amboy, New Jersey] for assistance to carry the said Thomas Frost there to have his trial.” Dunn stormed out of the meeting room. But after several hours, he returned and entered his complaint against the Island’s sheriff. According to Dunn, Frost had gone one “Sabbath-Day” to “Romer’s Tavern on the north side” and encouraged a Staten Islander “to go on board the man-of-war.” Upon hearing Dunn’s charge, Jacobson immediately ordered Frost released on bail “for his appearance to-morrow, to have his trial.” In the end, Dunn found it difficult to convince witnesses to testify against the High Sheriff. Those who did come forward either caught a sudden case of amnesia or were “very much in liquor” that they were unsure of what they had actually seen or heard at Roemer’s Tavern on that “Sabbath-Day.” Ultimately, the charges against Frost were dropped and he was released.¹⁰⁷

Once again, Staten Islanders demonstrated their reluctance to deal with and to punish suspected Loyalists. Frost’s position as High Sheriff probably had much to do

¹⁰⁶ Richmond County Committee to the New York Provincial Congress, 13 May 1776, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 6: 436–437.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 437–438.

with the sudden lack of evidence and witnesses against him. It is also entirely likely that in the close knit, deferential society of eighteenth century Staten Island, many residents would have been reluctant to come forward to testify against someone who was a powerful and respected member of their community.

As per Stirling's earlier request, the Richmond County Committee of Safety did its best to procure quarters, provisions, and labor for the Whig forces. This was done with the understanding that Staten Islanders would be compensated. After all, hadn't Stirling promised that these things would be "punctually paid for?" By early May, Staten Islanders had not been compensated by the Whigs. Thus, they grew anxious to know if they would ever be paid for the use of their homes, lands, produce, firewood, and labor. On May 2, Hendrick Garrison, who was the acting Chairman of the Richmond County Committee of Safety in place of the absent Christian Jacobson, appeared before the New York Committee of Safety and asked:

Whether the inhabitants will be paid for some Firewood furnished to the Troops in Richmond County . . . whether they must continue to supply the said Troops with Firewood . . . And to whom the Committee must apply for payment for repairing the Guard-House, which was done at the request of Lord Stirling.¹⁰⁸

He also lodged his own personal complaint informing the New York Committee that he had "lent a small sum to an Officer recruiting in Richmond" and was never repaid. Even though Garrison was told to contact Colonel Thomas Mifflin, the Continental army's quartermaster general, about obtaining compensation for the residents of Staten Island, no evidence exists to indicate if Staten Islanders were ever reimbursed by the Whig civil or military authorities. One British officer recalled that several Staten Islanders had

¹⁰⁸ See Proceedings of the New York Committee of Safety, 2 May 1776, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 5: 1485.

complained that their fields and gardens had been “over-run and eaten up by the Rebels” without regard for their property rights.¹⁰⁹ Moreover, Whig troops continued to disarm and apprehend Island residents who were suspected of loyalist behavior. These actions added to the estrangement between Staten Island and the Whig cause.

For many Staten Islanders, the treatment of their slaves by the British was further proof that the King’s forces and not the Whigs were the true defenders of their rights. Ever since early November 1775, when John Murray, Lord Dunmore, the exiled governor of Virginia, offered freedom to any slaves who fled their masters and were willing to bear arms for Britain, many African-Americans sought freedom behind British military lines. But to keep the support of Loyalist slave owners, the British offer of freedom applied only to the slaves of Whig masters. The British authorities thus guaranteed Loyalists that their property in the form of slaves would be protected.¹¹⁰

With slave ownership widespread on Staten Island, concerns over valuable slave property quickly emerged. What if the Island’s slaves attempted to gain their freedom by making their way to the British ships moored in New York harbor? What would be the reaction of the British naval commanders if this should happen? These questions were answered for Staten Islanders in late April. In his journal entry for May 1, Sergeant Henry Bedinger noted an incident involving five slaves who had escaped to the HMS *Asia*, anchored just below the Narrows in the Lower New York Bay. “Last Saturday

¹⁰⁹ Lieutenant Loftus Cliffe to Unknown, 8 July 1776, Transcript, in Military Collection, American Revolution, Box 1, Folder 2, SIHS.

¹¹⁰ Hodges, *Root and Branch*, chap. 5. See also Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1961), chap. 2.

Night five Negro men ran away in a boat and Got on board the Asia Ship of War,” wrote Bedinger. He added:

The Negroes belonged to several Farmers on this Island but to their Great Surprise the Captain [Captain George Vandeput] ordered them Set on Shore again and Return to their masters after they had been on board Two Days, with about 4 Dollars in Money and a Letter to one of the Negroes’ Masters Setting forth that they were a Fishing-off the Shore and that one of the Barges had Taken them and Detained them that Time against their Will. – All this was thought to be only a piece of policy In the Captain of the Asia.

Once back on Staten Island, the five men were apprehended by the Whigs. They were then “Tried and were Sentenced to have 30 Lashes apiece well Laid on.”¹¹¹ It is very likely that before sending them back to their owners, the captain of the *Asia* had extracted as much information about Whig fortifications on the Island as he could from the five runaways. The Staten Islanders’ loyalist sympathies no doubt had much to do with Captain Vandeput’s decision to return the slaves. Once apprehended by the Whigs, however, the men were viewed as collaborators and punished as such.

In April, elections were held for delegates to the Third New York Provincial Congress. However, the difference between these elections and those held for the first two Congresses was the issue of independence. “While the question of independence was not specifically referred to the electors,” historian Carl L. Becker argues, “it was well understood that the third congress would have to consider it.”¹¹² On April 22, Staten Islanders elected Richard Conner, Aaron Cortelyou, John Journeay, and Paul Micheau, Jr. to represent them at the Congress. All four men had served in the First Provincial Congress and were well known for their moderate-to-conservative political views. Thus,

¹¹¹ See Dandridge, ed., *Historic Shepherdstown*, 140 – 141.

¹¹² Becker, *The History of Political Parties in the Province of New York*, 256.

even with Whig military forces occupying key areas of Staten Island and the New York Whig government inching closer to supporting independence, Staten Islanders sent a delegation that supported reconciliation to the new Congress.

The main issues facing the Third Provincial Congress were independence, the organization of a new government, and the suppression of Loyalist activities. On the related issues of independence and the organization of a new government, the Provincial Congress decided to create a committee to look into the possibilities. The Island's Provincial congressmen voted against this proposal. As to the suppression of Loyalist activities, the Staten Island delegation managed to delay passage of a set of resolutions that called for "speedy and effectual Measures to prevent the hostile intentions of our Foes, to stop the channels of Intelligence and Communication among the disaffected and to quell the spirit of opposition which hath hitherto prevailed." With the British fleet daily expected, the New York Provincial Congress no longer tolerated the actions of New York's Loyalists. By the early summer, it ordered the arrest of those inhabitants "generally reputed inimical to American Liberty" or who held "Military Commissions under the King of Great Britain also such persons holding civil offices under the said King." Any persons arrested under these provisions were to be tried by a special committee appointed for that purpose. If found guilty these persons could be fined, jailed, or banished from the colony. Staten Island's Provincial congressmen protested this measure.¹¹³

¹¹³ The New York Provincial Congress ordered the immediate apprehension of Staten Islanders Christopher Billopp, Minah Burger, Isaac Decker, Abraham Harris, Benjamin Seaman, and Ephraim Taylor. These men were to appear before Congress's new committee for questioning. See Becker, *The History of Political Parties in the Province Of New York*, 261; Flick, ed., *The American Revolution in New York*, 213 and *Loyalism in New York*, 66-69. See also *Am. Arch.*, IV, 6: 1333; *Calendar of Historical Manuscripts*, 1: 338-339, 341.

On April 13, General George Washington arrived in New York and immediately began to inspect the city's defenses. "I have not had time since I came to look fully about me, but find many Works of defence begun & some finished," Washington wrote to Hancock. He added: "The Troops are much dispersed, some on Long Island, Others on Staten Island etc."¹¹⁴ Washington also persuaded the New York Committee of Safety to issue a resolution banning all trade and communication with the British ships in the harbor. The New York Committee of Safety therefore announced that any persons caught communicating with or supplying the British ships would be "dealt with in the severest Manner as Enemies to the Rights and Liberties of the united North American Colonies." That the Committee had thrown its support behind such a measure was a testament to Washington's political skill and astuteness. On April 29, he issued a proclamation indicating that the military was in full support of the civil authorities.¹¹⁵

Several days after Washington's proclamation was issued, Peter Poillion, a farmer from Staten Island's south shore, was apprehended by Whig military authorities after he was seen leaving the HMS *Asia* anchored near the Narrows. Poillion was arrested for having supplied the *Asia* with "some provision in violation of & contrary to the regulations which have been adopted for preventing such practices."¹¹⁶ On May 8, he appeared before the New York Committee of Safety and explained to its members that he had left his house on the morning of May 4 "with a considerable sum of Money to discharge a debt he owed to a person in King's County and with some articles of

¹¹⁴ General George Washington to John Hancock, 15 April 1776, *GWPRWS*, 4: 69-70.

¹¹⁵ See Proceedings of the New York Committee of Safety, 18 April 1776, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 5: 1453; General George Washington to the New York Committee of Safety, 17 April 1776; New York Committee of Safety to General George Washington, 18 April 1776, *GWPRWS*, 4: 77-79, 81-82.

¹¹⁶ General George Washington to the New York Committee of Safety, 6 May 1776, *Ibid.*, 221.

provisions, intended for the New-York market.” But, even though he “was as near to the shore with his boat, and at as great a distance from the Ship *Asia*,” he was fired upon and forced to give up his provisions. Although the New York Committee of Safety acquitted Poillion based on his claim that Washington’s proclamation was never published on Staten Island, it warned him to be “very cautious” next time. The committeemen also recommended that Poillion “endeavour to prevent any other inhabitant of Richmond County from attempting to come, with any Provisions, within reach of the guns of the said Ships, or of any other Ministerial Ship or Vessel . . . in that Channel” and to do his best “to make the Regulations adopted with respect to the said Ships publicly known in Richmond County.”¹¹⁷

During the months of April, May, and June 1776, Washington continued to prepare New York City’s defenses. He ordered many of the soldiers under his command to work on the fortifications in and around the city and often personally inspected their progress. When in early May 1776, the Continental Congress dismissed several militia units serving in New York, Washington pressed the Whig governments in the area to devise contingency plans for recalling these troops in case of an emergency. Moreover, he began to contemplate removing the cattle and other livestock from exposed areas of Staten- and Long Islands. Washington also ordered Brigadier Generals Nathanael Greene, John Sullivan, and William Alexander, Lord Stirling, to work with the Whig governments of New York and New Jersey on a signal system “to convey the first notice of the approach of an Enemy’s Fleet.” The system that was ultimately agreed upon included the establishment of signal stations at the Highlands of the Navesink River,

¹¹⁷ See *Am. Arch.*, IV, 5: 1491.

which is located near Sandy Hook on the Raritan Bay, in Monmouth County, New Jersey, and on the heights of Staten Island.¹¹⁸ If Howe and the British fleet were to arrive, Washington wanted to make sure New York City and its environs were prepared to face them.

On June 29, the first British ships from Halifax, Nova Scotia, were sighted off Sandy Hook, New Jersey. Throughout the first half of 1776, the Whigs did their best to prepare New York City and its countryside for a British descent on the area. Staten Island with its strategic location at the entrance to New York harbor and its Loyalist-leaning residents proved troublesome to the Whigs' plans for the defense of the city. In their efforts to secure Staten Island and to prevent it from becoming a potential headquarters for British operations in the region, the Whigs succeeded in further alienating Staten Islanders from the resistance movement. While to most observers the British fleet represented the scourge of ministerial tyranny, for many Staten Islanders it was the cure for what ailed them: Whig oppression in the name of American liberties.

¹¹⁸ General George Washington to the New York Committee of Safety, 20 April 1776; to the New York Committee of Safety, 24 April 1776; to Samuel Tucker, 24 April 1776; to Jonathan Trumbull, Sr., 26 April 1776; to the New York Committee of Safety, 27 April 1776; from Brigadier Generals John Sullivan, Nathanael Greene, and Lord Stirling, 27 April 1776; from the New York Committee of Safety, 29 April 1776, in *GWPRWS*, 4: 98-99, 119-120, 121-122, 139-140, 144-145, 145-146, 167-169.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Our Inveterate Enemies”: Staten Islanders and the Arrival of the British Fleet at New York

Through the early morning summer haze on June 29, 1776, Continental lookouts in lower Manhattan saw three white signal flags flying over the heights on Staten Island. The British fleet from Halifax, Nova Scotia, had been sighted and by noon the fleet’s vanguard, consisting of forty-five vessels, was anchored off Sandy Hook, New Jersey. The ships continued to arrive throughout the day and by nightfall 110 had been counted.¹ But that would not be the last of them. As the night wore on, more ships followed. At 11 o’ clock that evening, Staten Islander Adrian Bancker sat down and wrote to his brother Evert, a New York City merchant and Provincial congressman, informing him that “130 Sail are within the Hook.”² The British had originally intended to land on Long Island but chose to seize the more centrally located and weakly defended Staten Island instead. As British forces amassed on Staten Island for the campaign against New York City, many Staten Islanders willingly gave their support to the troops. The Loyalist residents of Staten Island had waited patiently to be rescued from the clutches of what they perceived to be Whig tyranny. Yet, even they had never imagined that their rescuers would arrive as members of what ultimately became the largest British expeditionary force ever assembled up to that time.

¹ Worthington C. Ford, ed., *Correspondence and Journals of Samuel Blachley Webb*. 3 vols. (Lancaster, PA: Wickersham Press, 1893-1894), 1: 150 -151; General George Washington to John Hancock, 29 June 1776; General George Washington to John Hancock, 30 June 1776, *GWPRWS*, 5: 148, 160.

² Adrian Bancker to Evert Bancker, 29 June 1776, Bancker Family Papers, Correspondence 1775-1787, Folder 2, NYHS.

Ever since the winter of 1775-1776, when he directed the Continental army's siege of Boston, General George Washington had anticipated a British descent on New York City. Now, in the summer of 1776, daily reports arrived at his headquarters in lower Manhattan, which indicated that the British fleet had sailed from Halifax, Nova Scotia, where it had gone after the British evacuation of Boston in March. According to these reports, New York City was the fleet's destination. On June 28, Washington was informed by Lieutenant Joseph Davison of the Continental sloop *Schuyler* that a "fleet of 130 Sail, [had] Sailed from Halifax on the 9th Instant for Sandy Hook & that General Howe [Sir William Howe] Is on Board the *Greyhound* which We Suppos'd Pass'd us 3 Days ago . . . Standing for Sandy Hook."³ Washington initially received this news with trepidation. To John Hancock, the president of the Continental Congress, he wrote: "I could wish General Howe & his Armament not to arrive yet, as not more than a Thousand militia have yet come in, and our whole force Including the Troops at all the detached posts, & on board the Armed vessels, which are comprehended in our Returns, is but small and inconsiderable when compared with the extensive lines they are to defend and most probably the Army that he brings." To allay Hancock's doubts, if he had any, that the British fleet was on the move, Washington referred to the intelligence he had received from Lieutenant Davison. "It may be certainly depended on," he wrote, "that General Howe & fleet have sailed from Halifax – Some of the men on board the

³ Lieutenant Joseph Davison to General George Washington, 27 June 1776, *GWPRWS*, 5: 119-120. The Continental sloop *Schuyler* was patrolling the waters off the eastern tip of Long Island near Fire Island when it spotted the HMS *Greyhound*.

prizes mentioned in the Lieutenant's [Davison's] Letter were on board the *Grey Hound* & Saw General Howe."⁴

Davison's letter added to an already grim situation facing Washington and the Whig cause. Four days prior to receiving the news of the British fleet's departure from Halifax, Washington was informed that Continental forces had been driven back in Canada. While the failure of the Canadian campaign wounded the American war effort, an inevitable British invasion and capture of New York City seemed likely to finish it off.

Had it been up to General Howe, the British fleet would have arrived at New York City even sooner. However, following the evacuation of Boston on March 17, the British army found itself short on transports and supplies. Although eager to proceed to New York City, Howe chose to retreat to Halifax, Nova Scotia, instead, where he sought to refurbish his ships, obtain needed supplies for his men, take care of his sick and wounded, and attend to the settlement of the 1,100 Loyalists he had carried with him from Boston. He also awaited a fleet commanded by his brother Admiral Richard Lord Howe, which was supposed to arrive from Europe with provisions and approximately 13,000 reinforcements. The British remained in Halifax throughout the spring of 1776. Thus, military operations against New York City were temporarily delayed.

While at Halifax, Howe, who had been formerly promoted to Commander-in-Chief of the British army in North America, received reports that Continental forces were fortifying New York City and its environs. In addition, he worried that the evacuation of Boston would strengthen the spirit of rebellion in America and make the Continental army more resilient. Howe became determined to undertake one decisive campaign

⁴ General George Washington to John Hancock, 28 June 1776, *Ibid*, 135. The prizes referred to in this letter were the brigs *Pembroke* and *Speedwell*, the schooner *Hiram*, and the sloop *Nonesuch*.

aimed at capturing New York and crushing the Continental army and the rebellion. However, such an attack would be impossible to undertake without fresh provisions, adequate supplies and transports, and healthy soldiers. "New York being the . . . object," Howe told Lord George Germain, who had replaced Lord Dartmouth as Colonial Secretary in November 1775, "the possession of it . . . will be my principal aim when Enabled to proceed thither by a Sufficient supply of Provisions, since . . . it is become highly necessary that the first exertion of the army should be directed . . . to check the spirit which the evacuation of Boston will naturally raise among the rebels."⁵

Howe was confident of success and grew increasingly anxious to leave Halifax. He believed that "a decisive Action" against the Continental army at New York City would be "the most effectual means to terminate this Expensive war."⁶ On May 7, Howe reiterated to Germain his desire to undertake offensive operations "as soon as I am enabled by a supply of Provisions . . . for every Instant we remain here must increase our embarrassments."⁷

By early June several transports and a number of supply ships laden with fresh provisions had reached Halifax from England. Howe immediately began to prepare his troops to sail for New York. On June 7, he informed Germain: "I have suffered . . . mortification by being so long detained at this place [Halifax], but the late arrivals of the provision ships and the repairing of those included in the number requisite for transporting the troops, . . . have made an earlier removal impracticable . . . [the] Troops,

⁵ Quoted in Troyer Steele Anderson, *The Command of the Howe Brothers during the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1936), 121.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ General Sir William Howe to Lord George Germain, 7 May 1776, in K. G. Davies, ed., *Documents of the American Revolution, 1770-1783*. Colonial Office Series, 21 vols. (Dublin, Ireland: Irish University Press, 1972-1981), 12: 127.

however, are at length embarked, waiting only for favourable weather to proceed to Sandy Hook.” The British Commander-in-Chief also planned to leave earlier than the rest of the fleet so that he could “have the advantage of communicating with Governour Tryon for obtaining the best information of the state of the rebel army in the environs of that place.”⁸

Howe arrived off Sandy Hook, New Jersey, onboard the frigate *HMS Greyhound* on June 25, four days ahead of the fleet. The next day, he met with Governor William Tryon and other local Loyalists aboard the *Greyhound*, where they briefed him on the military situation in and around New York City. Howe was informed “the rebels . . . are numerous and very advantageously posted with strong entrenchments both upon Long Island and that of New York.” With an eye toward landing his force on Long Island, Howe “made inquiries of these gentlemen respecting the face of the country between Gravesend Bay in Long Island and the enemy’s works in the neighbourhood of Brooklyn.”⁹ Tryon and other “fast friends to government” suggested that Howe should land his army on Long Island and launch a quick strike against the Continental forces. If need be, he was told he could count on a sizable Loyalist militia commanded by Captain Richard Hewlett of south Hempstead to lend his troops additional support.¹⁰

As the Continentals raised their signal flags high above Staten Island on the morning of June 29 to indicate that the British fleet was in sight, Howe ordered the

⁸ General Sir William Howe to Lord George Germain, 7 June 1776, *Ibid*, 145. See also Anderson, *The Command of the Howe Brothers*, 122; Gruber, *The Howe Brothers*, 83.

⁹ General Sir William Howe to Lord George Germain, 7 July 1776, Davies, ed., *Documents of the American Revolution*, 12: 157.

¹⁰ Nelson, *William Tryon and the Course of Empire*, 142; Joseph S. Tiedemann, “A Revolution Foiled: Queens County, New York, 1775-1776,” *Journal of American History* 75 (1988), 441.

captain of the HMS *Phoenix* to greet the fleet's commander Vice Admiral Molyneux Shuldham with a fifteen-gun salute.¹¹ From the second floor of a building in lower Manhattan, Daniel McCurtain, a private in a Maryland Rifle Company, was stunned by what he saw as he looked out towards the horizon. Lower New York Bay resembled "a wood of pine trees trimmed," remembered McCurtain, "I could not believe my eyes, . . . the whole bay was as full of shipping as ever it could be, I declare that I thought all of London was afloat."¹² To one Staten Islander, the British ships that were moored off Sandy Hook, New Jersey, with their sails lowered made the bay look like a "cedar swamp."¹³ The pro-Whig *New-York Journal* reported that the arrival of the British fleet resembled "a swarm of Locusts, escaped from the bottomless pit."¹⁴

On June 30 and July 1, Howe prepared his forces for a landing at Gravesend, Long Island. The reports he had received of the area from Tryon and several Long Island Loyalists "were so satisfactory," that Howe informed Germain he was "determined to disembark the army at Gravesend."¹⁵ In the late afternoon of July 1, he gave the command to ready the transports and ordered the ships to begin moving from Sandy Hook up to Gravesend Bay where they anchored in the evening. One British officer

¹¹ Journal of HMS *Phoenix*, Captain Hyde Parker, Jr., *NDAR*, 5: 817.

¹² Quoted in George F. Scheer and Hugh F. Rankin, *Rebels and Redcoats: The American Revolution through the Eyes of those who Fought and Lived It* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1988), 148.

¹³ Anthon, ed., "Anthon's Notes," 86.

¹⁴ *New-York Journal*, 4 July 1776.

¹⁵ General Sir William Howe to Lord George Germain, 7 July 1776, Davies, ed., *Documents of the American Revolution*, 12: 157.

wrote that the ships anchored “Opposite to the little town of New Utrick [Utrecht] . . . where a landing was intended.”¹⁶

However, during the overnight hours Howe was “informed . . . of a strong pass upon a ridge of craggy heights covered with wood that lay in the route the army must [take] only 2 miles distant from the front of the enemy’s encampment and seven from Gravesend, which the rebels would undoubtedly have occupied before the King’s troops could get up to it.”¹⁷ Howe, aware that his troops were weary from the voyage from Halifax and that the Whigs had occupied the major approaches to the strategically important heights of Brooklyn, decided that the terrain and the immediate military situation on Long Island was “too hazardous” to attempt a landing before the arrival of his brother with the reinforcements from Europe. Thus, he followed the advice of General James Robertson and landed his troops on the weakly defended and staunchly loyal Staten Island instead.¹⁸

A career soldier who had served on the staffs of every British Commander-in-Chief in America since 1756, Robertson convinced Howe that his better option was to capture Staten Island. Robertson, who had established a staging area for the British army at the Watering Place on Staten Island’s northeastern shore during the French and Indian War (1754-1763), was familiar with the Island’s strategic and logistical advantages and

¹⁶ Major Francis Hutcheson to General Sir Frederick Haldimand, 10 July 1776, *NDAR*, 5: 1011.

¹⁷ General Sir William Howe to Lord George Germain, 7 July 1776, Davies, ed., *Documents of the American Revolution*, 12: 157.

¹⁸ General Sir William Howe to Lord George Germain, 7 July 1776, *Ibid*; Major Charles Stuart to the Earl of Bute, 9 July 1775, *NDAR*, 5: 989; Milton M. Klein and Ronald W. Howard, eds., *The Twilight of British Rule in Revolutionary America: The New York Letter Book of General James Robertson, 1780-1783* (Cooperstown, NY: The New York State Historical Association, 1983), 18, 33; Ranlet, *The New York Loyalists*, 72; Tiedemann, “A Revolution Foiled,” 441; Governor William Tryon to Lord George Germain, 8 July 1776, *NYCD*, 8: 681.

brought them to Howe's attention. Major Charles Stuart of the Fourth Regiment of Highland Grenadiers wrote to his father John Stuart, the Earl of Bute: "Owing to the representations made by General Robertson the plans were changed . . . we received orders to sail on the 1st July for . . . [Staten] Island instead of Long Island."¹⁹

As it turned out Staten Island was the perfect site to establish a military base of operations for the New York area. Its proximity to Manhattan, Long Island, and New Jersey, as well as the ability of the British navy to control its coast, the agricultural abundance of its farms, the fresh water springs located at the Watering Place, and the Loyalist leanings of many of its residents made the Island attractive for use as a long term staging area. "Staten Island . . . is not only very fertile, but is absolutely the key of this province; as nothing can come or go out without the Admiral's leave" wrote one British officer, "besides which, this great city [New York] and Amboy, in New Jersey, can in an hour be bombarded, as they are not above six miles distant from Staten Island."²⁰

Staten Islanders had a history of aiding the British military dating back to the French and Indian War. During that conflict, the British army allowed Staten Islanders "to supply the Troops with Provisions or Goods . . . without Fee or Reward; . . . [and] without Tax or Restraint."²¹ Payment for local provisions was prompt and in the form of gold and silver specie, which was in short supply in America. Even though the troops had overrun some of the lands near the Watering Place many Staten Islanders took from this experience the belief that an encamped British army will always make for good

¹⁹ Major Charles Stuart to John Stuart, the Earl of Bute, 9 July 1776, *NDAR*, 5: 989.

²⁰ Extract from a letter received by the Mercury Packet, 7 July 1776, in Margaret Wheeler Willard, ed., *Letters on the American Revolution, 1774-1776* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1925), 329.

²¹ See *New-York Mercury*, 27 July 1761; Leng and Davis, *Staten Island and Its People*, 1: 272; Henry G. Steinmeyer, "The Knight of October 25, 1761," *SIH* 1st ser., 12 (1951), 23.

business.²² In contrast to other locales in America where civilian-military relations were strained as a result of the French and Indian War, on Staten Island a measure of sympathy existed for the British army.²³ Thus, capturing the Island as a preliminary step to an assault on New York City would enable the British forces to obtain supplies locally from a sympathetic populace who had previously demonstrated an eagerness to assist the army and a desire to acquire British merchandise and gold specie.

In Halifax, Alexander McDonald yearned to return to his family and friends on Staten Island. However, aside from his personal reasons, McDonald believed that it made strategic sense for the British to secure the Island as a permanent staging area for operations against the Continental army in and around New York City. "I have a few Lines from a young man on the Island [Staten Island]," he wrote to Major John Small of the Royal Highland Emigrants, "who assures me that the people are still at heart firmly Attached to Government, as much so as when I Left them Except a few scoundrels which he says I know well Enough; he says the people are patiently waiting for the assistance of Government and an opportunity for them to join the Kings troops." McDonald assured Small that if British troops land on Staten Island, not only would most of its residents join the King's army but many inhabitants from the surrounding region would do so as well.²⁴

By late June the Continental army in New York City and its surrounding countryside was in pitiful shape. The transfer of ten regiments in April and May to the Canadian theater under Brigadier Generals William Thompson and John Sullivan, the

²² Smith, *Staten Island: Gateway to New York*, 51-56.

²³ For civilian-military relations in America after the French and Indian War see John Shy, *Toward Lexington: The Role of the British Army in the Coming of the American Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965).

²⁴ Captain Alexander McDonald to Major John Small, 19 February 1776, *Letter-Book of Captain Alexander McDonald*, 246, 248.

failure of soldiers to reenlist when their terms expired, frequent desertions, and the reluctance or the ineptitude of the local Whig governments at filling their militia quotas all contributed to the army's dreadful condition. Moreover, the Continental forces were ill equipped, poorly trained, lacked discipline, had a shortage of senior, battle-tested officers, and had begun to experience a decrease in morale. The dreadful shape of the Continental army in New York caught the attention of John Adams, who served as the chairman of the Continental Congress's Board of War. On July 1, he wrote to Marylander Samuel Chase: "Transports arrived at Sandy-Hook, from whence we may expect an attack in a short time upon New-York, or New-Jersey, and our Army not so strong as we could wish."²⁵ With virtually no naval or cavalry support, a shortage of weapons and ammunition, and many short-term enlistments due to expire, the odds seemed to be stacked against Washington if Howe decided to make an immediate descent on New York.

Undeterred, however, Washington continued to search for more men and equipment. The American Commander-in-Chief wrote to Congress as well as to the Whig governments of Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and New York desperately pleading with them to send additional troops. "The force I now have is trifling, considering the many and important posts that are necessary & must be supported if possible," Washington wrote to Hancock on June 29. Then with a hint of exasperation he added: "few Militia have . . . come in; the whole being about Twelve hundred . . . I have wrote, I have done every thing I could, to call them in, but they have not come, tho I

²⁵ John Adams to Samuel Chase, 1 July 1776, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 6: 1194.

am told that they are generally willing.²⁶ Washington's troubles procuring reinforcements angered John Adams who blamed the delay on "the Militia of New-Jersey and New-England [who were] not so ready as they ought to be."²⁷

Whether or not he received reinforcements, Washington was determined to "attempt to make the best disposition I can for our Troops, in order to give them [the British] a proper reception, and to prevent the ruin and destruction they are meditating against us."²⁸ Realizing that until reinforcements arrived he would have to make do with the soldiers already under his command, Washington did his best to rally the troops and to bring much needed discipline to their ranks. In an impassioned message designed to inspire his men Washington declared:

The time is now near at hand which must probably determine, whether Americans are to be, Freemen, or Slaves; whether they are to have any property they can call their own; whether their Houses, and Farms, are to be pillaged and destroyed, and they consigned to a State of Wretchedness from which no human efforts will probably deliver them. The fate of unborn Millions will now depend, under God, on the Courage and Conduct of this army – Our cruel and unrelenting Enemy leaves us no choice but a brave resistance, or the most abject submission; this is all we can expect – We have therefore to resolve to conquer or die: Our own Country's Honour, all call upon us for a vigorous and manly exertion, and if we now shamefully fail, we shall become infamous to the whole world.²⁹

In an effort to prepare his troops for what he believed would be an immediate British attack on New York City, Washington called on his subordinates to better discipline their men. He ordered the troops to practice marksmanship, decamping at a moment's notice, and marching in an orderly manner. As historian Robert Middlekauff points out,

²⁶ General George Washington to John Hancock, 29 June 1776, *GWPRWS*, 5: 148.

²⁷ John Adams to Samuel Chase, 1 July 1776, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 6: 1194.

²⁸ General George Washington to John Hancock, 29 June 1776, *GWPRWS*, 5: 148.

²⁹ See General Orders, 2 July 1776, *Ibid*, 5: 180.

Washington had the soldiers practice “moving from their camps into the trenches in order to become familiar with the ground they would have to travel when the attack came.”³⁰

The words of encouragement and the extra drill began to pay some dividends. In a report to Hancock, Washington wrote: “I have the pleasure to inform you, that an agreeable spirit and willingness for Action seem to animate and pervade the whole of our Troops.”³¹

As he readied his troops, Washington also had to contend with the danger posed by local Loyalists. On the same morning as the arrival of the British fleet from Halifax, Thomas Hickey, who was a member of Washington’s personal guard, was hanged for his role in a complicated plot to kidnap the American Commander-in-Chief, murder his staff officers, blow up King’s Bridge in northern Manhattan, capture a number of arsenals throughout the city, promote mass desertions from the Continental army, and secretly recruit a Loyalist regiment under the direction of Governor William Tryon and New York City’s Mayor David Matthews. The “Hickey Conspiracy” or “Tryon’s Plot” drew attention to the fact that Howe’s capture of New York City would be virtually guaranteed if Loyalist behavior and movements were not controlled.

To prevent the British from obtaining vital supplies and information from local Loyalists, Washington called for the immediate apprehension and removal of all persons suspected of loyalist behavior in New York City and its surrounding countryside.

Washington was led to this decision by the actions of the Loyalists on Staten Island and in Perth Amboy, New Jersey. “The known Dissafection of the People of Amboy & the

³⁰ Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 340.

³¹ General George Washington to John Hancock, 3 July 1776, *Ibid.*, 193.

Treachery of those of Staten Island who after the fairest Professions have shewn themselves our inveterate Enemies,” Washington wrote to Brigadier General William Livingston of New Jersey on July 6, “induced me to give Directions that all Persons of known Enmity or doubtful Character should be removed from Places where they might enter into Correspondence with the Enemy & aid them in their Schemes.”³²

Staten Islanders, as expected gave assistance to the British. From the moment the British fleet appeared off Sandy Hook, New Jersey, many Staten Islanders made their way to the ships and offered their services to General Howe. Writing on July 5, Brigadier General Nathanael Greene, the Whig commander on Long Island, informed Washington that he had examined four British deserters and was told that the “People of Statten Island went on board the fleet as they lay at the Hook [Sandy Hook] – several boat loads of them.”³³ One of the first Staten Islanders to go on board the British ships and offer valuable intelligence and his services to General Howe was the shipwright Richard Lawrence, a former Provincial congressman. James McFarlan, a deserter from the British army who had been aboard one of the British ships, informed the Whigs on Long Island: “A large Man, a Ship Carpenter – Richard Lawrence – came aboard . . . with a

³² See General George Washington to Brigadier General William Livingston, 6 July 1776, *Ibid*, 223. On July 5, Brigadier General William Livingston ordered Major John Duyckinck to march to Perth Amboy, New Jersey, with “600 Middlesex Militia.” Duyckinck arrived with four hundred and fifty troops after posting about one hundred and fifty of his men at the Old Blazing Star Ferry (now in the vicinity of Carteret and Rahway), which was located about half way between Elizabethtown and Perth Amboy. On the following day, Duyckinck was ordered by Brigadier General Nathaniel Heard to apprehend nine of Perth Amboy’s Loyalists. The nine arrested were: Isaac Bonnell, Johnstone Fairholme, William Hick, Philip and Michael Kearny, Dr. John Lawrence, Thomas Skinner, John Smyth, and a Captain Turnbull. See General William Livingston to Samuel Tucker, 4 July 1776; Major John Duyckinck to Brigadier General William Livingston, 6 July 1776, in Prince and Ryan, eds., *The Papers of William Livingston*, 1: 72, 74; Brigadier General William Livingston to General George Washington, 5 July 1776, *GWPRWS*, 5: 215; Major John Duyckinck to Brigadier General William Livingston, 6 July 1776, Peter Force, *American Archives: A Documentary History of the United States*. Fifth Series. 3 vols. (Washington, DC: Published under authority of an Act of Congress, 1848-1853), 1: 38; Lundin, *Cockpit of the Revolution*, 119.

³³ Major General Nathanael Greene to General George Washington, 5 July 1776, *GWPRWS*, 5: 212.

likely young Man, the first Night after they came . . . [to] Sandy Hook & told them there was nobody on the other side of the Island but a parcel of Jersey rascals . . . 500 of such.”³⁴ On June 29, Captain Roger Curtis of the HMS *Senegal* wrote in his ship’s log that he had ordered brought onboard “a Canoe who had come from Staten Island, with a Gentleman & servant & one Rifle Man who run from the Rebels.”³⁵ One Staten Islander remembered: “when the fleet arrived they lay outside of Sandy Hook for want of pilots” but “Isaac Decker . . . said he would guide them, which he did, landing in the first boat.”³⁶ These actions confirmed what many Whigs had already suspected for quite some time – that given the opportunity many Staten Islanders would rush to assist the British.

At 8 o’clock on the morning of July 2 Howe ordered the warships *Greyhound*, *Phoenix*, and *Rose*, and the first division of transports, to sail from Gravesend Bay where they had moored for the evening to the Watering Place located on Staten Island’s northeastern shore, which faced the Upper New York Bay. But because of light winds, rain showers, and a contrary tide, only the three warships made the slow passage through the Narrows, finally anchoring off the Watering Place at noon. This limited show of force was sufficient, however, given the support of the Staten Islanders and the lack of Continental artillery positioned on the heights overlooking the Narrows.

Captain Archibald Robertson of the Royal Engineers made a notation in his diary that on the afternoon of July 1, although it “rained smartly,” “the 1st division of Transports got under way with the first of the flood Tide.” As the ships sailed through

³⁴ See Examination of James McFarlan, A Soldier Belonging to the Fifty-fifth Regiment, Colonel Medie, 5 July 1776, *NDAR*, 5: 936.

³⁵ *Journal of the HMS Senegal*, Captain Roger Curtis, 29 June 1776, *Ibid*, 817.

³⁶ Anthon, ed., “Anthon’s Notes,” 130.

the Narrows they met with limited resistance from Continental forces stationed on Long Island. According to Robertson, “a good many of the Rebels [who were] in motion on shore . . . fired musquetry at the nearest Ships without effect.” By 9 PM Robertson’s transport had finally reached the Watering Place where he noticed “the 3 men of war hauled close inshore, the General [Howe] on board the *Greyhound*, and the Grenadiers and Light Infantry under Earl Percy [General Hugh Percy].” He then added: “Generals Robertson [James Robertson] and Leslie [Alexander Leslie] landed immediately without opposition.” The troops “lay near the landing Place all night.”³⁷

Major Francis Hutcheson, who was an assistant secretary to General Howe, recalled that while moored in Gravesend Bay, those onboard the British ships had noticed “the few Rebels that were on . . . [Staten] Island displayed at the hights in the Narrows the Continental Collours, which made us believe they had a good Battery on that Commanding Ground.” As the British approached the Island, however, the Continental troops quickly withdrew from their positions. To the surprise of the British, there was “no cannon upon these posts.” In fact, as the Continental soldiers retreated they pulled down “the Colours . . . and the trifling brest work that was thrown up . . . [was] deserted.”³⁸ Major Charles Stuart wrote that if the Narrows had been fortified, the British ships would have “been annoyed most prodigiously, for the wind, not being favourable, we were three hours passing them.”³⁹ Because the Whigs’ main priority for the defense of New York City had been fortifying Brooklyn Heights, they concentrated a large part of

³⁷ Excerpts from Archibald Robertson’s Diary, Transcripts, 2 July 1776, Military Collection, American Revolution, Box 1, Folder 3, SIHS.

³⁸ Major Francis Hutcheson to General Sir Frederick Haldimand, 10 July 1776, *NDAR*, 5: 1011.

³⁹ Major Charles Stuart to John Stuart, the Earl of Bute, 9 July 1776, *Ibid*, 5: 989.

their forces and their scant arsenal of heavy artillery at that position. Washington simply did not have the men or the heavy artillery necessary to effectively fortify the hills on Staten Island. Thus outnumbered and without artillery, the three to four hundred Continental soldiers posted on Staten Island put up no resistance against Howe's forces.⁴⁰

The lack of Continental resistance led Howe to order the remainder of his troops to land on Staten Island the next morning. At 6AM on July 3 a cannon fired from the HMS *Phoenix* signalled for the rest of the fleet to sail into the Upper New York Bay and for the troops to begin landing on the Island.⁴¹ As the ships passed through the Narrows they were met by sporadic musket and small cannon fire from a Continental battery located on a bluff near the Long Island coast in what is today Fort Hamilton in Brooklyn. The HMS *Asia*, armed with sixty-four large cannon, returned the fire with a broadside.⁴² The British fleet then anchored in a line off Staten Island's northern coast from the Kill van Kull in the west to the Narrows in the east where "the *Asia* brought up the Rear."⁴³ By the end of the day most of Howe's nine thousand soldiers had disembarked on the Island. On July 4, Captain Robertson wrote in his journal: "All the troops [are] landed."⁴⁴

⁴⁰ The officer in charge of the Continental troops posted on Staten Island was Captain Ephraim Manning of the Twentieth Continental Regiment from Connecticut, which was commanded by Colonel John Durkee.

⁴¹ See Journal of the HMS *Greyhound*, Captain Archibald Dickson, *NDAR*, 5: 896.

⁴² The Continental battery was located at the present site of Fort Hamilton in the Bay Ridge section of the Borough of Brooklyn in western Long Island. It contained one "field piece." See Excerpts from Archibald Robertson's Diary, Transcripts, 4 July 1776, Military Collection, American Revolution, Box 1, Folder 3, SIHS. See also the Journal of HMS *Chatham*, Captain John Raynor, *NDAR*, 5: 897; Bliven, Jr., *Under the Guns*, 330; McMillen, "Red, Green, and a Little Blue," 47; Anthon, ed., "Anthon's Notes," 108.

⁴³ *New-York Gazette*, 8 July 1776.

⁴⁴ Excerpts from Archibald Robertson's Diary, Transcripts, 4 July 1776, Military Collection, American Revolution, Box 1, Folder 3, SIHS.

Many Staten Islanders lined the Island's beaches and climbed its hilltops, anxious to catch a glimpse of the flotilla. Others made their way down to the Watering Place to welcome Howe and to pledge their loyalty to the King. "When the first troops landed," wrote local historian Harlow McMillen, "as many as 200 or 300 Islanders were reported to have approached them and pledged their allegiance and help."⁴⁵ Vice Admiral Shuldham recalled that when "His Majesty's Troops under the command of General Howe were landed . . . on Staten Island without any Opposition . . . the Inhabitants . . . immediately surrendered and put themselves under the protection of His Majesty's Arms."⁴⁶ Major Charles Stuart was pleased by how "the inhabitants received us with the greatest joy, seeing well the difference between anarchy and a regular mild government."⁴⁷ Another British officer reported that many Staten Islanders "shew the Greatest Satisfaction on our Arrival, which has relived them from the most horred Opression that can be conceaved."⁴⁸ Captain John Bowater of the Royal Marines wrote to Basil Fielding, the Earl of Denbigh: "the Troops landed on Staten Island without Opposition" and "the Inhabitants receiv'd our people with the Utmost Joy, having been long oppress'd for their Attachment to Government."⁴⁹ A more subdued Archibald

⁴⁵ Harlow McMillen, "The Oath of Allegiance Signed by the Inhabitants of Staten Island on July 9, 1776," *SIH 1st ser.*, 32 (1976), 51.

⁴⁶ Vice Admiral Molyneux Shuldham to Philip Stephens, Secretary of the Admiralty, 8 July 1776, *NDAR*, 5: 975.

⁴⁷ Major Charles Stuart to John Stuart, the Earl of Bute, 9 July 1776, *Ibid*, 989.

⁴⁸ Major Francis Hutcheson to General Sir Frederick Haldimand, 10 July 1776, *Ibid*, 5: 1011.

⁴⁹ Captain John Bowater to Basil Fielding, the Sixth Earl of Denbigh, 7 July 1776, in Marian Balderston and David Syrett, eds., *The Lost War: Letters from British Officers during the American Revolution* (New York: Horizon Press, 1975), 88.

Robertson remarked that as Howe and the first division of troops landed on the Island, he noticed “the inhabitants [were] well-coming them ashore.”⁵⁰

Howe was overwhelmed by the reception his troops received from the Staten Islanders. To Lord Germain he wrote that the army had “landed to the great joy of a most loyal people, long suffering on that account under the oppression of the rebels stationed among them, who precipitately fled on the approach of the shipping.”⁵¹ Echoing Howe’s description of the British landing, Governor Tryon wrote to Germain that the troops “disembarked . . . on Staten Island the 2nd Instant without opposition, on which occasion the inhabitants of the Island came down to welcome the arrival of their deliverers.”⁵² Even George III acknowledged the warm reception that Staten Islanders gave to the army. On August 22, Germain wrote to Tryon:

The steady loyalty of the people of Staten Island cannot be too much commended, & their affectionate reception of the troops under General Howe cannot fail to recommend them to the particular favour of Government, and I have the pleasure to acquaint you that it is his Majesty’s command that you do signify to them, in the most public manner, his Majesty’s very great satisfaction in their conduct, and in the proofs they have given of their loyalty and affection, & to assure them of His Majesty’s paternal Regard and constant Protection.⁵³

For Staten Islanders, the army of liberation had finally arrived.

Several Staten Islanders publicly cursed the policies of the Continental Congress and defiantly burned stacks of its paper currency, of which, according to one British

⁵⁰ Excerpt from Archibald Robertson’s *Diary, Transcripts*, 2 July 1776, Military Collection, American Revolution, Box 1, Folder 3, SIHS.

⁵¹ General Sir William Howe to Lord George Germain, 7 July 1776, Davies, ed., *Documents of the American Revolution*, 12: 157-158.

⁵² Governor William Tryon to Lord George Germain, 8 July 1776, *NYCD*, 8: 681.

⁵³ Lord George Germain to Governor William Tryon, 22 August 1776, *Ibid*, 685.

officer, “there were a great plenty on this Island.”⁵⁴ They “burned forty pounds in Continental money,” one eyewitness recounted, “damning the Congress, and saying that they had nothing more to do with the Congress.”⁵⁵ The practice of burning Crown officials and Loyalists in effigy became a symbol of resistance to British policies throughout America. However, to demonstrate their displeasure with the rebellion, Staten Islanders burned effigies of several Whig leaders. One evening in late July, after a thunderstorm had passed, effigies of Generals Washington, Lee, and Putnam and the Reverend Dr. John Witherspoon of Princeton, New Jersey, a New Light Presbyterian minister, were burned “amidst the most terrible imprecations against the rebels.”⁵⁶ But Staten Islanders resisted the Whigs in a bigger and more odious way, that is – by enlisting in the British army.

Immediately following the British landing, several Staten Islanders joined the King’s service. North shore resident Isaac Decker assured British military leaders that between four and five hundred male residents of Staten Island were fit and ready to bear arms.⁵⁷ Writing from his cabin aboard the *Duchess of Gordon* moored in New York harbor, Tryon informed Lord George Germain that on July 6 he had “received the Militia of the Island at Richmondtown, where near four hundred appeared, who cheerfully, on my recommendation, took the oath of allegiance and fidelity to his Majesty.” He added:

⁵⁴ Lieutenant Loftus Cliffe to Unknown, 8 July 1776, Military Collection, American Revolution, Box 1, Folder 3, SIHS.

⁵⁵ See Examination of William Ash, from Staten Island, 8 July 1776, *Am. Arch.*, V, 1: 120.

⁵⁶ Frank Moore, *Diary of the American Revolution: From Newspapers and Original Documents*. 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner, 1858), 1: 277.

⁵⁷ See Examination of Abram Van Duzar, of New York, from Staten Island, 9 July 1776, *Am. Arch.*, V, 1: 200.

“I am to have another muster, for the inlistment of volunteers to form a Provincial Corps for the defence of the Island as the General [Howe] finds it an important quarter to hold against the rebels.”⁵⁸

On July 9, Tryon enlisted a large number of volunteers for a local provincial corps and company of light horse to defend Staten Island and provide auxiliary support for the British army. Tryon was not a novice at the recruitment of militia. As governor of North Carolina, he had successfully raised several regiments between 1768 and 1771 in order to crush the Regulator insurrection against his administration.⁵⁹ The British gave command of Staten Island’s Loyalist troops to prominent and influential members of the community who had the ability to be successful recruiters. Christopher Billopp, the former assemblyman and Staten Island’s largest landowner, was commissioned a lieutenant colonel and given command of the Island’s provincial corps, which was called Billopp’s Corps of Staten Island Militia. Isaac Decker, whose loyalist sympathies were never in doubt, commanded the light horse.⁶⁰

The news that the British had taken Staten Island without opposition quickly reached the Continental Congress meeting at Philadelphia. John Adams was shocked and

⁵⁸ Governor William Tryon to Lord George Germain, 8 July 1776, *NYCD*, 8: 681. In an elaborate ceremony held at Richmond Town on July 9, which was attended by Governor Tryon and General Sir William Howe, 507 Staten Islanders, the majority of which were members of the Island’s militia, formally signed the oath of allegiance to the King. See McMillen, “The Oath of Allegiance Signed by the Inhabitants of Staten Island,” 52.

⁵⁹ See Nelson, *William Tryon and the Course of Empire*, chap. 5.

⁶⁰ Other well respected residents of Staten Island who were given military commissions in either Billopp’s Corps or the company of light horse were Christopher Billopp’s sons Joseph and Willett Billopp, and his father-in-law Benjamin Seaman, as well as Richard Conner and Abraham Jones. For a muster roll of Billopp’s Corps see Morris, *Memorial History of Staten Island*, 2: 21-22. Intelligence received by the Continental forces in New Jersey indicated that members of Billopp’s Corps received “the same pay as the King’s troops,” while those who served in the company of light horse were promised “one dollar per day when called to duty.” See the Examination of Abram Van Duzar, of New York, from Staten Island, July 9, 1776, *Am. Arch.*, V, 1: 200. During the Revolution some Staten Islanders joined other provincial regiments such as Cortlandt Skinner’s New Jersey Volunteers and Oliver De Lancey’s New York Volunteers.

dismayed at the enthusiastic reception the Staten Islanders had given the British. He was most disturbed by the number of residents who had quickly enlisted in the King's service. In a letter to Abigail, his wife, Adams criticized the "unprincipled and unfeeling and unnatural inhabitants of Staten Island" for taking up arms against the Whig cause and for "cordially receiving the enemy." Because of their actions, he characterized Staten Islanders as "an ignorant, cowardly pack of scoundrels" and added "their numbers are small, and their spirit less."⁶¹

While Staten Island's Loyalists warmly welcomed the British army, residents who favored the Whigs fled to New Jersey. Isaac Simonson recalled how John and Peter Latourette, who lived near Richmondtown, "were great patriots [who] . . . when the British came went to Jersey." The two men became members of a group of New Jersey Whigs who raided the Island throughout the war.⁶² When the British landed, Cornelius Dissosway immediately fled to Elizabethtown, New Jersey. On the evening of July 4, two Staten Islanders, James Fitz Randolph and "a relation of Mr. Dississway" secretly went to Woodbridge, New Jersey, and met with Daniel Moores, who was a member of Woodbridge's Committee of Observation. The men asked Moores to inform Dissosway, who was at Elizabethtown, that if he did not return to Staten Island, "his Estate shall be forfeited." In addition, Fitz Randolph told Moores that some Staten Islanders had insulted him "for being a Whig" and that even though he wished to remain in

⁶¹ John Adams to Abigail Adams, 11 July 1776, *Am. Arch.*, V, 1: 183.

⁶² Anthon, ed., "Anthon's Notes," 133.

Woodbridge, he had to immediately return to the Island “to save his Family from being Hostages.”⁶³

The “ardent Whig” Hendrick Garrison, who had served on the Richmond County Committee of Safety, took his family and fled to New Jersey, leaving his property to the care of a slave named Harry. According to one Staten Islander, when Garrison returned to the Island after the British evacuation in December 1783, he discovered that Harry had “sold the produce of the farm to the British, and . . . presented him [Garrison] with a hoard of many hundred pounds which he had thus accumulated.” Unfortunately, Harry would remain in bondage for another fourteen years. He was eventually manumitted in 1807.⁶⁴

Several members of the Mersereau family, who were perhaps the strongest Whig supporters on Staten Island, also went to New Jersey. John and Joshua III became operatives in an American spy network working in and around Staten Island and eastern New Jersey, which also included Joshua III’s son John La Grange Mersereau and others. In addition to his espionage activities, Joshua Mersereau III served under Elias Boudinot as an Assistant Commissary of Prisoners in the Continental army.⁶⁵ In late July, after the

⁶³ Daniel Moores described the two Staten Islanders as “staunch Friends” to the American cause. Fitz Randolph told Moores that he had overheard a British officer mention “there should be 3000 Men landed at Amboy . . . and from what he could gather, that they intended to push Matters in the Jerseys.” General William Livingston sent a copy of Moores’s letter to Washington. See Brigadier General William Livingston to General George Washington, 5 July 1776, *GWPRWS*, 5: 215-216.

⁶⁴ Anthon, ed., “Anthon’s Notes,” 20; Jackson and Jackson, eds., *African American History on Staten Island*, 38; *Wills of Richmond County, New York, 1787-1863* (Staten Island, NY: The Staten Island Historical Society, 1941), 86.

⁶⁵ Joshua III, John, Jacob, and John L. Mersereau eventually joined the Continental army and became key operatives in an American spy ring that provided General George Washington with intelligence on British activities on Staten Island, in New York, and in eastern New Jersey. Other members of the Mersereau family known for their Whig sympathies were Cornelius and Paul Mersereau. See John E. Bakeless, *Turncoats, Traitors, and Heroes: Espionage in the American Revolution* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1959), 123, 166, 177-181, 194-195, 277, 345, 364; Pension Claim of John L. Mersereau, in

British capture of Staten Island, Alexander McDonald wrote to his wife Susannah: “I wonder how Justice Massaroe’s [Joshua Mersereau III] heart feels Now?”⁶⁶ Governor Tryon offered a bounty of one hundred dollars for Joshua Mersereau III, dead or alive.⁶⁷

For the Whigs who remained on Staten Island the “early days of July were a . . . disheartening time.”⁶⁸ Just like Loyalists in Whig-dominated New England, they publicly showed support for the other side, while privately professing their true sympathies. However, Staten Island Whigs who stubbornly refused to cooperate with the British and local Loyalist authorities were deemed open enemies to the Crown and endured public harassment, faced imprisonment, and in some cases had their homes and property commandeered for military use.

Adrian Bancker, for instance, went “to the Jerseys to seek a place for my Wife & Children” but returned to Staten Island in order to remain with his property.⁶⁹ When the British troops landed on July 2, Bancker’s home was commandeered for use as Howe’s headquarters. Bancker was “treated to a Quarter on board one of the Men of War,” wrote Major Francis Hutcheson, “and General Howe had taken care to give orders for his

John C. Dann, ed., *The Revolution Remembered: Eyewitness Accounts of the War for Independence* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 347-350; McMillen, “An Island Saga: The Mersereau Family: Part II,” 156-159; “An Island Saga: The Mersereau Family: Part III,” *COSI* 1 (1990), 168-172; “An Island Saga: The Mersereau Family: Part IV,” *COSI* 1 (1990), 184-185; Brigadier General Hugh Mercer to General George Washington, 16 July 1776, *GWPRWS*, 5: 344-346.

⁶⁶ Captain Alexander McDonald to Susannah McDonald, 27 July 1776, *Letter-Book of Captain Alexander McDonald*, 290.

⁶⁷ See Examination of William Ash, from Staten Island, 8 July 1776, *Am. Arch.*, V, 1: 120.

⁶⁸ Harlow McMillen, *A History of Staten Island, New York, during the American Revolution* (Staten Island, NY: The Staten Island Historical Society, 1976), 11.

⁶⁹ Adrian Bancker to Evert Bancker, 29 June 1776, Bancker Family Papers, Correspondence 1775-1787, Folder 2, NYHS.

Reception.”⁷⁰ Despite the hardships he endured, Adrian Bancker remained true to his “principles and sentiments.” As his nephew Abraham pointed out, he demonstrated a “degree of virtue and steadfastness in his country’s cause when in the midst of his enemies [that was] most noble.”⁷¹ Unlike the rest of his family, Cornelius Mersereau decided to remain on Staten Island. However, “the British turned him out of his property and occupied it themselves,” remembered Dr. John T. Harrison, “and he may be said to have suffered everything but death.”⁷²

Staten Islanders arrested for their Whig sympathies were placed in cramped British guard- and jailhouses located throughout the Island. Many of these prisoners were eventually released either for health reasons or because they had chosen to renounce the rebellion and pledged their loyalty to the King. However, those who “were hot-headed and stood out for their country” were held for longer periods. After September 1776, some Staten Island Whigs were sent to either land-based prisons in British-occupied New York City or to the various prison ships, the most notorious of which was the *Jersey*, moored in New York harbor. Isaac Simonson recounted the story of how his wife’s uncles, Hezekiah and Abraham Reckhow, who lived on Staten Island’s south shore, were arrested for their support of the Revolution. The two men were taken to a “very dark” guardhouse that was “partly under ground” in one of the British redoubts on the northern end of the Island. Hezekiah, who suffered several epileptic seizures while in

⁷⁰ Major Francis Hutcheson to General Sir Frederick Haldimand, 10 July 1776, *NDAR*, 5: 1011. See also the Examination of William Ash, from Staten Island, 8 July 1776, *Am. Arch.*, V, 1: 120.

⁷¹ Abraham Bancker to Evert Bancker, 25 January 1777, Miscellaneous Genealogical Files Collection, Box 1, Bancker Folder, SIHS.

⁷² Anthon, ed., “Anthon’s Notes,” 147.

British custody, was released for health reasons. However, Abraham was eventually “taken from the guard-house to the prison-ship *Jersey*, where he suffered greatly.”⁷³

The main British encampment was established at the Watering Place on the Island’s northeastern shore. But British troops were dispersed throughout Staten Island. “The British were confident that the Americans could not oppose them successfully if they tried,” wrote historian Bruce Bliven, Jr., “and so an elaborate deployment was going ahead slowly and carefully.”⁷⁴ Writing to Washington on July 4 from Elizabethtown, New Jersey, Brigadier General William Livingston reported: “We are fully Confirmed in the Enemy’s having Posts along the whole Staten Island Shore as far as Amboy – They have thrown up a couple of small Breast Works.” The next day Livingston observed: “The Enemy are throwing up Breast Works at every Avenue to the Island, but do not appear otherwise very busy.”⁷⁵ Intelligence obtained from British deserters and American civilians who had been to Staten Island indicated that Howe had not made plans to construct major entrenchments or fortifications on the Island. Instead, he had posted several guards along the coast and kept his troops active with drills and parades.⁷⁶

⁷³ Ibid, 133-134. Another Staten Islander imprisoned for his Whig sympathies was Barent Dupuy, Sr., whose son, Barent, Jr., “would go to visit him at the guard-house and carry him snuff, of which the old man was very fond, but which the sentries and officers would not allow,” remembered Isaac Simonson. “Old De Pew was finally taken very sick,” he continued, “and his son went to fetch him home.” Unfortunately, Barent, Sr. died that evening in his sleep.

⁷⁴ Bliven, Jr., *Under the Guns*, 332.

⁷⁵ Brigadier General William Livingston to General George Washington, 4 July 1776; Brigadier General William Livingston to General George Washington, 5 July 1776; General George Washington to John Hancock, 4-5 July 1776, *GWPRWS*, 5: 202, 204-205, 216. To John Hancock, Washington wrote that he had received intelligence from Brigadier General Livingston indicating: “the Enemy are throwing up small works at All the passes on the North Side of Staten Island, which It is probable they mean to secure.”

⁷⁶ See Examination of William Ash, from Staten Island, 8 July 1776; Examination of Abram Van Duzar, of New York, from Staten Island, 9 July 1776, *Am. Arch.*, V, 1: 120, 200. See also Examination of Emanuel Josephson, of New York, Deserter, 10 July 1776, Transcript, Military Collection, American Revolution, Box 1, Folder 1, SIHS.

Contrary to these reports, Howe had made plans to dig in and fortify the entire Island. By the end of July, the British had constructed several fortifications on Staten Island's heights. Colonel Stephen Kemble, the Deputy Adjutant General for the British army, confirmed the timely progression of the British fortifications. In his journal entry for July 26, Kemble recorded that the troops had begun to fortify the hills on the Island's northeastern shore. The British thought these hills strategically important because they overlooked the main encampment at the Watering Place and afforded a commanding view of New York harbor and the surrounding areas. "Our Redoubts, begun on the heights above the Watering-place, in great forwardness," wrote Kemble. He added: "They consist of a Redoubt to contain 200, another of 60, and a third of 20 men."⁷⁷

The British eventually constructed key fortifications in areas such as Decker's Ferry (now Port Richmond) on Staten Island's northwestern shore and Billopp's Point (now Tottenville) on the south shore opposite Perth Amboy, New Jersey, as well as at the center of the Island near Richmondtown, on the heights overlooking the Watering Place, and at the Narrows. In addition, the British deployed several war ships to patrol the waters off Staten Island and utilized Loyalist troops to strengthen the guard posts along the Island's coast. Thus, the British had transformed Staten Island into an armed fortress.

Some of the British soldiers were billeted in the homes of Loyalist Staten Islanders; while others were housed in make shift quarters in the abandoned homes of Whigs who fled to New Jersey. The British also quartered troops in commercial establishments, public buildings, and barns. On July 9, Brigadier General Hugh Mercer, who commanded the Continental forces in New Jersey, informed Washington that

⁷⁷ *The Kemble Papers, 1773-1779*. 2 vols. (New York: New York Historical Society Collections 1883), 1: 82.

Howe's troops "lye cantoned in the farmers Houses along the Shores of the Island."⁷⁸ British Lieutenant Loftus Cliffe was encamped with the Forty-sixth Regiment of Foot near Richmondtown. "We are . . . near Richmond, their Capitol," he wrote, "most of us lye in Barns upon a blanket." However, Cliffe was fortunate because of his officer's rank "to have got into a good house and have a Bear Skin under me."⁷⁹

Staten Island's approximately three thousand residents were now confronted with an army of nine thousand British regulars and a few hundred Loyalist refugees from the surrounding region. The sparsely populated Island did not have enough buildings to accommodate Howe's troops and the Loyalist refugees. Thus, many British soldiers pitched tents in fields and orchards and along hillsides. For example, the Forty-second Scottish Highlanders set up their tents in the apple orchards behind the home of John and Dorcas Bodine, which was located in the middle of the Island on property that was once part of Governor Thomas Dongan's Cassiltowne Manor.⁸⁰ The standard size of tents used by the British regulars measured six and a half feet square and five feet high, and housed five soldiers. However, Staten Islander Peter Wandel recalled that shortly after landing at the Watering Place the British constructed large tents from sailcloth, some of

⁷⁸ Brigadier General Hugh Mercer to General George Washington, 9 July 1776, *GWPRWS*, 5: 243-244. Mercer commanded the Continental army's *Flying Camp*, which was comprised of militia units from Maryland, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania.

⁷⁹ Lieutenant Loftus Cliffe to Unknown, 8 July 1776, Military Collection, American Revolution, Box 1, Folder 2, SIHS.

⁸⁰ Audrey W. Bodine, *A History of the Bodine Family of Staten Island, New York, from 1680* (La Jolla, CA: Published by the author, 1986), 46.

which held three hundred men. He also remembered that there were so many tents covering the Island that it seemed as if “not a blade of grass could be seen.”⁸¹

Prior to the British army’s arrival at New York, Washington accurately predicted that after the long voyage from Halifax the soldiers would be in need of fresh provisions and supplies, and that securing them would be one of Howe’s top priorities. The American Commander-in-Chief therefore began to work on preventing the livestock and horses in exposed areas of Long- and Staten Islands from falling into British hands. On June 27, he wrote to Nathaniel Woodhull, who was the president of the New York Provincial Congress and a brigadier general in the New York militia, that the British “will need Refreshment.” “Common Prudence,” he continued, “and a Regard to our own Safety, strongly evince the Necessity of depriving them of such Supplies as will enable them to act with more Vigour & Spirit against us.” To accomplish this he suggested “the Removal of the Stock of Cattle & Horses” from Staten Island and parts of Long Island.⁸²

The next day, the New York Provincial Congress appointed a committee to discuss with Washington plans to frustrate Howe’s attempts to procure fresh provisions for his men. Following a lengthy meeting with Washington and his staff officers, the committee agreed that arrangements should be made for the immediate removal of “all the Cattle Horses and Sheep” from Staten Island as well as from exposed areas of Long Island.⁸³ However, the proposal still needed the approval of the full Congress.

⁸¹ Sylvia R. Frey, *The British Soldier in America: A Social History of Military Life in the Revolutionary Period* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), 40. For Peter Wandel’s observations see Anthon, ed., “Anthon’s Notes,” 155.

⁸² General George Washington to Brigadier General Nathaniel Woodhull, 27 June 1776, *GWPRS*, 5: 128.

⁸³ The members of the committee appointed to confer with Washington about the removal of livestock consisted of Jacob Blackwell of Queens County, Richard Conner of Richmond County, John

The New York Provincial Congress took up the committee's recommendations on June 29, the day of the British fleet's arrival off Sandy Hook. The fleet's presence, however, provided the Provincial Congress with the incentive to approve Washington's plan. Thus, Congress agreed to do all in its power to remove the cattle, sheep, and horses – except those deemed “indispensably necessary” to the residents – from Staten Island and those areas of Long Island deemed most exposed to the enemy.⁸⁴ The New York Provincial Congress also gave specific orders to the Richmond County Committee of Safety to arrange to have Staten Island's livestock taken to New Jersey where adequate grazing lands could be found. To help with the transfer, Congress enlisted the help of the Elizabethtown Committee of Observation.⁸⁵

Anxious to hamper British entrenchment, Washington appealed to Nathaniel Heard, who was recently promoted to brigadier general, to assist in removing Staten Island's livestock and horses. In a June 29 directive, Washington told Heard: “It being a Matter of much Consequence to prevent the ministerial Fleet and Army from obtaining Supplies of fresh Provisions, as was experienced during the Blockade of Boston by our Army, it is indispensably necessary, that all the Cattle and Stock, along the Jersey and Staten Island Shores, and within their Vicinity should be immediately removed out of

Leffertse of Kings County, and Thomas Tredwell and Thomas Wickham of Suffolk County. See Council of War, 28 June 1776, *Ibid*, 130-131.

⁸⁴ See Proceedings of the New York Provincial Congress, 29 June 1776, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 6: 1439.

⁸⁵ New York Provincial Congress to the Elizabethtown Committee of Observation, 29 June 1776, *Ibid*, 1440.

Reach of the Shipping and their Tenders.” He ended by urging Heard to “take every Step in your Power to have it carried into Execution.”⁸⁶

When the British began to gather off Staten Island’s coast, preparations for securing the livestock took on more urgency. “Yesterday evening fifty of them came up the Bay, and Anchored on the Staten Island side,” Washington wrote to Hancock, “their views I cannot precisely determine, but am extremely apprehensive as part of ‘em only came, that they mean to surround the Island and secure the Stock upon It.” Having no time to wait for Heard and not trusting the Richmond County Committee of Safety to act quickly enough to prevent the British from securing the livestock, Washington directed Captain Ephraim Manning, who commanded the Continental troops on the Island, to immediately “drive the Stock off, without waiting for the assistance or direction of the Committee there [Staten Island], lest their slow mode of transacting business might produce too much delay.”⁸⁷

The plan to remove Staten Island’s livestock and horses fell short of its intended goal when Captain Manning failed to fully execute Washington’s orders. Manning explained to Washington that with Howe’s forces fast approaching the Island, securing the livestock was impossible without risking the capture of all or part of his men. “Last Night about 12 oClock I recd your Excellencies Orders to give my Assistance in taking the Stock off Staten Island,” Manning wrote to Washington on July 3, “beg leave to inform your Excellency, that by the Advice of all my Officers, I left the Island Yesterday about 3 oClock P. M. the Inhabitants being unfriendly & the Enemy so near & my Party

⁸⁶ Robert Hanson Harrison to Brigadier General Nathaniel Heard, 29 June 1776, *Am. Arch.*, IV, 6: 1134-1135.

⁸⁷ General George Washington to John Hancock, 3 July 1776, *GWPRWS*, 5: 193.

so small, had I staid any longer we must have fallen into their Hands, as they were surrounding the Island with their Shipping.”⁸⁸ Manning’s troops were not the only Continental forces that attempted to remove Staten Island’s livestock and horses. A cavalry unit had arrived from Elizabethtown, but it too was forced to quickly retreat when the British landed on the Island.⁸⁹

Washington reaped the bitter fruit of New York politics when widespread opposition from Staten Islanders hampered the removal of the livestock and horses from the Island. Instead of cooperating with the Continental troops, Staten Islanders impeded the operation, hiding their animals by driving them into Staten Island’s densely wooded areas. This was not surprising given the Staten Islanders’ Loyalist reputation. A frustrated Brigadier General John Morin Scott of the New York militia wrote to the New York Provincial Congress: “Our infamous brethren of Staten Island, instead of assisting the troops in removing the stock, drove them into hiding places.” He estimated that “not above a hundred” head of cattle were driven off the Island.⁹⁰ Governor Jonathan Trumbull of Connecticut wrote to Jeremiah Wadsworth, the Commissary General of the Connecticut militia: “Staten Island are mostly Tory’s – they are ordered to send off their stock, but they found means to delay & delay, so that, we had but Just got off the fat Cattle, when the Enemy, as they wished, came on, & prevented our taking off the

⁸⁸ Captain Ephraim Manning to General George Washington, 3 July 1776, *Ibid*, 194.

⁸⁹ Captain John Bowater to Basil Fielding, the Sixth Earl of Denbigh, 7 July 1776, in Balderston and Syrett, eds., *The Lost War*, 88. “A Body of five Hundred [American] Rifle men & one Troop of light Horse, who was Employ’d in destroying & driving off the Cattle, Stock, &c,” wrote Captain John Bowater, “Retreated very precipitally.”

⁹⁰ Brigadier General John Morin Scott to the New York Provincial Congress, 5 July 1776, *Am. Arch.*, V, 1: 22.

Lean.”⁹¹ The lack of cooperation that the Continental forces received in their attempt to remove the livestock and horses from Staten Island demonstrated the weakness of the Whig position there.

General Howe used local Loyalists to procure supplies from the residents of Staten Island. He dispatched Cortlandt Skinner of New Jersey to the Island and ordered him to purchase provisions from the residents with hard currency. Skinner was also ordered to inform Staten Islanders as to where to deliver their goods in the future.⁹² “General Howe immediately or within a few days after his landing, employed Isaac Decker (a very noted man and great friend of the British) . . . to go all over the Island, and direct the farmers, if willing to dispose of their cattle, or sheep, . . . to drive them to the Watering-Place,” recounted Isaac Simonson. He added: “None were taken by force [as] Decker himself had nothing to do with bringing them, and when the farmers had brought them, they were all paid by the paymaster.”⁹³ The British commander gave Richard Lawrence the position of Master Carpenter of shipyards and ordered him to seize the vessels, naval stores, and timber of unrepentant Whigs. Lawrence was also employed in building several flat-bottomed boats. These boats were used to transport British troops and their baggage during the invasion of Long Island in late August.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Governor Jonathan Trumbull to Jeremiah Wadsworth, 4 July 1776, *NDAR*, 5: 918.

⁹² Thomas Fleming, *1776: Year of Illusions* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1975), 299.

⁹³ Quoted in Anthon, ed., “Anthon’s Notes,” 130.

⁹⁴ Leng and Davis, *Staten Island and Its People*, 1: 201; Sabine, *Sabine’s Loyalists*, 2: 6; McMillen, “Green, and Red, and a Little Blue,” 48; Examination of Emanuel Josephson, of New York, Deserter, 10 July 1776, Transcript, Military Collection, American Revolution, Box 1, Folder 1, SIHS; Examination of William Ash, from Staten Island, 8 July 1779, *Am Arch.*, V, 1: 120. Ash told the Continentals in Elizabethtown, New Jersey, that Lawrence “was made a collector.”

The British army was desperately in need of horses, wagons, and drivers to transport their heavy artillery, equipment, and baggage. In their efforts to recruit drivers and acquire horses and wagons, the British relied on Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Billopp, the former assemblyman, and the brothers George and Roger Barnes. Billopp recruited “several hundred men to drive wagons and artillery for the army, as likewise many horses and wagons for their Service.”⁹⁵ It is very likely that the men employed as drivers by the British on Staten Island were not only natives, white and black, but also Loyalists who had fled from Whig-occupied New York City, eastern New Jersey, and Long Island. The British army’s need for drivers also led the Quartermaster General’s Department to employ slaves who had escaped to Staten Island seeking protection and freedom. In a day book kept by Roger Barnes, a former member of the Richmond County Committee of Safety, and after 1777 by his brother George, it was noted that Staten Islanders contributed several horses and wagons to “the Kings Service” in order “to beat the Rebbels on long Island.”⁹⁶ An account book dated August 1776 kept by the British Quartermaster General’s Department recorded the number of horses and wagons supplied to the army, their appraised value, and the owner’s name. For example, Christopher Billopp’s three horses and one wagon were appraised at £48 and £12 respectively; two horses (£17 each) and one wagon (£16) belonging to John Journeyay, a former Provincial congressman, were valued at £50; and Daniel Lake, a miller, was listed as providing Howe’s army with one horse valued at £7 and one wagon valued at £12.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Loyalist Claim of Christopher Billopp, Staten Island Loyalist Collection, Box 1, Folder 1, SIHS.

⁹⁶ Barnes Day Book (c. 1776 – 1805), Misc. Genealogical Files Collection, Box 1, Folder 8, SIHS.

⁹⁷ List of Horses and Wagons in His Majesty’s Service, August 1776, Military Collection, American Revolution, Box 1, Folder 12, SIHS.

On July 4, British officials announced wage rates for Staten Islanders employed as wagon drivers. Residents hired to drive what were referred to as “heavy wagons” pulled by a team of four horses or oxen were paid eleven shillings per day, while the driver whose wagon was hitched to one horse or ox earned eight shillings. These rates more than likely applied to white drivers.⁹⁸ Black drivers were paid less than their white counterparts.⁹⁹

The British military was also dependent on locally cut wood for fuel. After landing his troops on Staten Island, Howe immediately set out to procure large amounts of firewood. The soldiers were supplied with wood from the Island’s dense forests and from private woodlots. Beginning in July 1776 and continuing throughout the war, the British and local Loyalists cleared large sections of woodland from Staten Island. For example, Benjamin Seaman employed several teams of residents, horses, and wagons in cutting and transporting wood to the British from his property.¹⁰⁰

Although the British military purchased wood directly from private individuals, its enormous need for fuel was satisfied through a contracting system. Local contractors in each district of Staten Island were issued permits to cut a proportion of wood from lands either abandoned by or commandeered from Whig sympathizers. The contractors were to transport this wood to designated military drop-off points. Unfortunately, some

⁹⁸ British Order Book #13, Transcript, Military Collection, American Revolution, Box 1, Folder 4, SIHS.

⁹⁹ Hodges, *Root and Branch*, 149, points out “although the British paid these laborers less than they did white Loyalists, wartime necessity permitted desegregation of several occupations such as cart man, wagon driver, and carpenter. As the labor shortage worsened, blacks commanded the same inflationary wages as whites.”

¹⁰⁰ “1783-To the King-One Bill for 1017 Cords of Wood,” *SIH* 1st ser., 31 (1972), 79.

of these contractors stripped entire estates of their timber.¹⁰¹ Peter Wandel remembered that before the Revolution the Island's hills were thickly "covered with all kinds of timber," while Isaac Simonson lamented "this was all cleared during the Revolution . . . Hundreds and Hundreds of acres were cut."¹⁰²

During the first months of British occupation, the Staten Islanders were "well used," reported one British deserter, "no soldier dare do anything against them."¹⁰³ Aware of the negative effects that plundering may have on support for the Crown, Howe ordered his subordinates to severely punish any member of his forces caught looting the civilian population. Staten Islanders were to be paid immediately for their goods. In addition, strict curfews were initiated to prevent soldiers from committing theft under the cover of darkness.¹⁰⁴ This strict discipline was also applied to the Hessians who joined the British on the Island in mid-August.¹⁰⁵ One Hessian officer wrote: "We received very strict orders of discipline because Staten Island was still sympathetic to the Crown."¹⁰⁶ Another Hessian noted in his diary that "all food supplied to the troops must be paid for, dearly and with hard cash."¹⁰⁷

¹⁰¹ See Kenneth Scott, "Cutting of Staten Island Forests During the Revolution," *PSIIAS* 17 (1955), 8-13. The British also used locally procured wood for the construction of pickets, fascines, palisades, pontoon bridges, and to repair keels and masts on their ships.

¹⁰² Quoted in Anthon, ed., "Anthon's Notes," 160.

¹⁰³ See Examination of James McFarlan, a soldier belonging to the Fifty-fifth Regiment, *Am. Arch.*, V, 1: 199.

¹⁰⁴ British Order Book #13, Transcript, Military Collection, American Revolution, Box 1, Folder 4, SIHS. See also Gruber, *The Howe Brothers*, 92; Frey, *The British Soldier in America*, 75.

¹⁰⁵ Atwood, *The Hessians*, 60.

¹⁰⁶ Walter G. Buchholz, Anton Floess, Mary Ann Furetti, Otto J. Grossmann, Rudolph Lindenfeld, eds., *Journal of the Grenadier Battalion von Mimmigerode, 1776-1784* (Staten Island, NY: The Staten Island Historical Society, 1976), 7.

¹⁰⁷ Burgoyne, ed., *A Hessian Diary*, 36-37.

Howe's strict orders were welcome news to Staten Islanders who resented the brazen way in which Whig commanders and their troops had treated them. The Island's residents had complained to British officers that their homes and farms had been plundered by the Whig troops.¹⁰⁸ In addition, Staten Islanders hired by the Whigs to construct guardhouses and entrenchments never received compensation for their labor. Instead, they received empty promises.¹⁰⁹

While political loyalty and personal resentment had much to do with the willingness of many Staten Islanders to provide the British troops with fresh provisions and supplies, the lure of British specie cannot be ignored. Soon after their arrival, the British quickly returned Staten Island to the hard money standard. Captain John Bowater told the Earl of Denbigh that Staten Islanders "sell their things to the Soldiers at the most Reasonable Terms . . . there is fresh Provisions & Vegetables Enough for . . . six Weeks without distressing the Inhabitants who like our Gold & Silver better than the Congress paper money."¹¹⁰ One Staten Islander recalled that several days after the British landing, four soldiers came to his parents' house and "said they wanted something to eat." Following their meal, the soldiers "threw down a half dollar." He also remembered that Howe's troops "in general behaved at first very well, paying for everything they could lay their hands on" mainly with "English Dollars."¹¹¹ One member of the British high

¹⁰⁸ Lieutenant Loftus Cliffe to Unknown, 8 July 1776, Transcript, Military Collection, American Revolution, Box 1, Folder 2, SIHS.

¹⁰⁹ McMillen, "Green, and Red, and a Little Blue," 23-24.

¹¹⁰ Captain John Bowater to Basil Fielding, Sixth Earl of Denbigh, 7 July 1776, in Balderston and Syrett, eds., *The Lost War*, 88-89.

¹¹¹ Anthon, ed., "Anthon's Notes," 76.

command observed that the “Residence of the Army enriches the Island, and gives it a good Reward for its Loyalty.”¹¹² Brigadier General John Morin Scott of the New York militia informed the New York Provincial Congress that “the enemy . . . live in great harmony with [the] inhabitants” of Staten Island, “who sell them their stock for hard money, and I suppose [they] were never so happy in their lives.”¹¹³

One of those “happy” Staten Islanders was Gozen Ryers. For Ryers, the arrival of the British troops was an opportunity to increase his personal wealth. He became one of the British army’s chief military contractors for the Island and made a fortune supplying the troops with livestock and other provisions from both Staten Island and New Jersey.¹¹⁴ Thus for Ryers and other Staten Islanders, Loyalism came with its material rewards.

There is no question that the British forces were thankful for the supplies and fresh provisions provided by the Staten Islanders. Lieutenant Colonel Mungo Campbell of the Fifty-fifth Regiment of Foot wrote that for the first time since he had left Europe he had “refreshment and repose.” Campbell described the Island as “the most beautiful and fertile in the world, [it] supplys the Army, with the very Luxuries of life.”¹¹⁵ For Major Charles Stuart, Howe couldn’t have picked a better place to establish an encampment than on Staten Island. He told his father: “Our situation is by no means despicable, we are in the most beautiful Island that nature could form or art improve,

¹¹² Tatum, ed., *The American Journal of Ambrose Serle*, 37.

¹¹³ Brigadier General John Morin Scott to the New York Provincial Congress, 5 July 1776, *Am. Arch.*, V, 1: 22.

¹¹⁴ See Anthon, ed., “Anthon’s Notes,” 75; Loring McMillen, “Gozen Ryers and the Port Richmond Hotel,” *COSI* 1 (1986-1987), 51-56.

¹¹⁵ Lieutenant Colonel Mungo Campbell to Duncan Campbell, July 8, 1776, in “A 1776 Item,” *SIH* 1st ser., 23 (1962), 22.

[and] we have everything we want.”¹¹⁶ Another British officer wrote: “This Island is the most beautiful fertile spott I was ever in, we have a good deal of fresh provisions . . . how different this is from the inhospitable coast of Nova Scotia, where nothing was to be seen but impervious Woods and barren soil and cold moist Climate even in June.”¹¹⁷

On July 12, Admiral Richard Lord Howe arrived onboard his flagship the HMS *Eagle*. The *Eagle* sailed through the Narrows and was greeted with a thunderous salute from “all the Ships of War in the Harbour” and “by the Cheers of the Sailors all along the Ships, and by those of the Soldiers on the Shore.”¹¹⁸ As soon as the *Eagle* anchored off Staten Island, the admiral’s brother, Sir William, as well as Admiral Shuldhham and other British officers “came on board.” Lord Howe informed them that the British government had given him and his brother the authority to act as peace commissioners. However, the admiral was given the sobering news that the Continental Congress had issued a declaration of independence, which Ambrose Serle stated was proof of “the Villainy and Madness of these deluded People.”¹¹⁹

In late July, nine hundred Scottish Highlanders and a unit of light horse arrived on Staten Island. On July 21, Brigadier General Nathanael Greene reported to Washington that he had received intelligence of “Eight hundred Negroes Collected on Statten Island, this day to be formed into a Regiment.”¹²⁰ On August 1, the Howes were joined by a

¹¹⁶ Major Charles Stuart to John Stuart, the Earl of Bute, 9 July 1776, *NDAR*, 5: 989.

¹¹⁷ Lieutenant Loftus Cliffe to Unknown, 8 July 1776, Military Collection, American Revolution, Box 1, Folder 2, SIHS.

¹¹⁸ Tatum, Jr., ed., *The American Journal of Ambrose Serle*, 28.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, 30.

¹²⁰ Major General Nathanael Greene to George Washington, 21 July 1776, *GWPRWS*, 5: 414.

small fleet commanded by Admiral Sir Peter Parker with about three thousand troops from the ill-fated June campaign to capture Charleston, South Carolina, led by Generals Sir Henry Clinton and Charles Lord Cornwallis.¹²¹ The British forces were joined on August 12 by a fleet of over one hundred ships commanded by Commodore William Hotham, which carried a large supply of camp equipment and ten thousand British and Hessian troops. “So large a Fleet made a Fine Appearance upon entering the Harbour,” remarked Ambrose Serle, “it was a Picture, by no means agreeable to them [Americans].”¹²² Moreover, a group of Virginia Loyalists arrived a day after Hotham’s fleet, including Lord Dunmore with about one hundred and fifty African-American Loyalists, which were the remnants of his Ethiopian Regiment.¹²³ By August 15, several thousand Hessians under the command of Lieutenant General Leopold Philipp von Heister had disembarked and encamped on the Island.¹²⁴ In slightly over a month, then, the British had built up a force estimated to contain nearly twenty-five thousand regular

¹²¹ General George Washington to John Hancock, 7 August 1776; General George Washington to Samuel Tucker, 7 August 1776; General George Washington to Brigadier General William Livingston, 8 August 1776; General George Washington to Brigadier General Hugh Mercer, 8 August 1776, *Ibid.*, 5: 606, 617, 632, 633.

¹²² Tatum, Jr., *The American Journal of Ambrose Serle*, 62.

¹²³ Hodges, *Root and Branch*, 144. See also Edwin G. Burrows and Michael Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 248. Barnet Schecter, *The Battle for New York: The City at the Heart of the American Revolution*, (New York: Walker & Company, 2002), 113-114; General George Washington to John Hancock, 17 August 1776; General George Washington to Jonathan Trumbull, Sr., 18 August 1776; General George Washington to Lund Washington, 19 August 1776, in *GWPRWS*, 6: 49, 71, 83. Prior to their arrival on Staten Island, Dunmore’s troops were decimated by smallpox. See Elizabeth A. Fenn, *Pox Americana: The Great Smallpox Epidemic of 1775-82* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2001), 57-62, 267-268.

¹²⁴ Atwood, *The Hessians*, 55. For a report on the arrival of the Hessian units see the Examination of Thomas Givens, a Private of the 64th Regiment who deserted from Staten Island, included in General George Washington to John Hancock, 14 August 1776, *GWPRWS*, 6: 23-24. See also Major General Nathanael Greene to General George Washington, 15 August 1776, *Ibid.*, 6: 29. Greene wrote to Washington: “The Hessians were landing on Staten Island to [a] considerable Number.”

and provincial soldiers and sailors and approximately four hundred and fifty ships, including thirty men-of-war.¹²⁵

As the British military build up continued on Staten Island, Lord Howe was determined to demonstrate that reconciliation was still a viable alternative to military suppression. Although the admiral's brother Sir William believed that the Declaration of Independence had given the Americans a strong cause to fight for, making reconciliation virtually impossible, Lord Howe issued a proclamation announcing that he and his brother had been appointed peace commissioners with the power to grant pardons and to declare any region at peace where Royal authority had been restored.¹²⁶ On July 17, news of Lord Howe's proclamation reached the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. It was quickly referred to a three-member committee comprised of Charles Carroll of Maryland, Thomas Jefferson of Virginia, and Robert Treat Paine of Massachusetts. Because Lord Howe had not announced any major concessions, the Committee recommended that Congress publish the proclamation so that the

good People of these United States may be informed of what nature are the commissioners, and what the terms, with the expectation of which, the insidious court of Britain has endeavoured to amuse and disarm them, and that the few, who still remain suspended by a hope founded either in the justice or moderation of their late king, may now, at length, be convinced, that the valour alone of their country is to save its liberties.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Gruber, *The Howe Brothers*, 101-102; McMillen, *A History of Staten Island, New York, During the American Revolution*, 12; Piers Mackesy, *The War for America, 1775-1783* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), 86-87.

¹²⁶ Ira D. Gruber, "Lord Howe and Lord George Germain: British Politics and the Winning of American Independence," *WMQ* 3rd ser., 22 (1965), 233. The British ministry also named General Sir William Howe as a peace commissioner.

¹²⁷ Quoted in Gruber, *The Howe Brothers*, 98-99. See also Weldon A. Brown, *Empire or Independence: A Study in the Failure of Reconciliation, 1774-1783* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1941), 113. On July 22, 1776, Washington wrote to John Hancock, the president of the Continental Congress that when the "Letter and Declaration from Lord Howe . . . come to be published I should suppose the warmest Advocates for dependence on the British Crown must be silent, and be Convinced beyond all possibility of doubt, that All that has been said about the Commissioners was

The admiral also contacted Washington in an attempt to open talks with the American Commander-in-Chief.¹²⁸ However, Washington rejected Howe's overtures by indicating that he had not been properly addressed in accordance with his rank as the Commander-in-Chief of the Continental army and that he did not possess any authority to negotiate a settlement to the conflict. Moreover, as he understood it the peace commissioners were empowered "only to grant Pardons [and] that those who had committed no Fault wanted no Pardon: that we are only defending what we deemed our indisputable Rights."¹²⁹ A frustrated Ambrose Serle made a notation in his journal that Washington's rejection of Lord Howe's peace overtures had left "no Alternative but War and Bloodshed, which must lay at the Door of these unhappy People [who] pretend (or rather have pretended) to seek Peace, and yet renounce it . . . [they] have thrown aside all Appearances at length, and declare openly for Independence and War."¹³⁰

Illusory and calculated expressly to deceive and unguard, not only the Good people of our own Country, but those of the English nation that were averse to the proceedings of the King & Ministry." See General George Washington to John Hancock, 22 July 1776, *GWPRWS*, 5: 424.

¹²⁸ Admiral Richard Lord Howe to General George Washington, 13 July 1776, *Ibid*, 5: 296-297. Lord Howe had also tried to open a dialogue with Benjamin Franklin who rejected the admiral's offer of pardons. "Directing Pardons to be offered the Colonies, who are the very Parties injured," wrote Franklin, "expresses indeed that Opinion of our Ignorance, Baseness, and Insensibility which your uninform'd and proud Nation has long been pleased to entertain of us; but it can have no other Effect than that of increasing our Resentment. It is impossible we should think of Submission to a Government, that has with the most wanton Barbarity and Cruelty, burnt our defence-less Towns in the midst of Winter, excited the Savages to massacre our Farmers, and our Slaves to murder their Masters, and is even now bringing foreign Mercenaries to deluge our Settlements with Blood. These atrocious Injuries have extinguished every remaining Spark of Affection for that Parent Country we once held so dear." See Benjamin Franklin to Admiral Richard Lord Howe, 20 July 1776, in Leonard W. Labaree, William B. Wilcox, and Claude A. Lopez, eds., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* 27 vols. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959-1988), 22: 519.

¹²⁹ General George Washington to John Hancock, 14 July 1776; General George Washington to John Hancock, 15 July 1776; Memorandum of an Interview with Lieutenant Colonel James Paterson, 20 July 1776, *Ibid*, 5: 304-308, 325-326, 398-403.

¹³⁰ Tatum, Jr., ed., *The American Journal of Ambrose Serle*, 33.

Although by early August, Washington and the Continental Congress had rejected Lord Howe's peace overtures and General Howe had begun to load the army's field artillery onto vessels anchored off Staten Island's coast, an attack against New York City was still not imminent. One Continental officer wrote: "The Enemy have a very Formidable Army, . . . at what Place they will bend their Fury is unknown but is expected to be at this City and Long Island."¹³¹ The reason for the delay was the late arrival of Commodore Hotham's fleet and the Howes' desire to keep the door to a negotiated peace slightly open. Thus, the military campaign to capture New York City and bring the rebellion to a quick end was temporary put on hold.

The longer the Howes delayed the more restless the British troops grew. After a meeting with Governor Tryon, Ambrose Serle noted that many leading Loyalists were "in earnest for the Commencement of our operations." Yet, he agreed with the Howes that "a little Time" was needed "in Preparation and till the Arrival of our Reinforcements."¹³² Captain John Bowater spoke for many of the soldiers when he informed the Earl of Denbigh: "I was in hopes before this to have been able to have given your Lordship an Account of a Victory obtained by our Troops, but we have been only looking at one another for this last Month."¹³³ By mid-August, Bowater and the other soldiers finally got their wish. The Howes were ready to attack Washington's troops on Long Island. "By the best Inteligence the enemy are Determined to give us Battle Soon," wrote Colonel William Douglas from Long Island to his wife Hannah in Northford,

¹³¹ Colonel William Douglas to Hannah Douglas, 10 August 1776, in "Letters Written During the Revolutionary War," 79.

¹³² Tatum, Jr., ed., *The American Journal of Ambrose Serle*, 37.

¹³³ Captain John Bowater to Basil Fielding, the Earl of Denbigh, 15 August 1776, in Balderston and Syrett, eds., *The Lost War*, 95.

Connecticut, "Gen'l Howe gave orders . . . (as we find by a Deserter) for his men to Cook three Days Provisions."¹³⁴ The failure to achieve a negotiated settlement to the conflict and the arrival of Hotham's fleet led the Howes to finally use their massive force to try to crush Washington's army, capture New York City, and bring the rebellion to an end. The military campaign of 1776 was about to begin.

On August 18, General Howe ordered seven regiments to embark from the Watering Place and from Cole's Ferry (near the vicinity of present day Stapleton) at 9 AM the next morning. Three days later, Colonel Stephen Kemble, the British army's Deputy Adjutant General, made a brief notation in his journal that "embarkation of the Whole Troops [was] completed."¹³⁵ At "Day break" on August 22, after an evening of high winds and heavy rain, ninety vessels were ready to transport the British soldiers across the Narrows to Long Island. The first contingent of troops landed unopposed on the coast of Long Island between New Utrecht and the town of Gravesend and immediately secured a beachhead. Throughout the morning, transports carrying several thousand British soldiers plied the waters between Staten and Long Islands. "The Disembarkation was effected . . . without the least Resistance," recorded Ambrose Serle in his journal, "the inhuman Rebels contenting themselves with burning as much of the People's Corn as they could, . . . [and] with driving off their Cattle as far as their Time would permit, and doing as much Injury to the Inhabitants, who are generally well disposed, as they possibly could."¹³⁶ By noon Colonel Kemble estimated that "Fourteen

¹³⁴ Colonel William Douglas to Hannah Douglas, 15 August 1776, in "Letters Written During the Revolutionary War by Colonel William Douglas to His Wife Covering the Period July 19, 1775 to December 5, 1776," 80.

¹³⁵ *The Kemble Papers*, 1: 84.

¹³⁶ Tatum, Jr., ed., *The American Journal of Ambrose Serle*, 71.

Thousand Seven Hundred Men” had been landed on Long Island.¹³⁷ Over the next several days the remainder of the British and Hessian forces were transported from Staten Island to the main encampment near Gravesend, Long Island, where British commanders were preparing to launch an assault against the Continental positions at Brooklyn Heights.

Although the main British army had vacated Staten Island, the British still considered it strategically important enough to hold. British commanders envisioned the Island as an area from which future operations against New Jersey could be launched and where a military hospital could be established. Along these lines General Howe ordered one brigade of infantry and a detachment of Virginia Loyalists to remain at “the Centre Redoubt” near Richmondtown with a contingent of convalescents. Brigades were also to be posted “opposite Amboy, another at the Narrows, and the third at Elizabethtown Point.” These troops joined the local Loyalist militia commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Billopp in defending Staten Island against any attack by Whig forces from New Jersey.¹³⁸

Thus, as the Continental Congress declared the American colonies “free and independent states,” Staten Islanders welcomed the King’s troops and the chance to aid in the restoration of the British government in America. After two years of local turmoil and economic hardship, which several residents blamed on the Whigs’ coercive policies,

¹³⁷ *The Kemble Papers*, 1: 85.

¹³⁸ Examination of Thomas Givens, a Private of the 64th Regiment who deserted from Staten Island, in General George Washington to John Hancock, 14 August 1776, *GWPRWS*, 6: 23-24. See also McMillen, *A History of Staten Island, New York, During the American Revolution*, 16.

the arrival of the British army on Staten Island was hailed as the beginning of a return to social and political stability and economic prosperity. Staten Islanders viewed the British army not only as the bearer of the blessings of Crown rule and the British constitution but also of plenty of hard currency to spend. In addition, the Island's residents believed they would finally obtain relief and protection from what they regarded as "a Merciless Enemy."¹³⁹ For many Staten Islanders, then, the choice to remain loyal was a simple one.

¹³⁹ Captain Alexander McDonald to John Ogilvie, 24 April 1776, *Letter-Book of Captain Alexander McDonald*, 267.

EPILOGUE

The Revolutionary War on Staten Island and the Price of Loyalty

When the Revolution began nearly 99 percent of Staten Islanders supported the British, yet the experience of war led many of them to a change of heart. The Revolution brought plunder, kidnappings, physical violence, murder, economic constraints, and intense partisan warfare to Staten Island. The wartime experiences of Staten Islanders demonstrate that atrocities such as those connected with the Revolution in the backcountry of the southern colonies also occurred in the North. Seven and a half years of British occupation, longer than any other American community endured, drew Staten Islanders directly into a war that they had hoped could be averted.

During the Revolution, the British stationed a small number of regulars as well as several Hessian regiments on Staten Island. In addition, Loyalist regiments such as Cortlandt Skinner's New Jersey Volunteers, Oliver De Lancey's New York Volunteers, and Robert Rogers and John Graves Simcoe's Queen's Rangers bolstered the British military presence.¹ Given the presence of these troops and the Island's recent political history, it is not surprising that Staten Island also became home to Loyalist refugees

¹ Smith, *Loyalists and Redcoats*, 48-49, writes that during the summer of 1776 "General Howe issued warrants to Oliver De Lancey for raising the New York Loyalists, to Cortlandt Skinner for raising the New Jersey Loyalists, and to Robert Rogers for raising the Queen's Rangers. These regiments became the strongest, numerically, of all the provincial regiments, and later were among the most reliable. During the following winter of 1776-77 while more important steps were being taken to utilize the Loyalists, Howe added to the loyalist corps from New York by granting authority to Edmund Fanning for raising the King's American Regiment, to John Bayard for the King's Orange Rangers, to Beverly Robinson for the Loyal American Regiment (plus a warrant for a corps of Royal Guides and Pioneers, which later was joined to Robinson's regiment), and to Montfort Browne for the Prince of Wales American Regiment . . . These units, authorized within nearly a year of Howe's arrival at Staten Island and recruited chiefly from the Loyalists of the middle colonies, plus the regiments in Nova Scotia and Canada, were the nucleus of the Provincial Service."

fleeing Whig-occupied New York City, Long Island, and eastern New Jersey. “Several People came in from the Jerseys, and a whole Group of sloops in particular from near Amboy,” noted Ambrose Serle, “by whom we received still further Instances of the Tyranny & Oppression of the Oligarchic Faction & of the general Distress, for many Things, of the whole Country.”² Joseph Thorne of Piscataway in Middlesex County, New Jersey, “came to Staten Island as a Loyal Refugee” with his family after “the British Army Evacuated Jersey” in June of 1777.³ Several of these refugees had enlisted to serve the King. For example, in his Loyalist claim filed with the British government, John Ariel of New York City explained that in 1776 he “retired to Staten Island and offered his services when the Army arrived there.” He was eventually “made Major of a Militia brigade.”⁴ David Fitz Randolph of Old Blazing Star (in the vicinity of what is now Carteret and Rahway), New Jersey, “joined the British army in February 1777 at Amboy” and “during the whole war . . . lived on a farm in Staten Island, and acted in the militia of that Island.”⁵ In addition to joining provincial regiments, some Loyalist refugees purchased land on Staten Island and became permanent residents or they left at the conclusion of the war, eventually settling in other parts of the British Empire, mainly in Nova Scotia, Canada.

² Tatum, ed., *American Journal of Ambrose Serle*, 47.

³ Loyalist Claim of Joseph Thorne, Transcript, Staten Island Loyalist Collection, Box 1, Folder 2, SIHS.

⁴ Excerpt of the Loyalist Claim of John Ariel, in Peter W. Coldham, ed., *American Migrations, 1765-1799: the Lives, Times, and Families of Colonial Americans who Remained Loyal to the British Crown Before, During, and After the Revolutionary War, As Related in their own Words and Through their Correspondence* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2000), 172.

⁵ Loyalist Claim of David Fitz Randolph, Transcript, Staten Island Loyalist Collection, Box 1, Folder 2, SIHS.

Among the refugees who came to Staten Island were freeborn African-Americans as well as fugitive slaves who sought freedom behind the British lines. One Hessian officer wrote to a friend that while on Staten Island he had “seen quite a number of blacks, who are just as free as the whites.”⁶ African-Americans quickly found work on Staten Island in the support services of the British army. They served as guides, spies, wagon drivers, orderlies, woodcutters, couriers, foragers, harbor pilots, and laborers. For example, Benjamin Whitecuff, a freeborn African-American from Long Island, joined the British on Staten Island in 1776 and was employed as a spy for two years.⁷ On occasion, African-American Loyalist regiments such as Dunmore’s Ethiopian Regiment, the Black Pioneers and Guides, the Black Brigade, and several smaller units that specialized in reconnaissance and partisan warfare augmented the British military presence on the Island.⁸

Staten Island, which was located in the outer border of British control around New York City, did not always prove a safe haven for these refugees or for its native residents. For the British presence on the Island also led to confrontations with Whigs from nearby New Jersey. Loyalist and Hessian military units stationed on Staten Island made repeated forays into eastern New Jersey, where they terrorized Whigs and plundered their farms, carrying off livestock, produce, arms and ammunition, valuables, and prisoners. New Jersey Whigs organized into vigilante groups and retaliated for these

⁶ Lieutenant Johann Heinrich to August Ludwig Schlozer, 18 September 1776, in Stone, ed., *Letters of Brunswick and Hessian Officers*, 195.

⁷ Hodges, *Root and Branch*, 148. For the plight of African-Americans behind British lines in New York see Van Buskirk, *Generous Enemies*, chap. 5.

⁸ For a discussion of African-American Loyalist regiments during the American Revolution see Todd W. Braisted, “The Black Pioneers and Others: The Military Role of Black Loyalists in the American War for Independence” in John W. Pulis, ed., *Moving On: Black Loyalists in the Afro-Atlantic World* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1999), 3-37. See also Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, chap. 8.

raids. They slipped past British guards and gunboats patrolling the waters off Staten Island at night and attacked Staten Islanders and their farms and businesses. In 1777, the English traveler Nicholas Cresswell commented that although Staten Island contained “some very pretty houses along the shore, . . . everything about them seems to be going to ruin & destruction in consequence of this Rebellion.”⁹ Cresswell noticed that Staten Islanders were “very uneasy” and constantly on the look out for “a visit from the Rebels.”¹⁰ The frequency and ferocity of these raids prompted many Staten Islanders to hide their valuables and barricade their doors and windows in the evenings. Most of the Island’s residents refused to quit their farms and move farther behind the British lines to New York City or Long Island, even though their lives and property were endangered by the partisan warfare occurring around them. Unlike their counterparts in Massachusetts, who eventually abandoned their property for the safety of British-held Boston, Staten Islanders did all they could to protect their homes and possessions, even at the risk of permanent harm.¹¹

Staten Island was not, however, a secure Loyalist stronghold. Friends and relatives recognized the dangers facing the stubborn Staten Islanders. During his months as a recruiter for the Royal Highland Emigrants in Halifax, Nova Scotia, for example, Alexander McDonald worried about his family on Staten Island. “I am in a perfect good state of health and neither want Nor wish for any thing more upon the face of the Earth

⁹ MacVeagh, ed., *The Journal of Nicholas Cresswell*, 217.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 243.

¹¹ By 1780, a few prominent Staten Islanders such as Christopher Billopp and Benjamin Seaman had sent their families to more secure quarters behind the British lines in New York or Long Island, while they remained with their property on Staten Island. In September 1780, the Anglican Reverend Dr. Samuel Seabury reported: “The Island, . . . has been frequently visited by small parties of banditti, in the night, [and] some of the principal families there have been obliged to retire to New York or Long Island.” Seabury is quoted in Burch, “History of Saint Andrew’s,” 17.

than to hear the Like account from you and the Children,” he wrote to his wife Susannah in January 1776, “I hope the People round about you are not so Much out of their Senses as to use you ill in any Shape.”¹² To Lord Jeffrey Amherst, McDonald wrote that his wife “continued a Steady loyal Subject in spite of every abuse or insult they [Whigs] could offer her.”¹³

Loyalist testimonials to the British government and damage claims from Staten Island reveal the widespread destruction caused by Whig vigilantes. Thomas McDonogh filed a claim on behalf of his widowed mother-in-law Rachel Dawson. He explained that because her estate “lay contiguous to the posts of the Army” it was “subject to Incursions from Jersey, and though capable of yielding great Advantages, yet little or no Benefit was derived from it during the Calamities of the War, as nothing could be preserved from plunder, which was a very great loss.”¹⁴ In 1779 and 1780, Whig raiding parties plundered the store owned by the merchants John Bedell and Benjamin Micheau in Richmondtown. The two men believed that the value of the goods taken from their store totaled “1,200 New York Currency.” According to Christopher Billopp, these men were active in Staten Island’s Loyalist militia and had “been out with the British Troops which made [them] obnoxious to ye Rebels and particularly pointed them out for being plundered.”¹⁵

¹² Captain Alexander McDonald to Susannah McDonald, 15 January 1776, *The Letter-Book of Captain Alexander McDonald*, 239.

¹³ Captain Alexander McDonald to Lord Jeffrey Amherst, August, 1777, *Ibid*, 361.

¹⁴ Memorial of Thomas McDonogh on Behalf of Rachel Dawson, Transcript, *Ibid*, Box 1 Folder 4, SIHS.

¹⁵ Loyalist Claim of John Bedel and Benjamin Micheau, Transcript, Staten Island Loyalist Collection, Box 1, Folder 2, SIHS.

During one of these raids, a group of nine New Jersey Whigs had disguised their faces with black soot and entered the home of yeoman Peter Houseman who at the time was talking with his son-in-law John Tysen. They demanded that Houseman turn over his money and any other valuables. When he refused, the Whig mob beat Houseman and Tysen with a heavy club. While Tysen survived the assault, Houseman died instantly. As the raiders searched through the house and property, Houseman's "Negro slaves hurried [his] children into the kitchen and barred the door." Although "there was a good deal of plate about" the raiders did not take it "for fear of being identified."¹⁶

In one of the most horrific incidents of vigilante violence on Staten Island during the Revolution, John Bodine, Jr. was dragged by a group of New Jersey Whigs into a room in his house that "was not ceiled but there were beams instead, in which were spikes on which he was in the habit of hanging his guns." The men suspended Bodine from the spikes using bed-cords and then "heated the shovel and tongs red-hot, and burned him with them." When Bodine refused to tell them where he had hidden his valuables, they threatened to bayonet his wife and infant son, but "ransacked the house [instead] and whatever they could not take, they destroyed." The group eventually fled the premises when a British soldier on patrol "heard the noise and fired [his] gun to give the alarm." Bodine eventually recovered from his wounds.¹⁷

No one was exempt from vigilantism, not even the wealthiest of Staten Island's residents. Christopher Billopp was the victim of several Whig raids. In one particular raid, "the Rebels . . . carried off a Negro, cattle, horses, carriages, bedding and other furniture to a large amount." That "large amount" was £944. Billopp was also "twice

¹⁶ Anthon, ed. "Anthon's Notes," 82-83.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 82, 108-109.

taken and imprisoned” by New Jersey Whigs. The first time occurred on June 5, 1778, when Captain Nathaniel Fitz Randolph of Woodbridge, New Jersey, and fifteen others captured Billopp as he was returning home from a dinner party. He was released nine months later. In June 1779, Billopp was again abducted – this time from his own bed – by a group of Whigs led by Fitz Randolph’s brother-in-law, Captain David Coddington. Billopp was taken to a “common Goal at Burlington, new Jersey” along with Lieutenant Colonel John Graves Simcoe of the provincial Queen’s Rangers. While in prison he was “Ironed and chained to the floor . . . and allowed no other Sustenance than Bread and Water.” This was apparently in retaliation for the treatment accorded to Fitz Randolph who had been captured by the British several months earlier. After Simcoe had written several letters to Washington and other Whig leaders protesting Billopp’s treatment by the Whig jailers, the American Commander-in-Chief exchanged the two Loyalists for two of his officers being held by the British.¹⁸

Staten Islanders also endured attacks from regular Whig forces. On several occasions, Whig troops launched raids to capture the British garrison on Staten Island. The first of these forays occurred on October 15, 1776, when a detachment of troops under Brigadier General Hugh Mercer crossed from New Jersey and attacked British and Hessian posts at several points along the Island’s southern and western shores and penetrated as far as Richmondtown before being turned back.¹⁹ Troops under the

¹⁸ Lieutenant Colonel John Graves Simcoe, *Simcoe’s Military Journal: A History of the Operations of a Partisan Corps, Called the Queen’s Rangers, Commanded by Lieut. Col. J. G. Simcoe, During the War of the American Revolution* (New York: Bartlett and Welford, 1844), 268-286; Loyalist Claim of Christopher Billopp, Transcript, Staten Island Loyalist Collection, Box 1, Folder 1, SIHS; Field Horne, *The Conference House Revisited*, 24; Davis, *Conference/Billopp House*, 133-144.

¹⁹ Brigadier General Hugh Mercer to General George Washington, 16 October 1776, *GWPRWS*, 6: 577. See also McMillen, *A History of Staten Island, New York, During the American Revolution*, 31; Kwasny, *Washington’s Partisan War*, 63, 73, 81-82; Moore, ed., *Diary of the Revolution*, 1: 325.

command of Brigadier General John Sullivan attacked the Island on August 22, 1777. After some initial success and the capture of several British prisoners, the Loyalists defending Staten Island rallied and forced Sullivan's troops to retreat to New Jersey. Sullivan's raid cost the Whigs one hundred and seventy men either killed or captured and led to the creation of a Court of Inquiry into the general's performance.²⁰ Three months later, Brigadier General Philemon Dickinson led a detachment of "about 1400 Men" from Halstead's Point near Elizabethtown, New Jersey, to Staten Island. The raid netted Dickinson several prisoners from Cortlandt Skinner's New Jersey Volunteers including the son of Lieutenant Colonel Abraham Van Buskirk.²¹ However, the largest Whig raid of Staten Island took place in January 1780. During the unusually severe winter of 1779-1780, the waterways around New York City froze so completely that artillery, infantry, and cavalry units easily marched across them. Taking advantage of the frozen Kill van Kull, Brigadier General William Alexander, Lord Stirling, led three thousand men from New Jersey to Staten Island with intentions of capturing the British garrison. He counted on the element of surprise to catch the British off guard. However, the British forces were alerted to Stirling's maneuvers and offered stiff resistance from their defensive positions, eventually halting the Whig advance. Realizing that he had lost his advantage

²⁰ Walter T. Dornfest, "Sullivan's Raid on Staten Island: August 22, 1777," *SIH* 1st ser., 31 (1972), 97-102; Charles P. Whittemore, *A General of the Revolution: John Sullivan of New Hampshire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 54-55, 64, 67, 75-76; McMillen, *A History of Staten Island, New York, During the American Revolution*, 33-35; Herbert B. Reed, "The Old Ridgway House," *SIH* 1st ser., 25 (1964), 6; Kwasny, 160-161; Burgoyne, ed., *A Hessian Diary*, 45-46; *Kemble Papers*, 1: 127-131. For a civilian's account of the skirmishing associated with Sullivan's raid see the Loyalist Claim of Frances Dongan, Widow of Lieutenant Edward Vaughan Dongan of the Third Battalion of the New Jersey Volunteers, Transcript, Staten Island Loyalist Collection, Box 1, Folder 2, SIHS.

²¹ Brigadier General Philemon Dickinson to General George Washington, 28 November 1777, *GWPRWS*, 8: 434-435; William Livingston to General George Washington, 1 December 1777, *Ibid*, 471. See also McMillen, *A History of Staten Island, New York, During the American Revolution*, 35; Kwasny, *Washington's Partisan War*, 178-180.

and that his troops were suffering from the severe cold weather, Stirling retreated back to New Jersey.²²

During each of these major attacks, many of the Island's homes and fields were plundered. However, the most extensive damage occurred during Stirling's raid in 1780. Even though Brigadier General William Alexander, Lord Stirling, had issued strict orders to his officers and soldiers that "any man Quitting his post or Ranks in Order to plunder is to be punished with Instant Death – no private property of the Inhabitants is to be medled with or Brought off, on any pretence what ever, excepting fat Cattle and Sheep, of which regular accounts are to be taken with the names of the persons from whom taken, and to whom Delivered," he couldn't account for the actions of independent groups of Whig partisans who had decided to use the attack as an opportunity to raid Staten Island farms.²³ While Stirling's regular troops kept the British occupied, Whig partisans crossed from New Jersey and plundered property belonging to Loyalist Staten Islanders. For example, Evan Cameron, a refugee from Elizabethtown, New Jersey, had "started a business and was settled comfortably" on Staten Island "when he was plundered by the rebels under General Stirling."²⁴ In a claim for compensation filed with the British government in 1786, Job Smith of Decker's Ferry (now Port Richmond) noted that his two boats were burned and his house on Staten Island was "seized by the rebels

²² McMillen, *A History of Staten Island, New York, During the American Revolution*, 40-41; Kwasny, *Washington's Partisan War*, 257-258; Moore, ed., *Diary of the Revolution*, 2: 252; Simcoe, *Simcoe's Military Journal*, 120-128; *New-York Journal*, 18 January, 1780.

²³ Brigadier General William Alexander's orders dated 14 January, 1780 are reprinted in Elmer G. Van Name, ed., "A Hitherto Unpublished Item Relating to the American Revolution," *SIH* 1st ser., 22 (1961), 19.

²⁴ Excerpt of the Loyalist Claim of Evan Cameron, Coldham, ed., *American Migrations*, 385.

in 1780.”²⁵ Pompey Prall, a former slave, recalled that in the winter of 1779-1780, “the ice being so strong, the Americans . . . come over and steal the coloured people and sell them for slaves.”²⁶ Some of the Whig raiders associated with Stirling’s expedition specifically targeted the property of Captain Isaac Decker, a notorious Staten Island Loyalist, for plunder. “In January 1780, Americans under General Stirling came over on the ice,” wrote Decker to the British government after the war, “burned all the rigging of the claimant’s sloop lying there, though the hull was saved, plundered his house, stripped his wife to her under-petticoat, took all his crops and burned his fences.” Decker, who commanded Staten Island’s Loyalist cavalry unit, was busy engaging Stirling’s regular forces and therefore was “unable to help his distressed family.”²⁷

While they expected this type of hostile behavior from the Whigs, Staten Islanders did not anticipate the daily abuse to their persons and property from the British, Hessian, and Loyalist troops living among them. These were supposed to be their protectors. But the protectors became the enemy as well. Undisciplined Loyalist and Hessian troops and frustrated British regulars plundered and attacked Staten Islanders regardless of their declarations of loyalty. They often cared less whether the firewood, furnishings, valuables, food, money, or lives they took were from a Loyalist or Whig home. One Hessian wrote that although “the inhabitants of this island, claim to have nothing in common with the rebels, . . . [they] are basically the same.”²⁸ An informant notified Washington that the British soldiers on Staten Island “are prodigiously incensed

²⁵ Excerpt of the Loyalist Claim of Job Smith, *Ibid*, 342.

²⁶ Quoted in Anthon, ed., “Anthon’s Notes,” 141-142.

²⁷ Memorial of Isaac Decker, Transcript, Staten Island Loyalist Collection, Box 1, Folder 1, SIHS.

²⁸ Burgoyne, ed., *A Hessian Diary*, 36.

against the Tories, and curse them as the instruments of the war now raging.”²⁹ On Staten Island, as in the British-occupied areas around Philadelphia from 1777 to 1778 and Charleston from 1780 to 1782, the behavior of the British forces toward the residents was something less than desirable.³⁰

Despite General Sir William Howe’s orders to execute any soldier found plundering or destroying civilian property, damages by the British and their allies were extensive.³¹ One resident remembered that British troops “destroyed all the fences, and when they went to Jersey, proclamation was made to put them up again, but when they [British] returned from Jersey they destroyed them again.”³² In a claim filed with the British government, Anne Perine explained that she and her late husband Edward had been loyal subjects of the King when their woodland “was entered [into] by a body of the British Troops and great Quantities cut by Order of Sir Henry Clinton for the purpose of erecting Works.” Adding to her frustration was the fact that she “never Received any pay or Compensation” for the cutting of her wood.³³ In September 1776, a Hessian officer wrote to a friend that the Island was in “an uncivilized and poverty-stricken state, for the foraging parties of the rebels and the different encampments of his Majesty’s troops have

²⁹ See *Am. Arch.*, V, 1: 1111-1112.

³⁰ For the plundering that took place in the areas surrounding Philadelphia see Gruber, *The Howe Brothers*, 242-244. On the plundering of homes and farms around Charleston see Pancake, *This Destructive War*, 94-95.

³¹ See General Sir William Howe’s orders of June 29, 1776 in British Order Book (1776-1779), Transcript, Military Collection, American Revolution, Box 1, Folder 4, SIHS. In response to reports that some of his troops “Posted in the Suburbs of the City” were “committing Depredations on the Deserted houses and Property of the Inhabitants,” General Howe warned that any “Soldier or Person whatsoever that is detected in Disorders of this Nature will be punished with the utmost Severity.” See General Sir William Howe’s Orders, 15 January 1777, in *Kemble Papers*, 1: 437.

³² Anthon, ed., “Anthon’s Notes,” 139-140.

³³ Memorial of Anne Perine, Perine Collection, Box 1, Folder 1, SIHS.

stripped the country of all the necessary articles of life.” He added: “The soldiers have eaten up most of the horned cattle hereabouts.”³⁴ Loyalist New Jersey Volunteers under the commands of Abraham Van Buskirk and Joseph Barton frequently stole livestock and plundered fields and gardens.³⁵

As with the Whigs, the British occupation forces did not distinguish by rank in their attacks on property. Even the property of staunch Loyalists such as Alexander McDonald and Christopher Billopp fell victim to such attacks. In June 1777, McDonald asked for a “2 or 3 Month” leave from his post in Nova Scotia, Canada, to return to Staten Island to “look after my place . . . which is totally Ruined. I am told that £1000 will not indemnify me for the Damages I sustained All my fences burned & my Woods cut down which render the place unfit for any use and makes me Loser of £200 Sterling pr year.”³⁶ He also wrote to a British officer that if “you are Still on my place in Staten Island as I am informed your Regiment was Stationed there I will be infinitely obliged to you if you give every possible assistance to my Brother in law [Gilbert Meyer] in allowing your men to work in Cultivating the farm Making up the fences etc. as the place has been ruined by the troops last Summer.”³⁷ Writing to Lord Amherst in August 1777, McDonald lamented: “My place upon Staten Island is totally ruined as well by our own

³⁴ Lieutenant Johann Heinrich to August Ludwig Schlozer, 18 September 1776, in Stone, ed., *Letters of Brunswick and Hessian Officers*, 194-195.

³⁵ Anthon, ed., “Anthon’s Notes,” 139-140.

³⁶ Captain Alexander McDonald to Captain Robert McKenzie, 11 June 1777, *The Letter-Book of Captain Alexander McDonald*, 340.

³⁷ Captain Alexander McDonald to Unknown, 11 June 1777, *Ibid*, 341. McDonald was referring to Gilbert Meyer, his wife Susannah’s brother.

troops as by the Rebels.”³⁸ In addition to the £944 worth of property taken from his estate by Whig raiders, Christopher Billopp claimed that he had amassed “Losses also from the British Army & Sailors” to the amount of “£1441.16s.”³⁹ Brigadier General Cortlandt Skinner of the New Jersey Volunteers testified that Billopp “was plundered by the Hessians [and] the Rebels.”⁴⁰ Unfortunately for Billopp and McDonald, they were not reimbursed for the damages to their estates.⁴¹

The loss of property – real and personal – was not the only thing Staten Islanders had to fear from the occupying forces. Like the inhabitants of the backcountry of the southern colonies, the residents of Staten Island also suffered from brutal and senseless acts of violence and murder committed by British regulars and their Hessian and Loyalist allies. For example, soldiers belonging to the provincial Queen’s Rangers murdered Christian Jacobson, who had served as the chairman of the Richmond County Committee of Safety. They broke into Jacobson’s house “at night when he was in bed” and entered the kitchen. The four intruders awoke Jacobson’s slaves “threatening to blow their brains out” if they did not tell them “where their master kept his money.” One of the slaves quickly went and got Jacobson from his bed. Jacobson rushed into the kitchen and was shot by one of the intruders. Jacobson bled to death on the kitchen floor while his wife

³⁸ Captain Alexander McDonald to Lord Jeffrey Amherst, August 1777, *Ibid*, 361.

³⁹ Loyalist Claim of Christopher Billopp, Transcript, Staten Island Loyalist Collection, Box 1, Folder 1, SIHS.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*

⁴¹ Report on the Claim of Christopher Billopp, December 1783, Transcript, Staten Island Loyalist Collection, Box 1, Folder 1, SIHS.

and a female slave “attempted to stanch the blood which flowed from two orifices.” The soldiers were eventually caught, found guilty by a court martial, and hanged.⁴²

Women became easy targets as well. Sexual assaults by British occupying forces on Staten Island women grew in frequency as the war dragged on.⁴³ One British officer, Lieutenant Colonel Francis Lord Rawdon found the complaints of sexual assault lodged by Staten Island women amusing. “The fair nymphs of this isle [Staten Island] are in wonderful tribulation, as the fresh meat our men have got here has made them as riotous as satyrs,” he wrote to the Earl of Huntingdon, “a girl cannot step into the bushes to pluck a rose without running the most imminent risk of being ravished, and they are so little accustomed to these vigorous methods that they don’t bear them with the proper resignation, and of consequence we have most entertaining courts-martial every day.”⁴⁴ Historian Sylvia R. Frey indicates that during the Revolution, “fewer rapes were detected than were committed; even fewer rapists were actually tried and convicted, and only a part of those were ever punished.”⁴⁵ While murder and plunder were rightfully treated as a major crime by the British army and those found guilty summarily dealt with, British officers often suppressed reports of rape and did very little to punish rapists. The discrepancy in the handling of cases that involved theft and murder and for those that

⁴² Anthon, ed., “Anthon’s Notes,” 87. The Vanderbilts eventually acquired Jacobson’s property, which was located in New Dorp.

⁴³ See Carol Berkin, *First Generations: Women in Colonial America* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1996), 184; Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty’s Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980), 202; Joan R. Gunderson, *To Be Useful to the World: Women in Revolutionary America, 1740-1790* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), 124, 155-156.

⁴⁴ Lieutenant Colonel Francis Lord Rawdon to the Earl of Huntingdon, 5 August 1776, in Henry Steele Commager and Richard B. Morris, eds., *The Spirit of Seventy-Six: The Story of the American Revolution as told by Participants* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995), 424.

⁴⁵ Frey, *The British Soldier in America*, 78.

involved rape could be due to any number of reasons from the character and quality of British, Hessian, and Loyalist commanding officers who may not have taken reports of rape as seriously as those of theft and murder to simply a lack of cases being officially reported. According to historian Jerome J. Nadelhaft, many soldiers viewed rape as “a necessary and enjoyable part of war.”⁴⁶ It is also quite possible, as Frey points out, that rape cases that were not officially tried by general courts martial were tried by more informal regimental courts and therefore not recorded.⁴⁷

The miseries suffered by Staten Islanders under British occupation were exacerbated by the threat of communicable diseases. Like the residents of British-held Boston in 1775, Staten Islanders were vulnerable to infectious diseases such as dysentery, typhus, and small pox that came with military camp life.⁴⁸ The concentration of large numbers of soldiers in small, confined, unsanitary areas such as barracks, redoubts, tents, huts, private residences, public buildings, and churches lent itself to the spread of disease. According to reports from British deserters, when the army arrived on Staten Island in July 1776, several soldiers had been taken ill with “the bloody flux” (dysentery) and “besides those who have the small-pox, of which there are fifty or sixty, there are many sick among them.”⁴⁹ One deserter informed Brigadier General Hugh Mercer “two

⁴⁶ Nadelhaft, *The Disorders of War*, 68.

⁴⁷ Frey, *The British Soldier in America*, 79.

⁴⁸ For the concern over the spread of smallpox in Boston during and after the British occupation of the city see Fenn, *Pox Americana*, 45-55, 264-265.

⁴⁹ Examination of James MacFarlan, A Soldier Belonging to the Fifty-Fifth Regiment, Colonel Medie, 5 July 1776, *NDAR*, 5: 936; Examination of Elijah Stephens and Chauncey Smith, Deserters from the Enemy’s Fleet, New York, 11 July 1776, *Am Arch.*, V, 1: 198.

thousand men [were] sick [with] small-pox, the Highlanders with fluxes-poxes.”⁵⁰ A Hessian officer wrote in his regimental journal that soon after his troops disembarked on Staten Island, “some kind of red dysentery started to show very much among the ranks.”⁵¹ Private Johann Conrad Dohla made a notation in his diary that the “highly unhealthy” conditions in the military encampments on Staten Island caused the spread of “sicknesses such as putrid fever, diarrhea, and dysentery.”⁵² There is no doubt that Staten Islanders suffered from these diseases as well. In August 1776, Ambrose Serle remarked that on a walk around the Island he saw several women with their children who had “just emerged from an Hospital, on recovering from a dreadful Fit of Sickness.”⁵³ Several residents of Staten Island died during the dysentery epidemic of 1779-1780, which ravaged the civilian and military populations in and around New York City.⁵⁴

Staten Islanders not only faced health risks under British occupation, but also the deterioration of their economic situation. The Island’s residents originally profited from the sale of supplies to the British army, but British regulations designed to control the price of goods eventually cut into this profit. Staten Islanders resented regulations on ferry rates and on the type, price, and amount of produce they could sell to the army.⁵⁵ In

⁵⁰ Brigadier General Hugh Mercer to General George Washington, 7 August 1776, *Am. Arch.*, V, 1: 813.

⁵¹ Mary Ann Furetti, ed., *Lossberg Journal, 1776-1783* (Staten Island, NY: The Staten Island Historical Society, 1976), 23.

⁵² Burgoyne, ed., *A Hessian Diary*, 44.

⁵³ Tatum, ed., *American Journal of Ambrose Serle*, 65.

⁵⁴ Frey, *The British Soldier in America*, 42.

⁵⁵ For example, Staten Islanders who provided the troops with beef, lamb, mutton, pork, and veal were paid six pence per pound, while chicken could fetch nine pence and geese two pence. Staten Islanders who supplied the army with eggs were paid one shilling per dozen. The British military also set prices for butter, flour, and hay. See British Order Book #13, Transcript, Military Collection, American Revolution,

the frigid December of 1779, the British Commandant of New York, Major General James Pattison, wrote to Brigadier General Cortlandt Skinner of the provincial New Jersey Volunteers that Staten Islanders were hoarding wood “in order to enhance the Price.” Pattison, who saw this as blackmail, ordered Skinner to “oblige them [Staten Islanders] to dispose of it immediately at the Established Rate.” If they refused, Skinner was to seize “this Wood and transport it to Cole’s Ferry.”⁵⁶ Staten Islanders also resented the fact that British authorities restricted the markets in which farmers could sell their goods. Moreover, mandatory policies requiring Staten Islanders to provide the troops with hay, grains, and cordwood added to their dissatisfaction.⁵⁷ Peter Wandel remembered his father’s frustration after turning over two hundred cords of wood to the British military and receiving “no pay for it.”⁵⁸

In his study of the Revolution in the Carolinas, historian John S. Pancake wrote “loyalty can be tenuous . . . [and] is preeminently a matter of give and take. One gives loyalty to a government in the expectation of a return – the rule of law, protection of life

Box 1, Folder 4, SIHS. On January 13, 1779, the *Royal Gazette* published a proclamation issued by Brigadier General Alexander Leslie, who was commanding on Staten Island, concerning the “exorbitant price . . . extracted by the different proprietors of the Ferry Boats, for the fare of passengers between this [Staten Island] and New York.” Leslie fixed ferry rates “at the following prices, Two shillings currency for each passenger and Six shillings currency for each Horse” and stipulated that boats with a capacity of “six or more passengers” were to be used in the ferrying trade. If “complaint [is] made of noncompliance, with the above regulations, the offender shall forfeit the liberty of plying with his boat to or from this island.”

⁵⁶ Major General James Pattison to Brigadier General Cortlandt Skinner, 22 December 1779, in *The Official Letters of Major General James Pattison* (New York: New York Historical Society Collections, 1875), 319.

⁵⁷ McMillen, *A History of Staten Island, New York, During the Revolution*, 30. For an example of these mandatory policies see the notice in the *New York Gazette and Weekly Mercury*, 22 September 1777, in which the British Commissary of Forage, George Brinley, announced that “By Order of His Excellency Lieutenant General Sir Henry Clinton, The Farmers are hereby directed immediately to deliver into his Majesty’s Magazines . . . all the straw they have already thresh’d, and that they without delay get the remainder ready. It is expected that due attention be paid to this order, as any further delay must occasion disagreeable methods.” See also *Royal Gazette*, 2 October 1779.

⁵⁸ Anthon, ed., “Anthon’s Notes,” 158.

and property, a society that will be conducive to the “pursuit of happiness.”⁵⁹ By the end of August 1776, loyalty became tenuous on Staten Island, as many residents had begun to grow disenchanted with the British and their allies. On the eve of the invasion of Long Island, Brigadier General William Livingston informed Washington that he was told by a spy that the British on Staten Island “have eat [ate] up all the Cattle and are now killing & barreling up all the Horses.” Moreover, “the Tories on the Island are very ill treated lately, so that the Inhabitants who at first were pleased, would now be willing to poison them all. They [British] take from them every Thing they choose, and no one has any Thing they can call their own.”⁶⁰ Several residents showed their displeasure towards their British occupiers by refusing to serve in the Island’s Loyalist militia. In July 1779, Major General James Pattison received a copy of a report from Colonel Aaron Cortelyou of the Loyalist militia of Staten Island in which the colonel complained of several “Inhabitants who have refused to do duty as Militia Men.”⁶¹ A frustrated Abraham Bancker resented the fact that even the mail “must be exposed to inspection” by the British authorities.⁶² Thus, the behavior of the British occupying forces complicated matters on Staten Island and severely damaged the trust Staten Islanders had placed in them. While initially viewed as part of the solution, His Majesty’s troops quickly became the problem.

⁵⁹ Pancake, *The Destructive War*, 82-83.

⁶⁰ Brigadier General William Livingston to General George Washington, 21 August 1776, *GWPRWS*, 6: 99.

⁶¹ Major General James Pattison to Major Frederick Bowes, 25 July 1779, *The Official Letters of Major General James Pattison*, 230.

⁶² Abraham Bancker to Abraham Bancker, 10 November 1779, Bancker Family Papers, Correspondence, 1775-1787, Folder 14, NYHS.

As in other areas of America, Staten Island's Dissenter churches became targets of British and Loyalist resentment and suffered miserably during the war. The wood-framed United Reformed Church in Richmondtown was demolished by British troops who used its timbers for firewood and to construct huts and redoubts. In addition, the small Presbyterian meetinghouse on Staten Island's southwest shore was seized by the British and used as a hospital before it too was destroyed. And the North Side Reformed Church at Decker's Ferry (now Port Richmond) sustained much damage during the war and was converted into a barracks and stable.⁶³

Staten Island's Anglican congregation was also affected by the war. At first, the conflict did not impede the Reverend Richard Charlton's services at Saint Andrew's Church in Richmondtown. Even the Reverend Dr. Samuel Seabury occasionally traveled from New York City to preach at Saint Andrew's.⁶⁴ However, the combined pressure that came with Whig raids and British occupation caused some hardship for the congregation. Charlton and others complained that the British troops had destroyed the church's glebe near the Watering Place on the Island's northeastern shore. In August 1776, Charlton informed the Anglican Church's missionary agency, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG), "the poor Duxbury glebe" was "laid waste" by the troops.⁶⁵ Coincidentally, Charlton had made the same complaint against

⁶³ Jones, *History of New York During the Revolutionary War*, 1: 337; McMillen, "The Presbyterian Church, Staten Island, . . . Part I," 7; Vander Naald, "History of the Reformed Church on Staten Island," 4; Harlow McMillen, "Richmondton: The First 160 Years, Part IV: The Dutch Congregation," *SIH* 1st ser., 22 (1961), 22. The small Presbyterian meetinghouse on Staten Island's southwestern shore was located at Smoking Point (now Rossville).

⁶⁴ Harlow McMillen, "Richmondton: The First 160 Years, Part V: The Church of St. Andrew," *SIH* 22 (1961), 28; Burch, "History of Saint Andrew's," 15-18.

⁶⁵ Quoted in Jordan, "The Anglican Establishment in Colonial New York," 560.

the British soldiers encamped on Staten Island during the French and Indian War.⁶⁶ In January 1778, the Reverend Seabury told the SPG that Staten Island's north shore "has suffered very much from the troops, particularly the Duxbury glebe; the fences being demolished, the timber, which was of considerable value, cut off so that scarce a single tree is left, and a fine young orchard of 500 or 600 apple trees nearly destroyed."⁶⁷ In 1781, he wrote: "the Duxbury glebe is covered with huts for the soldiers and there is no fence and scarcely a tree left on it."⁶⁸ The British also used Saint Andrew's as a makeshift hospital for their wounded and on two occasions Whig raids against the British posts near Richmondtown damaged the church's edifice.⁶⁹

Staten Island became the home to several independent bands of Loyalists who used the Island as a base of operations for quick, vengeful strikes into New Jersey. For example, Cornelius Hatfield, Jr., a former resident of Elizabethtown, New Jersey, who had fled to Staten Island and organized a band of Loyalist raiders that included several members of his family, was one of the most violent partisans. Hatfield was described as "a noble-looking fellow but capable of doing almost anything." The members of his gang were said to be "a rough set of men, with no grace or shame, and feared neither God nor Devil."⁷⁰ On January 25, 1780, Hatfield and his raiders joined a party of New Jersey

⁶⁶ Archbishop Secker to Reverend Dr. Samuel Johnson, 6 October 1762, in *NYCD*, 7: 508; Archbishop Secker to Reverend Dr. Samuel Johnson, 30 March 1763, *Ibid*, 517-519; Davis, et al., eds., *The Church of St. Andrew*, 37.

⁶⁷ Quoted in Burch, "History of Saint Andrew's," 17.

⁶⁸ Quoted in *Ibid*, 17-18.

⁶⁹ McMillen, "Richmondtown . . . Part V," 28; Davis, et al., eds., *The Church of St. Andrew*, 38-39. Saint Andrew's was damaged during Mercer's raid in October 1776 and Sullivan's raid in August 1777.

⁷⁰ Cornelius Hatfield, Jr. was also known as Major Hatfield. His band of raiders was comprised of Loyalists from New Jersey and Staten Island. Although Hatfield and his men would provide

Volunteers and cavalry under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Abraham Van Buskirk in an attack on the Whig garrison at Elizabethtown, New Jersey. This strike was in retaliation for Stirling's raid on Staten Island, which had occurred ten days earlier. During the attack on the Whig garrison, Hatfield and his men went on a rampage capturing a number of leading Whigs and burning several buildings in Elizabethtown including the courthouse, the schoolhouse, and the First Presbyterian Church where his father Corneius Sr. served as deacon.⁷¹

But Hatfield's marauding was not restricted to hit-and-run raids into the New Jersey countryside. A resident of New Jersey named Ball had come to Staten Island with a wagon full of "poultry, beef, etc" to sell to the British, remembered Isaac Simonson, when "the Hatfields caught him." Apparently, Ball was given a chance "to escape and let them take his things but he would not leave his goods." The Hatfields then took him to a meadow "up the Kills" where there was "a big tree." One of the men affixed a noose to a tree branch and "they got a table for him [Ball] to stand upon." Simonson recalled that Ball "didn't think they were really going to hang him." However, as he stood atop the table Jake Hatfield kicked it out from under him.⁷²

reconnaissance and participate with Briagidier General Cortlandt Skinner's Loyalist troops in raids on Whig farms and military garrisons in New Jersey, one Staten Islander remembered that Hatfield was hardly "under General Skinner's commands." See Anthon, ed., "Anthon's Notes," 111, 135, 158.

⁷¹ Lieutenant Colonel Abraham Van Buskirk had been a successful doctor from Bergen County, New Jersey, before the Revolution. He and his Loyalist troops nearly captured the entire Whig garrison at Elizabethtown, New Jersey. For the raid on Elizabethtown see Thayer, *As We Were*, 133; Ellis L. Derry, *Old and Historic Churches of New Jersey* 2 vols. (Medford, NJ: Plexus Publishing, Inc., 1994), 2: 75. For Cornelius Hatfield, Jr. see Anthon, ed., "Anthon's Notes," 135-136. Captain Nathaniel Robbins led another Loyalist band that operated from Staten Island. One Staten Islander recalled that Robbins had gained "a bad name" for himself because of his exploits both on and off the Island. For Captain Nathaniel Robbins see Anthon, ed., "Anthon's Notes," 96-97, 137; McMillen, *A History of Staten Island, New York, During the American Revolution*, 44.

⁷² Anthon, ed., "Anthon's Notes," 135.

Another notorious Loyalist who used Staten Island to launch raids into New Jersey was Colonel Tye. A former slave from Monmouth County, New Jersey, Tye had escaped to freedom behind the British lines. Colonel Tye and his small group of African-American Loyalists often plundered Whig farms in Monmouth County from Staten Island and from Refugeetown in Sandy Hook, New Jersey. As a consequence of the raids led by Loyalists such as Colonel Tye, Monmouth County Whigs under the leadership of David Forman, a former brigadier general in the New Jersey militia, formed the Association for Retaliation in July 1780, which waged its own campaign against Loyalist marauders.⁷³

During the Revolution, Staten Islanders lived under martial law. Except for an occasional meeting of the town supervisors, the Island's colonial government ceased to function.⁷⁴ The British also shut down Staten Island's colonial courts, which left Staten Islanders without legal recourse in civil matters or against British abuses. In February 1778, the British government sent a peace commission to America, headed by Frederick Howard, the Earl of Carlisle. Even though the commission failed, it recommended to Lord George Germain, the British Colonial Secretary, that civil government should be restored in British-occupied areas. Germain incorporated this proposal into a new strategy designed to reduce the British military presence in America.⁷⁵

⁷³ Colonel Tye was a slave on the farm of John Corlies of Shrewbury, Monmouth County, New Jersey. He was known as Titus. See Graham Russell Hodges, *Slavery and Freedom in the Rural North: African-Americans in Monmouth County, New Jersey, 1665-1865* (Madison, WI: Madison House, 1997), 96-98. For the Whig response to Loyalist raids led by Colonel Tye and others into Monmouth County, New Jersey, from Staten Island see Michael S. Adelberg, "A Combination to Trample All Law Underfoot": The Association for Retaliation and the American Revolution in Monmouth County," *New Jersey History* 115 (1997), 3-35.

⁷⁴ Two Town Supervisors' Books from the Revolution still exist. See Richmond County Public Records Collection, Box 342, SIHS.

⁷⁵ Klein and Howard, eds., *The Twilight of British Rule in Revolutionary America*, 7-9.

In March 1780, Germain appointed General James Robertson as governor of New York and ordered him to take steps to restore civil government. In February 1781, Robertson began to revive civil government on Staten Island when he created a Police Court and appointed Christopher Billopp to the post of Superintendent of Police, which came “with a salary of Three hundred fifty pounds Currency.”⁷⁶ Billopp had the authority to “hear and determine Controversies, maintain Peace and good Order, and regulate the Police . . . until Civil Government in all Forms can take Place.”⁷⁷ In essence, he enforced military regulations, carried out orders from the British commandant, dealt with civilian complaints against the military, and tried cases involving civilians. Billopp announced that the Police Court would be located in Richmondtown and that it would hear cases every Monday. However, no evidence exists of this court’s proceedings.⁷⁸ Even though British officials portrayed the creation of a Police Court as a step toward the revival of civil government on Staten Island, in essence it was a form of military police.

The British defeat at Yorktown in October 1781 forced all Loyalists to make a difficult decision: accept the reality of Whig victory and the new state governments or leave for a life of exile. By 1783, some of Staten Island’s Loyalists had already chosen to seek new homes in other parts of the British Empire rather than live under a government led by their wartime enemies. “The last Division of Refugees are . . . preparing for Embarkation,” wrote Staten Islander Abraham Bancker to his cousin living in New

⁷⁶ Ibid, 188; General James Robertson to General Sir Guy Carleton, 16 March 1782, Sir Guy Carleton Papers, 1724-1808, Reel 14, Harriet Irving Library, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 189.

⁷⁸ See McMillen, *A History of Staten Island, New York, During the American Revolution*, 29. Billopp served as the Staten Island’s Superintendent of Police until 1782. Two men, Richard Conner and Paul Mischeau, Jr., filled the position until the British evacuation in early December 1783.

Jersey, “many families on Long Island, Staten Island, and New York are struck with a Panick & making preparations to go off, Some of them I think might stay in Safety but are frightened away by others.”⁷⁹ Loyalist Stephen Skinner of Perth Amboy, New Jersey, who was the brother of Brigadier General Cortlandt Skinner, described the conditions among the Loyalists in New York City as filled with “Anarchy and Confusion.”⁸⁰ In July 1783, Staten Islander John M. Mersereau, who served as a captain in Oliver De Lancey’s New York Volunteers, departed New York City on board the *Lord Townsend* bound for Saint John, New Brunswick, Canada. Mersereau’s two sons, Andrew and Lawrence joined their father. All three men eventually settled in Mougerville on the St. John River in Sunbury County, New Brunswick.⁸¹ Peter Guyon sold his property on Staten Island for “\$9,000” and eventually settled near Shelburne, Nova Scotia.⁸² Alexander McDonald also sold his property on Staten Island and remained in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where he had been stationed throughout most of the war. Susannah had finally joined him in late 1776, but tragically died in 1779. “I have nothing now to trouble you with but the Melancholy Account of Mrs. McDonald’s Death,” he wrote to his friend, the New York City merchant William McAdam, “and left me behind a Miserable wretch with five children much at a loss which way to turn myself to provide for them Shou’d God Spare

⁷⁹ Abraham Bancker to Abraham Bancker, 28 August 1783, Banker Family Papers, Correspondence, 1775-1787, Folder 14, NYHS.

⁸⁰ Stephen Skinner to Effingham Lawrence, 11 June 1783, Stephen Skinner Letter-Book, 1780-1793, NYHS.

⁸¹ McMillen, “An Island Saga: The Mersereau Family, Part V,” 202; Esther Clark Wright, *The Loyalists of New Brunswick* 5th ed. (Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, Canada: Sentinel Printing, LTD, 1985), 80, 245.

⁸² Hix, *The Crocheron Family of Staten Island*, 35.

my life to see them able to do for themselves.”⁸³ In November 1784, he sailed for Britain, never to return to Staten Island.⁸⁴ It is not known precisely how many Staten Islanders left the Island for Nova Scotia and other parts of the British Empire but it may be safe to assume that the number was less than 10 percent.

The path for Staten Island’s Loyalist refugees was paved with uncertainty. The decision to depart the Island for a new life in Canada or Britain brought hardship and heartache not only to many of the refugees but also to the loved ones they had left behind. In January 1785, Lettie Heslop, who married a British officer during the war and eventually settled with him in Britain, answered a letter from her aunt Anne Perine in which she wrote that it gave her “great pleasure to hear from you as it is the only letter I have received from any of my Friends since I left New York.” She lamented that many of her letters had gone unanswered and pleaded with her aunt to “give me the particulars about my Mother and sister and friends.”⁸⁵ “I imbrace this opportunity to inform you that we are all in good health,” wrote Richard Decker to his former neighbor Jane Jones, who settled with her husband Abraham, a captain in the Staten Island Loyalist militia, near Shelburne, Nova Scotia, “am sorry any Evil should subsist between you and any of your former Friends. Hope the true Friendship subsisting between your family & mine may never be dissolved.” Decker closed his letter by asking Jones to “give our best Respects

⁸³ Captain Alexander McDonald to William McAdam, 19 January 1779, *The Letter-Book of Captain Alexander McDonald*, 496.

⁸⁴ Loyalist Claim of Captain Alexander McDonald, Transcript, Staten Island Loyalist Collection, Box 1, Folder 2, SIHS. See also McMillen, “Captain Alexander McDonald: Part II,” 51; Moore, *The Loyalists*, 216.

⁸⁵ Lettie Heslop to Anne Perine, 23 January 1785, Perine Collection, Box 1, Folder 1, SIHS.

to Captain Jones, to Mr. and Mrs. Guyon, Capt. Isaac Decker, his Family and all Friends.”⁸⁶

While some Loyalists voluntarily departed Staten Island, others were forced to leave. New York State confiscated the landholdings and banished those deemed too dangerous to the stability and security of its government. Under the law entitled “An Act for the forfeiture and sale of the estates of persons who have adhered to the enemies of this state, and in respect to all property within the same” (Forfeiture Act) passed in October 1779, fifty-nine prominent New Yorkers, including Christopher Billopp and Benjamin Seaman from Staten Island, were attainted as loyalist felons, their estates were confiscated, and they were banished from the state.⁸⁷ This law, which was applied once the British abandoned an occupied area, was designed to undermine Loyalist power and to raise much needed revenue for the State from the sale of confiscated Loyalist property. However, because Staten Island was under British occupation, the State could not enforce the law against Staten Islanders. In May 1780, Billopp began to sell sections of his estate “because of the Attainder.” If the British army withdrew from Staten Island, he risked losing the property to New York State without compensation. Thus, rather than not receiving anything in return for the land that had been in his family’s possession for generations, he decided to sell it for about two-thirds its value.⁸⁸ Seaman was also

⁸⁶ Richard Decker to Jane Jones, 1 August 1788, Decker/Prall/Hillyer Collection, Box 19, Folder 12, SIHS.

⁸⁷ In July 1783, Billopp and Seaman joined fifty-three other prominent Loyalists in a petition to the British Commander-in-Chief, General Sir Guy Carleton, requesting over 200,000 acres of choice land in Nova Scotia, Canada. General Carleton referred the petition to John Parr, the governor of Nova Scotia, who denied the request. See Ranlet, *The New York Loyalists*, 175; Wright, *The Loyalists of New Brunswick*, 60, 175-177.

⁸⁸ Loyalist Claim of Christopher Billopp, Transcript, Staten Island Loyalist Collection, Box 1, Folder 1, SIHS. See also Horne, *The Conference House Revisited*, 26.

“induced to sell part of his Lands” at a reduced price. The buyers were “afraid to give near the Value,” he said, because the land was still “Subject . . . to seizure.”⁸⁹

Once the British evacuated Staten Island in December 1783, New York State claimed the Billopp and Seaman landholdings and sold them at auction. The speculators who bought the property at the State auction became entangled in legal disputes with the Staten Islanders who had earlier purchased the land from Billopp and Seaman. The disputed claims to these lands would take several years to settle.⁹⁰

Another state law designed to punish Loyalists was the Trespass Act of 1783. This law allowed Whigs who had fled British-held areas of the state to sue Loyalists for unauthorized occupation of, and damages to, their property. While very few Staten Island Loyalists were sued under this law, a couple of cases do stand out.

In two separate lawsuits, the prominent Whigs John and Samuel Broome of New York City and their attorney Aaron Burr accused Richard Conner of cutting off wood from property belonging to them on the southern side of the Fresh Kills creek on Staten Island. Samuel Broome charged that beginning in September 1776, Conner “injured, cut down, and destroyed” thousands of oak, beech, birch, maple, cedar, and nut wood trees that were located on his property. In addition, Broome’s suit claimed that Conner sold 1,000 cords of the nut wood and 1,000 cords each of the beech, birch, cedar, maple, and oak to the British army for the hefty sum of £7000. His brother John made similar claims. Conner, who was represented by Henry Brockholst Livingston, the son of New Jersey governor William Livingston and the husband of Benjamin Seaman’s

⁸⁹ Loyalist Claim of Benjamin Seaman, Transcript, Ibid, SIHS.

⁹⁰ Home, *The Conference House Revisited*, 26-27.

granddaughter Catherine, pleaded not guilty to the charges. In both suits Conner was found guilty and assessed damages.⁹¹

In another trespass case, several Whigs sued the former Provincial congressman Richard Lawrence for his actions as Master Carpenter of the shipyards on Staten Island. Lawrence, who received legal advice from Alexander Hamilton, pleaded not guilty, contending that the Act was in violation of the peace treaty ending the war.⁹² In 1786, Lawrence was found guilty and jailed. While in prison he wrote to several members of the Confederation Congress, to King George III, and to various British officials seeking relief.⁹³ “Mr. Richard Lawrence of Staten Island has complained to Congress, and to the King of Great Britain, that Judgments have been obtained and executed against him in certain Actions of Trespass, which he says were commenced & prosecuted in Violation of the Treaty of Peace,” John Jay, the American secretary for foreign affairs, wrote to Alexander Hamilton. He then added: “in these Actions I understand you was Concerned for him, and as it is important that the Facts which concern the Merits of his Complaint be ascertained with Precision, I take the Liberty of requesting the Favor of your to furnish

⁹¹ See Kenneth Scott, “Cutting of Staten Island Forests,” 11-12. Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Billopp’s Corps of Loyalist militia used much of the wood from John Broome’s property as firewood.

⁹² Alexander Hamilton saw nothing but harm coming from New York State’s persecution and expulsion of Loyalists. According to his biographer Forrest McDonald, Hamilton “opposed such persecution on grounds of humanity and national honor, but also on grounds of policy, and he wrote a long letter to Clinton [Governor George Clinton of New York] before the evacuation urging the governor to use his influence to stem the flood of anti-Tory legislation. The British, said Hamilton, were hardly so magnanimous or dispassionate as not to respond in kind to persecutions of Loyalists in violation of the peace treaty. Indeed, they would be eager to seize upon American violations as an excuse to violate disadvantageous articles of the treaty themselves – for instance, by retaining control of their military posts in western New York, which were the keys to the lucrative fur trade with the Indians. Soon afterward, Hamilton discovered another practical reason for moderation. Tories were fleeing in droves: some 35,000, nearly a fifth of the state’s prewar population left for Britain, Nova Scotia, or Canada, draining the city of money in the doing.” See Forrest McDonald, *Alexander Hamilton: A Biography* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1979), 73-74.

⁹³ Ranlet, *The New York Loyalists*, 173.

me with a State of them as soon as you conveniently can.”⁹⁴ Lawrence remained in prison until 1788 and after his release went to Britain with his wife and nine children. He died one year later “advanced in life and impaired by hard toil.”⁹⁵

By 1784, civil government was fully restored in those areas of New York State formerly under British occupation. On Staten Island, the courts were reopened, elections were held for local and state offices, and the town supervisors were meeting regularly. Although the Island’s political culture continued to reflect deference to particular families as well as to the educated and wealthier members of society, the war did bring some important changes. The most obvious change was the pre-revolutionary leadership provided by the Loyalists Christopher Billopp and Benjamin Seaman was replaced with men from families known for their active support of independence. Whigs such as Adrian and Abraham Bancker and John and Joshua Mersereau III became post-revolutionary Staten Island’s political power brokers. In addition, the religious affiliation of the Island’s political leadership shifted from Anglican to Reformed. For example, six of the ten men who represented Staten Island in the New York State Assembly between 1777 and 1800 were affiliated with the Reformed Church.

Apart from the confiscation and breakup of the Billopp and Seaman properties, the Revolution did not bring drastic changes to the socioeconomic structure of Staten Island. The Island remained a predominantly middle class, agrarian society.⁹⁶ Staten Islanders continued to plant on lands that were ravaged by the war. Staten Island’s

⁹⁴ John Jay to Alexander Hamilton, 15 May 1788, in Syrett, ed., *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 4: 648–649.

⁹⁵ Excerpt from the Loyalist Claim of Elizabeth Lawrence, in Coldham, ed., *American Migrations*, 273.

⁹⁶ Sachs, *Made on Staten Island*, 15.

population experienced only slight growth from about 2,847 at the beginning of the Revolution to 3,835 in 1790. Of that number, 127 were free African-Americans and 759 were slaves.⁹⁷ According to Graham Russell Hodges, “almost 60 percent of the white households [on Staten Island] in 1790 used black laborers” and “nearly 40 percent” of those households owned slaves, which was “a higher ratio than in South Carolina, North Carolina, or Maryland.”⁹⁸ Slavery therefore did not diminish on Staten Island as a result of the Revolution but grew stronger.

On December 3, 1783, the British finally evacuated Staten Island. The nearly seven and a half years of British occupation took a physical and emotional toll on many Staten Islanders. Their fields and homes were left in ruins, plundered not only by marauding bands of Whigs, but also to their dismay, by undisciplined Loyalist and Hessian troops and war-weary, disillusioned British regulars. In addition to the destruction of personal property, Staten Islanders endured physical violence and on occasion, the murder of a family member or neighbor. Although the callous acts of violence by Whig partisans enraged Staten Islanders, those perpetrated by the British and their allies, the very people to whom they had turned to for protection in 1776, were more disturbing. As the Revolution progressed, the daily demands of an army of occupation, the rough treatment of residents, and the British army’s inability to subdue the rebellion were major causes for the cooling of Loyalist ardor on the Island. By 1783, many Staten Islanders were ready to embrace the Whig cause. With the British defeated, only the most vocal and active Loyalists voluntarily left Staten Island for a life of exile in other

⁹⁷ Greene and Harrington, eds., *American Population Before the Federal Census of 1790*, 105.

⁹⁸ Hodges, *Root and Branch*, 164.

parts of the British Empire or were forced out by New York State. For those that remained, it was time to rebuild the community, physically and emotionally, within their new country – the United States.

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