

NEW YORK

Volume 4 • Number 3 • Winter 2005

archives

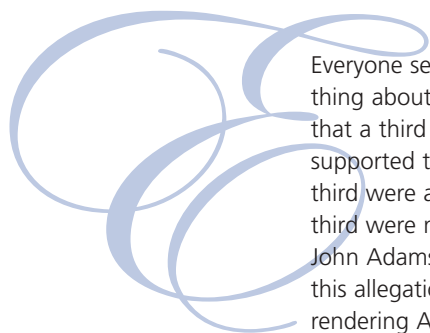


To "Lulu"
Happy New Year
Ernie
Cora Jones and
Mother

BY PHILIP RANLET

On the of HISTORY

DURING THE REVOLUTION, SOME NEW YORKERS REMAINED LOYAL TO ENGLAND'S KING GEORGE III. THEIR NAMES—AS WELL AS THEIR REASONS AND THEIR CHOICE OF HOMES AFTERWARDS—MIGHT SURPRISE YOU.



Everyone seems to know one thing about the Revolution: that a third of the people supported the Revolution, a third were against it, and a third were neutral. However, John Adams, the source of this allegation, was actually rendering American opinion on the *French* Revolution, not America's, making that estimate irrelevant. In reality, Loyalists—supporters of George III, King of England—were a small minority, and Patriots were an overwhelming majority.

Confusion also reigns about the strength of the Loyalists (also called Tories) in what would become the State of New York. Once they were seen as the majority of New Yorkers. But a few years after the start of the war, John Adams traveled in New York and found himself in Poughkeepsie, the Dutchess County seat. In a letter to his wife Abigail, Adams explained that “the Dutch” in that community were

“[z]ealous against the Tories, who have not half the Tranquility here that they have in the Town of Boston, after all the noise that has been made about New York Tories.” Thanks to Adams once again, it's now clear that the Loyalists were just as weak in the Empire State as everywhere else.

Strongholds of the Enemy

Still, some of the noise about New York's Loyalists was legitimate. Some places in the rebellious state did have strongholds of friends of the King, and northern New York had some of these Tory bastions.

By the time of the Revolution, northern New York had been divided into two huge counties, Albany and the frontier Tryon County. A powerful family, the Johnsons, dominated Tryon. The founder of the dynasty, Sir William Johnson, had been Great Britain's Indian agent for the northern colonies. Esteemed

by the Iroquois, his closest and most important clients, Johnson was clearly the most influential man in New York. If he had lived, the Six Nations would have been united behind the British and solidly against the Patriots. But Johnson died just before the Revolution broke out, and the Iroquois remained divided between the two sides. Guy Johnson, Sir William's nephew, succeeded to his uncle's job but not to his personal authority. William's heir, Sir John Johnson, also did not have the influence of his father.

Nonetheless, the King's forces on the Tryon frontier had strength. After the French and Indian War (1754–1763), many British veterans, having seen the unclaimed expanses of New York, decided to settle there. A substantial number of Scottish Highlanders, including their officers, also picked the New York frontier as their new home.

WRONG SIDE



IF SIR WILLIAM
JOHNSON HAD
LIVED, THE SIX
NATIONS WOULD
HAVE BEEN
UNITED BEHIND
THE BRITISH AND
SOLIDLY AGAINST
THE PATRIOTS.

*Above: Loyalists and Indians led by Major Walter Butler and Mohawk Chief Joseph Brant attacked and burned the frontier community of Cherry Valley in central New York.
Right: Sir William Johnson*



NEW YORK STATE OFFICE OF PARKS, RECREATION AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION



NEW YORK STATE OFFICE OF PARKS, RECREATION AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

Sir William Johnson's home in Johnstown, confiscated in 1779 by the State of New York as Loyalist property, was subsequently sold at auction. In 1906, New York acquired the house as a historic site. Today it is open to the public from May 1 through October.

Scotland would send even more immigrants to Tryon County. In the 1770s, hundreds of Catholics from Scotland arrived, as well as some from Ireland. Perhaps most astonishing for the time is that these immigrants came with their own priest, Reverend John McKenna. No Catholic services had been performed publicly in Protestant-controlled New York since the seventeenth century.

Life had been difficult for Catholics in the British Isles for hundreds of years, and these immigrants soon learned that New York was little better. To punish Massachusetts for the Boston Tea Party of 1773, the British Parliament passed what were known as the Intolerable Acts, which closed Boston Harbor. By coincidence, Parliament passed the Quebec Act at the same time, which established Roman Catholicism as the official religion in British Canada. This heightened Protestant fears at a very tense time, and suspicious New Yorkers believed that Parliament might actually pass a similar act in their colony. Bigotry against Catholics became so intense in New York that the recently arrived Catholic immigrants became Loyalists. Ironically, many of them had been rebels in Britain, having supported the cause of the Stuart pretender to

the British throne. But their circumstances dictated that they now be loyal to George III, since their very survival seemed to depend upon it.

Awash with Tories?

The Loyalist center in Tryon County was Johnstown, named for the Johnson family. There were two other towns where the King had support. One of these, Butternuts, had been populated by other new settlers from Scotland. Unadilla, the third reputed "Tory town," had Loyalists of a different sort: Anglicans, congregants of the Church of England.

Today, a reliable guide to Loyalists in New York is: find an Anglican (now called Episcopal) congregation, and you will find Loyalists. Anglicanism stressed ideas such as order and devotion to the royal family. Thus it was unsurprising that

BURGOYNE EXPECTED HIS ENTRY INTO NEW YORK TO BE MORE LIKE A VICTORY PARADE THAN WARFARE.

some Anglicans kept their allegiance to King George. The Church of England was by no means strong in northern New York, but it did have outposts in Albany County, such as Schenectady and the City of Albany itself.

The more eastern sections of the county experienced Tory outbreaks that displayed some interesting nuances, such as in Kinderhook, the home of a well-known Loyalist of Dutch

ancestry, Peter Van Schaack. He and other Dutch leaders in Kinderhook drifted into Toryism because of local infighting. Many New Englanders had moved into the old Dutch community, and both wanted to lead the town. So much squabbling took place that each group created its own revolutionary committee. In 1776, when Van Schaack and his allies finally gained control of Kinderhook's government, they were subsequently removed by the county leaders of Albany, who were suspicious of their patriotism. Not surprisingly, Peter Van Schaack became a Tory.

"Would the Tories Have Risen?"

At least Van Schaack and his friends weren't dangerous. But the Johnsons were. Early in 1776, the Johnsons and the Loyalist Scots and Irish fled to the safe asylum of Canada. After their arrival, Sir John Johnson and Reverend McKenna told British officials that New York was awash with Tories. This mistaken intelligence helped inspire one of the great British disasters of the American Revolution, the invasion of New York by British General John Burgoyne.

A better author and party-goer than a military man, Burgoyne expected his entry into New York to be more like a victory parade than warfare, since hordes of Loyalists would make the conquest of the rebellious colony very quick indeed. Burgoyne's army easily captured Fort Ticonderoga and moved deeper into New York. But the German Baroness Fredericke Riedesel, whose husband served with Burgoyne, soon noted a major problem: "We passed through bound-



British General John Burgoyne surrendered at Saratoga on October 17, 1777. Faulty intelligence had led him to believe that New York was full of Loyalists who would help him when he invaded the state.

less forests and magnificent tracts of country, which, however, were abandoned by all the inhabitants, who fled before us." The Tory outpouring had not materialized. Burgoyne kept going south, but the situation did not change. Finally, in October, 1777, Burgoyne was forced to surrender at Saratoga. To the end, he was puzzled by the dearth of support: "Would the Tories have risen? Why did they not rise round Albany and below it?" But the supposed Tories had only existed in the imaginations of over-confident Loyalists.

On the other hand, Sir John Johnson and his Loyalist men were very real. After their arrival in Canada, they formed themselves into military units with names like the King's Royal Regiment of New York. Another group, Butler's Rangers, became infamous. Commanded by John Butler, a political ally of the Johnsons, the Rangers evoked fear in the heart of every Patriot on the frontier. Most terrifying of all was their second-in-command, John Butler's son Walter. Known as "Bloody

Butler," he led a raid on the small frontier community of Cherry Valley, where he presided over brutality that shocked Americans. In fact, when Bloody Butler was killed in 1781, Patriot New Yorkers celebrated.

Cherry Valley was just one of the raids conducted by vengeful Loyalists. One town after another was destroyed by Johnson's men and their Indian allies. But the Patriots proved themselves effective in gaining revenge: Unadilla and Butternuts were likewise decimated.

In such circumstances, Loyalists who stayed in Patriot territory literally risked their lives. New York State, needing money to pay for its part in the war, hit Loyalists with special taxes; the chief source of money for the state was the land owned by Loyalists. The state then confiscated all the Tory property it could find, ranging from small family farms to giant manors in Westchester. Frederick Philipse, James Delancey, Roger Morris, and Beverly Robinson were among those whose vast landholdings were lost to confiscation.

Good Citizens Once Again

In 1783, when the British finally accepted the independence of their thirteen colonies, the remaining Loyalists had to provide for their future. Some less-controversial friends of the King decided to stay in the United States, but this option wasn't possible for the soldiers of Butler's Rangers, for example. If caught, such men would have been hanged after a show trial. Others picked the British Isles for their asylum. But most chose to go north to Canada, at the time simply a group of isolated colonies. Butler's Rangers put down roots at Niagara, which had been their base for their numerous raids into New York. What became Kingston was settled by the men who had served with Sir John Johnson. These Loyalists who stayed in the future Ontario province prospered. However, the colonies of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick (carved from the former), which also attracted many Loyalists, were less successful as a home for these refugees because the land was not as fertile.

Yet a surprising number of Loyalists decided to return to New York. Perhaps even more surprising is that, as time passed, many of their old enemies stopped objecting to their return. Some of the most extreme Tory-haters lost their political influence because of their own greed. Wild speculation in confiscated Tory land discredited many of them; as a result, many of the extremists were voted out of office. Their departure from power improved the climate for returning Loyalists.

By 1789, when the new federal Constitution went into effect, the former Tories were once again seen as good citizens. Oppressive laws that had been passed to punish them had either been voided or were simply ignored. A number of them had been compensated for their financial losses by the British government. Some no doubt still yearned for the good old days when America had a king, but they all accepted that America was now a republic and would remain one. Thus the Loyalists were no longer on the wrong side of history. ■

SOURCES Some of the most important Loyalist documents, which were held by the New York State Library, were destroyed in the Capitol fire of 1911. However, plenty of information still exists. Tories were compensated for their losses by the British, resulting in the collection of extensive claims and associated materials; these are on microfilm, and the New-York Historical Society has the films for New Yorkers. The original indexes were complicated, but the publication of Gregory Palmer's *Biographical Sketches of Loyalists of the American Revolution* (1984) simplified them. Along with a brief summary of each Loyalist claim, Palmer lists the location in the manuscript collection of every document relating to each Loyalist. For those interested in the Tories (especially those determined to learn about their own ancestors), the Loyalist claims material is invaluable.

The history of New York's Tories is thoroughly detailed in the second edition of my book, *The New York Loyalists* (University Press of America, 2002).