

Part II: The Longest Occupation – Long Island

In the entire American War of Independence, the Battle of Long Island that took place in late August of 1776 was the largest battle of the conflict in terms of the numbers of combatants involved. The Royal Navy invasion fleet of over 400 vessels that converged on New York Harbor was the largest expeditionary force ever assembled by Britain up to that time. General William Howe had under his command 32,000 British soldiers and German mercenaries, concentrated on Staten Island, and they would be opposed by General George Washington's Continental forces (army and militia), estimated to have been up to 10,000 men, and deployed in lower Manhattan and on the Brooklyn Heights. The invasion force would come ashore on the Brooklyn beach at Gravesend Bay, gaining the name the Battle of Brooklyn, although it is more often referred to as the Battle of Long Island.

The Battle of Long Island turned out to be Washington's first defeat, but as a successful strategic withdrawal in the face of superior forces, it proved to be a morale booster for the Continental Army. However, the loss of New York and Long Island initiated the longest occupation of the war by British forces, who would not depart these shores until two years after the conclusive Battle of Yorktown, and two months after the Treaty of Paris was signed in 1783 that formally ended the Revolutionary War.

Life under occupation was more like civil war. Local families were divided in their loyalties. Benjamin Woolsey of Dosoris became an officer in the Queens Rangers, a British unit that was headquartered at Robert Townsend's home in Oyster Bay (Raynam Hall). Ironically, the member of Washington's spy ring known as "Culper Junior" was Robert Townsend. Melancthon Woolsey, also of Dosoris, served as a Major in the Continental Army. Among one of the founding families of Musketa Cove there were Coles family members serving in both the Patriot and Loyalist militias.

During the occupation, Loyalists (also called "Tories") abused their Patriot neighbors and, when they could get away with it, those favoring the rebellion abused their Tory neighbors. It was an anxious time. Civilian governments were dissolved, and the British established "police courts" throughout Long Island and exercised military court proceedings over the inhabitants, but occupation force soldiers often robbed and pillaged the populace with impunity. Finally, any Patriot militias that had formed prior to the Battle of Long Island were disbanded, and Loyalist militias were raised in their stead.

Many Patriots, with or without their families, fled across the Sound to Connecticut and became refugees, impoverished because they left behind their possessions and livelihoods. A good number of Long Island's Patriots joined the Continental Army. Those Patriot families who remained were often required to pledge allegiance to the Crown. Being denounced as an enemy of the Crown could result in years of imprisonment, often on the disease-ridden prison hulks moored in New York Harbor.

Once these Long Islanders fled to the opposite shore of the Sound, it was usually difficult or impossible to return during the war to visit family or retrieve their goods, money, or family members. The Continental authorities in Connecticut and Westchester County would rarely approve permits to return to Long Island. However, the refugee

stream was a two-way street: Loyalists fleeing from Connecticut and Rhode Island, both in the Patriot camp, came across the Sound to seek protection under the British in New York.

Musketa Cove and the surrounding farms and villages suffered the confiscation of property and other abuses by British Army units, by the Quartermasters responsible for obtaining supplies, by individual soldiers, and by local raiding parties known as “skinners” – Loyalist bands sanctioned, and often led by British officers. The inhabitants took to burying their valuables and hiding their livestock in woods and hollows to avoid confiscation. With New York City and Long Island under occupation, the British Quartermasters took full advantage of the availability of the Island’s farm produce, timber, livestock, and forage to supply the army. Major collection points, or “magazines” for requisitioned supplies were established at Jericho and Oyster Bay, and shipped to New York City by water. Army Quartermasters ordered significant supplies of wood provided by the woodlands of Musketa Cove, particularly during the winter of 1779-1780, one of the coldest on record. Although British policy called for receipts to be given for requisitioned supplies and compensation paid, it was a well-established scam that Quartermasters became wealthy from receiving the compensation funds but paying nothing to those from whom the supplies were taken.

The “Quartering” or “Billeting” of British troops in Long Islanders’ homes and the destruction of churches, which were often used as barracks or stables, or demolished for the wood, was a feature of the occupation. If a family still lived in the home, the kitchen area was often closed off and used to house a number of troops, while the family was left to occupy the bedrooms.

For the Patriots that remained on Long Island during the occupation, guerilla warfare, smuggling, and spying were surreptitiously pursued. Sheep Pen Point (Garvies Point) and Hempstead Harbor were used by smugglers to avoid payment of British-imposed taxes before the Revolutionary War, and became a destination for the “whaleboatmen” during the war itself. British warships often anchored in Hempstead Harbor to combat smuggling and to intercept the whaleboatmen coming from Westchester County across the Sound to plunder Loyalist homes on the Musketa Cove peninsula.

While the major port cities of Boston, Philadelphia, Charleston, and Savannah were occupied by British forces at various times during the War for Independence for periods of from 9 months to 3-1/2 years, only New York and Long Island remained under continuous occupation for virtually the entire war – 7 years. This is far longer than the Nazi occupation of Europe in World War II.

The “whaleboat war”, and the final years of the War for Independence will be the subject of Part III of this series.