

Part III: The “Whaleboat Wars” and Retribution

The “whaleboat war” was a theater of action particular to Long Island Sound. Continental forces from harbors in New York’s Westchester County and Connecticut would row across Long Island Sound in multi-oared boats up to 30’ in length, to attack Loyalist homes (and often homes belonging to Patriots as well) on Long Island’s north shore. The purpose was to steal supplies that might be used by the British forces; kidnap Loyalists who might be ransomed or used in a prisoner exchange; attack and destroy British fortifications and supply depots; spread terror among the Loyalist populace; and ensure the British maintained forces on Long Island that might be better employed elsewhere during the war.

In 1777, a whaleboat flotilla commanded by Lt. Col. Jonathan Meigs made an attack from Guilford, Connecticut on the south shore village of Sag Harbor – a British stronghold. The whaleboatmen destroyed 12 brigs and sloops which supported the Royal forces, burned supplies, feed, forage and merchandize stockpiled by the British, took 90 enemy captives, and returned without any casualties in 25 hours. Lt. Col. Meigs was awarded a sword by the Continental Congress for this raid.

A party of rebels headed by one Benjamin Kirby attacked the home of Abraham Walton at Pembroke, Musketa Cove in 1779, and took him together with his silver plate and Mrs. Walton’s money. They then proceeded to the neighbors, and took Dr. Brooks, Albert Coles, and eight more Loyalists, and carried them all to Connecticut.

Like the Continental forces on the mainland, Loyalist whaleboatmen often raided the Westchester and Connecticut shores. In 1779, a major raid near New Haven by British and Loyalist forces destroyed homes and businesses from East Haven to Norwalk, and sought to capture alleged rebel whaleboatmen.

And there were whaleboatmen who raided Long Island merely for plunder, and did not recognize any difference between Loyalist or Patriot Islanders. These raids were known as “predatory excursions”. Late in the war, the governors of both Connecticut and New York issued decrees in an attempt to limit the depredations of the rogue whaleboatmen on the Sound, to no avail.

While the final large battle at Yorktown, Virginia in 1781 essentially ended the war in favor of the Colonists, the Treaty of Paris, officially ending the war, was not signed until two years after the battle. The final departure of the British forces, along with some 39,000 American Loyalists, and over 3,000 free blacks and slaves, was not completed until November 25, 1783 – “Evacuation Day”. As the last British troops sailed from New York Harbor on that day, General Washington entered New York City in triumph. Throughout the war Washington had maintained the objective of retaking New York, but the Continental Army was destined to respond to British invasions in other parts of the colonies, and the necessary force to invade New York could never be assembled.

Among the Loyalists who left the United States, and later became an officer in the New Brunswick (Canada) Militia, was Lt. Benjamin Woolsey of “Dosoris”. Woolsey had served in the Loyalist Queen’s Rangers during the occupation. Yet Long Island also gained distinguished individuals after the war. James Garvie, a British officer during the American Revolution, bought land at Musketa Cove along the Creek and Hempstead

Harbor after the war. In 1803, he emigrated to the United States with his son, Dr. Thomas Garvie, who became one of only two physicians in Musketa Cove in the early 1800s.

While under the British occupation Long Island ironically suffered from the acts of New York State as well. Retribution had started early in the war, with the confiscation of Loyalist property even before the state's constitution was ratified in 1777. In October 1779, the Forfeiture Act was passed by the New York legislature. This act authorized the seizure and selling of Loyalist properties and their banishment from the state. It is little wonder that so many Loyalists chose to embark with the British Army, and to relocate to England and to other countries at war's end

The Confiscation Act passed by New York punished Loyalists between 1780 and 1783. Lists of Loyalists were drawn up and judgments on their property were documented. Alexander Hamilton, later first Secretary of the United States Treasury, built his law practice in New York successfully defending Loyalists whose property had been seized under these laws.

After the celebrations died down and large numbers of Loyalists had left the new United States, a period of reconciliation began. However, the confiscation of Loyalist property continued in New York and in other states even after 1800. With the adoption of the United States Constitution, a clause of which prohibited "bills of attainder" – a category of laws under which states had passed these punitive measures – came into force. This ended these practices and allowed for reintegration of Loyalists into American society.

The Revolutionary War, though not fought on Long Island with the exception of the Battle of Brooklyn, resulted in widespread losses of property by the inhabitants, the division of, and separation of families, and devastation of churches, farms, orchards and forest land. The suffering of the Long Island populace lasted for nearly the entire duration of the war and through the peace negotiations. Long Island was further penalized by New York State by the imposition of a tax: the reason being that the inhabitants hadn't fully participated in the War for Independence. Recall that, following the largest battle of the war, the Battle of Long Island, of all the cities and colonies, Long Island and New York City suffered the longest under British occupation – 1776-1783.

The War for Independence was a civil war, dividing families politically, not unlike the way in which America is divided today in their political beliefs. George Washington's farewell address warned us that political parties were a threat to national unity. We did not heed his advice. It is only by recognizing what united us as Americans 250 years ago that we can overcome these divisions and work together to form a more perfect union.