

Part I: Long Island's Road to Rebellion

by Dave Nieri, Glen Cove City Historian

What did the residents of this community endure to obtain freedom from the Crown of England?

Musketa Cove (the original name of Glen Cove when it was settled), was little more than a 108-year old farming community when the events in Boston ignited the War for Independence. Boston was a trouble-making town, strongly opposed to the taxes being assessed on the American colonies by the English Parliament, and so troublesome that it was occupied by a British Army in 1776. Massachusetts firebrands John and Samuel Adams were strong advocates for the colonies to cut ties with England, while Philadelphia's Ben Franklin had been advocating that the thirteen colonies unite and define common goals so that they could have some leverage with Parliament. These and other colony representatives were active in Philadelphia at the 1st and 2nd Continental Congresses. Meanwhile, cosmopolitan New York City was focused on pursuing commerce and remaining within the good graces of the King. Long Islanders were not so easily moved to open rebellion, and so remained a quiet mix of Loyalists, potential Patriots, or indifference.

Here on Long Island's north shore was a community engaged primarily in farming, fishing, milling, and raising livestock. News of current events traveled slowly and newspapers were rare so that, while the inhabitants were aware of the tensions between the colonies and England, they were somewhat insulated from the "independence fever" of Boston and Philadelphia.

The hard life of the farmer left little time to dwell on such momentous topics. Lack of interest in rebellion was illustrated when, as early as December 1774, a meeting of freeholders was held in Oyster Bay to elect a Queens County delegate to attend the upcoming meeting of the 1st New York Provincial Congress, a legislative body that would replace the Loyalist New York Assembly in 1775. (*Musketa Cove and Oyster Bay were in Queens County – Nassau County was not formed until 1899.*) Local residents Zebulon Williams of Oyster Bay and William Hopkins of Musketa Cove participated in the effort, but only a third of the eligible freeholders showed up at the meeting and no election took place. This lack of interest meant that Queens County failed to provide a delegate to the upcoming Provincial Congress. When the 2nd Provincial Congress was called in late 1775, once again, Queens County was not represented. Long Islanders were not enthusiastic about rebellion.

With the news of the Battles of Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts in 1775, and the disbanding of the New York Assembly, the handwriting was on the wall – New York's Royal Governor William Tryon fled to the safety of a British man-o-war in October of that year. By this time each community knew who were the Loyalists (or Tories) and who supported independence from England. Now, Long Island authorities that favored the Patriot cause began to impress cattle, horses and forage, and to disarm those identified as Loyalists in their communities.

When Long Island learned that General George Washington and his hastily-assembled Continental Army had broken the siege of Boston and forced the British forces to evacuate that city in March of 1776, this news gave encouragement to those with pro-

rebellion views. Patriot militias formed on Long Island, and the lines between Loyalists and Patriots began to solidify. But Long Island was still comprised of a fairly even distribution of those who favored independence and those wishing to remain British subjects, with a sizable number of Quaker farms whose occupants would take no sides. On the bright side, by the 3rd New York Provincial Congress in May 1776, Queens County would finally have representation, with delegates William Townsend of Duck Pond and Samuel Townsend of Oyster Bay. Yet the timid Provincial Congress refused to send a delegate to the 2nd Continental Congress in Philadelphia, which would soon be drafting the Declaration of Independence.

When the British sailed away from Boston in March 1776, they developed a new strategy to quickly end the rebellion. New York City was a center of commerce in the colonies, the second most populace city after Philadelphia, and still predominantly loyal to the Crown. If England could control New York and the Hudson River, it could split the colonies between defiant Philadelphia and Boston and break the rebellion. General Washington brought the Continental Army to New York immediately after the British evacuated Boston arriving in April, rightly believing New York City would be their next objective. The Declaration of Independence, adopted on July 4th, was read to Washington's troops at Bowling Green on July 9th 1776.

That same month, General William Howe gathered 32,000 British troops and German mercenaries on Staten Island, to invade and occupy New York. George Washington's roughly 9,000 Continental forces had fortified Manhattan Island and the Brooklyn Heights to repel them. This set the stage for the largest battle of the American Revolution – the Battle of Long Island. The invasion took place in late August at Gravesend Bay, Brooklyn, hence it is often called the Battle of Brooklyn. While this battle turned into a defeat for General Washington's severely outnumbered troops, it also proved to be a masterful withdrawal that preserved the Continental Army to fight another day. Washington subsequently suffered other defeats which forced him to abandon New York and to withdraw into New Jersey until winter paused the fighting. But the campaign in New Jersey in winter led to some of his greatest victories at Trenton and Princeton.

Life would change dramatically for Long Islanders after the "Battle of Long Island". When the Continental Army withdrew from New York, the longest occupation of the war began. Long Island was occupied by the British for seven years – longer than the occupation of Europe in World War II. But it was not only an occupation by enemy forces, but a Civil War between Americans – Loyalist vs. Patriot.

Part II: The Occupation of Long Island