

We honor our patriot ancestors by telling their story.

As we all know, too much of our history is lost, or is in danger of being lost to the ages. So, we as compatriots must make a difference to preserve alive a memory of the patriots who gave so much for country and paid so dear a price for liberty.

Numbers can confuse an audience, so, let's slow down and briefly illustrate examples:

In the civil war 33% of the 16-40 year old male population was willing to sacrifice their lives to preserve the union. In World War II it was about 30%. Today on the war on terror, it's about 1%.

But, during the Revolution, over 50% of the 16-50 year-old male population was willing to sacrifice their lives and property for liberty in the colonies. Of those 50% that made the ultimate sacrifice, three times as many American Patriots were liquidated – 11,500 on the infamous British prison ships and in New York prisons - than the 4,300 killed in the American armed forces during the entire Revolutionary War.

American Patriot prisoners held by the British, who preferred death at its worst rather than disloyalty to their country, are still the forgotten heroes of our War for Independence.

All of these Patriots could have betrayed the cause of liberty and independence in exchange for their lives, but preferred death. All they had to do was to sign a document of allegiance to the Crown and receive a free pardon by enlisting in His Majesty's Army or Navy.

I personally researched the treatment of prisoner atrocities by the British in qualifying one of my Patriot relatives. In May of 1776, a Connecticut regiment had been ordered to be raised for the defense of the State, "*to be subject to join the continental army, if so ordered by the Governor.*" Captain Bezaleel Beebe was appointed to the command of one of the companies with 91 officers and soldiers under Col. Bradley's State Regiment.

That November 1776 Thirty-six handpicked men under Captain Beebe had been sent to reinforce Fort Washington.

My 5th great grandfather was one of the 36 men chosen and later, taken prisoner at Fort Washington. Gershom Gibbs was born July 28, 1721, the son of Benjamin Gibbs and Abigail Marshall, the first male born in Litchfield, Connecticut. At the age of 55, he died of starvation and disease as a prisoner of war on the *Grosvenor* prison ship in Wallabout Bay, New York Harbor, New York City, NY. His son Isaac Gibbs also died of starvation and disease on January 17, 1777 at age 17 on the *Grosvenor*, one of at least 16 of these floating prisons anchored in Wallabout Bay on the East River in New York City for most of the war.

Moore Gibbs, my 4th great grandfather, son of Gershom, fortunately was not picked by Capt. Beebe or I may not of been here today! Military records from 1777 show Moore Gibb's occupation was a shoemaker, that he was 5'9" tall, that he had light complexion, dark eyes and dark hair and that he saw duty on the east side of The Hudson.

Following the American defeat at the Battle of White Plains in late October 1776, British General William Howe chose to forgo a direct assault against the Continental Army and instead turned his attention to Fort Washington. General Nathanael Greene was in command of Fort Lee on the Palisades on the New Jersey shore. Fort Washington was directly across the Hudson River.

The Battle of Fort Washington took place on Saturday, November 16, 1776 at Washington Heights, Manhattan, New York.

The fort was a 5-sided earthwork on the crest of Mount Washington, which was the principal fortification within the American lines on the battle field, and was commanded by Colonel Robert Mcgaw. It was 230 feet above tide-water and had 34 great guns. Old ships had been sunk in the river near the forts to provide obstacles to the British Navy.

The American Regiments occupying were:

Shee's 3rd Pennsylvania Regiment

Magaw's 5th Pennsylvania Regiment

Col Moses Rawlings Maryland and Virginia Riflemen

Col Baxter's Bucks County militia of Pennsylvania

This post, together with Fort Lee on the Jersey shore, commanded the mouth of the Hudson, was hence regarded by the enemy as a tempting prize. In anticipation of an attack, the works had been

strengthened and reinforced. At the critical time, the Fort and Harlem Heights were manned by the two Pennsylvania Regiments and Riflemen from Maryland, some militia, and a few companies detailed such as my 5th great grandfather's Connecticut Regiments.

General Nathanael Greene was confident that Fort Washington would hold against the British and advised General Washington accordingly. He was wrong.

Hessian Lieutenant General Wilhelm von Knyphausen and a force of 3,000 Hessian mercenaries and 5,000 Redcoats lay siege to Fort Washington at the northern end and highest point of Manhattan Island.

Throughout the morning, Knyphausen met stiff resistance from the Patriot riflemen inside the fort, but by afternoon, the Patriots were overwhelmed, and the garrison commander, Colonel Robert Magaw, surrendered. Nearly 3,000 Patriots were taken prisoner, and valuable ammunition and supplies were lost to the Hessians.

Two weeks earlier, one of Magaw's officers, William Demont, had deserted the Fifth Pennsylvania Battalion and given British intelligence agents information about the Patriot defense of New York, including details about the location and defense of Fort Washington. Demont was the first traitor to the Patriot cause, and his treason contributed significantly to Knyphausen's victory.

The British side suffered 450 casualties of which 320 were Hessians.

The Americans lost 59 killed, had 96 wounded casualties, and 2,838 men captured.

Historians inform us that "while the enemy was advancing to the attack, Generals Washington, Putnam and Greene, and Colonel Knox, with their aids, crossed the river and approached toward the Fort. They were warned of their danger, and, after much persuasion, were induced to return.

The garrison, however, was watched with intense interest by Washington, who, from Fort Lee, could view several parts of the attack; and when he saw his men bayoneted, and in that way killed while begging for quarter, he cried the tenderness of a child, denouncing the barbarity that was practiced."

Eventually, the captured were crowded into the Sugar-House and on board the Prison-Ships, without air or water and for the first two days without food, contagion and death were the natural consequences. The dysentery, small-pox, and other terrible diseases, broke out among them, and very few of the whole number survived the terrible ordeal.

Of the 2,838 men captured, only 800 survived their captivity; nearly three-quarters of the prisoners died.

On the 27th of December, 1776, one month after being captured, an exchange of prisoners took place. Only eleven of Captain Beebe's Connecticut Company were able to sail for Connecticut. Six of these died on their way home. The remainder of those who were living at that date, being too ill to be removed, were left behind where all died within a few days, most of them with the small-pox.

Three days after the fall of Fort Washington, the Patriots abandoned Fort Lee. General Washington and the army retreated through New Jersey and crossed the Delaware River into Pennsylvania northwest of Trenton, pursued as far as New Brunswick, New Jersey by British forces.

Probably no similar instance of mortality occurred during the entire war. Only six survivors out of that Connecticut company of thirty-six hale and hearty men, is a percentage of loss rarely reached even in the most fatal engagements. But few, if any, of these men were slain in battle. They died miserable deaths, from cold, hunger, thirst, suffocation, disease, and the vilest cruelty from those to whom they had surrendered their arms on a solemn promise of fair and honorable treatment! One of the men named Ethan Allen (a professed infidel,) with clenched teeth, exclaim to Captain Beebe, as he did on one occasion " *I confess my faith in my own creed is shaken; there ought to be a hell for such infernal scoundrels as that Lowrie !*" referring to the officer in charge of the prisoners at the time. General Howe's relationship

with the wife of Joshua Loring, whom he had appointed commissary of the prisons, was a scandal well known among the Loyalists. Loring was finally relieved of his position on charges of corruption and sent to England during the war, where he died shortly afterwards, a disgraceful and despicable character.

Captain Beebe, in consideration of his office, was allowed the limits of the city on his parole of honor, but was compelled to provide himself with food, lodging, and shelter. He was accustomed to visit his men daily, so long as any remained, and did whatever he was allowed to do, to alleviate their wretched condition. He was not exchanged with the other prisoners, but was detained within the "limits" for nearly a year, at his own expense. During much of this time Colonel Allen was held in New York as a prisoner of war; and, before the remnant of the Litchfield soldiers were exchanged, these two gallant officers often met for consultation.

This story, this experience was repeated thousands of times, in the War years to come, to men and some women who died as Patriots. Few survived the horrors of mistreatment, neglect, and disease on the prison ships. Through their policy, the British put thousands of prisoners on ships in New York waters from 1776 to 1783. More than 13,000 people died aboard the ships, which were moored in *Wallabout Bay*, a small inlet that lies adjacent to the Brooklyn Navy Yard, and nearby.

Patriot American prisoners died like rats, of disease and hunger. In the summertime, they suffered from suffocation and, being without covering, froze to death or died of pneumonia in the winter. The British refused to allow them water for washing, and what water was furnished was brought to them in chamber pots, from which they would have to drink or perish. Under these conditions the men became afflicted with lice and other vermin, and they were required to answer the call of nature in their places of confinement.

There was obviously a conspiracy among Provost Marshal William Cunningham, Commissary Joshua Loring, and Naval Commissary David Sprout, down to the lowly prison guards, to "annihilate" or "exterminate." It was one of the most horrible and awesome tragedies in American history. There is nothing to compare with it in military history since the religious wars 400 years ago, except the butchery of the Jews by the Nazis. The Black Hole of Calcutta, in which English soldiers in overcrowded prisons were suffocated to death, is the nearest resemblance to what occurred on the terrible prison ships and in other British prisons in New York City, Charleston, and Savannah.

Ten thousand American Patriots, mostly in their early twenties or thirties, imprisoned on board the inhuman British prison ship *Jersey*, were given stinking food and literally starved to death or died of disease. This extermination policy now appears to have been a deliberate conspiracy not only among the prison commissaries, but actually by the British High Command.

In New York the unfortunate victims of the Revolution were buried in the sands of the adjacent shore of *Wallabout Bay*, where the Navy Yard in Brooklyn was located. Twenty years after the war, in making walls and building sites, a vast quantity of the bones of these martyrs were dislodged and strewn over the shore. They were, however, collected by Captain John Jackson, the proprietor of the neighboring land, and re-interred at his expense.

The *Jersey* was by far the largest prison hulk, but there were others, and several so-called hospital ships which were almost equally as bad. It can be compared to a more recent and even more horrendous crime, but actually much more merciful, and that was the mass murder by shooting of 12,000 Polish officers by the Communists in Katyn Forest and in other parts of Russia. At least they did not die by degrees - a living death.

Naturally, the British used every propaganda device when they capitulated and evacuated New York City to cover up their responsibility for these prison dens of iniquity and death and for the stinking hulks of abomination and desolation. The evidence is contained in the letters written by prisoners who survived. There is also the word of escaped and exchanged prisoners. Then there is the report made by Elias Boudinot, appointed commissioner by Congress to secure the exchange of prisoners, to provide them with clothing and food, and to investigate the situation in some of the New York prisons, by consent of the British.

Eight years after the prison doors were opened as a result of the American victory, William Cunningham, the notorious former provost marshal, made a pre-hanging confession in writing. He was hanged in England in 1791 for forgery. Cunningham was a thoroughly vicious character. He was the son of a British soldier, brought up in Ireland. He became engaged in the illicit business of shipping indentured

servants to Boston and New York under false pretenses. The last shipment was freed by the New York courts.

From that time on, Cunningham developed an intense and bitter hatred of American Patriots. He came to New York and became a leader among a gang of "bully boys" who annoyed and picked fights with the Whigs or Patriots. On one occasion, the retaliation by the Sons of Liberty was instantaneous. Cunningham was beaten and forced to get on his knees and bellow for liberty. The chastisement by the Liberty Boys added insult to injury and increased his intense hatred of the Patriots. Later, when he became provost marshal, he brutally treated the American prisoners who came under his absolute reign of terror. He ingratiated himself with General Howe and other British authorities because of his well-known hatred of the so-called American rebels.

General Howe, as commander in chief, cannot escape his responsibility for appointing Cunningham, a person of the lowest character, to the important office of provost marshal. The appointment of such a scoundrel and his bloody acts of reprisals and hangings are a black mark on the record of General Howe and Sir Henry Clinton, before God and man. They not only had a direct responsibility for the acts of their agent, but they obviously knew the terrible situation in the prisons, yet kept Cunningham in office during the entire time of their command.

Howe had a direct link also with Commissioner Loring, whom he appointed after an affair with Loring's wife. Loring was a Boston Loyalist and a contemptible character second only to Cunningham, in greed, graft, and starvation of prisoners, besides selling his wife to Howe for the appointment. Later, Loring admitted he misappropriated two-thirds of the allowance for prison food, resulting in the starvation of the American prisoners which caused them in their weakened condition to die off like flies before the ravages of disease and exposure. When the American commissioner, Elias Boudinot, asked Cunningham who was responsible for the loathsome conditions of the prisons, he arrogantly replied that he was entirely responsible and that he saw no reason for any change or excuses.

He had an assistant by the name of Sergeant O'Keefe, a cruel, brutal blackguard who treated the prisoners worse than condemned criminals. He was probably the secret hangman or at least in charge of almost 300 private, unofficial hangings ordered and directed by Cunningham without any kind of trial. The public hangings were those of spies, British deserters, and condemned criminals. It is inconceivable that under British army control such bestial and lethal treatment of prisoners of war was permitted and continued almost to the end of the war.

It is not surprising, however, that the British authorities did everything in their power to cover it up, and denounced Cunningham's confession as a forgery just as the Nazis tried to hide their iniquities in the concentration and extermination camps. Commissioner Loring, who admitted appropriating the money for the prisoners' food, and who was responsible for the deaths of a large number of them from starvation, escaped hanging and died shortly after the war in England.

Both Cunningham and Loring combined did not cause one-fourth as many deaths of American Patriots as Naval Commissioner Sprout in the old death-trap prison ships. Cunningham and Loring killed off, between them, approximately 2,500 prisoners through starvation, sickness, and privation in the city prisons, warehouses, churches, and in the Provost jail, whereas 10,500 helpless prisoners died of disease and putrid food in the stinking British hulks.

If we estimate 1,000 were exchanged, 100 escaped, and 200 more permitted to go free through bribery or parole, the percentage of death amounted to 75 percent, as compared with Andersonville and Elmira prisons of 33 percent in our Civil War. The death rate of French and British prisoners of war in German prison camps was not more than 15 percent, and actually less for American prisoners. The estimated death rate on the *Jersey* was 85 percent.

On the 18th of January, 1777, George Washington wrote to Lord Howe on the subject of naval prisoners: *"that I am under the disagreeable necessity of troubling your Lordship with a letter almost wholly on the subject of the cruel treatment which our officers and men in the Naval Department, who are unhappy enough to fall into your hands received on board the Prison ships in the harbor of New York.*

From the opinion I entertain of your Lordship's humanity I will not suppose that you are privy of proceedings of so cruel and unjustifiable a nature and I hope that upon making the proper inquiry you will have the matter so regulated that the unhappy persons whose lot is captivity may not, in the future, have the misery of cold, disease and famine added to their other misfortunes.

You may call us Rebels, and say we deserve no better treatment, but remember, my Lord, that we still have feelings as keen and sensible as Loyalists and will if forced to, most assuredly retaliate upon those upon whom we look as the unjust invaders of our rights, liberties and properties.

I should not have said this much, but injured countrymen have long called upon me to endeavor to

obtain redress of their grievances, and I should think, myself, as culpable as those who inflicted such severities, were I to continue silent."

The answer of Lord Howe was evasive and a general denial of the charges.

Howe was a poor disciplinarian, and naturally lazy and indolent, who preferred the good things in life and did not want to be bothered with investigations that might take up his time or reflect on the British army's administration in New York. Judge Thomas Jones, an ardent Loyalist, and in exile with the British, condemned General Howe bitterly in his book on New York during the war for inefficiency and disregard even of the property, of the Loyalists, who were constantly being robbed by British troops.

Bancroft's History of the United States drew a tragic picture of the British prison ships in Charleston, South Carolina, and stated, "of more than 3,000 confined in these ships all but 700 were made away with." The situation among the American prisoners in Savannah was almost as bad. It would seem from this that there was a definite policy of extermination of so-called rebel prisoners in these horrible disease-infested British hulks.

Early in the war, the Continental Congress commissioned Lewis Pintard of New York to try to alleviate the conditions of the prisoners held there, which he did until the funds ran out, but continued with his own money until it was exhausted.

His nephew John Pintard wrote a description in the New York Mirror of September 10, 1831, of the treatment of American officers in the Provost Prison during the Revolution:

"Cunningham roamed from cell to cell . . ., insulting the noblest of the land. He saw them suffering from cold, and he mocked their cry for bread. For slight offenses he thrust them into underground dungeons. . . . The North-east chamber, turning to the left on the second floor, was appropriated to officers and prisoners of superior rank and distinction, and was called Congress Hall. So closely were they packed that when they lay down at night to rest, when their bones ached on the hard oak planks, and they wished to turn, it was altogether by word of command, "right-left" being so wedged and compact as to form almost a solid mass of human bodies"

Cunningham in later life confessed:

I was appointed Provost Marshal to the 'Royal Army, which placed me in a situation to wreak my vengeance on the Americans. I shudder to think of the murders I have been accessory to, both with and without orders from the government, especially while in New York, during which time there were more than 2000 prisoners starved in the different churches, by stopping their rations, which I sold. There were also 275 American prisoners and obnoxious persons executed The mode for private executions was thus conducted: a guard was dispatched from the Provost, about half past twelve at night to the Barracks street, and the neighborhood of the upper Barracks, to order the people to shut their window-shutters and put out their lights, forbidding them at the same time to presume to look out of their windows and doors on pain of death. After which the unfortunate prisoners were conducted, gagged, just behind the upper barracks and hung without ceremony, and there buried by the black [prisoners] of the Provost.

Nathan Hale, just before his execution as a spy, was permitted to write a brief note to his mother and to Miss Adams, to whom he was betrothed, in which he said, "*I wish to be useful and every kind of service, necessary to the public good, becomes honorable by being necessary. . . . If the exigencies of my country demand a service, its claims to the performance of that service are imperious.*" As he ascended the ladder, he turned to his executioner and said, "*I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my' country.*" The brutal provost marshal Cunningham who was the chief of the execution, upon reading his other letters, destroyed them and exclaimed with an oath "*the damned rebels shall never know they had a man who could die so bravely.*"

It appears that the treatment of American prisoners became steadily worse as the war progressed. Actually, the *Jersey*, the monster of them all, was only used as a prison ship the last four years. The *Jersey* was abandoned as she lay when the final prisoners were liberated. The dread thought of contamination prevented any one from venturing on board or even from approaching her polluted frame. The *Jersey* met her death in a manner similar to that of many of her victims. She sank when her hull

became infested with worms -that ate through her hulk. To a watery grave went the names of thousands who had written their names upon her planks.

Sometime after the war, in response to a request from our government, the British army archives furnished a partial list of the American prisoners on the Jersey to the number of 8,000. "This list of names was copied from the papers of the British War Department. There is nothing to indicate what became of any of these prisoners, whether they died, escaped, or were exchanged. The list seems to have been carelessly kept, and is full of obvious mistakes in spelling the names. This list of prisoners is the only one that could be found in the British War Department. What became of the lists of prisoners on the many other prison ships, and prisons, used by the English in America, we do not know."

I remind you once again, all of these Patriots could have betrayed the cause of liberty and independence in exchange for their lives, but preferred death. All they had to do was to sign a document of allegiance to the Crown and receive a free pardon by enlisting in His Majesty's Army or Navy.

In August 1997 a memorial service was held at Fort Greene Park in Brooklyn, near the Brooklyn Navy Yard, rededicating a monument to the men interred in a vault that lies below it. The monument itself is an impressive tower that stands high above the park with a lighthouse-like beacon on top. The original light was extinguished during World War II as a wartime security measure, and it would not be relit until a new solar-powered eternal beacon was turned on as part of the ceremony. The intention is for the light to shine forever as a symbol that, as the monument's motto promises, "They Shall Not Be Forgotten."

References:

Town and Church Records; Conn. Men 422; Gen. Reg. 85; Kilbourn's Hist. Litchfield, 97, 98, 100.

Treatment of American Prisoners of War During the Revolution

By William R. Lindsey KANSAS STATE TEACHERS COLLEGE, EMPORIA, KANSAS

Volume XXII Summer, 1973 Number 1

<http://www.iroquoiscsd.org/cms/lib/NY19000365/Centricity/Domain/198/pow%20am%20rev.pdf>

American Prisoners of the Revolution: Names of 8000 Men <http://www.usmm.org/revdead.html>

"New York State - The battleground of the Revolutionary War," by Hamilton Fish. *1976 Martyrdom of thirteen thousand American Patriots aboard the monstrous Jersey and other British prison ships in New York Harbor*

Kenneth "Kim Brimer, retired Texas State Senator, NSSAR # 178249 Brazos Valley Chapter, Texas Society