

Introduction

In 1775, Alexander McDonald of Staten Island, New York, was deeply disturbed by the “unhappy State of America.”¹ Although he initially had been content to leave the debates over colonial rights to others, McDonald could no longer remain silent as, in his words, “madness prevails all over America” and “King & Country [are] reviled & their Laws treated with Contempt.”² For McDonald, the moment was extraordinary because the American colonists were “Commencing Rebellion.”³ By 1775, the colonists’ protests against British imperial policy had escalated, leading some Americans, like McDonald, who valued their bond with Britain, to do what they could to defend “the Authority of the Parent State.”⁴

Many of Alexander McDonald’s neighbors on Staten Island shared his views of the imperial crisis. In fact, almost 99 percent of Staten Islanders remained loyal to the Crown by defying the colonial resistance movement and refusing to support American independence. Loyalty was thus a communal experience both unique and important to Staten Island. This book analyzes how such factors as the island’s expanding commercial agrarian economy, the deferential structure of its society and political culture, its history as a British military staging area during the French and Indian War (1754–1763), the methods used by the Whigs^a to enforce con-

^a The term Whig refers to the earlier supporters of a limited monarchy and guarantees of political and religious liberties in Britain. To Whig propagandists, colonists who refused to cooperate with the colonial resistance movement and resisted the measures taken by the Continental Congress were enemies of American liberty. The Whigs labeled these Americans Tories, after the traditional supporters of the authority of the church and the monarchy in Britain. American Tories believed that the political impasse between the colonies and Britain could and should be peacefully reconciled. They felt that colonial grievances could be redressed within the existing framework of government and by means of negotiation. As the American Revolution progressed, the terms Patriot and Loyalist were used to denote the differences between the two opposing viewpoints.

formity to the colonial resistance movement, and the creation of an Anglican culture hearth contributed to the Staten Islanders' decision to remain loyal. These factors set the scene for understanding Loyalism on Staten Island in reference to local considerations and its residents' lived history.

Using Staten Island as a case study, I explore several issues pertaining to the American Revolution and Loyalism. The first is that Loyalism was a logical and self-interested choice that was equally as progressive as the Whig cause. Second, the Loyalists were a potential source of support for Britain and a counterweight to the colonial resistance movement. Finally, the effect of the war on the populations of Staten Island and adjacent communities in New Jersey shows that the northern theater of the American Revolution was more than a singular contest between conventional armies, that it was a vicious civil war pitting family members and neighbors against one another. This study's emphasis on these issues places it in the revisionist historiography of the American Revolution and Loyalism.

Loyalism in American historiography is first found in the highly nationalistic, patriotic literature that followed the American Revolution, which either ignored or treated the Loyalists as the villains of the revolutionary conflict.⁵ The noteworthy exception is Lorenzo Sabine's *Biographical Sketches of Loyalists of the American Revolution*, which is sympathetic to Loyalist aspirations.⁶ Then, during the first two decades of the twentieth century, scholars who had abandoned the intense nationalism of the previous century rescued the Loyalists from historical purgatory. Many of these scholars—most notably Moses C. Tyler, Claude H. Van Tyne, and Alexander C. Flick—examined the Loyalists from the dual lenses of intellectual and institutional history. Whereas Tyler assessed the Loyalists' arguments against revolution and for empire, Flick and Van Tyne explored the legal and political dynamics of the Loyalists' relationship to royal officials and the newly formed state governments.⁷ In particular, Flick's *Loyalism in New York during the American Revolution* (1901) brought attention to state laws and committees designed to control and to punish Loyalists and subsequently influenced numerous state studies of the subject.⁸

With the emergence of the Progressive school of historiography following the 1909 publication of Carl L. Becker's *History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 1760–1776*, scholars developed a social profile of Loyalism. Because Progressive scholars viewed class struggle as the most important characteristic of early American politics, their studies

often depicted the Loyalists as wealthy white males: merchants, large landowners, professionals, royal officials, and Anglican clergy. Progressive scholars saw these men opposing American independence because their social position depended directly on the British government. They also argued that the Loyalists feared a successful war for independence because it would disrupt the social and political hierarchy and lead to major class antagonisms in American society. Historians later challenged the Progressives' social profile of Loyalism, insisting that the Loyalists comprised a heterogeneous group that included not only wealthy white males but also white male yeoman farmers, skilled artisans, journeymen, apprentices, day laborers, shopkeepers, schoolteachers, free and enslaved African Americans, Native Americans, and their wives and families.

One of those scholars challenging the Progressive paradigm was Leonard W. Labaree. In his *Conservatism in Early American History* (1948), he argued that regardless of their social position, the core of the Loyalists' experience was a shared fundamental caution and fatalistic pessimism: "Loyalism in the Revolutionary period, while it had for many men an economic basis, cannot be explained wholly on materialistic grounds, nor can the Loyalists be fully classified into economic groups." Instead, Loyalism "was not only a consequence of social or economic position; it was quite as much the result of an attitude of mind." For Labaree, the "Tory Mind," which refused to accept a future without guarantees and feared that colonial resistance and American independence would lead to social upheaval, was shaped by an individual's circumstances, regardless of his political ideology or social class standing. Thus, he urged historians to look beyond the narrow constraints of ideology and social class to "factors of personality, of individual conditioning, of subconscious motivation, and of sheer human inertia" when discussing the Loyalists' response to the American Revolution.⁹

William H. Nelson's *The American Tory* (1961) also remains an important work in the field of Loyalist studies. Nelson maintained that the Whig leadership's ability to formulate a clear argument favoring independence and republicanism provided the energy necessary to drive the American Revolution. The Whigs' success was the result of a "commonness of purpose" that was seriously lacking among the Loyalists. Unlike the Whigs, Loyalist leaders never created the propaganda or the effective communications network to disseminate their ideas and shape public opinion. Thus, the Loyalists never coalesced into a coherent movement but instead were fragmented both socioeconomically and regionally. Nel-

son contended that the Loyalists were motivated to oppose revolution and independence by various disparate factors stemming from concerns about self-preservation, personal animosities, and political and social rivalries.¹⁰ Other scholars, notably Robert M. Calhoun, agreed with Nelson, finding no direct connection between ideology and the Loyalists' motivation. In *The Loyalists in Revolutionary America, 1760–1781* (1973), Calhoun wrote, "Loyalist beliefs and pretences never coalesced into a common, vital persuasion with its own logic and momentum," adding that the events of the American Revolution "moved too rapidly for them, constantly cutting the ground of their arguments . . . and frustrating their belated and often clumsy attempts to rally their adherents to action."¹¹ Like Nelson, Calhoun saw a myriad of factors in shaping Loyalist motivations and actions.

In contrast, Ann G. Condon and Janice Potter refuted the Nelson–Calhoun thesis, contending that regardless of social class or region, the Loyalists' shared ideology promoted a strong commitment to the supremacy of Parliament, affection for the empire, and a fear that revolution would destroy political and social stability and cause anarchy to descend on America.¹² In *The Liberty We Seek: Loyalist Ideology in Colonial New York and Massachusetts* (1983), Janice Potter argued that the Loyalists' rejection of American independence and republicanism and their support for British imperial rule "merits definition as an ideology because it was a comprehensive, logical, and consistent alternative to Patriot proposals."¹³

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, scholars made an effort to produce a more comprehensive and balanced history of the American Revolution. In his 1974 biography of the Massachusetts royal governor Thomas Hutchinson, Bernard Bailyn stressed the need "to see the Revolutionary movement from the other side around."¹⁴ The studies of Loyalism that were produced during this period relied solely on the experiences of the social elite and depicted Loyalists as tragic figures caught in a vortex of events that they could not control. Although these studies focused on the Loyalist elite, they also described the dilemma faced by many Americans who chose to remain loyal.¹⁵

The mid-1980s witnessed a resurgence of state studies reevaluating the methods and interpretations employed by Alexander C. Flick and others at the turn of the twentieth century. These studies synthesized the earlier institutional history with the approaches pioneered by Labaree, Nelson, and Calhoun. Although they did not ignore the various state laws and

committees designed to curtail and punish Loyalist behavior, studies by Rick J. Ashton, Robert S. Lambert, Anne M. Ousterhut, Philip Ranlet, and Dennis P. Ryan concentrated on the Loyalists' personal thoughts and individual actions and motivations.¹⁶

More recently, the focus of Loyalist studies has shifted to the local level, to explain the Loyalists' motivation and behavior from the perspective of the economic, political, and social relationships forged over time by the residents of a particular community. Beyond its importance to the study of Loyalism, the localist paradigm looks at the American Revolution as a civil war. With only a few exceptions, historians of the American Revolution have not paid much attention to the local dynamics of the war in the north,¹⁷ instead applying the localist paradigm mainly to southern communities.¹⁸ Moreover, historians have treated the extreme episodes of partisan warfare in the war's northern theater as tangential to the conventional combat operations of the two main adversaries. But in many northern communities, partisan warfare carried out by Whig and Loyalist guerrilla bands was the norm, not the exception.¹⁹

My study of Loyalism and the American Revolution on Staten Island, New York, addresses many of these issues. It draws on the insights of those historians who have examined the local Loyalist experience and on the recognition that the American Revolution was both a civil war and a war for independence. This study applies these insights to northern communities, thereby extending the notion of the American Revolution as a civil war outside the south.

Chapter 1 discusses the island's physical and cultural landscape, including several variables that affected the settlement and development of Staten Island into a society of prosperous yeoman farmers inclined to favor political moderation over radicalism. It challenges the problematic assumption made by local historians that Staten Islanders lived in economic isolation. The island's geographic proximity to the urban markets of New York City and New Jersey and its network of roads and ferries linked Staten Island to the transatlantic market economy and exposed Staten Islanders to manufactured goods that they did not produce for themselves. The chapter points out that the island's physical landscape helped produce a pattern of mixed farming that utilized slaves, indentured servants, and wage laborers that contributed to the development of Staten Island into a prosperous community of commercial agricultural production. Moreover, the island's dense hardwood forests, offshore

fisheries, and oyster and clam beds provided residents with an extra source of food and income, and its long jagged shoreline helped produce a cottage industry of clandestine trade. Staten Island's physical landscape and its location at the entrance to New York Harbor also contributed to its economic prosperity and its value as a strategic military site.

Even though it was ethnically and religiously pluralistic, Staten Island was principally Anglican. Chapter 1 also tracks its success in cultivating a shared sense of English identity and bringing Anglican uniformity to the island. In this way, chapter 1 offers a historical account of Staten Island's transformation into a hearth of Anglican culture and shows its political significance to the island. Both the Crown's sovereignty as well as English religious and cultural institutions were securely extended to Staten Island.

Chapter 2 examines the methods that Staten Islanders used to avoid participating in the colonial resistance movement against British imperial policy. The community's strong sense of social and political deference had conditioned most of its residents to defer judgment on political issues to a small group of prominent men who favored reconciliation over resistance. The chapter also describes the political measures that the Whigs undertook to coerce Staten Islanders into conforming to the colonial resistance movement. These measures convinced Staten Islanders that the Whigs posed a greater threat to their community's political and social stability, its material prosperity, and the islanders' individual liberties than did the British government.

Chapter 3 outlines the Whigs' plans for the military campaign of 1776 in the region around New York City and its failure to defend Staten Island against a British landing. It demonstrates that the Whig military commanders were acutely aware of the local political culture in situating and organizing their forces. Chapter 3 also points out that the measures imposed by the Whig military authorities for the effective governance of the island placed additional strain on the relationship between Staten Islanders and the Whigs.

Chapter 4 explores Staten Island's pivotal role in Britain's plans for the military campaign of 1776. The chapter recounts the events leading up to the decision by General William Howe, the commander in chief of the British army in America, to secure Staten Island as a prelude to military operations against New York City and examines Staten Island's strategic and logistical advantages to the British. The chapter also discusses the island's history as a military staging area during the French and Indian War (1754–1763) and points out that this experience fostered amicable rela-

tions between Staten Islanders and British military personnel. In the summer of 1776, Staten Island's Loyalists welcomed the British military as liberators, and this chapter looks at the logistical problems faced by the British and the actions that they took to secure supplies, firewood, and livestock from the island's residents. In addition to giving the British logistical support, Staten Islanders gave them information about the movement of Whig troops in the region and the strength of their defenses. They also readily joined the British army. Indeed, by late August 1776, Staten Island had been transformed into a British fortress, a military force moving into a specific social environment. General Howe had amassed 32,000 soldiers and sailors, including Loyalist refugees and Hessian mercenaries, and more than 450 warships on the island.

Chapter 5 is a historical account of the events that shaped Staten Islanders' wartime experiences. Staten Island remained under British occupation for seven and a half years, longer than any other community in America. Although a large part of the regular British army had left after August 1776, the British still used the island as a military staging area for operations in the middle colonies, a hospital, and a base for Loyalist refugees and the provincial regiments that they joined. Thus, the fact that the regular British army had moved on from Staten Island did not mean that the war had moved on as well. In addition, the American Revolution brought new challenges: plundering, kidnapping, physical violence, murder, rape, economic stress, and partisan warfare. Staten Islanders were terrorized daily by bands of Whig and Loyalist partisans and abused by disillusioned and poorly disciplined British regulars and their Hessian allies. The realities of the war and the British army's failure to protect them eventually led many Staten Islanders to question their initial political loyalty to Britain.

Staten Island was a community on the periphery of the British Empire and accordingly was constantly subjected to the unanticipated force of imperial decisions regarding war and peace. Just as the Anglican culture governed the island in the 1760s, political and military realities held sway in the late 1770s and early 1780s.

Even though the experiences of Staten Island's Loyalists were replicated in other areas of America, Staten Island presents a unique case. Historians have explained the origins of the strong Loyalist sentiments in some communities of New York's Hudson River valley as arising from conflicts between landless, oppressed tenants who yearned to own property and the wealthy landlords who denied them that opportunity or, as

in the case of the North Carolina Regulators, from economic and political animosities between backcountry farmers and the tidewater planter elite. But Loyalism on Staten Island was rooted in the community's experience of social stability. This had been brought about by decades of political and social deference by a population composed of middle-class property owners long settled on their lands, the tremendous influence of the Anglican Church in the community, and the development of transatlantic commercial ties threatened by colonial boycotts and a war for independence. In essence, the communal experience of Staten Island Loyalism sets it apart from other communities that have been studied.

The implications of Loyalism and the American Revolution on Staten Island extend beyond the confines of community-based studies. They remind us of the importance of the local environment where ordinary Americans lived and enable us to view similarities in vastly different regions. This study also allows us to ask questions about New York's political culture during the American Revolution and the city's complex socioeconomic and political relationship with its neighboring communities. The threat posed by Staten Island's Loyalists to the security of New York and New Jersey introduces an investigation into the relationship between the Whig governments of these two states. In addition, this study of Loyalism and the American Revolution on Staten Island may prompt new questions about military-civilian relations in areas occupied by either the British or the Continental army. It could also give historians a new perspective on the northern theater of the American Revolution as a civil war. Finally, it enables a better understanding of the revolutionary struggle and an appreciation of individuals' and communities' difficult choices when confronted by the events of the American Revolution.