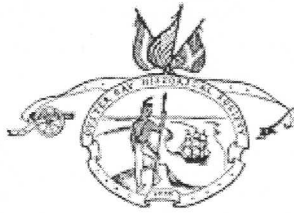


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Long Island's Loyalists: The Misunderstood Americans

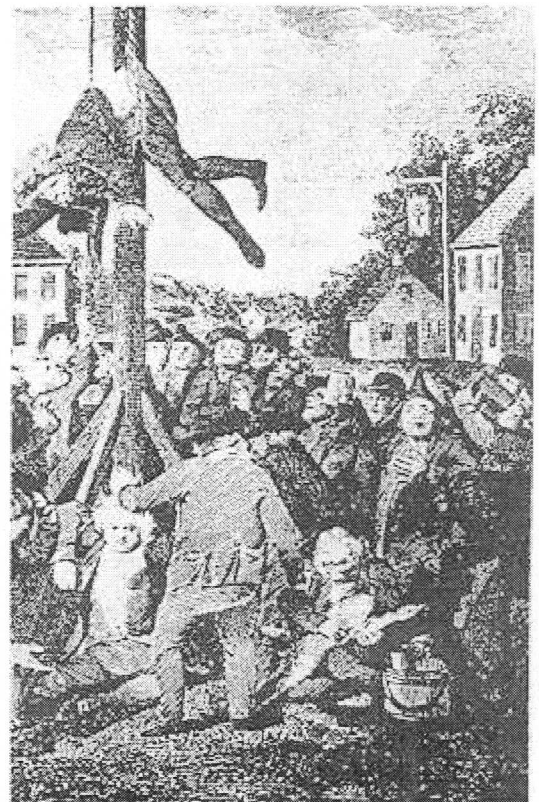
by Andrew C. Batten

[Ed.: Andrew Batten is the Director of Raynham Hall Museum. His article, fashioned from the notes for his April 1999 20/20 lecture, originally appeared in the Spring 1999 issue of the Freeholder. Our thanks to Mr. Batten for permission to reproduce it here.]

Late in 1774, the rebellious citizens of Plymouth, Massachusetts decided to appropriate a local landmark as the base for the town's Liberty Pole. Twenty yoke of oxen were hitched up and driven to the beach to claim their trophy: Plymouth Rock.

Ropes were passed around the rock, huge jacks were slipped in beneath it, and the signal was given to start forward the ox-teams. The rock was sliding gradually out of the sand when, suddenly and silently, it split into two pieces. One part of the rock was pulled free of the ground while the other part slipped back into the place it had always occupied. Not much notice was taken of this event at the time, but it is hard to find a more perfect symbol of the divide between Rebel and Loyalist in America.

On the eve of war in 1775 little of the turmoil which wracked New England ruffled the calm of Long Island. Long Islanders were largely prosperous, contented, and deeply loyal to the Crown. Life was good for 18th century Long Islanders: American-born colonists were taller, stronger, longer-lived, and better-fed than their British-born cousins. Literacy was high among Americans, perhaps 70 percent of white colonists could read, and taxes were lower than anywhere else in the British Empire. 1775 found Long Island at peace, seemingly a world away from the violent passions being acted out in the streets of Boston.



A Tory strung up on a liberty pole. Such incidents were rare on Long Island.

Here in Oyster Bay, the first storm clouds were gathering in March of 1775. On the 27th of that month Samuel Townsend, Town Clerk, published a notice announcing an election for deputies to be sent to the New York Provincial Convention.

This Convention would then elect delegates who would attend the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. As the annual Town Meeting was already set for April 4, it was decided to combine the two meetings into one. On the day appointed, 247 freeholders gathered for the meeting and election. The Town Meeting proceeded smoothly, but the comity dissolved when it came to the vote. "It was objected by many against having anything to do with Deputies or Congresses," read the transcript, and a preliminary vote was called for on the question of whether or not to vote for deputies. The vote was nearly five-to-one against the motion: 42 freeholders came out in favor of electing deputies, while 205 voted to reject the notion entirely. Oyster Bay had spoken with a clear voice, and the message was one of loyalty to Britain.

Eight days after the town meeting, a second vote was held on the question of electing deputies to the Provincial Convention. This time, however, the majority of Oyster Bay freeholders were not invited to attend. Instead, only those who favored electing deputies were in attendance, and the result was not surprising. The vote was 43 to 0 in favor of electing Zebulon Williams as Oyster Bay's deputy, and he was immediately dispatched to the Convention in New York City. Here, at the Exchange Coffee House, Williams took his seat along with the other deputies from Queens County: Col. Jacob Blackwell, Joseph Robinson, and Joseph Talman. The other towns of Queens County were as deeply divided as Oyster Bay, and the Convention recognized this with one of its first votes. Acknowledging that these four men did not reflect the feeling of the majority of their constituents, the Convention resolved on April 20 "that the gentlemen from Queens County ... be allowed to be present at its deliberations, and will take into consideration any advice they may offer, but cannot allow them a vote." What no one present at the Convention could have known was that, while they sat in deliberation over such procedural matters, events had already passed them by. The morning before, on Lexington green, the war had begun.

Any hope of reconciliation between the factions on Long Island was shattered by the events of the summer and fall of 1775. Desperate for arms to equip New York's troops, the Provincial Congress ordered the 3rd New York Regiment (under the regrettably named Colonel Lasher) to disarm the people of Queens County, using force if necessary. Lasher's men met with little success, however. One subordinate, William Williams, wrote, "The people concealed all their arms that are of any value; many declare that they know nothing about the Congress, would sooner lose their lives than give up their arms; and that they would blow any man's brains out that should attempt to take them." Not only were the Loyalists of Long Island unwilling to give up their guns, but they were actively soliciting additional weaponry from the British. On November 30, the warship *Asia* landed a large quantity of gunpowder, bullets, small arms, and even a cannon to bolster the Loyalist forces in Queens County.

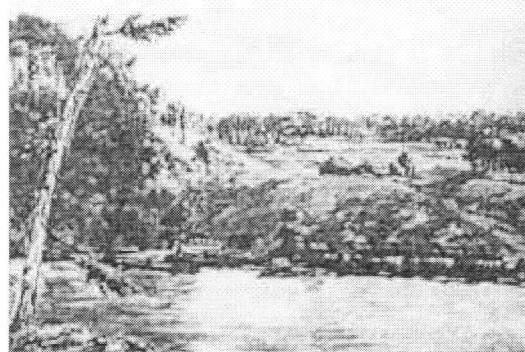
1776 saw hostilities increase even more between Rebel and Loyalist. The Provincial Congress' attitude toward Queens County became increasingly bitter, causing passage of punitive measures such as the "Black List" and the "Tory Act." Many Long Islanders were now pursued like criminals because of their Loyalist beliefs, and some were compelled to take refuge in the swamps along the South Shore. Then, when the fortunes of Queens County's loyal majority looked almost hopeless, the tide turned. In late August General William Howe's force of 17,000 men met and decisively beat General Washington at the Battle of Long Island. Now it was the Rebels who were pursued, and Long Island became a haven for displaced Loyalists from other colonies. Among the refugees was Filer Diblee of Stamford, Connecticut. He, perhaps better than any other character in the American Revolution, sums up the heartbreak of loyal Americans.

Filer Diblee moved his family to Long Island in August 1776, in the wake of the Battle of Long Island. Here, under the protection of the British garrison in New York City, Diblee hoped that his family could live safely. His dreams were short-lived, however, for he found himself singled out by local Rebels almost at once. His home was attacked in October, the house ransacked and his wife and five children driven "naked into the streets." Diblee moved his family again, this time finding a home in Oyster Bay in early 1777. For more than a year the Diblees found sanctuary in the midst of their Loyalist friends, and Long Island was spared much of the hardship which was visited on the rest of the Mid-Atlantic colonies. Tragedy struck again in 1778, when whaleboat-men from Connecticut looted the family's home, taking Filer Diblee as a hostage with them back across Long Island Sound. Destitute and demoralized, the Diblee family moved once more, this time inland to West Hills. There they waited for the return of Filer Diblee and for the end to their bad fortune. It was not to be.

Loyal Long Islanders were not all passive victims like the Diblee family. Many were actively involved in fighting for the British cause. General Oliver De Lancey was sent to Long Island to recruit three battalions of Loyalist troops. He had no difficulty in meeting his quota, and one entire battalion, commanded by Colonel Gabriel Ludlow, was raised from loyal citizens of Queens County. Indeed, New York proved to be the British Army's most productive area for recruiting, eventually providing more than 15,000 troops for the cause. Although ranking seventh in total population among the

colonies, New York provided more Loyalist soldiers than the other twelve colonies combined. Some Loyalists, like the garrison at Lloyd's Neck and the Queens Rangers quartered at Oyster Bay, were used as local defense forces across Long Island. Others were dispatched to Virginia and the Carolinas where, even as the war gradually turned against them, they fought valiantly on.

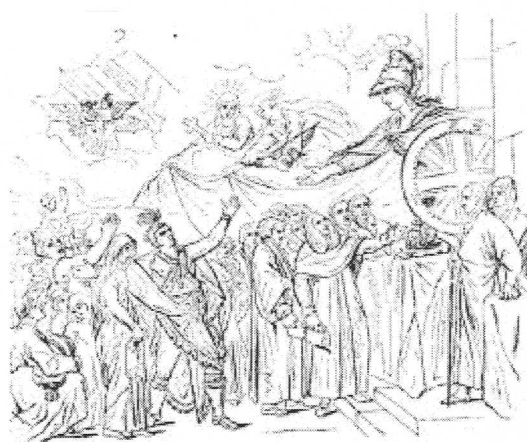
For the Diblee family, each passing year brought renewed agony. Their West Hills home was plundered in 1779 and again in 1780. One bright spot in their travail was the return of Filer Diblee, who was finally freed by the rebels and returned to Long Island. He, like thousands of his Loyalist neighbors, soon came to realize that their cause was lost. Filer Diblee petitioned the British government for restitution and relocation for himself and his family, and in 1783 his request was granted. He was paid \$100 and was given passage for his family to New Brunswick, Canada. Diblee and his family were among the perhaps 6,000 Long Islanders who sailed away from Huntington Harbor at the end of the war. The majority of Loyalists on the island, however, did not leave aboard British ships. Most remained in the land of their birth, waiting to see how they would be treated by their victorious Rebel neighbors.



1793 view of Queenston, Upper Canada. It was settled by the Queens Rangers, who recruited heavily on Long Island.

Even with the evacuation of thousands of British sympathizers at war's end, Queens County still had an overwhelmingly Loyalist population. The New York legislature, faced with this unavoidable truth, had to deal somewhat gingerly with Long Islanders. The estates of nine prominent Queens County Loyalists were seized, but this was really nothing more than a gesture of warning to others to toe the line. The property rights of most Loyalists remained unquestioned, although some punitive measures were instituted by the new government.

One of these was the Disenfranchisement Act of 1784, which stripped Loyalists of the right to vote. One historian estimates that perhaps 90 percent of Long Island voters lost the franchise with this measure, giving some idea of how Loyalists still formed the vast majority of the population. A second blow fell in the form of a fine of £100,000 levied by the New York State legislature against the people of Long Island. This fine was intended "as compensation to other parts of the state for not having been in a condition to take an active part against the enemy," and was a painful reminder to local residents that they were on the losing side of history.



Benjamin West's allegorical sketch of the "Reception of the American Loyalists in England." In actuality, few Americans received a warm welcome there.

Some local Loyalists found themselves pursued not by the government, but by their former friends and neighbors. John Luister of Oyster Bay brought suit against a neighbor, Squire Van Wyck, for assisting the British in the theft of his horse and wagon some years before. Another Oyster Bay man, Robert Townsend, pursued Loyalists in court as well. He sued his former business partner, Francis Bryce, for non-payment of debts. Bryce fled New York for North Carolina, another state with a sizable population of Loyalists, and finally to the West Indies, joining the world-wide diaspora of displaced New York Loyalists. Francis Bryce disappears from history at this point, but another refugee brings this sad tale of Long Island's Loyalists to a close. In his new home in New Brunswick, Filer Diblee rose from the table where his family was having tea. "Seemingly much composed," he quietly took a razor, lay down on the bed, and cut his throat. In a way, Filer Diblee was the last casualty of the American Revolution.

By 1790 the Disenfranchisement Act had been repealed, and with it went the last legal stigma attached to former Loyalists. What remained, however, was a far more lasting and dramatic punishment: the Loyalists were made to disappear. What force of arms and the fortunes of war could not erase, textbooks and historians have accomplished. Every Long Islander has heard of Nathan Hale, but how many know Filer Diblee? We remember and commemorate the lives and deeds of Long Island's rebels, yet we

pointedly ignore the ninety percent of the population who remained loyal to King and Country. Long Island's Loyalist majority fought and died for a cause they believed in -- they fought for their homeland, and they fought for the government of their choice. Their only crime was failing to choose the winning side.

Historian William Nelson in his book *The American Tory*, perfectly summed up the tragic fate of Long Island's Loyalists. "The Loyalists in the American Revolution suffered a most abject kind of political failure, losing not only their argument, their war, and their place in American society, but even their proper place in history." They, like the bottom half of Plymouth Rock, refused to be moved from the place they felt was rightfully theirs. The Loyalists remained, submerged, hidden, and ignored, beneath the surface of America's history. Perhaps it is finally time that we set aside our differences and acknowledge these countless thousands of forgotten, misunderstood Americans.

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