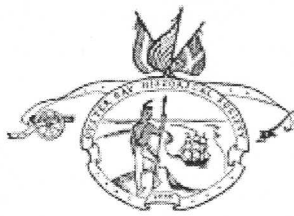


The Oyster Bay Historical Society



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Long Island's Loyalists: The Misunderstood Americans

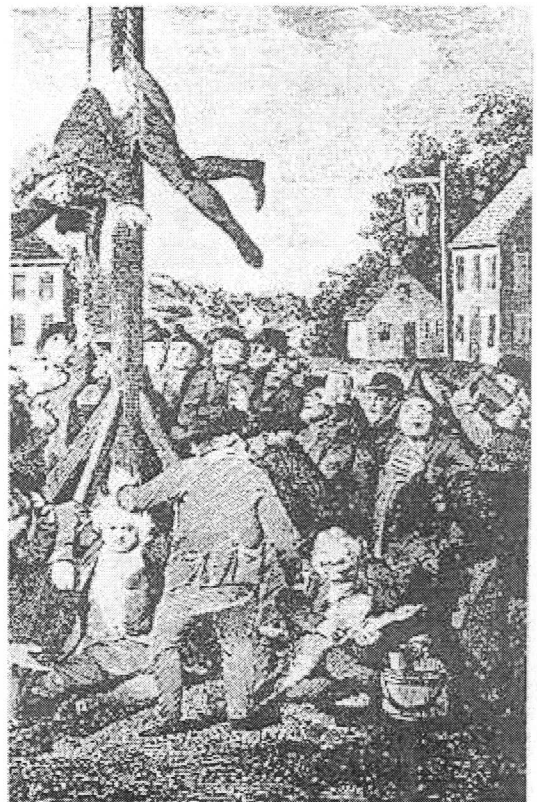
by Andrew C. Batten

[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.

