

18 Cortlandt Skinner, The Odyssey of a Loyalist

[Hugh Edward Egerton, ed., *The Royal Commission on the Losses and Services of American Loyalists, 1783-1785. Being the Notes of Mr. Daniel Parker Coke, One of the Commissioners . . .* (Oxford, 1915), pp. 113-15.]

The commissioners investigating Loyalist claims did so with a thoroughness that not only helped them evaluate the requests but also enabled subsequent generations to trace accurately the activities of the individual claimant. For five years they labored to determine the degree of the claimant's loyalty, the amount of property lost specifically because of his Loyalism, and the value of the lost property. Besides formal petitions (see Doc. 17) the commissioners interrogated the petitioners privately under oath, solicited documentary evidence such as deeds and affidavits, and took testimony from witnesses to corroborate or refute the representations. Under the circumstances it is unlikely that they received many fraudulent, exaggerated, or inaccurate claims. The following notes taken by Daniel Coke, prominent attorney and member of Parliament, constitute a capsule summary of the conduct of Cortlandt Skinner, who, next to Governor William Franklin, was New Jersey's most famous Loyalist. A member of one of the oldest and wealthiest families in New Jersey, Skinner was second only to the governor in political influence on the eve of the Revolution. If Coke's notes do not reveal why Skinner became a Loyalist, they do provide (as intended) information about his activities on behalf of the crown, the extent of his personal losses, and the intensity of his Loyalism. Skinner entered a claim of £10,382 with the commissioners; he received £5,169 plus £500 per year compensation for lost official income during the war.

25th of March 1784

Brig[adie]r Gen[era]l Skynner—the Claimant—sworn.

Was Attorney Gen[era]l of the Province & Speaker of the House of Assembly when the troubles broke out. Was appointed in 1754.¹ Is a Native of New Jersey.² In April 1775 soon after the Battle of Lexington he was insulted in the Execution of his Office & in the Sept[embe]r following at Morristown he was called upon before the Town Committee & found guilty of being inimical to the liberties of America but on his declaring himself generally a friend to Liberty & this Country his friends on the Committee took advantage of these general Expressions & obtain'd his Discharge for him. From this time to the 7th of Jan[uar]y 1776 He met with various obstructions in the Execution of his Office.

In Aug[us]t 1775 He had an offer made him of the Command of the provincial Troops by the provincial Congress with what rank in the province he chose which he refused.

In Jan[uar]y 1776 Upon the Discovery of some papers which the Claimant had copied for Gov[erno]r Franklyn concerning the Proceedings of Congress he was obliged to quit the Province & went to New York.³ His Wife & family retired to Amboy but were in the Course of 3 Months forced to quit by an order of the

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Provincial Congress. The 4th of Sept[embe]r 1776 He rec[eive]d a Commission from Sir Wm. Howe⁴ of Brig[adie]r Gen[era]l of all the provincial Troops.⁵ Continued as such till the arrival of Sir Guy Carleton⁶ when he was order'd to Paulus Hook⁷ & then to Long Island. He arrived the latter end of May or beginning of June 1782. He was in an engagement on Staten Island on the first of Aug[us]t 1777 with Gen[era]l Sullivan under the Command of Gen[era]l Campbell.⁸ He had previously been in a Cannonade at Trenton in Dec[embe]r 1776⁹ & in two at Brunswick early in 1776.¹⁰

Says that in 1777 when he enter'd Jersey he found six Battalions were raising. He was very instrumental in getting them collected. The Battalions were to be of 500 Men each. In 1778 they were reduced to four & these were nearly compleated to 400 each. Gen[era]l Howe commission'd the Officers principally by his Advice. Says that the first Year he was at £100 S[terling] expence in raising his own Company which consisted of 56 rank & file. It cost him from 30 to 40 Gas¹¹ a Y[ea]r for raising Men over & above the Royal Bounty from 1777 to 1781. That he constantly furnished Lord Cornwallis¹² & the Commander in chief with intelligence & says that Lord Cornwallis will speak particularly thereon. Was always paid for the Expences he was at in procuring information by the Commanders in chief. Rec[eive]d full pay as Brig[adie]r Gen[era]l from the 4th of Sept[embe]r 1776 till Oct[obe]r 1783 but as Colonel only from April or June 1781 till Oct[obe]r 1783. Does not know yet whether he is to receive half pay from that time. From last fall he has rec[eive]d at the rate of £200 per Ann[um] from the Treasury & gave a Rec[eip]t up to July 1784.

Library of Books 482 Vol[umes]. Values them at 500 Cur[rent money].

The Salary of Att[orne]y Gen[era]l when he came to the Office was only £30 per Ann[um]. It was afterwards augmented to £60. The Emoluments of his Profession & Office from £900 to £1000 per Ann[um] Cur[rent Money]. Produces a Copy of the Order under which Mrs. Skinner was turned out from Home which he says he believes to be a true Copy.¹³

Lord Cornwallis—sworn. 26th March 1784.

Says that his first personal knowledge of the Claimant was in Nov[embe]r 1776. At that time he join'd his Lordship in the Jerseys & had the rank of Brig[adie]r Gen[era]l Says that he went thro' all the hardships of the service with the utmost cheerfulness & that he was of the utmost Assistance to him that he was entrusted in matters of the most confidential nature by his Lordship & that he always found him to be a most Zealous Man. In Dec[embe]r 1776 as soon as they got poss[essio]n of the Country the Claim[an]t began to raise Men & Lord Cornwallis says that on one Day 100 Men join'd him that he had nearly rais'd the Complement of 6 Batt[alio]ns. Does not think that he ever met a Man who had so perfect a knowledge of the Country as the Claim[an]t. Lord Cornwallis says that he does not think it possible that any Man could shew more real zeal & attachment towards Great Britain than the Claim[an]t. That he had from him once a week a perfect Acc[oun]t of the real State of Washington's Army.

Brig[adie]r Gen[era]l Skynner—again sworn.

In Aug[us]t 1775 He was called upon by a Mr. Dickenson¹⁴ who was a Major Gen[era]l in the American Service. He asked him to dine with him which the Claim[an]t refused fearing that some Conversation might be held at the table by persons who were to be there disagreeable to him but that he dined with him alone the next Day. Says that before he did so the Secretary to the Provincial Congress Mr

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Carter¹⁵ & two other Gent[leme]n Mr Ellis¹⁶ & Mr Stewart¹⁷ deputed by that body acquainted him with their being authorized to offer him the rank of Major Gen[era]l which should be confirmed by the Gen[era]l Congress or if he prefer'd it the Gov[ernmen]t of the Province or any Station within it upon such terms as he should point out. That he has seen the Minute of Congress ordering the Deputation to wait upon him. This he refused to accept of. In June 1776 he rec[ieve]d a Commission from Gov[erno]r Franklin (after he was taken Prisoner) appointing him Major Gen[era]l of the Militia of the Province & delegating to him all the Military powers granted to him under the Great Seal of Great Britain. Says when he went into the Jerseys after the arrival of Sir Wm. Howe he did endeavour to put the Comm[issio]n in force & with some effect but the Evacuation of the Province render'd it afterwards useless.

Governor Franklin—sworn.

Says that the Claim[an]t was Att[orne]y Gen[era]l & Speaker of the Assembly of the province when the troubles broke out in 1775 in which Situation he had been for several Years previous to the rebellion. He says that the Conduct of the Claim[an]t on all occasions was such as to deserve his fullest confidence that from time to time he rec[ieve]d the most material Information from him before he resolved to leave the Province. Confirms what the Claim[an]t has just said relative to his giving him a Commission to act as Maj[o]r Gen[era]l. Says that he was an active Zealous Subject & that he did everything in his power to render Services to the British Gov[ernmen]t.

Isaac Ogden Esq¹⁸—sworn.

Was acquainted with the Claim[an]t in 1775 & many Years before. Says that he heard in 1775 from some Members of the provincial Congress that they wished him (Witness) to serve therein which he refused & that they then told him that Mr. Skinner would be offer'd the post of Maj[o]r Gen[era]l & used that as an Argum[en]t to induce him to serve as a Member of Congress. Witness believes that Gen[era]l Skynner's practice was worth £500 S[terling] per Ann[um]. Would have given the Claim[an]t £300 S[terling] per ann[um] for the Att[orne]y Generalship. This Office led the claim[an]t into great practice.

David Ogden Esq¹⁹—sworn.

Has known Gen[era]l Skynner from his Infancy. Was Att[orne]y Gen[era]l & Speaker of the Assembly when the troubles broke out. Says that Claim[an]t was most sincerely attached to the British Gov[ernmen]t.

Sir Henry Clinton²⁰—K[night] B[aronet]—sworn. 12th May 1784.

Says that Gen[era]l Skynner conducted himself with great Zeal during the War. He has frequently receiv'd material Information from him & found great Use from his Extensive knowledge of the Country & the Characters of the Americans. He says that upon the whole Gen[era]l Skynner was particularly zealous & active in the Cause of Great Britain.

1. He was appointed attorney general in 1754; he served in the assembly from 1763 to 1776, holding the important post of Speaker of the House during the years 1765-1770 and 1772-1776.

2. He was a life-long resident of Perth Amboy prior to his exile.

3. This is incorrect. The Provincial Congress ordered Skinner's arrest

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because of the sentiments contained in a letter to his brother William Skinner; that missive, along with some of Governor William Franklin's dispatches, was captured early in January 1776 (see Sec. V, Doc. 14).

4. General Sir William Howe, commander of the British army in America from October 1775 to May 1778.

5. Skinner's New Jersey Volunteers was the largest American Loyalist unit raised during the war; it was also one of the most effective refugee fighting forces.

6. General Sir Guy Carleton replaced General Sir Henry Clinton as commander in chief of the Royal Army in April 1782; his chief duties involved preparation for the impending British evacuation of New York.

7. Paulus Hook (or Powles Hook), now part of Jersey City, was the principal ferry connection with New York. It is not known what Skinner is referring to; some of his brigade was at Paulus Hook when it was taken by Light Horse Harry Lee on August 19, 1779.

8. On August 22, 1777, an American force under General John Sullivan of New Hampshire surprised two battalions under Skinner on Staten Island; the Americans were intercepted and repulsed en route to Richmond by the Fifty-Second Regiment, led by Brigadier General John Campbell, commander of British forces on the island.

9. The reference is probably to the so-called second battle of Trenton fought on January 2, 1776, as a preliminary to the battle of Princeton (see Sec. IX, Doc. 3).

10. This is certainly an error in transcription; there were no engagements near New Brunswick in early 1776, but several took place a year later.

11. Guineas. A guinea was a gold coin circulated in England from 1663 to 1813 worth 21 shillings.

12. General Charles Cornwallis, who earned ignominy for his surrender to General Washington at Yorktown in October 1781 which ended the revolutionary war (see Sec. IX, Doc. 11).

13. On July 29, 1776, the Convention of New Jersey ordered several disaffected Perth Amboy families, including the Skinners, to be removed to the interior of the state and away from access to the British lines.

14. Philemon Dickinson, who was named brigadier general of the New Jersey militia in October 1775; he was promoted to major general in June 1777.

15. No one by the name of Carter ever sat in the Provincial Congress. Jonathan Dickinson Sergeant was secretary of the First Provincial Congress (May-August 1775); John Carey of Salem was secretary of the Second Provincial Congress (October 1775).

16. Joseph Ellis of Gloucester County.

17. Probably Charles Stewart of Hunterdon County, who was a member of the first Congress; Archibald Stewart of Sussex County was also a member of the Congress but did not attend in August 1775.

18. A member of the famous Ogden family of Newark (see Doc. 5, note 1).

19. One of New Jersey's leading lawyers, David Ogden became an associate justice of the supreme court in 1772. He was also a member of the Board of Proprietors of East New Jersey and a member of the governor's council from 1751 to 1776. Three of his sons (Isaac, Nicholas, and Peter) were Loyal-

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ists like their father; the other two (Abraham and Samuel) were patriots. He went into exile in January 1777, and soon thereafter his property was confiscated and sold.

20. General Sir Henry Clinton, commander in chief of the British army in America from May 1778 to April 1782.