

## 5 Tory Prisoners Describe Conditions in the Morris County Jail

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Incarceration, a popular means of curbing Loyalist activities, would have been utilized even more had suitable prison facilities been available. Throughout the war Jerseymen suspected or convicted of crimes against the state endured grievous hardships in jails that were invariably overcrowded, ill-supplied, and unsanitary. Neither state nor local officials had adequate resources to house and care for the numerous political dissenters who warranted imprisonment. The problem, bad enough at best, became even worse when the military situation necessitated the removal of prisoners away from the front to already jammed jails in the interior. Such was the plight of three Essex County men sent to the Morristown jail in the summer of 1777 to await trial for alleged treasonous conduct. In petitioning the Council of Safety for transfer back to Essex County, they poignantly described conditions that were, unfortunately, typical of wartime Jersey jails.

[July 1777]

The Petition of Isaac Ogden,<sup>1</sup> George Watts<sup>2</sup> & Arent Kingsland<sup>3</sup> Prisoners confined in the Goal<sup>4</sup> of the County of Morris, humbly sheweth That your Petitioners were apprehended and committed to the Common Goal of the County of Essex, your Petitioner Isaac Ogden about 3 Months ago your Petitioners George Watts & Arent Kingsland about Six Weeks ago, That they were removed from the Goal of the County of Essex to the Goal of Morris County by order of Your Excellency & Honors.<sup>5</sup>

And your Petitioners further humbly shew that their Sufferings in the Goal of Morris have been exceedingly grievous. Sometimes upwards of 50 have been confined with them in one Room not exceeding 18 Feet Square; frequently Water was not to be had from the Failure of the Public Pump; often very often have they been obliged to fast 48 Hours & not been able to procure for Money Provisions to subsist upon; & finally unless relieved by the Charity of some Familys in the Neighbourhood they must have Starved to Death.

And your Petitioners further shew unto your Excellency & the Hon[ora]ble Council of Safety that altho they now draw Provisions [and] are for the present well supplied with Water & the Numbers confined in the same Goal Room with them is reduced to Eleven, yet from the Difficulty of getting their provisions dressed, from the Stench & Filth of the Goal, the unhealthy State of the Air of the Town of Morris, [and] the Prevalence of the Bloody Flux<sup>6</sup> and Camp Fever<sup>7</sup> in & about the Court House<sup>8</sup> your Petitioners are in great Danger of their Lives.

Your Petitioners therefore humbly pray that your Excellency & Honors would

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be pleased to take their Case into your Consideration & order them a Trial for the offences charged against them; & until such Trial can be had that your Excellency & Honors in order to lessen their Sufferings & render their Imprisonment Supportable, would be pleased to remand them back to the Goal of Essex County, where their respective Families may extend to them such Relief & Comfort as their long Confinement in this Goal has rendered absolutely necessary for their future Existence.<sup>9</sup>

And your Petitioner George Watts particularly prays that his great Sufferings may be taken into Consideration his Irons to be removed from his Hands & his future Imprisonment be rendered tolerable.

And your Petitioners as in duty bound will ever Pray

ISAAC OGDEN  
GEORGE WATTS  
ARENT KINGSLAND

1. Isaac Ogden, Newark lawyer and son of Judge David Ogden. (The Ogdens were a family divided: the father and three of his sons, Isaac, Nicholas, and Peter, were Loyalists, while two other sons, Abraham and Samuel, were patriots.) Despite serving on several town and county committees in 1774-1775 and in the Provincial Congress in 1775, Isaac sided with the crown after independence. After the war he removed to Canada, where he became judge of the admiralty court in Quebec.

2. Probably George Watts, an Essex County farmer. I have used "Watts" throughout whereas it was originally printed variously as "Walts" and "Walls." The name appears "Watts" in the minutes of the Council of Safety.

3. Identity undetermined; there were numerous Kingslands in Essex County. The Council of Safety minutes gives his first name as "Aaron."

4. "Goal" or "gaol" was the common eighteenth-century spelling of "jail."

5. The Council of Safety and Governor William Livingston (an ex officio member) ordered the men to the Morristown jail on July 2, 1777.

6. Dysentery.

7. Malaria.

8. The Morris County jail was located in the county courthouse in Morristown.

9. On July 21 the Council of Safety ordered the men remanded to the Essex County jail at their own expense. The governor and council met in Morristown in July and August to conduct trials for those charged with treason. See Sec. IX, Doc. 5, note 16.