

4 The Reverend Alexander MacWhorter on British Brutality

[*Pennsylvania Evening Post*, April 26, 1777.]

The Reverend Dr. Alexander MacWhorter (1734-1807), pastor of the Newark Presbyterian Church, accompanied General Washington's army on its retreat across New Jersey in November-December 1776 and its return to Morristown by way of Trenton and Princeton in January 1777. Arriving back home in Newark, MacWhorter was distraught to learn that the British had committed the same kinds of depredations behind the lines as they had in the war zones. In the following extract of a letter to an unidentified correspondent, MacWhorter details some of the personal ravages of war suffered by civilians.

Newark, March 12, 1777

Great have been the ravages committed by the British troops in this part of the country, as to what has been done by them in Trenton, Princeton, &c. you have seen. Their footsteps with us are marked with desolation and ruin of every kind. I, with many others fled, from the town,¹ and those that tarried behind suffered almost every manner of evil. The murder, robbery, ravishments, and insults, they were guilty of are dreadful. When I returned to the town, it looked more like a scene of ruin than a pleasant well cultivated village.

One Thomas Hayes, who lived about three miles out of town as peaceable and inoffensive a man as in the state of New Jersey, was unprovokedly murdered by one of their Negroes, who run him through the body with his sword. He also cut and slashed his aged uncle in such a manner that he is not yet recovered of his wounds, though received about three months ago. The same fellow stabbed one Nathan Baldwin in the neighbourhood, who recovered. Three women were most horridly ravished by them, one of them an old woman near seventy years of age, whom they abused in a manner beyond description, another of them was a woman considerably advanced in her pregnancy, and the third was a young girl. Various others were assaulted by them, who, by the favourable interpositions of Providence, were preserved, that they did not accomplish upon them their base designs. Yea, not only common soldiers, but officers, even British officers, four or five, sometimes more sometimes less in a gang, went about the town by night, entering into houses and openly inquiring for women.²

Their plundering is so universal, and their robberies so atrocious, that I cannot fully describe their conduct. Whig and Tory were all treated in the same manner, except such who were happy enough to procure a sentinel to be placed as a guard at their door. There was one Nutman, who had always been a remarkable Tory, and who met the British troops with huzzas of joy, had his house plundered of almost everything; he himself had his shoes taken off his feet, and threatened to be hanged, so that with difficulty he escaped being murdered by them. It was diligently propagated by the Tories, before the enemy came, that all those who tarried in their

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houses would not be plundered, which induced some to stay, who otherwise would probably have saved many of their effects by removing them. But nothing was a greater deception or baser falsehood than this, as the event proved, for none were more robbed than those that tarried at home with their families. I shall only here mention a few names, John Ogden, Esq;³ an aged man, who had never done much in the controversy one way or another; they carried out of his house every thing they thought worth bearing away; they ripped open the feather beds, scattered the feathers in the air, and carried the ticks with them; broke his desk to pieces, and tore and destroyed a great number of important papers, deeds, wills, &c. belonging to himself and others, and they insulted and abused the old gentleman in the most outrageous manner, threatening sometimes to hang him, and sometimes to cut off his head. They hauled a sick son of his, whose life had been for some time despaired of, out of his bed, and grossly abused him, threatening him with death in a variety of forms.

The next neighbour to this Ogden was one Benjamin Coe, a very aged man, who, with his wife, was at home; they plundered and destroyed every thing in the house, and insulted them with such fury and rage, that the old people fled for fear of their lives; and then to shew the fulness of their malice, they burnt his house to ashes. Zophar Beach, Josiah Beach, Samuel Pennington, and others, who had large families, and were all at home, they robbed in so egregious a manner, that they were hardly left a rag of clothing, save what was on their backs. The mischief committed in the houses forsaken of their inhabitants, the destruction of fences, barns, stables, and other outhouses, the breaking of chests of drawers, desks, tables and other furniture, the burning and carrying away of carpenters and shoemakers tools are intirely beyond description.

Now this is only a faint account of the justice and humanity of the British troops. They fully answer the character of the wicked, whose mercies are cruelty. For in addition to all, they imposed an oath of absolute submission to the British King, turning the declaration contained in Howe's proclamation⁴ into an oath, and causing the people solemnly to swear the same. Those who took the oath, and obtained what were falsely called protections, there are instances with us of these being robbed and plundered afterwards, but the most general way in which they obtained the effects of such people was by bargaining with them for their hay, cattle or corn, promising them pay, but none with us ever received any thing worth mentioning.

I might have observed, that it was not only the common soldiers that plundered and stole, but also their officers, and not merely low officers and subalterns,⁵ but some of high rank were aiding and abetting and reaped the profits of this business, no less a person than Gen. Erskine,⁶ who lodged at Daniel Baldwin's had his room furnished from a neighbouring house with mahogany chairs and tables, a considerable part of which was taken away with his baggage when he went to Elizabeth-Town. Col. M'Donald who made his quarters at Alexander Robinson's had his room furnished in the same felonious manner, and the furniture was carried off, as though it had been part of his baggage. Another Colonel, whose name I have forget, sent his servants who took away a sick woman's bed, Mrs. Crane's, from under her for him to sleep upon. But there is no end of describing their inhuman conduct. And what they practised in this town seems, as far as I can hear, only a sample of their general treatment of the inhabitants wherever they came.

ALEX. M'WHORTER

NEW JERSEY IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

1. Newark.

2. Although reports of rape and molestation of women by soldiers abound, virtually all are hearsay. Sexual assaults have always been one of the more nasty byproducts of war; while there is no question that British and American troops abused numerous women, it is equally certain that reports of such incidents far exceeded their actual occurrence. Word of atrocities committed by lustful soldiers was excellent propaganda.

3. Ogden (1705-1795), lawyer and assemblyman from Essex County, 1751-1771.

4. General Sir William Howe, commander of the British army in America, sought to take advantage of the demoralized state of the population after Washington's crushing defeats in and around New York by offering on November 30 to pardon those who had taken up arms against the king provided they now take an oath of allegiance to the crown. According to Howe, more than 2,700 Jerseymen took the oath during the winter of 1776-1777.

5. Subalterns are men holding the ranks of captain lieutenant, 1st lieutenant, 2d lieutenant, and ensign lieutenant. Any one of them could serve as substitute for a captain as commander of the company.

6. Colonel Sir William Erskine, who served as quartermaster general for the British army in New Jersey.

5 Ebenezer Hazard, Journey Through Wartorn New Jersey

[Fred Shelley, ed., "Ebenezer Hazard's Diary: New Jersey During the Revolution," *New Jersey History*, (Autumn 1972), 90:171-79. Unless otherwise indicated, the diary appears as edited by Shelley; the footnotes, however, are mine.]

In November 1776, Ebenezer Hazard (1745-1817), postmaster of New York, traveled across New Jersey in advance of Washington's retreating army en route to his native Philadelphia. In August 1777 he left the Pennsylvania capital on a ten-day trip through central Jersey, presumably in conjunction with his current position as surveyor of the post office. The diary of his journey graphically depicts the kinds of physical destruction brought to communities and the countryside by massive troop movements and warfare. The devastation of war not only had a direct impact on the welfare of individual people, but also had a profound effect on public morale. As the War for Independence dragged on, it became increasingly a matter of endurance in which Jerseymen tested their ability to withstand the ravages of war.