

9 The Killing of Hannah Caldwell

[*New-Jersey Journal*, June 14, 1780.]

One of the most publicized events in New Jersey during the war was the death of Hannah Ogden Caldwell, wife of the fiery "rebel pastor" James Caldwell, at the battle of Connecticut Farms on June 7, 1780. For nearly six months newspapers carried accounts of the episode: patriot sympathizers contended that she had been murdered deliberately by the king's troops because of her husband's activities, while British supporters argued that she had been struck by a stray shot from the American ranks (see Doc. 10). The facts surrounding her death are unclear, but the weight of evidence supports the contention that a British soldier, harassed by snipers in private dwellings, fired at a movement in a window in the Caldwell house and hit and killed Mrs. Caldwell. Whatever the case, the patriot press revealed considerable callousness in the way it exploited her tragic demise for propaganda purposes. The report of the incident below is datelined Chatham, June 14; correspondent unknown.

[June 7, 1780]

... As soon as they came to Connecticut Farms, seven miles from the place of their landing, they began the exercise of their awful cruelty.¹ They first set fire to the house of Deacon Wade,² and then to the Presbyterian church; but soon advancing to the house of the Rev. Mr. Caldwell,³ they had an opportunity of reaching the summit of that cruelty after which they have been climbing for so many years. Mr. Caldwell could not remove his property, nor all his family. His amiable wife, with a babe of eight months, and one of three years old, with the housekeeper⁴ and a little maid,⁵ were left. Mrs. Caldwell having dressed herself, and put her house in order, retired with those into a back room, which was so situated that she was entirely secured against transient shot from either party, should they dispute the ground near the house, which happened not to be the case. The babe was in the arms of the housekeeper, the other child the mother held by the hand, all sitting upon the side of the bed, when one of the barbarians advancing round the house, took the advantage of a small space, through which the room was accessible, and fired two balls into that amiable lady, so well directed that they ended her life in a moment. This horrid deed appears the more cruel in the eyes of all who knew the lovely person, the sweet temper, and the not only inoffensive but benevolent life of that dear mother of nine children now living, the eldest of which is but just turned sixteen. From some circumstances this appears not to have been the act of one rash inconsiderate villain, but the effect of deliberate orders given previous to their coming to the place, that she should be murdered. She was stripped of part of her clothes, but her corps was preserved from the flames by two or three of the enemy whose humanity was not yet extinct. This was a murder without provocation, and the most opposite to humanity; for although her husband has uniformly defended the American cause, yet he has not only avoided cruelty

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himself, but used his utmost endeavours to prevent it being done by others; and as to herself, one would have thought her sweet appearance, and amiable life, would have protected her from even British or Tory cruelty. Not satiated by this horrid deed, after stripping the house they set fire to it and eleven more dwelling-houses in the neighbourhood, without the outhouses, &c. . . .

Consider Americans! what you have to expect from such enemies, and what you have to do! If the tribes of Israel rose as one man to revenge the cruelty offered an individual of no good character, (Judges xix)⁶ what ought to be our conduct when the fairest innocence is no protection; when the condition of widowhood, attended with age, or a large offspring, is no defence. . . .

1. For the battle of Connecticut Farms-Springfield, see Doc. 8.
2. Caleb Wade.
3. Residents of Elizabethtown, the Caldwells moved to a rented house in Connecticut Farms to escape the British.
4. Catherine Benward.
5. Abigail Lennington.
6. The rising of the Israelites to punish the men who raped a concubine. Judg. 19-20.

10 “A British Officer” on Guerrilla Warfare

[*The Royal Gazette*, June 21, 1780.]

In the wake of the destruction and havoc wrought by the British army at Connecticut Farms and Springfield (see Doc. 8), the patriot press came alive with articles detailing alleged British atrocities. The accidental death of Hannah Caldwell received especial publicity (see Doc. 9). Perturbed by what he considered the “glaring falsehoods” being spread about the action of the Royal Army, an unidentified British officer wrote a public letter to Loyalist publisher James Rivington to set the record straight. At the end of the letter, he departed from an account of military operations to discuss some of the problems attendant on waging a guerrilla war in which one could not tell friend from foe and in which enemy soldiers preferred to fight from places of concealment rather than on open battlefields. The British task was further complicated by having to fight both Washington’s regular army and irregular militia units, contend with a civil war between rebels and Loyalists, and suppress a rebellion motivated by ideologies that they could not comprehend. It was not surprising, as the officer admitted, that at times emotions on both sides carried the day.