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War and Peace

For all the confident rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence, national sovereignty could not be achieved unless American forces were able to resist the incursions of British arms and emerge victorious on the battlefield. From the firing of shots at Lexington in April 1775 to the signing of the preliminary articles of peace in Paris in 1782, warfare was the central focus in the lives of the revolutionary generation. The tocsin of war rang loudly in New Jersey. With the outbreak of hostilities between British and American forces in Massachusetts, Jerseymen began to prepare for the eventuality of full-scale war. During the summer and fall of 1775 militia units formed throughout the province; by the time the Declaration of Independence was proclaimed Jersey soldiers had ranged as far as Canada in defense of their liberties (see Sec. V, Docs. 6 and 12; Sec. VI, Doc. 4). But it was from the military action that took place within the borders of the state that the people of New Jersey learned what it meant to be at war.

The war came early to New Jersey. On November 20, 1776, a British assault force under Lord Cornwallis scaled the Jersey Palisades a few miles north of Fort Lee at Closter Landing. The American garrison, the last remnant of Washington's army that had been routed in and around New York City during the past three months, fled to Pennsylvania with the British in pursuit. A pattern was thus set: during the next eighteen months (November 1776-June 1778) the rival armies would march across New Jersey four times, each time leaving a wake of death and destruction. Geography and military strategy destined New Jersey, situated between the strategic ports of New York and Philadelphia (both of which were occupied by the British during the war), to be the "Cockpit of the Revolution." For most residents the presence of battle-ready soldiers was an everyday fact of life until 1781. And no state suffered more from the ravages of the War for American Independence than New Jersey.

IX WAR AND PEACE

New Jersey was a principal battleground of the revolutionary war, and two of the earliest battles that took place in the state were of profound psychological importance to the war effort. By December 1776 American morale was at low ebb. The British army, it seemed, was indeed invincible. But then came the successful attack upon the Hessians at Trenton on December 25-26 (Doc. 2) and the surprise victory at Princeton on January 3, 1777 (Doc. 3). When Washington went into winter encampment at Morristown in January 1777, western New Jersey had been cleared of the enemy and, more important, the triumphs over British arms so desperately needed to boost the confidence of soldiers and civilians alike had been achieved. Ten eventful days had fundamentally altered the tenor of the first campaign of the war.

The principal theaters of the war moved elsewhere after the eventful New Jersey campaign of 1776—to eastern Pennsylvania and upstate New York in 1777 and to the South from 1778 to 1781. The battle of Monmouth Court House (Doc. 7) was the lone major engagement to take place on Jersey soil during these years. But the fighting never really left the state. For the remainder of the conflict New Jersey was the scene of seemingly interminable raids, patrol actions, and skirmishes—the froth of war. It was as George Washington described it: “a desultory kind of war.” Except for Henry (Light-Horse Harry) Lee’s attack on the isolated outpost at Paulus (Powles) Hook in August 1779 and attempts by Jersey militia to interdict the enemy’s supply routes and harass his maneuvers, the military initiative lay with the British. The most significant operations of the Royal Army included the attack on Benjamin Lincoln’s small post at Bound Brook in April 1777, the amphibious assaults upon privateer bases at Little Egg Harbor and Chestnut Neck in October 1778 and Toms River in March 1782, the vicious sortie of J. G. Simcoe’s Queen’s Rangers (Loyalists) through the Raritan Valley in October 1779, and Baron von Knyphausen’s attacks on Connecticut Farms and Springfield in June 1780 (Doc. 8). Individually of relatively minor importance, together such actions brought untold death and destruction to the state and had both positive and negative effects on the morale of its citizens.

The people of New Jersey suffered greatly during the war. Rival armies cut swaths of destruction through the countryside (Doc. 5) and committed atrocities against civilians (Doc. 4). Fortunate residents of battle zones lost only their property (Doc. 14); the unfortunate lost their lives (Doc. 9). The war was especially hard on noncombatants because of the nature of the conflict. British officers had a difficult time controlling their men who, commanded to suppress a treasonous rebellion, could not easily distinguish between friend and foe (Doc. 10). Moreover, Americans of differing political persuasions gave vent to their baser passions in the civil war (Doc. 6). Small wonder that citizens in every portion of the state lived in constant fear of falling victim to the savage war that swirled about them for nearly eight years (Doc. 1).

In 1781 war-weary Jerseymen, sensing that the end of the protracted struggle was now near, greeted the news that Lord Cornwallis had surrendered to Washington in Virginia with joyous celebrations (Doc. 11). But while the battle of Yorktown did mark the virtual end of hostilities, it was not until the spring of 1783 that they could celebrate the signing of the Treaty of Paris which recognized American independence and ushered in an era of peace (Doc. 12).

NEW JERSEY IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

However, serious problems facing the state and nation had to be resolved before the United States could become a full-fledged member of the international community (Doc. 13). The War of Independence was over, but the American Revolution had not yet run its course.

1 Margaret Morris, A Woman's View of the War

[Margaret Morris, Private Journal Kept During a Portion of the Revolutionary War, Quaker Collection, Haverford College Library.]

Unfortunately, precious little is known about New Jersey women during the American Revolution. Excluded by both custom and law from the more visible roles played by men, most women received at best a rudimentary education and few recorded their thoughts and deeds for posterity. An outstanding exception was Margaret Hill Morris (1737-1816) of the city of Burlington. Upon the death of her husband, Philadelphia merchant William Morris, Jr., in 1766, she became the sole provider for the family. In 1770 they moved to New Jersey, apparently to be near friends and relatives, and she purchased a home formerly owned by Governor William Franklin. The excerpts from her private journal which follow provide intimate glimpses into how that courageous, pious, sensitive lady responded to the war as a mother, widow, head of household, Quaker, and woman. Politically neutral, Margaret Morris wanted no part of the warfare that raged about her. Like so many of her fellow citizens, she was able to endure the travails of war because of the strength of her convictions and her indomitable will to survive.

[December 6, 1776-January 11, 1777]

December 6th, 1776. Being on a visit to my fr[ien]d, M.S. at Haddonfield. I was preparing to return to my Family, when a Person from Philad[elphi]a told us the people there were in great Commotion, that the English fleet was in the River & hourly expected to sail up to the City; that the inhabitants were removing into the Country; & that several persons of considerable repute had been discover[e]d to have formed a design of setting fire to the City, & were Summoned before the Congress and strictly enjoin[e]d to drop the horrid purpose.¹ When I heard the above report my heart almost died within me, & I cried surely the Lord will not punish the innocent with the guilty, & I wished there might be found some interceeding Lotts & Abrahams amongst *our People*.² On my Journey home I was told the inhabitants of our little Town were going in haste into the Country & that my nearest neighbours were already removed. When I heard this, I felt myself quite Sick; I was ready to faint. I thought of my S.D.,³ the beloved Companion of my