Panorama of the Twin Forts, Montgomery and Clinton, on the Hudson
(Painting by Jack Mead; courtesy of NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation)

Split Wide and Split Deep—The Revolutionary Hudson Valley

Edward Countryman

The American Revolution was the real thing, fully as disruptive, painful, and transforming as any revolution in the modern world. But despite generations of historians' hard work, it remains difficult to convince Americans that this was so. Somehow, we think the Founding Generation was different. They escaped all the misery and conflict that plagued the English in the 1640s, the French in the 1790s, and twentieth-century people from China to Cuba. United and harmonious, they faced an external enemy, abandoned the monarchy, and experimented with republicanism until they found a solution to whatever problems they faced. What they wrought—the United States Constitution—has endured. A remarkable elite led them into the conflict with Britain and then led them out. Our revolution was unique. Or so it seems.

I certainly thought that way when I began the doctoral project that led to my own New York book.[1] But as I encountered the evidence that Revolutionary New Yorkers left behind, I grew more and more puzzled. Their actual record just did not fit this perceived image. Finally I realized that the great Cornell historian Carl Becker had been correct all along. Writing nearly a century ago, Becker described New York's revolution not just as a struggle for independence, but also as a profound internal conflict.[2] Becker dealt only with the period prior to independence, and mostly with New York City. Carrying the subject through the war, the creation of the state government, the disputes about what kind of place independent New York should be, and the movement for the U.S. Constitution—as I sought to do—only bore out his insight.

I wrote then about white men. Now we can see that, one way or another, the Revolution transformed everybody it touched: white, Native American, and African-American; downstate and upstate; urban, rural, and frontier; female and male. We can see as well how all these different kinds of people transformed the Revolution as they lived through it. Their American Revolution was exhilarating and liberating, but also profoundly frightening, very disruptive, and deeply painful. For some, it brought great opportunity; for others, just to survive was success enough. And for more, the Revolution meant great and permanent loss. Each of the essays collected here addresses these themes.

Barnet Schecter tells a story that is both familiar and strange. Virtually anybody who claims to know the Revolution's story can give the outline of General John Burgoyne's attempt to drive down the Champlain/Hudson corridor from Canada toward Albany, and eventually New York City. Burgoyne's great failure at Saratoga often is described as one of the world's truly historic battles, because the outcome brought the French in on the American side. That may overstate Saratoga's importance for diplomacy and alliance-making: there is good evidence that the French already had made their decision to intervene. Like Lincoln waiting for a victory over the South before he announced emancipation, Louis XIV and his advisors were merely waiting for the right moment to act.[3] Schecter takes us into the backstabbing, the self-seeking, and the intrigues of the British commanders, Sir William Howe, Sir Henry Clinton, and Burgoyne. The larger thesis of his book, *Battle for New York*,[4] is that the colony/state was "at the heart of the American Revolution." If it was, the Hudson Valley was the Revolution's aorta.

Both Schecter's pages and the firsthand evidence that survives from the Valley in 1777 show how close that aorta came to being cut. Burgoyne's was not the only invasion. Another expedition burst through the defenses at the Hudson Highlands in October and plundered its way north until it captured and burned Kingston. It stopped there, where it scattered and nearly destroyed the newly created state government. Clinton, directing events from his headquarters in New York City, and his field commander, General John Vaughan, may never have intended to aid Burgoyne, who was trapped in the consequences of his own hubris. But taken together, the expeditions of Burgoyne and Vaughan, along with Barry St. Leger's Mohawk Valley incursion, terrified the people of New York's shrinking Patriot zone. When Burgoyne fell into the trap that Horatio Gates laid for him, and when St. Leger and Vaughan turned around, they had come very close to ending New York's revolution altogether. The ruins of Fort Montgomery, whose historic events and recovery for modern visitors are described here by James Johnson and Gregory Smith, are mute witnesses to a terrible time.

The Valley people's sense of nearly unbearable crisis comes through most strongly in the records of Albany County's Committee of Safety.[5] The very phrase "Committee of Safety" is frightening. It conjures up images of the French Terror, as that revolution's hapless victims faced former neighbors who had become implacable enemies. Even more frightening is the name of the Revolutionary New York government's political police force, the Commissioners for Detecting and Defeating Conspiracies. Their records, and those kept by the county committees, show whole populations stripped of firearms for "disaffection," entire villages called for interrogation, and hapless individuals arrested at midnight and exiled to the

British lines or imprisoned underground at the Simsbury mines in Connecticut.[6] State policy shifted from just trying to control Loyalists and neutrals to punishing them strongly. So many anti-Loyalist statutes passed through the legislature and the Council of Revision that they filled a good-sized volume. A London printer assembled such a volume in 1786 to demonstrate that Revolutionary New York had no intention of letting up on the king's friends within its borders.[7] He did not need to comment; just publishing the statutes was enough.

Kenneth Shefsiek's moving tale of the ordeal of Roeloff Josiah Eltinge shows what could happen to someone who fell into the conspiracy commissioners' hands. Eltinge does not seem to have been an outright Loyalist. He was not condemned by name in the 1779 statute that exiled many Loyalists on pain of death and seized their property. There is no evidence that he harbored British spies, or joined a Tory guerrilla group. When it was all over, he did not flee to Canada or Britain (or further away) rather than accept the Revolution's triumph, and he did not have to plead for compensation from the British government. His initial arrest was for nothing more than refusing Continental currency. But by refusing it, he was laying bare something deeper within himself. Clearly, this was a man in real pain as he faced the need to choose, one way or another. By no means was he the only New Yorker who would have preferred to hang back.

The currency that Eltinge refused was offered to him by Esther Hasbrouck Wirtz. Shefsiek shows that her family and Eltinge's had a long history of mutual hostility. Perhaps, as he suggests, what came of her offer and his refusal was just small-town nastiness, writ large. But Thomas Wermuth demonstrates that her involvement, as a woman, had more about it than happenstance or past quarrels. We cannot go far into her mind, but all over the northern states women were finding political voices and roles.

In many instances, what they said and did involved their right to purchase necessary goods like salt and bread and flour at what the community called just prices. Wermuth describes many such events in the Hudson Valley. "Bread riots" of this sort had a long history in the Atlantic world. We can find them in Georgian London, in Hapsburg Vienna, and even in Bogota under the Spanish Bourbon monarchy. There is a direct link between Esther Hasbrouck Wirtz offering Eltinge her depreciating paper money for what she needed and the hungry women of Paris confronting "the Baker" (Louis XVI), "the Baker's wife" (Marie-Antoinette), and their "little boy" (the Dauphin). Eltinge's refusal of Wirtz's money directly prefigures the Queen's contemptuous "They have no bread? Let them eat cake." Marie-Antoinette paid by far the higher price. But Roeloff Josiah Eltinge of New Paltz, New York, suffered enough for doing much the same thing. Though Esther

Wirtz could not have known it, she and other women of the American Revolution were changing the course of very large human events. Like the more famous Abigail Smith Adams, Judith Sargent Murray, and Mercy Otis Warren, she was finding a voice of her own.

Listening to academic papers, donning eighteenth-century costume, honoring the Founders great and obscure, watching the fireworks: these are how we remember the American Revolution. We are right to do so. It does rank among modern history's great events, and it did bring permanent change. But living through it was not easy for anybody involved, as the record of what happened in the Revolutionary Hudson Valley shows.

1. Edward Countryman, *A People in Revolution: The American Revolution and Political Society in New York, 1760-1790* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).
2. Carl Lotus Becker, *The History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 1760-1776* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1909).
3. See Jonathan R. Dull, *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) and Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert, eds., *Diplomacy and Revolution: The Franco-American Alliance of 1778* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1980).
4. (New York: Walker, 2002).
5. *Minutes of the Albany Committee of Correspondence*, 1775-1778 ed. James Sullivan (2 vols., Albany: University of the State of New York, 1923-1925).
6. *Minutes of the Commissioners for Detecting and Defeating Conspiracies in the State of New York, Albany County Sessions, 1778-1781* ed. Victor Hugo Paltsits (Albany, 3 vols., University of the State of New York, 1909-1910) and *Minutes of the Committee and of the first Commission for Detecting and Defeating Conspiracies in the State of New York, Dec. 11, 1776-Sept. 23, 1778*, ed. Dorothy C. Barck [*Collections* of the New-York Historical Society, vols. 57-58] (New York: Printed for the Society, 1924-25).
7. *Laws of the Legislature of the State of New York, in Force Against the Loyalists* (London: H. Reynell, 1786).