

American Prisoners of the Revolution by Danske Dandridge

CHAPTER III. — NAMES OF SOME OF THE PRISONERS OF 1776

As we have seen, the officers fared well in comparison with the wretched privates. Paroled and allowed the freedom of the city, they had far better opportunities to obtain the necessities of life. "Our poor soldiers fared most wretchedly different," says Major Bedinger.

Before we begin, however, to speak of the treatment they received, we must make some attempt to tell the reader who they were. We wish it were possible to give the name of every private who died, or rather who was murdered, in the prisons of New York at this time. But that, we fear, is now an impossibility. As this account is designed as a memorial to those martyred privates, we have made many efforts to obtain their names. But if the muster rolls of the different companies who formed the Rifle Regiment, the Pennsylvania Flying Camp, and the other troops captured by the British in the summer and fall of 1776 are in existence, we have not been able to find them.

The records of the Revolution kept in the War Department in England have been searched in vain by American historians. It is said that the Provost Marshal, William Cunningham, destroyed his books, in order to leave no written record of his crimes. The names of 8,000 prisoners, mostly seamen, who were confined on the prison ship *Jersey*, alone, have been obtained by the Society of Old Brooklynites, from the British Archives, and, by the kind permission of this Society, we re-publish them in the Appendix to this volume.

Here and there, also, we have obtained a name of one of the brave young riflemen who died in torment a hundred times worse, because so much less swift, than that endured on a memorable occasion in India, when British soldiers were placed, during a single night, into one of their own "Black Holes." But the names of almost all of these our tortured countrymen are forgotten as completely as their places of interment are neglected.

In the hands of the writer, however, at this time [Footnote: This muster roll was lent to the writer by Henry Bedinger Davenport, Esq, a descendant of Major Bedinger] is the pay-roll of one of these companies of riflemen,—that of Captain Abraham Shepherd of Shepherdstown, Virginia. It is in the handwriting of Henry Bedinger, one of the lieutenants of the company.

We propose to take this list, or pay roll, as a sample, and to follow, as well as we can, at this late day, the misfortunes of the men named therein. For this purpose we will first give the list of names, and afterwards attempt to indicate how many of the men died in confinement, and how many lived to be exchanged.

MUSTER ROLL

The paper in question, falling to pieces with age, and almost illegible in places, is headed, "An ABSTRACT of the Pay due the Officers and Privates of the Company of Riflemen belonging to Captain Abraham Shepherd, being part of a Battalion raised by Colonel Hugh Stevenson, deceased, and afterwards commanded by Lieut Colonel Moses Rawlings, in the Continental Service from July 1st, 1776, to October 1st, 1778." The paper gives the dates of enlistment; those who were killed; those who died; those who deserted; those who were discharged; drafted; made prisoners; "dates until when pay is charged;" "pay per month;" "amount in Dollars," and "amount in lawful Money, Pounds, Shillings and pence." From this account much information can be gleaned concerning the members of the company, but we will, for the present, content ourselves with giving the muster roll of the company.

MUSTER ROLL OF CAPTAIN ABRAHAM SHEPHERD'S COMPANY OF RIFLEMEN RAISED IN JULY, 1776

Captain Abraham Shepherd. First Lieutenant, Samuel Finley. Second Lieutenant, William Kelly. Third Lieutenant, Henry Bedinger. First Sergeant, John Crawford. Second Sergeant, John Kerney. Third Sergeant, Robert Howard. Fourth Sergeant, Dennis Bush. First Corporal, John Seaburn. Second Corporal, Evert Hoglant. Third Corporal, Thomas Knox. Fourth Corporal, Jonathan Gibbons. Drummer, Stephen Vardine. Fifer, Thomas Cook. Armourer, James Roberts.

Privates, William Anderson, Jacob Wine, Richard Neal, Peter Hill, William Waller, Adam Sheetz, James Hamilton, George Taylor, Adam Rider, Patrick Vaughan, Peter Hanes, John Malcher, Peter Snyder, Daniel Bedinger, John Barger, William Hickman, Thomas Pollock, Bryan Timmons, Thomas Mitchell, Conrad Rush, David Harman, James Aitken, William Wilson, John Wilson, Moses McComesky, Thomas Beatty, John Gray, Valentine Fritz, Zechariah Bull, William Moredock, Charles Collins, Samuel Davis, Conrad Cabbage, John Cummins, Gabriel Stevens, Michael Wolf, John Lewis, William Donnelly, David Gilmore, John Cassody, Samuel Blount, Peter Good, George Helm, William Bogle (or Boyle), John Nixon, Anthony Blackhead, Christian Peninger, Charles Jones, William Case, Casper Myre, George Brown, Benjamin McKnight, Anthony Larkin, William Seaman, Charles Snowden, John Boulden, John Blake, Nicholas Russell, Benjamin Hughes, James Brown, James Fox, William Hicks, Patrick Connell, John Holmes, John McSwaine, James Griffith, Patrick Murphy, James Aitken.

Besides the names of this company we can give a few privates of the Pennsylvania Flying Camp who are mentioned by Saffel. He adds that, as far as is known, all of these perished in prison, after inscribing their names high up upon the walls.

SOME PRIVATES OF THE PENNSYLVANIA FLYING CAMP WHO PERISHED IN PRISON IN 1776-7

"Charles Fleming, John Wright, James McKinney, Ebenezer Stille, Jacob Leinhart, Abraham Van

Gordon, Peter D'Aubert, William Carbury, John McDowell, Wm. McKague, Henry Parker, James Burns, Henry Yepler, Baltus Weigh, Charles Beason, Leonard Huber, John McCarroll, Jacob Guiger, John May, Daniel Adams, George McCormick, Jacob Kettle, Jacob Miller, George Mason, James Kearney, David Sutor, Adam Bridel, Christian Mull, Daniel McKnight, Cornelius Westbrook, Luke Murphy, Joseph Conklin, Adam Dennis, Edward Ogden, Wm. Scoonover, James Rosencrants."

The names of the officers who were prisoners in New York after the battle of Long Island and the surrender of Fort Washington, can easily be obtained. But it is not with these, at present, that we have to do. We have already seen how much better was their treatment than that accorded to the hapless privates. It is chiefly to commemorate the sufferings of the private soldier and seaman in the British prisons that this account has been written.

CHAPTER XLVI. — SOME OF THE PRISONERS ON BOARD THE JERSEY

We have seen that the crew of the *Chance* was exchanged in the fall of 1782. A few of the men who composed this crew were ill at the time that the exchange was affected, and had been sent to Blackwell's Island. Among these unfortunate sufferers was the sailing-master of the *Chance*, whose name was Sylvester Rhodes.

This gentleman was born at Warwick, R. I., November 21, 1745. He married Mary Aborn, youngest sister of Captain Daniel Aborn, and entered the service of his country, in the early part of the war, sometimes on land, and sometimes as a seaman. He was with Commodore Whipple on his first cruise, and as prize-master carried into Boston the first prize captured by that officer. He also served in a Rhode Island regiment.

When the crew of the *Jersey* was exchanged and he was not among the number, his brother-in-law, Captain Aborn, endeavored to obtain his release, but, as he had been an officer in the army as well as on the privateer, the British refused to release him as a seaman. His father, however, through the influence of some prominent Tories with whom he was connected, finally secured his parole, and Captain Aborn went to New York to bring him home. But it was too late. He had become greatly enfeebled by disease, and died on board the cartel, while on her passage through the Sound, on the 3rd of November, 1782, leaving a widow and five children. Mary Aborn Rhodes lived to be 98, dying in 1852, one of the last survivors of the stirring times of the Revolution.

WILLIAM DROWNE

One of the most adventurous of American seamen was William Drowne, who was taken prisoner more than once. He was born in Providence, R. I., in April 1755. After many adventures he sailed on the 18th of May, 1780, in the *General Washington*, owned by Mr. John Brown of Providence.

In a Journal kept by Mr. Drowne on board of this ship, he writes:

“The cruise is for two months and a half, though should New York fetch us up again, the time may be protracted, but it is not in the bargain to pay that potent city a visit this bout. It may easily be imagined what a sensible mortification it must be to dispense with the delicious sweets of a Prison-ship. But though the Washington is deemed a prime sailor, and is well armed, I will not be too sanguine in the prospect of escape, as ‘the race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong.’ But, as I said before, it is not in the articles to go there this time, especially as it is said the prisoners are very much crowded there already, and it would be a piece of unfeeling inhumanity to be adding to their unavoidable inconvenience by our presence. Nor could we, in such a case, by any means expect that Madam Fortune would deign to smile so propitiously as she did before, in the promotion of an exchange so much sooner than our most sanguine expectations flattered us with, as ‘tis said to be with no small difficulty that a parole can be obtained, much more an exchange.”

This cruise resulted in the capture by the Washington of several vessels, among them the Robust, Lord Sandwich, Barrington, and the Spitfire, a British privateer.

In May, 1781, Mr. Drowne sailed on board the Belisarius, commanded by Captain James Munro, which vessel was captured on the 26th of July and brought into the port of New York. Browne and the other officers were sent to the Jersey, where close confinement and all the horrors of the place soon impaired his vigorous constitution. Although he was, through the influence of his friends, allowed to visit Newport on parole in November, 1781, he was returned to the prison ship, and was not released until some time in 1783. His brother, who was a physician, nursed him faithfully, but he died on the 9th of August, 1786. Letters written on board the Jersey have a melancholy interest to the student of history, and this one, written by William Drowne to a Mrs. Johnston, of New York, is taken from the appendix to the “Recollections of Captain Dring.”

Jersey Prison Ship Sep. 25 1781

Madam:

Your letter to Captain Joshua Sawyer of the 23d Inst, came on board this moment, which I being requested to answer, take the freedom to do, and with sensible regret, as it announces the dissolution of the good man. It was an event very unexpected. Tis true he had been for some days very ill, but a turn in his favor cancel’d all further apprehension of his being dangerous, and but yesterday he was able without assistance to go upon deck; said he felt much better, and without any further Complaints, at the usual time turned into his Hammock, and as was supposed went to sleep. Judge of our Surprise and Astonishment this morning at being informed of his being found a lifeless Corpse.

Could anything nourishing or comfortable have been procured for him during his illness, ‘tis

possible He might now have been a well man. But Heaven thought proper to take him to itself, and we must not repine.

A Coffin would have been procured in case it could be done seasonably, but his situation render'd a speedy Interment unavoidable. Agreeably to which 10 or 12 Gentlemen of his acquaintance presented a petition to the Commanding Officer on board, requesting the favor that they might be permitted, under the Inspection of a file of Soldiers, to pay the last sad duties to a Gentleman of merit; which he humanely granted, and in the Afternoon his remains were taken on shore, and committed to their native dust in as decent a manner as our situation would admit. Myself, in room of a better, officiated in the sacred office of a Chaplain and read prayers over the Corpse previous to its final close in its gloomy mansion. I have given you these particulars, Madam, as I was sensible it must give you great satisfaction to hear he had some friends on board. Your benevolent and good intentions to him shall, (if Heaven permits my return) be safely delivered to his afflicted wife, to give her the sensible Consolation that her late much esteemed and affectionate Husband was not destitute of a Friend, who had wish'd to do him all the good offices in his power, had not the hand of fate prevented.

If you wish to know anything relative to myself—if you will give Yourself the trouble to call on Mrs. James Selhrig, she will inform You, or Jos. Aplin, Esqre.

You will please to excuse the Liberty I have taken being an entire stranger. I have no Views in it but those of giving, as I said before, satisfaction to one who took a friendly part towards a Gentleman dease'd, whom I very much esteemed. Your goodness will not look with a critical eye over the numerous Imperfections of this Epistle.

I am, Madam, with every sentiment of respect

yr most Obdt Servt

Wm. Drowne

The next letter we will give was written by Dr. Solomon Drowne to his sister Sally. This gentleman was making every effort to obtain his brother's release from captivity.

Providence, Oct. 17 1781

Dear Sally:

We have not forgot you;—but if we think strongly on other objects the memory of you returns, more grateful than the airs which fan the Summer, or all the golden products of ye Autumn. The Cartel is still detained, for what reason is not fully known. Perhaps they meditate an attack upon some unguarded, unsuspecting quarter, and already in idea glut their eyes, with the smoke of burning Towns and Villages, and are soothed by the sounds of deep distress. Forbid it Guardian

of America!—and rather let the reason be their fear that we should know the state of their shattered Navy and declining affairs—However, Bill is yet a Prisoner, and still must feel, if not for himself, yet what a mind like his will ever feel for others. In a letter I received from him about three weeks since he mentioned that having a letter to Mr. George Deblois, he sent it, accompanied with one he wrote requesting his influence towards effecting his return the next Flag,—that Mr. Deblois being indisposed, his cousin Captain William Deblois, taken by Monro last year, came on board to see him, with a present from Mr. Deblois of some Tea, Sugar, Wine, Rum, etc, and the offer of any other Civilities that lay in the power of either:—This was beneficence and true Urbanity,—that he was not destitute of Cash, that best friend in Adversity, except some other best friends,—that as long as he had health, he should, he had like to have said, be happy. In a word he bears up with his wonted fortitude and good spirits, as we say, nor discovers the least repining at his fate. But you and I who sleep on beds of down and inhale the untainted, cherishing air, surrounded by most endeared connexions, know that his cannot be the most delectable of situations: therefor with impatience we look for his happy return to the Circle of his Friends.

Yr aff Bro.

Solomon Drowne

DR. S. DROWNE TO MRS. MARCY DROWNE

Newport Nov. 14 1781

Respected Mother,

I found Billy much better than I expected, the account we received of his situation having been considerably exaggerated: However we ought to be thankful we were not deceived by a too favorable account, and so left him to the care of strangers, when he might most need the soothing aid of close relatives. He is very weak yet, and as a second relapse might endanger his reduced, tottering system, think it advisable not to set off for home with him till the wind is favorable. He is impatient, for the moment of its shifting, as he is anxious to see you all.

The boat is just going, Adieu, yr aff son

Solomon Drowne

We have already quoted from the Recollections of Jeremiah Johnson who lived on the banks of Wallabout Bay during the Revolution. He further says: “The prisoners confined in the Jersey had secretly obtained a crow-bar which was kept concealed in the berth of some confidential officer among the prisoners. The bar was used to break off the port gratings. This was done, in windy nights, when good swimmers were ready to leave the ship for the land. In this way a number

escaped.

“Captain Doughty, a friend of the writer, had charge of the bar when he was a prisoner on board of the Jersey, and effected his escape by its means. When he left the ship he gave the bar to a confidant to be used for the relief of others. Very few who left the ship were retaken. They knew where to find friends to conceal them, and to help them beyond pursuit.

“A singularly daring and successful escape was effected from the Jersey about 4 o’clock one afternoon in the beginning of Dec. 1780. The best boat of the ship had returned from New York between 3 & 4 o’clock, and was left fast at the gangway, with the oars on board. The afternoon was stormy, the wind blew from the north-east, and the tide ran flood. A watchword was given, and a number of prisoners placed themselves carelessly between the ship’s waist and the sentinel. At this juncture four Eastern Captains got on board the boat, which was cast off by their friends. The boat passed close under the bows of the ship, and was a considerable distance from her before the sentinel in the fo’castle gave the alarm, and fired at her. The second boat was manned for a chase; she pursued in vain; one man from her bow fired several shots at the boat, and a few guns were fired at her from the Bushwick shore; but all to no effect,—and the boat passed Hell-gate in the evening, and arrived safe in Connecticut next morning.

“A spring of the writer was a favorite watering-place for the British shipping. The water-boat of the Jersey watered from this spring daily when it could be done; four prisoners were generally brought on shore to fill the casks, attended by a guard. The prisoners were frequently permitted to come to the (Johnstons’) house to get milk and food; and often brought letters privately from the prisoners. From these the sufferings on board were revealed.

“Supplies of vegetables were frequently collected by Mr. Remsen (the benevolent owner of the mill,) for the prisoners; and small sums of money were sent on board by the writer’s father to his friends by means of these watering parties.”

AN ESCAPE FROM THE JERSEY

“I was one of 850 souls confined in the Jersey in the summer of 1781, and witnessed several daring attempts to escape. They generally ended tragically. They were always undertaken in the night, after wrenching or filing the bar off the port-holes. Having been on board several weeks, and goaded to death in various ways, four of us concluded to run the hazard. We set to work and got the bars off, and waited impatiently for a dark night. We lay in front of Mr. Remsen’s door, inside of the pier head and not more that 20 yards distant. There were several guard sloops, one on our bow, and the other off our quarter a short distance from us. The dark night came, the first two were lowered quietly into the water; and the third made some rumbling. I was the fourth that descended, but had not struck off from the vessel before the guards were alarmed, and fired upon us. The alarm became general, and I was immediately hauled on board

(by the other prisoners).

“They manned their boats, and with their lights and implements of death were quick in pursuit of the unfortunates, cursing and swearing, and bellowing and firing. It was awful to witness this deed of blood. It lasted about an hour,—all on board trembling for our shipmates. These desperadoes returned to their different vessels rejoicing that they had killed three damned rebels.

“About three years after this I saw a gentleman in John St., near Nassau, who accosted me thus: ‘Manley, how do you do?’ I could not recollect him. ‘Is it possible you don’t know me? Recollect the Old Jersey?’ And he opened his vest and bared his breast. I immediately said to him—‘You are James McClain.’ ‘I am,’ said he. We both stepped into Mariner’s public house, at the corner, and he related his marvellous escape to me.

“‘They pursued me:—I frequently dived to avoid them, and when I came up they fired on me. I caught my breath, and immediately dived again, and held my breath till I crawled along the mud. They no doubt thought they killed me. I however, with much exertion, though weak and wounded, made out to reach the shore, and got into a barn, not far from the ship, a little north of Mr. Remsen’s house. The farmer, the next morning, came into his barn,—saw me lying on the floor, and ran out in a fright. I begged him to come to me, and he did, I gave an account of myself, where I was from, how I was pursued, with several others. He saw my wounds, took pity on me; sent for his wife, and bound up my wounds, and kept me in the barn until night-fall,—took me into his house, nursed me secretly, and then furnished me with clothing, etc., and when I was restored, he took me with him, into his market-boat to this city, and went with me to the west part of the city, provided me with a passage over to Bergen, and I landed somewhere in Communipaw. Some friends helped me across Newark Bay, and then I worked my way, until I reached Baltimore, to the great joy of all my friends.” [Footnote: “Recollections of Captain Manley”.]

Just what proportion of captives died on board of the Jersey it is now impossible to determine. No doubt there were many escapes of which it is impossible to obtain the particulars. The winter of 1779-80 was excessively cold, and the Wallabout Bay was frozen over. One night a number of prisoners took advantage of this to make their escape by lowering themselves from a port hole on to the ice. It is recorded that the cold was so excessive that one man was frozen to death, that the British pursued the party and brought a few of them back, but that a number succeeded in making their escape to New Jersey. Who these men were we have been unable to discover. Tradition also states that while Wallabout Bay was thus frozen over the Long Island market women skated across it, with supplies of vegetables in large hampers attached to their backs, and that some of them came near enough to throw some of their supplies to the half-famished prisoners on board the Jersey.

It would appear that these poor sufferers had warm friends in the farmers who lived on the shores of the Wallabout. Of these Mr. A. Remsen, who owned a mill at the mouth of a creek which empties into the Bay, was one of the most benevolent, and it was his daughter who is said to have kept a list of the number of bodies that were interred in the sand in the neighborhood of the mill and house. In 1780 Mr Remsen hid an escaped prisoner, Major H. Wyckoff, for several days in one of his upper rooms, while at the same time the young lieutenant of the guard of the Jersey was quartered in the house. Remsen also lent Captain Wyckoff as much money as he needed, and finally, one dark night, safely conveyed him in a sleigh to Cow Neck. From thence he crossed to Poughkeepsie.

Although little mention is made by those prisoners who have left accounts of their experiences while on board the Jersey, of any aid received by them from the American government the following passage from a Connecticut paper would seem to indicate that such aid was tendered them at least for a time. It is possible that Congress sent some provisions to the prison-ships for her imprisoned soldiers, or marines, but made no provision for the crews of privateers.

"New London. September 1st. 1779. D. Stanton testifies that he was taken June 5th, and put in the Jersey prison ship. An allowance from Congress was sent on board. About three or four weeks past we were removed on board the Good Hope, where we found many sick. There is now a hospital ship provided, to which they are removed and good attention paid."

The next extract that we will quote probably refers to the escape of prisoners on the ice referred to above.

"New London. Conn. Feb. 16th. 1780. Fifteen prisoners arrived here who three weeks ago escaped from the prison-ship in the East River. A number of others escaped about the same time from the same ship, some of whom being frost-bitten and unable to endure the cold, were taken up and carried back, one frozen to death before he reached the shore."

"Rivington's Gazette, Dec. 19th 1780. George Batterman, who had been a prisoner on board the prison ship at New York, deposes that he had had eight ounces of condemned bread per day; and eight ounces of meat. He was afterwards put on board the Jersey, where were, as was supposed, 1,100 prisoners; recruiting officers came on board and finding that the American officers persuaded the men not to enlist, removed them, as he was told, to the Provost. The prisoners were tempted to enlist to free themselves from confinement, hopeless of exchange. * * * The prisoners had a pint of water per day:—the sick were not sent to the hospitals until they were so weak and ill that they often expired before they got out of the Jersey. The commanding officer said his orders were that if the ship took fire we should all be turned below, and left to perish in the flames. By accident the ship took fire in the steward's room, when the Hessian guards were ordered to drive the prisoners below, and fire among them if they resisted or got in

the water.”

Talbot in his Memoirs stated that: “When the weather became cool and dry in the fall and the nights frosty the number of deaths on board the Jersey was reduced to an average of ten per day! which was small compared with the mortality for three months before. The human bones and skulls yet bleaching on the shore of Long Island, and exposed by the falling down of the high bank, on which the prisoners were buried, is a shocking sight.” (Talbot, page 106.)

In May, 1808, one William Burke of New York testified that “He was a prisoner in the Jersey 14 months, has known many American prisoners put to death by the bayonet. It was the custom for but one prisoner at a time to go on deck. One night while many prisoners were assembled at the grate, at the hatchway to obtain fresh air, and waiting their turn to go on deck, a sentinel thrust his bayonet down among them, and 25 next morning were found to be dead. This was the case several mornings, when sometimes six, and sometimes eight or ten were found dead by wounds thus received.”

A Connecticut paper, some time in May, 1781, stated that. “Eleven hundred French and American prisoners died in New York last winter.”

A paper published in Philadelphia, on the 20th of February, 1782, says: “Many of our unfortunate prisoners on board the prison ships in the East River have perished during the late extreme weather, for want of fuel and other necessities.”

“New London. May 3rd. 1782. One thousand of our seamen remain in prison ships in New York, a great part in close confinement for six months past, and in a most deplorable condition. Five hundred have died during the past five or six months, three hundred are sick; many seeing no prospect of release are entering the British service to elude the contagion with which the prison ships are fraught.”

Joel Barlow in his Columbiad says that Mr. Elias Boudinot told him that in the Jersey 1,100 prisoners died in eighteen months, almost the whole of them from the barbarous treatment of being stifled in a crowded hold with infected air; and poisoned with unwholesome food, and Mr Barlow adds that the cruelties exercised by the British armies on American prisoners during the first years of the war were unexampled among civilized nations.

