

The Navesink Highlands and the American Revolution along New Jersey's Military Frontier



Left: Revolutionary War Map of the New York Harbor. Note the “Highlands of the Navesink” as the border between the British-held harbor and the interior of New Jersey

Michael S. Adelberg,
for the Highlands Historical
Society

May 2011

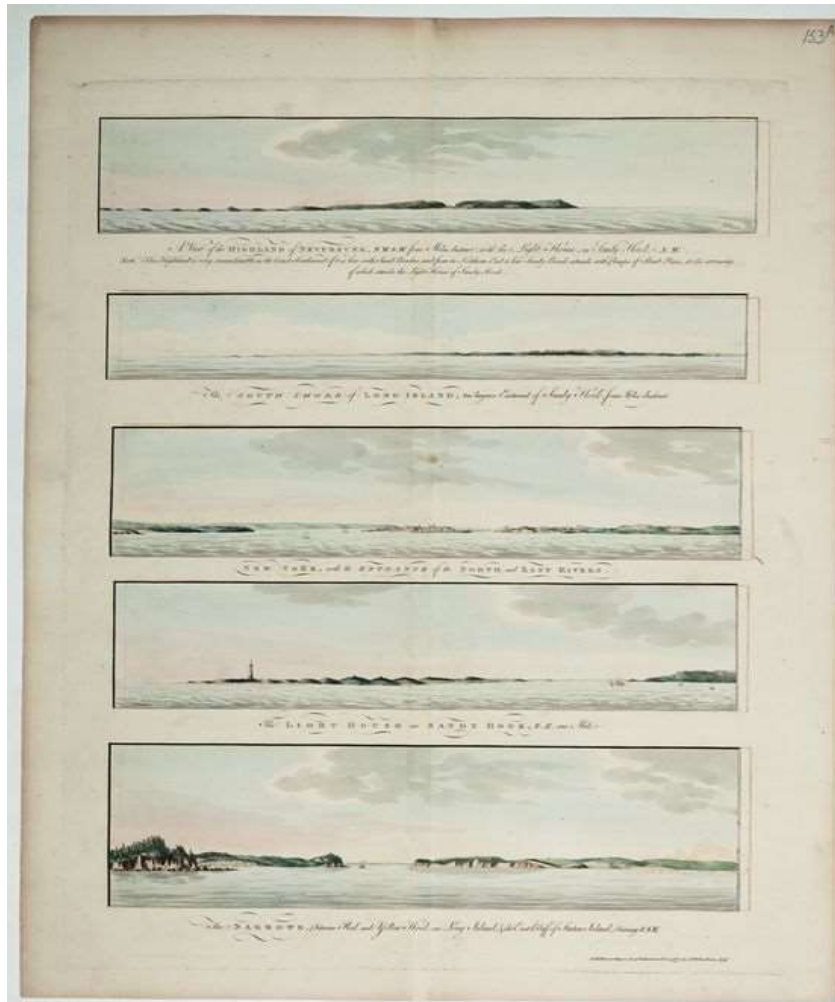
Monmouth County – circa 1776

- Very rural: less 15,000 people,
No large towns
Farming & Maritime
- Diverse: 5 religious groups
Large African-American pop.
- Tensions:
Boom/bust economy
Average acreage is shrinking
Limited democracy
A history of violence



Right: British military map of Monmouth County; note lack of easy cross-county travel

The Highlands – Circa 1776



- Part of Middletown Township
- One family, the Hartshornes, owns much of the land
- Tenant farmers and boatmen fish and rake for oysters
- Nearby Sandy Hook is key to NY commerce
 - Light house with pilots

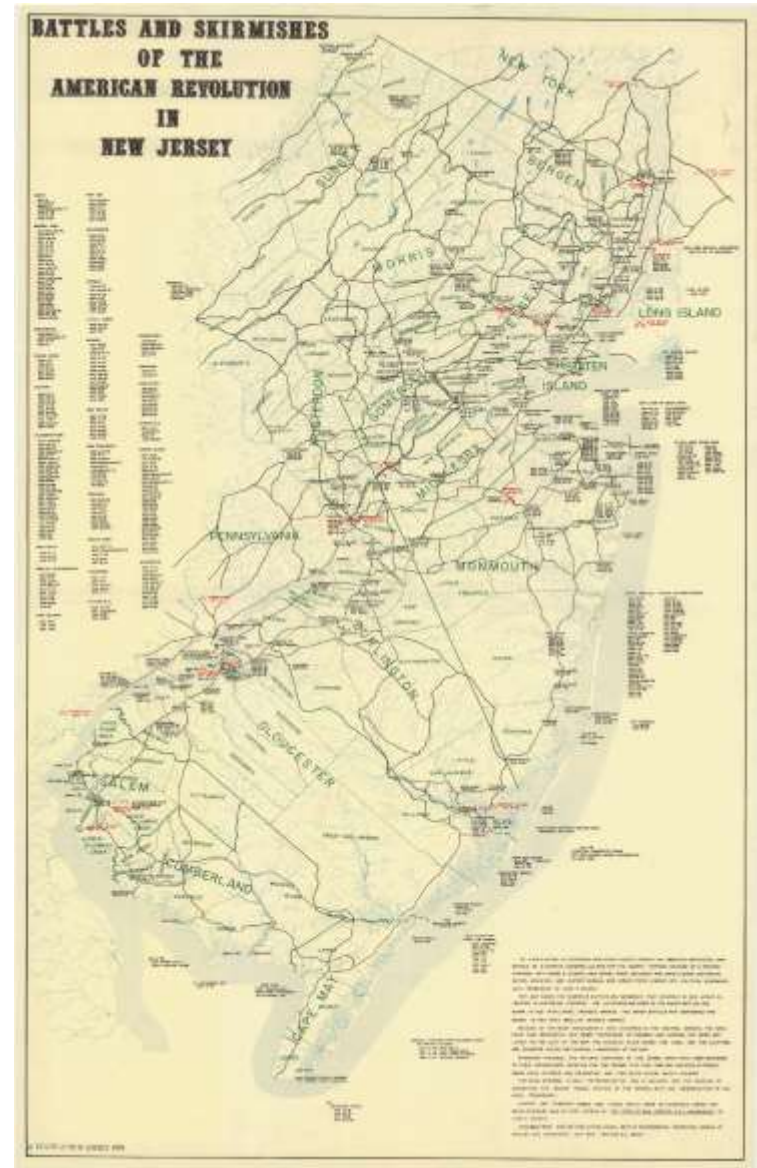
Sketches of the Raritan Bay including the Highlands from anchor near Sandy Hook

Two American Revolutions

Continental Army/Navy vs. British
Army/Navy

American vs. American

- 20-35% of Americans were Loyalists
- Civil warfare in areas where local Loyalists received British support
- Military Frontiers emerge
 - The Navesink Highlands were one of those frontiers—troops based there at least four times
 - Between British-held Sandy Hook and Continental-held inland villages like Middletown and Tinton Falls



David Munn's map of NJ Battles and Skirmishes, note concentration of actions near Highlands and Sandy Hook

1st Deployment: May 1776

Stillwell's State Troops

Context:

- Imminent British invasion of New York
- British navy based at Sandy Hook
- Loyalist associations forming across Monmouth County



Naval sketch of Sandy Hook and Highlands

First Deployment

- Capt. Joseph Stillwell of Mtown authorized to raise a company of State Troops and deploy on the Highlands (May-July)
 - size of unit: 2 officers, 57 men
- Stillwell's State Troops never see combat
 - assigned only to “watch the movements of the enemy”
 - do not support Continental Army attack on Sandy Hook on June 21
 - Stillwell's senior officer is Col. George Taylor, a secret Loyalist
 - Stillwell's company melts away amid Loyalist insurrections in July 1776

2nd Deployment: Summer-Fall 1776

Pennsylvania Flying Camp



George Keith-Elphinstone,
Captain of the HMS *Perseus*,
active in different actions in
the Raritan Bay in 1776

Context:

- British “armada” controls NY Harbor
- British Army defeats Continental Army at Battle of Long Island and later battles
- Loyalist New Jersey Volunteers, raising two battalions from Monmouth

Second Deployment

- 3,500 Pennsylvanians stationed along NJ Shore from Navesink to Elizabeth; VA and Mass. Continentals stationed at Perth Amboy
- Little activity—besides capture of the Loyalist recruiter, Samuel Wright, at Keansburg
- HMS *Perseus* burns beached Continental vessel west of Sandy Hook, amid small arms fire from shore
- PA. troops join Continental Army in November then retreat with Washington’s Army into PA.

3rd Deployment: February 1777

1st Regiment of the Monmouth Militia

Context: After Battle of Trenton , British retreat across NJ; January 2, 1777, Loyalist militia defeated by Continentals at Freehold



DAVID FORMAN.

Third Deployment:

- Col. David Forman re-organizes militia, 140 men camp on the Highlands
- February 12, 170 British regulars surprise and rout the militia
- Militia losses: 25 killed, 72 captured, along with supplies; Highlands are abandoned
- July 1777, Forman proposes to garrison a “redoubt” on the Highlands if Continental Army will send him 8 cannon; request is denied
- Highlands remain no-man’s land, as Continental Army and militia establish inland bases at Middletown and Tinton Falls

Left: Col. David Forman, Monmouth’s senior militia officer through 1777, and Continental Army Officer

4th Deployment: July 1778

The British Army

Context:

- British give up Philadelphia retreat across NJ, June 1778
- Continental Army engages British at Battle of Monmouth, but British continue their retreat toward awaiting fleet at Sandy Hook

Fourth Deployment

- British Army camps on the Highlands July 1-5, 1778
- Col. Daniel Morgan's Continentals camp at Middletown; takes 30 prisoners and 100 deserters;
- British abandon 500 worn out horses and other property
- British Officers complain of the "primitive encampment, consisting of twig huts."

"We were so terribly bitten by the mosquitoes and other kinds of vermin that we could not open our eyes from the swelling on our faces. Many men were made almost unrecognizable, and our bodies looked like those people who have suddenly been attacked by measles or small pox."



Col. Daniel Morgan, assigned to harass British Army camped at the Highlands in July 1778

The Highlands as the Military Frontier, 1778-82

Context:

- During the later years of the war, Sandy Hook was the spigot for local civil warfare and illegal trade
- Although too dangerous for either side to garrison permanently, the Highlands are criss-crossed by military units on both sides

The Highlands are critical in the local war:

- As an intelligence gathering post, from 1778 thru 1782: almost two dozen intelligence reports on British fleet movements were sent to Continental leadership from either the Highlands or nearby Garrett's Hill
- Skirmishes & Loyalist Raids: Dec. 1, 1778; March 25, 1779; April 11, 1779; Sept. 20, 1779; Sept. 22, 1779; June 8, 1779; Jan. 15, 1781; June 21, 1781



British/Loyalists “hold” Highlands for days at a time; in 1779, George Washington suggests a British may have the Highlands “in view” as site for a permanent base.

Left: Loyalist re-enactors portray landing

The Huddy Affair: Climax of the Local War

Context:

• Yorktown, October 1781, officially ends hostilities but local war continues; Loyalists and Whigs execute retaliatory acts vs. the other side



The headstone of Captain Joshua Huddy, buried near Freehold

The Huddy Affair

- Capt. Joshua Huddy was captured on March 24
- Loyalist Stephen White captured on March 30—murdered attempting to escape
- April 14, Loyalists take Huddy out of British prison, bring him to the Highlands, and hang him in retaliation for White's murder
- Escalates into diplomatic bonfire
 - Washington demands the commanding Loyalist
 - Selects British POW as a subject for retaliation
 - British refuse but convene court martial and drydock Loyalist raiders
 - Thomas Paine, James Madison and numerous others write passionately on the controversy
 - French diplomats persuade Washington to back down

Conclusion



Above: Re-enactors portray New Jersey Whigs firing a volley from behind a fence

The Highlands were a particularly violent and important part of the military frontier

- Between two armed camps
- Occupied by both armies at different times
- Scene of varied military activity
- Scene of the infamous the Huddy Affair

To Learn More...

If you'd like to learn more about this topic:

- Visit the sites and support local history:
 - Sandy Hook Light House
 - Marlpit Hall and the Murray House (in nearby Middletown)
- Read my book, *The American Revolution in Monmouth County: The Theatre of Spoil and Destruction*
- Visit my website and drop me a note, www.michaeladelberg.com

Thanks for your time and interest.



Above: Sandy Hook Light House in 1790

