

“Necessity Has No Law”

Leadership and Governance
in Revolutionary
Monmouth County, New Jersey

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Was the American Revolution “revolutionary”?

- Many historians argue it was not...
 - Leadership continuity: “Founding fathers” were elite, pre-war leaders
 - Suppression of “revolutionary” movements (Philadelphia militia and Continental Line mutinies)
 - Locality studies (Concord, MA; Lunenburg County, VA; Westchester County, NY; Charles County, MD) show continuity between pre-war and post-war institutions
 - Jean Lee’s conclusion about Charles County, MD, that “almost to a man, the colonial elite remained intact” exemplifies this view

the *Military Frontier* was Different

Military Frontier: areas of prolonged irregular warfare where local Whigs (supporters of the independence) could not fully subdue Loyalists (opponents of independence)

Military Frontier Areas:

- New York and New Jersey areas near British held New York City
- Southeast Pennsylvania and eastern shore of Chesapeake Bay
- Carolina Upcountry
- Georgia-Florida border

Thesis: the American Revolution was 'revolutionary' on the military frontier

- High turnover of pre-war leaders
- New 'democratic' leadership emerges
- Crucible of civil warfare
 - Changes socio-economic make up of localities
 - Breaks down and remakes institutions
 - Creates new local leader blocs and rivalries
- Monmouth County, NJ as a case study

Monmouth County on the eve of War

- Present-day counties of Monmouth and Ocean
- 12-15,000 diverse people
 - 5 religious denominations
 - Significant African-American minority
- No cities
- New York and Philadelphia-bound commerce
 - Agricultural and maritime economies
- Pre-Revolutionary Agitation:
 - Sons of Liberty chapters, 1765-6
 - Land Riots, 1769-70

Civil War in Monmouth County

- Rival Militias and Loyalist insurrections: 1776-1777
- Loyalist raid warfare: 1777-1782
- Internal Loyalist partisan warfare: 1778-1782
- Sustained illegal trade with British: 1777-1783
- Vigilante Whig reprisals (outside militia and courts): 1780-1783

Scope and Severity of Warfare:

- About 20% of men suffer a documented adverse event during the war
- Estimated 50% of families suffered at least one adverse event
- Well over 100 battles and skirmishes
- 127 estate confiscations
- Over 600 serve in Loyalist New Jersey Volunteers
 - Hundreds more as Loyalist irregulars

Impact on Local Leadership

- Democratizing Local Government
 - Suffrage reform doubles electorate
 - Number of local offices double
 - Military – new militia regiments; State Troops
 - Civil – new offices at township and county level
 - Continental – purchasing agents, Cont. Army
 - New leaders
 - Loyalist families turned out; Whig families ascend
 - Yeomanry rises to leadership, but also men of modest means
 - 1/3 of new leaders under pre-war suffrage requirement
 - Sharp decline in incumbency
 - Few leaders serve more than two consecutive years

Sketches of Two New Leaders

Abiel Aiken of Dover

- Homeowner in small port village of Toms River
- Becomes tavernkeeper as privateers and saltmakers boost village economy
- Named port collector in 1778; Magistrate in 1780
- Part-owner of privateer
- Home/tavern burned by Loyalists in 1782

Thomas Farr of U. Freehold

- Owns 25 acres, 4 livestock
- Vocal Whig during Loyalist insurrections, 1776
- Elected Tax Assessor, selected Baptist Meeting Deacon in 1777
- Testifies against disaffected
- Signs Whig petitions
- Robbed and killed by Pine Robbers in 1779

Machiavellian Whigs

- Centered in Freehold
- Mostly Presbyterian
- Defining Issues
 - Curbing illegal trade
 - “Retaliation” against disaffected
- Machiavellian Acts:
 - Election Day Coercion
 - Articles of Retaliation
 - Loyalist Estate Auction Scandals
 - “Sweeps” of the shore

Example: James Green

- Tavernkeeper and Militia Captain
- Active Whig throughout the war
- Horse stolen 1778; captured by Loyalists 1780
- Aggressively fines militia delinquents
- Engages in numerous extra-legal property confiscations

Due Process Whigs

- Centered in Middletown and Shrewsbury townships
- Mostly Dutch and Anglican
- Defining Issues
 - “Security” for shore
 - Legal Protections
- Due Process Actions:
 - Advertising and boycotting their foes
 - *Holmes v. Walton*
 - Local prisoner exchanges
 - Maintaining the State Troops

Example: Hendrick Smock

- Pre-war leader
- Plundered during Loyalist insurrection (Dec. 1776) and by British (June 1778)
- Captain, militia
- Delegate, NJ Assembly
- Captured, 1780
- Paroled home on condition of presenting Loyalist grievances
- Retires from service, but still holds civil offices

Raucous Local Government

- No local civil government in 1777
 - Many officials disqualified: took British Oaths during insurrection
 - Conflicting Commissions
 - No courts: June 1776-June 1778
 - Col. David Forman claims “martial law” powers
- Disaffected officeholders in shore township throughout war
 - Officials arrested for illegal trading while in office
 - Corresponding with Assoc. Loyalists while in office
- Coercion and Scandal at Annual Elections, i.e.,
 - 1777: armed men coerce voters – Legislature annuls results
 - 1780: incumbent assemblyman beaten for protesting poll closure
 - 1785: election-day coercion – Legislature annuls results
- Rigged Loyalist estate auctions, 1779
- Unchecked activities of the Association for Retaliation, 1780-2
(this list is a representative sample: not exhaustive)

Post-War Re-Alignment

- By late 1780s a new order: triumph of the Due Process Whigs
 - Disaffected meld into Due Process Whigs
 - More strident Machiavellian Whig leaders head west
 - Machiavellians last stand: 1785 elections annulled
- What changed....
 - Reformed Courts: three tiers, expanded pool of jurors
 - Elections stabilize
 - Pre-war gentry out of power, or sharing power
 - Expanded electorate and leaders from nearly all classes
 - Rallying issue: oppose return of Loyalists (1783, 1787)

Concluding Thoughts

- In Monmouth County , the American Revolution was fairly “revolutionary”
 - High turnover of pre-war leaders
 - Greatly expanded electorate and roster of leaders
 - Raucous, scandalous, faction-driven local politics
 - Politics and leadership in 1785 was very different from politics and leadership in 1775
- Monmouth County’s experience may be more suggestive of the military frontier than the safer locales studied by Gross, Lee, etc.

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