The World Turned Upside Down: New York in the Revolution

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When we research New York during the American Revolution, we generally turn to its military events: the Battle of Long Island, the British occupation of New York City, and the evacuation of British troops in November 1783.

Much attention is naturally focused on the Patriot and Loyalist veterans who lived, fought, and died in New York. Another group often overlooked is the civilian population. This lecture will discuss the military side, as well as the stories of those not in uniform and not on the front lines.

British Occupation of New York City

- General George Washington withdrew his troops in August 1776 following the loss at the Battle of Long Island.
- The strategic port of New York was under British control from summer of 1776 through 1783.

Great Fire of September 20, 1776

- Three days after the British occupation of New York City, a fire broke out in the Fighting Cocks Tavern.
- The city's firemen were not present.
- A third of the city was burned, and nearly 500 houses and other structures, including Trinity Church, were destroyed.
- Arson was suspected. More than 200 suspects were interrogated, but no charges were filed.

British Evacuation

- In mid-August 1783, Sir Guy Carleton, British army and naval commander, received orders from London for the evacuation.
- More than 29,000 Loyalist refugees were evacuated from the city.
- The British evacuated over 3,000 Black Loyalists, who were formerly enslaved persons, to Nova Scotia, East Florida, the Caribbean, and London.
- George Washington and the Continental Army triumphantly entered New York on November 25, 1783.

People of the Revolution

- Women of New York during the war
- African Americans during the war
  New York Slavery Records Index: https://nyslavery.commons.gc.cuny.edu/
- Native Americans during the war

Researching the People of Revolutionary-Era New York

NEWSPAPERS

- British-occupied New York City allowed Loyalist publications.
- Patriot newspapers continued to circulate in areas controlled by the Patriot cause.
- Newspapers strongly influenced public opinion and political positions, and criticized the other side.
- Newspapers also carried notices of commercial transactions, employment, property sales, and community affairs.

You can search ***Early American Newspapers***, an American Ancestors partner database, for New York newspapers of the 18th century: https://www.americanancestors.org/browse-database

DIARIES AND LETTERS

The New York State Library in Albany offers many resources for researching the Revolution. The State Library also offers a digital version of Stefan Bielinski, ed., *A Guide to the Revolutionary War Manuscripts in the New York State Library* https://nysl.nysed.gov/scandocs/revolution

The New York Public Library provides resources for students and educators about the Revolutionary War. Their series *Life During the American Revolution: Resources for Students and Educators* can be accessed online: https://libguides.nypl.org/americanrevolutionresources/primarysources

Resources on the local level

- Published local histories of individual towns and counties.
- Archives at local historical societies for manuscripts not digitized or cataloged.
- Contacting the local town historian. In New York State, the town historian is a paid position.

For an alternative to federal census and city directories, the database *Inhabitants of New York, 1774-1776* is useful for locating Revolutionary War–era inhabitants of New York: https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/49200

18th-Century Primary Sources for New York

Very few vital records were recorded at the county level during the 18th century. Alternative records include:

- Church Records
- Probate Records
- Land Deeds
- Almshouse Records
- Coroner Records
- Newspapers

New York Loyalists

The Forfeiture Act of 1779 was passed in New York on October 22, 1779, as part of New York's policy of punishing those who "adhered to the enemies of this state" during the Revolutionary War.

- Targeted individuals: Known Loyalists who supported the British cause.
- Property seizure: All real and personal property of the Loyalists named in the act.
- Banishment: Specific individuals were listed for banishment from New York.
- Sale of property: Forfeited estates were to be sold, and proceeds returned to the State of New York.

To access a digital copy of the printed Forfeiture Act online:
https://digitalcollections.archives.nysed.gov/index.php/Detail/objects/41931#

WEBSITES

- U.K., American Loyalist Claims, 1776–1835 https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/3712
- New York Public Library – Confiscation Act List
  https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/554d98e0-cc5f-0133-9fc2-00505686a51c?canvasIndex=13
- Alexander Clarence Flick, *Loyalism in New York during the American Revolution*
  https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/catalog/koha:107577
- United Empire Loyalist Association of Canada https://uelac.org/
- New York, U.S., Sales of Loyalist Land, 1762-1830 https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/5368

New York Revolutionary War Patriots

Determine if your ancestor fought

- How old was your Revolutionary War veteran during:
- King George's War (1740–1748)
- French and Indian War (1754–1763)

Battles in New York

- Capture of Fort Ticonderoga, May 10, 1775 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Capture_of_Fort_Ticonderoga
- Battle of Long Island, 1776 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Long_Island
- Battle of Harlem Heights, September 16, 1776 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Harlem_Heights
- Battle of Fort Washington, November 16, 1776 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Fort_Washington
- Battle of Oriskany, August 6, 1777 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Oriskany
- Saratoga Campaign, June 14 – October 17, 1777 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saratoga_campaign

Does your Soldier's age fit?

- Ages are not listed very often, and town given; Use the "FAN" approach.
- Typical soldier age range: 18–35
- Average birth year: 1735–1760
- Extremes: early 1700s and late 1760s

Oral Family Traditions

- 1775 to 2026
- Lost in translation
- Preserving stories
- Confirming stories with primary sources
- Hero or Deserter?
- Proving or disproving Grandma

Cemetery Clues and Pitfalls

- Cemetery and burial records
- Transcribed gravestones
- Where is his spouse buried?
- Is there a flag marker, and is it on the right grave?

Useful Resources

- Muster rolls
- Quartermaster rolls
- Published genealogies
- Officer correspondence
- Town histories
- Pension files
- Journals and diaries
- 1840 Census
- Maps

New York State Library Fire of 1911

Many New York resources, including muster rolls, were destroyed in the March 29, 1911, State Capitol fire in Albany, New York. Approximately 450,000 to 500,000 books, 270,000 manuscripts, and 300,000 pamphlets from the State Library were lost, including colonial New Netherland Dutch records and Governor DeWitt Clinton's papers.

Published resources that captured the muster rolls are all that survive for many regiments. Continental line troop records are available from Fold3.com and from the Citizen Archivist Dashboard of the National Archives: https://www.archives.gov/citizen-archivist/missions/revolutionary-war-pension-files

Papers of the War Department, 1784–1800

- On November 8, 1800, there was a fire at the War Department.
- Revolutionary War pension applications and bounty land application files were destroyed.
- A project was started to rebuild the War Department Papers, led by Ted Crackel. The project team visited more than 200 repositories and collected and scanned about 42,000 documents.

Learn more about this project and what has been recovered: https://wardepartmentpapers.org/guides/

Pensions

A collection of early New York pensions granted by the state can be searched in the U.S., Pension Claims by Disabled War Veterans, 1779–1789 database: https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/9730

FEDERAL PENSION TIMELINE

1776: Half pay for officers and men who were disabled in service and incapable of earning a living.

1780: Half pay for seven years to widows and orphans of officers.

1806: Pensions were allowed to veterans of State troops and militia for the first time.

1818: Pensions for life based on a service period of nine months or until the end of the war.

1820: Certified inventories of pensioners' estates and income were required.

1832: Pensions were granted to those with service of less than six months.

1838: Widows were authorized pensions for five years if they had married the veteran before 1794.

1848: Widows were authorized pensions for life if they had married the veteran before 1800.

1853: All widow restrictions were eliminated.

1869: Daniel F. Bakeman, the last pensioner, dies.

1878: Widows were authorized pensions for life if the veteran had served only two weeks.

1906: Esther (Sumner) Damon, the last widow to collect a pension, dies in Vermont.

DISSECTING PENSION FILES: GOING BEYOND ABSTRACTS

U.S. Revolutionary War Pensions, 1800–1900, are available on the subscription website Fold3: https://www.fold3.com/publication/467/us-revolutionary-war-pensions-1800-1900

The National Archives offers free access to Revolutionary War pension files and some compiled military service records online: https://www.archives.gov/citizen-archivist/missions/revolutionary-war-pension-files

The Final Payment Voucher Index for Military Pensions, 1818–1864, is available from Fold3: https://www.fold3.com/publication/654/us-final-payment-vouchers-index-for-military-pensions-1818-1864. The original records for New York have not been digitized.

Tip: Consider Adopting the Regiment or the Crew

Seek or Apply to Hereditary Societies

- Look for online access to applications or lineage that confirms a connection to a veteran ancestor.
- Confirm with relatives whether someone has already joined a group such as the DAR or the SAR.
- Inquire about membership after confirming a match.

REVOLUTIONARY WAR–RELATED HEREDITARY SOCIETIES

- National Society of the Sons of the American Revolution - https://www.sar.org/
- National Society Daughters of the American Revolution - https://www.dar.org/
- National Society Children of the American Revolution - https://www.nscar.org/
- General Society of the Sons of the Revolution - https://sr1776.org/
- Society of the Cincinnati - https://www.societyofthecincinnati.org/
- Daughters of the Cincinnati - https://daughters1894.org/
- The Order of Founders and Patriots - https://ofpa.org/

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