

## LADY JOHNSON'S ESCAPE FROM THE REBELS

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A poem about the United Empire Loyalists written by William Kirby in 1894 contains the following lines:

*They left their native soil, with sword belts drawn  
The tighter; while the women only wept  
At thoughts of old firesides no longer theirs.*

Studies of the American Revolution and the experience of those who were on the losing side demonstrate clearly just how far from the truth Kirby's idea of Loyalist women actually was. Certainly they had just cause to weep, but little or no time for such luxuries as self-pity and tears.

The experience of Lady Mary Watts Johnson, wife of Sir John Johnson, provides a good example. The blow fell on 19 May 1776. A messenger arrived at the door of Johnson Hall with a letter from Sir John's friend, Daniel Campbell, of Schenectady. "I have just received word," Campbell had written, "that a detachment left Albany this morning and are now just east of this place. Their precise orders could not be learned but they march for Johnstown." There was no doubt in Sir John's mind as to what the orders were, and he realized he had very little time.

Lady Johnson wasted no time weeping about the sad turn of events or begging her husband not to leave her in the clutches of the enemy. She helped while Sir John buried the silver and the family papers in the basement, gathered up some necessaries to carry with him, and summoned the 170 friends and tenants who were to go with him. She said goodbye to her husband as he left to take a little known route through the Adirondacks, not knowing if he would ever arrive at his planned destination or what on earth would ever happen to her and her two little children, Mary, less than two years old and William, less than one. And to make matters worse, she was pregnant again. What would she do? Where could she go?

She had little time to think about her future, for soon General Schuyler's officers were pounding at her door. Sir John was not at home, she told them. He and some men were on their way to Niagara, she said, hoping to give her husband a little more time. She no doubt succeeded, for very few of the colonists knew of the existence of the route he had actually taken. And it was only a few days until Schuyler's officers were back again, this time for Lady Johnson. She was arrested and taken to Albany. At least she wasn't put in irons and, being seven months pregnant, was allowed to travel in her own carriage with her sister, Margaret, and her two little children. In Albany she was allowed to live with an elderly aunt, at whose home she gave birth on 7 October 1776 to her third child, a son whom she named John.

Lady Johnson was not at all happy with her situation and resolved to make some change. The problem had nothing to do with her aunt; it was Albany, which was not home. She was barely settled in her aunt's house when she took up her pen and wrote to the Albany Committee of Correspondence asking permission to go to New York to live. The Committee replied by

referring her to the Provincial Committee at Fishkill, which granted her permission to move to Fishkill. In Fishkill she was permitted to live at the home of Cadwallader Colden, former governor of the province, a friend of both the Johnson and the Watts families. Life was good here, but Fishkill was not New York, and staying with friends was not like living with your parents in a luxurious mansion. Lady Johnson was determined to go to New York even though her petition was rejected - as the contemporary historian Thomas Jones, who never let objectivity spoil a good story, wrote - "in a manner infamous, scornful, and brutish." She realized she must make other plans.

Polly Watts Johnson was possessed of a courage and determination which the gentlemen in the Rebel Congress had not anticipated. No sooner had she received their message of refusal than she began to lay plans for her escape. One winter's day, disguised and aided by Loyalist friends and a good team of horses, she and her party made it to Paulus Hook across the river from Manhattan. Sir John was waiting for her on the other side, and the story has it that after leaping across the numerous cracks in the ice, exhausted, she handed the infant to his father, who, looking at his son for the first time, realized that the baby was dead, that the exposure to the cold and excitement had been too much for him. So much for melodrama; the baby was certainly not dead. The records show that little John Johnson died in Montreal on 14 September 1778 less than a month before his second birthday. The Johnson family spent the winter in New York, no doubt with Polly's mother and father, They arrived in Quebec on board the *Nottingham* on 27 May 1777 and left immediately for Montreal, which became their home.