My Calamitous Situation:

The Life of Polly Jarvis Dibblee

by Stephen Davidson

Polly Jarvis Dibblee was a United Empire Loyalist who experienced first hand the persecutions, hopes, and disappointments of New Brunswick's original refugee settlers. What makes her story unique is that even at a distance of two centuries we can still hear her voice.

Just four years after her arrival in the new colony, Polly penned a letter filled with frustration and despair to her brother William Jarvis in England.

Kingston, New Brunswick
November 17, 1787

Dear Billy....

O gracious God, that I should live to see such times under the protection of a British Government for whose sake we have done and suffered everything but that of dying --- May you never experience such heart piercing troubles as I have and still labor under -- you may depend on it that the sufferings of the poor Loyalists are beyond all possible description....

... I dare not let my friends at Stamford know of my calamitous situation lest it should bring down the grey hairs of my mother to the grave; and besides they could not relieve me without distressing themselves should I apply - - as they have been ruined by the rebels during the war -- therefore I have no other ground to hope, but, on your goodness and bounty --

your affectionate sister,

Polly Dibblee

This is the story of Polly Jarvis Dibblee; a "calamitous situation" that many women of her generation shared. Few, however, have had their stories brought to the light of day in such rich detail.

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Polly was born in Stamford, Connecticut in 1747. Located near Long Island Sound, Polly's hometown was noted for agriculture, fishing, and trade by sea. At sixteen years of age Polly married a young lawyer named Fyler Dibblee. Her husband was a university graduate, led the town's militia company and had served as Stamford's representative to the Connecticut general assembly. Within ten years, the Dibblee couple would have five children, Walter, William, Peggy, Ralph, and Sally. Their house, which had its own library, was valued at over £500. No doubt Polly felt that her situation was the envy of all her friends.

Life could easily have been a happy whirl of parish activities and socials for Polly had it not been for the political unrest that was sweeping through the Thirteen Colonies. British retaliation was quick after the Congressional Congress made its Declaration of Independence. The king's troops took control of New York City in August, and by the end of September they occupied all of Long Island. Suddenly,

Stamford, Connecticut was on the frontier that separated patriot and British forces. It was no longer a safe place for a loyalist lawyer and his family to live.

In December of 1776 Fyler had to flee to Long Island to escape a violent patriot mob. Polly and her children were evicted from their fine home, joining Fyler on Long Island later in the spring. However, marauding rebels attacked the Dibblees, stealing everything they owned. Hats were snatched from the children's heads, shoes from their feet. Almost naked, the Dibblees were sent to New York City under a flag of truce.

Polly and Fyler eventually returned to Long Island, settling among other loyalists at Oyster Bay. Polly must have felt that their five children, ranging from thirteen to three years of age, were now finally at a safe distance from any further rebel attacks. Oyster Bay was, after all, near the largest of all of Long Island's British garrisons, Fort Franklin. But that only made it an irresistible target for rebel raids.

In April of 1778 Polly watched in horror as Connecticut patriots invaded their home, dragging Fyler away. Six months later Polly's husband was set free in a prisoner exchange. The Dibblees then moved from Oyster Bay to West Hills, a seemingly safer location.

However, Polly's family was sought out and attacked by another group of raiders. The children were threatened with being "*put to the bayonet*" if they made any noise. Did the vandals stop to notice that Polly was pregnant with her sixth child? Left to perish in the cold with hardly any clothing, the Dibblees once again moved, this time to Hempstead South. In November, 1779 Polly gave birth to a son. Before his first birthday, little Ebenezer Dibblee and his family would yet again be robbed in a night attack.

After petitioning the British government for restitution, Fyler Dibblee was compensated for his losses and made a deputy agent in transporting loyalists from New York to Nova Scotia. In the months leading up to their departure, Polly and Fyler acquired two African servants, Tom Hyde and nine year old Sukey. They would be the only servants on the *Union*, the first ship of loyalists to arrive in modern day New Brunswick – and they were the first Black Loyalists to make the colony their home.

On Thursday, April 24, 1783, with 62 men, 39 women, and 108 children aboard her, the *Union* set off as the flag ship for a fleet of nineteen vessels. On May 11th, the Dibblees' ship was guided into the harbour of Parrtown, a settlement that would one day be known as Saint John.

With his duties as the *Union's* deputy agent now fulfilled, Fyler Dibblee prepared to settle in Parrtown. He was appointed a magistrate and served as an agent in the settling of the loyalist refugees. By October, Fyler wrote his father to say that his family was settled "*to their unspeakable satisfaction*".

However, over the winter, the calls for Fyler's services gradually diminished, forcing him to borrow a great sums of money from both a fellow *Union* passenger and Polly's brother, Munson Jarvis, who had also settled in Parrtown. How did Polly and her African servants run a household and feed six children in such conditions?

The gloom of that first winter in Parrtown lightened for at least a few days in early April. Walter, the Dibblees' oldest son, married the daughter of an Anglican clergyman. No doubt both Fyler and Polly were pleased to be connected to such a prestigious family.

However, the spring's brief excitement faded quickly for the Dibblees. Living in a crowded home and subsisting on a diet of potatoes were physical discomforts. Depression over Fyler's property losses in Connecticut and the limited chances for success in his new country were psychological strains.

On the evening of Thursday, May 6th, as his family sat down for their meal, Fyler took out his razor, drew the curtains, lay down on his bed, and ended his life. The Dibblees' winter of despair did to Fyler what rebel attacks, incarceration, and the loss of property over seven years had been unable to do -- utterly crush his will to live.

It was indeed a calamitous situation for Polly. Although she had brothers in the colony, the new widow knew they could not give her very much assistance. The burden of supporting five children was ultimately Polly's to bear. Regretfully, Fyler's widow dismissed her two African servants.

Polly couldn't sell their house and land. One of Fyler's creditors claimed the Dibblees' property to cover the lawyer's debts. Then a fire swept through Parrtown, burning the Dibblee home to the ground.

Fyler's suicide and the family's economic predicament had the potential to ruin daughter Peggy's plans to marry John Bedell. Would she still be considered a desirable a match for an ambitious young man? Fortunately, John Bedell was not deterred; he married Peggy later that year.

In July, Polly was given a grant of land which included Palmer Point near Kingston. The widow and her children settled there, building themselves a log cabin and hiring a native girl as a servant. Polly's younger brother, John Jarvis, and his wife had already settled in Kingston, as had her brother-in-law, Frederick Dibblee, so there was the comfort of having family nearby.

But the suffering of the Dibblees was not over. Polly's servant girl set their log cabin on fire, burning it to ashes. A second home was built, but by now the family had no furnishings whatsoever. When her brother visited Polly, he was shocked to find her in a "miserable habitation". The fire which was in the centre of the room had no chimney, and the cabin had only a dirt floor.

Polly became a grandmother at thirty-nine years of age when Peggy and John Bedell had their first born in 1786. The new family decided to move to Kingston sometime after the baby's birth.

Although the estate of Polly's father had been sold, Connecticut would not pay out the bequests to any of his loyalist children. Only his patriot children and their heirs received shares of the estate.

In addition to this slap in the face from the American legal system, Polly received no help whatsoever from Great Britain. Her brother Munson Jarvis had received £250 as compensation for the losses he suffered in the revolution. However, Polly, who had lost both home and husband, got nothing. Having had every one of the family's deeds and papers destroyed in the many fires they had survived since coming to New Brunswick, Polly had nothing but the testimonies of her children to verify her claims of loss.

All of the loyalist widow's frustration and grief finally burst out in the letter she wrote to her brother, William in late 1787. He had tried to help his sister when he learned that she was in "*low circumstances*", sending Polly a trunk from England filled with old clothes, brushes and other items. Miraculously, Polly's letter to William has survived to this day, revealing the despair of a woman who felt her life was one horrid "*calamitous situation"*.

While 1787 was the year of Polly's despair, the next year signalled a time of new beginnings for her entire extended family. One by one, they left Kingston to settle in the new settlement of Woodstock. Brother-in-law Frederick Dibblee was the first to take a trip up the St. John River in search of a site for a First Nations school. Later he would be ordained as Woodstock's first Anglican vicar in 1791.

John and Peggy Dibblee Bedell also bid farewell to Kingston in 1788. Within the year, Polly's son-in-law was Woodstock's commissioner of roads, overseer of the poor, and town clerk. A capable man, John Bedell went on to become a Justice of the Peace. Peggy's bachelor brothers, William and Ralph, also headed for Woodstock.

Polly's brother John remained in Kingston where brother Munson Jarvis had bought him a house with the sad realization that "*liquor has got to be his master*". At least Polly's son, Walter, seemed to be doing well; he and his wife had made nearby Maugerville their home.

Polly's life in Kingston had been one of indebtedness and poverty despite the best efforts of her brothers. Brother William lent her money so that she and her children could buy beef, flour, butter, tea and sugar instead existing on their steady diet of potatoes. "*Pour soul, she has suffered beyond the ability of human nature to bear. How she has lived to me is a mystery*" is how William summed up Polly's situation.

All of the choices before Polly were difficult ones: live with the family of an alcoholic brother in Kingston, stay with her son in Maugerville, become a burden to her brother in Saint John, move deeper into the wilderness of New Brunswick, or return to Connecticut.

By September 1788, Polly had come to a decision. She would go back to Connecticut to live with her mother. Ever since her arrival in New Brunswick, Polly's aching homesickness for her aged mother, her siblings, and her childhood friends had never left her. Polly was about to sail for Stamford, when she received a letter from her brother William in England that urged her to stay in New Brunswick.

Her younger brother feared that Polly's trip back to the United States would injure his efforts in seeking compensation from the British government for the losses his sister had suffered as a result of her

loyalty to the crown. There were stories abroad in England that a number of loyalists were returning to their homes once they received their compensation settlements from the crown. Reluctantly Polly stayed in New Brunswick

Then, early in the new year, a letter from William brought new hope. Her brother's appeals to the British government had been successful! Polly was to receive three hundred fifty pounds as compensation for all that she had lost during the revolution.

With brother Munson's assistance, Polly paid off her late husband's debts, and bought necessities "*wanted for current use*". With the balance of £186 and the income from her St. John River lands, Munson felt that Polly would "*make a tolerable life of it*." But would that life be lived in Connecticut or New Brunswick?

In the spring of 1789 Polly Dibblee sailed out of Saint John harbour on a ship bound for Stamford, Connecticut. Fyler's widow had not seen her hometown's familiar streets and houses in over a dozen years. After this visit, however, Polly would never again set foot in the United States of America.

Upon returning to New Brunswick Polly collected her family's few possessions and sailed up the St. John River with Sally and Ebenezer to live in Woodstock with her son, William. For the second time in her life, Polly faced the decision of where to live in North America, and for the second time she decided to stay with the king's loyal subjects.

At forty-one, Fyler Dibblee's widow determined to make the best of what life had given her. She became the mistress of her son William's home, and for the next thirty years she busied herself preparing their meals, tending their garden, and running their household.

In the years that followed, Ralph, Ebenezer and Sally Dibblee eventually married into the families of the Woodstock area. William Dibblee never found a wife, but over the next forty years he would serve in many of Woodstock's public offices, including the town clerk.

In 1799 Polly's twenty-nine year old son, Ralph, died, leaving a widow and two young sons to grieve. Family letters reveal that "*Sister Dibblee..is overwhelmed in trouble for the loss of her son... Brother John's wife writes she is greatly distressed*." A life of calamity had done nothing to diminish Polly's capacity to mourn.

By the 1820s the people of Woodstock regarded Polly Dibblee as a "well preserved old lady" who liked to sit and knit. With a spirit stronger than that of her late husband's, and in the company of family and friends, Polly was able to know happiness in her final years.

The last recorded memory of Polly Dibblee was put to paper by one of her great-grandsons. The frail widow took a moment to show five year old Charles Raymond how to roast an apple over an open fire. Polly suspended an apple from a string and twirled it over the flames so that it would bake equally on all sides. Little Charles grew up to become the father of Reverend W.O. Raymond, New Brunswick's earliest historian of the loyalist period.

In the early days of May, 1826, Polly died at the age of seventy-nine. A most amazing life had come to an end.

Polly had been witness to one of the greatest upheavals in North American history, surviving rebel attacks, separation from family, the loss of a husband, and the neglect of the British Empire. A "calamitous situation"? Yes, but it was a life that forced Polly Jarvis Dibblee to dig deep into reservoirs of faith and perseverance, securing for herself the courage to see life through to its end.

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The full text of Polly's 1787 letter to her brother William is given below:

Kingston, New Brunswick
Novbr 17.[17]87

Dear Billy
I have received your two Letters and the Trunk, and I feel the good Effects of the Clothes you sent me and my children, and I value them to be worth more than I should have valued a thousand Pounds sterling in the year 1774. Also, my Brother, that Providence should permit so many Evils to fall on me and my Fatherless Children---I know the sensibility of your Heart---therefore will not exaggerate in my story, lest I should contribute towards your Infelicity on my account---Since I wrote you, I have been twice burnt out, and left destitute of Food and Raiment; and in this dreary Country I know not where to find Relief--for Poverty has expelled Friendship and charity from the human Heart, and planted in its stead the Law of self-preservation---which scarcely can preserve alive the rustic Hero in this frozen Climate and barren wilderness---You say "that you have received accounts of the great sufferings of the Loyalists for want of Provisions, and I hope that you and your Children have not had the fate to live on Potatoes alone"--- I assure you, my dear Billy, that many have been the Days since my arrival in this inhospitable Country, that I should have thought myself and Family truly happy could we have "had Potatoes alone"---but his mighty Boon was denied us---I could have borned these Burdens of Loyalty with Fortitutde had not my poor children in doleful accents cried, Mama, why don't you help me and give me Bread? O gracious God, that I should live to see such times under the Protection of a British Government for whose sake we have Done and suffered every thing but that of Dying---May you never Experience such heart piercing troubles as I have and still labour under---you may Depend on it that the Sufferings of the poor Loyalists are beyond all possible Description---the old Egyptians who required Brick without giving straw were more Merciful than to turn the Israelites into a thick Wood to gain Subsistence from an uncultivated Wilderness--Nay, the British Government allowed to the first Inhabitants of Halifax, Provisions for Seven years, and have denied them to the Loyalists after two years--which proves to me that the British Rulers value Loyal Subjects less than the Refuse of the Gaols of England and America in former Days---Inhumane Treatment I suffered under the Power of American Mobs and Rebels for that Loyalty, which is now thought handsomely compensated for, by neglect and starvation---I dare not let my Friends at Stamford know of my Calamitous Situation lest it should bring down the grey Hairs of my Mother to the Grave; and besides they could not relieve me without distressing themselves should I apply---as they have been ruined by the Rebels during the War---therefore I have no other Ground to hope, but, on your Goodness and bounty---I wish every possible happiness may attend you, and your amiable Wife, and Child---and my children have sense enough to know they have an Uncle Billy, and beg he will always remember them as they deserve. I have only to add---that by your Brother Dibblee's Death---my Miseries were rendered Compleat in this World but as God is just and Merciful my prospects in a future World are substantial and pleasing---I will therefore endeavour to live on hopes till I hear again from you---I remain in possession of a graceful Heart,
Dear Billy
Your affectionate sister,
Polly Dibblee

~*~

Author:
A contributor to *The Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Stephen Davidson has been an elementary school teacher for 25 years. A book about his ancestors who came to New Brunswick with Polly Dibblee, titled *The Burdens of Loyalty: Refugee Tales from the First American Civil War is being published by Trinity Enterprises Ltd of Saint John, NB in the spring of 2007. .*

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