The American Vicars of Bray

Exploring New Areas of Research
for Loyalist Studies

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Loyalist research, the study of those Americans who openly supported King George and the British Government during the War of the Revolution, 1775-1783, has largely focused on the belief that allegiances were unchanging during the conflict; once a Loyalist, always a Loyalist. By the same logic, those supporters of Congress and the new United States were true to their allegiance throughout the war, perhaps with one famous major general as the notable exception.

The American Revolution was as much civil war as anything, but more complex than the conflict of 1861-1865. Not only were neighbors against neighbors, family against family, but it is becoming clearer that thousands of men served on both sides at one time or another, some more than once. This is not a new revelation. What is becoming more apparent however is the scope of the situation, as reflects geography, numbers and periods of time.

For this particular study, the Philadelphia Campaign of 1777-1778 was considered the most suitable for research. The primary reason for this conclusion being the availability of existing records for both the Continental Army and the Provincial Corps during this period, something not possible for earlier or later periods, at least on as wide a scope.

The key tantalizing piece of evidence in showing the extent of the disaffection in Washington’s Army that campaign comes from Joseph Galloway, a former delegate to the Continental Congress. Galloway had come over to the British in December 1776, later joining Sir William Howe on the Philadelphia expedition. Upon the capture of the city, Galloway was appointed by Howe as Superintendent of the Philadelphia Police. In this office he tendered oaths of allegiance to the inhabitants of the city, and all those seeking refuge within it. Galloway, assisted by Philadelphia Merchant & Loyalist Enoch Story, were engaged in “making out weekly returns of all recruits attested, with the names of deserters from the Rebel Army and Navy, as well as the Inhabitants who had taken the Oaths of allegiance…” While Galloway’s and Story’s book of named deserters has not been located, an abstract with some of its information does.

Two documents by Galloway, one showing a month by month breakdown of oaths of allegiance tendered and another showing the nativity of deserters arrived in Philadelphia, show the precarious situation Washington’s Army was in, while underscoring what might have been with a more active British commander in Philadelphia. Galloway was no fan of Sir William Howe, and would spend his later years in London penning newspaper pieces against the former British commander-in-chief. The first document shows deserters from the Continental Army on a month by month basis once the British entered Philadelphia on 26 September 1777:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>October 1777</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 1777</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 1777</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 1778</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
February 1778  132
March 1778    180
April 1778    106
May 1778      104
June (to the 17th)  28
  1289 Soldiers

This figure did not include an additional 61 wagoners, 391 sailors and 603 militiamen, plus 2003 inhabitants.²

Galloway’s second document breaks down the deserters by nationality, giving us an insight into the composition of Washington’s Army at this time. Of the 1134 Continental Army deserters who had registered with the British, there were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scottish</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish</td>
<td>492</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canadian</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
  1134 Soldiers

Nationalities for the 354 sailors that had registered were proportionally similar. Significantly, Galloway estimated that perhaps one-third more had come in and bypassed the registration process.³

So what was to be done with deserters? Deserters tended to be a doubly beneficial item: while decreasing the army they deserted from, they often enlisted in the army they deserted to. British official policy, as ordered by Sir William Howe on 3 July 1777, stated “The Provincial Troops (except Wemys’s Corps) are not to enlist Deserters from the Rebels.”⁴ The prohibition was not even casually enforced. Every Provincial unit raised, most from their inception, eagerly took in rebel deserters.

These deserters presented an interesting problem to those, then and now, who feel the need to label groups of people: what were these men considered, Rebels or Loyalists? The question was actually asked in 1779 by Lt. Col. John Graves Simcoe, the commanding officer of the Queen’s Rangers. Simcoe, since October 16th 1777, had under his command the colorful Captain John Ferdinand Dalziel Smyth, who during the six preceding weeks had attempted to raise an independent corps, the Royal Hunters. On that date however, his unit, the strength of two companies, was attached to the Queen’s Rangers and by Simcoe fully incorporated into them. Smyth, in 1779, had brought Simcoe up on a number of charges concerning this and other things. During his trial, Simcoe noted that Smyth’s Company “being in general Rebel Deserters and not Loyalists as he had been ordered to raise was one reason of his being sent to the Rangers— for they having a General Order in their favor to enlist Rebel Deserters, and all other Corps being excluded, had a right to any men of that description that Captain Smyth had enlisted.” The Q&A during the trial provides an excellent description of recruiting at Philadelphia during that time:

Q. You...had orders to enlist no men but of approved Loyalty and attachment to Government. Do rebel Deserters come under the denomination of approved Loyalists?
A. I had orders to enlist any men that I thought good; but to be particular careful they were so. I conceive a great number of men, who have deserted from the Rebels, have been Loyalists from the beginning, and forced into their Service, and who have deserted from them the first opportunity: Instances of which I have in my own Company.

Q. ...you say you proposed to raise men who were well acquainted with the roads throughout the Country. Do rebel Deserters come under that description?

A. I conceive they do.

Q. What do you mean by saying you refused many men as improper persons, that other Corps must enlist?

A. A great number of men came to me at Philadelphia when having examined them, I conceived some only wished to enlist for the sake of Provision, Cloathing or some other Sinister purpose: on which suspicion tho their appearance was ever so good, I did not enlist them.5

While few of the deserters left behind written records of their actions, one appears to somewhat confirm Captain Smyth's opinion. Gersham Hilyard, of Piscataway, entered the Philadelphia Campaign as a sergeant in Captain William Piatt’s Company of the 1st New Jersey Regiment. Muster rolls of that corps show he deserted sometime in October 1777.6 After the war, applying to Parliament for compensation for property losses, Hilyard related he joined the British “from Loyalty and Attachment to his King and Country.” After serving sometime in the secret service, Hilyard enlisted as a sergeant in Emmerick’s Chasseurs, in which he was later promoted to quartermaster.7 He remained with the British for the remainder of the war, and was in London in 1784.8

The deserters from Valley Forge and other places in that theater of operations is only a part of the story. One significant source of recruits not mentioned by Galloway, and conceivably unknown to him, was that of prisoners taken during the campaign. Battles such as Brandywine and Germantown yielded hundreds of prisoners for the British. The enlisting of them by the British for the Provincial Forces began in 1776, when hundreds of those taken prisoner at Quebec and Brooklyn joined the Royal Highland Emigrants.9 Although officially prohibited by Congress and Washington, the practice had actually been started by the Americans in the very first weeks of the war, when George McKay of the 26th Regiment immediately joined up after being taken prisoner at Crown Point on 11 May 1775.10

Richard Jesper was one such person enlisted out of the prison. At a later trial, he related the story of his capture, his enlistment in the Pennsylvania Loyalists, his desertion from them and subsequent apprehension:

…he was a Servant to a Colonel Antill of the Congress’s own Regt. and was taken prisoner at the Battle of Germantown, and put in the Provost Guard, where Captain [Thomas] Stephens found him; that upon Captain Stephens asking him what Countryman he was, and whether he would enlist, he reply’d that he would rather wait upon some Gentleman, & Captain Stephens said that he would enquire if any Gentleman wanted such a man, & that he afterwards took him out of Goal to wait upon himself, that Captain Stephens gave him small Sums of money at
different times, which he thought he had earned, as a Servant, &
not as a Soldier and never Signed any Pay Lists; that he had no
thoughts of going off till Smith persuaded him to attempt to go
home in some Ship, as there was a Slur lay upon his Character in
the Regt. but Smith being apprehended, he could find no
Opportunity of going off, & therefore went into the Jersies,
where he lived as a servant with a Colonel Ogden, in which
Capacity he was and not in Arms or Serving as a Soldier, when
he was taken by a Party of the Guards.¹¹

Jesper’s story does not bear scrutiny however. If he had been a servant of Lt. Col.
Edward Antill, he was not in that capacity at Germantown, as Antill had been taken prisoner six
weeks earlier during Sullivan’s raid on Staten Island.¹² The muster rolls of the Pennsylvania
Loyalists show Jesper enlisted 20 October 1777 as a soldier in the ranks, from which he deserted
on 7 February 1778.¹³ After his desertion from the Pennsylvania Loyalists, he eventually enlisted
in Captain John Flahaven’s Company of the 1st New Jersey Regiment, joining them on 24 May
1778, and being listed as taken prisoner the following month.¹⁴ The muster rolls of the
Pennsylvania Loyalists show he rejoined that corps on 27 June 1778, the day before the Battle of
Monmouth, and was found lodged in the provost wearing a blue coat faced red, the uniform of the
1st New Jersey. For the crime of desertion, the British found Jesper guilty and sentenced him to
receive 1,000 lashes on the bare back with a cat o’ nine tails. Whether he actually received all or
part of the punishment is not recorded, but whatever the reason, Jesper would go on to actually
become a useful soldier. He served with the Pennsylvania Loyalists throughout their tenure at
Pensacola, the capital of West Florida, where he was killed in action on 4 May 1781, during the
Spanish siege of the garrison.

The stories of Hilyard and Jesper raise the question of just how reliable or serviceable
were men who had at least once deserted their cause. Parliament had similar thoughts, when it
queried Joseph Galloway “What is the character that the Provincials serving in the British army
bear? Are they good troops, and have they behaved well when employed?” To which Galloway
replied “I have understood, as soon as they are disciplined, they are very good troops, and have
always behaved well; I know of no instance to the contrary. That I know to be the opinion of
many of the military gentlemen.”¹⁵ That being said, the deserter recruits ran the full spectrum of
poor to very good.

British Judge Advocate records provide several accounts of former deserters’ troubles
with their new army, none more serious than Edward Warren, a deserter from the 1st New York
Regiment who enlisted in the Roman Catholic Volunteers. After his corps was drafted in 1778,
Warren entered into the Volunteers of Ireland, from whom he deserted on 28 March 1779. He
was not seen again for several months, until brought back into New York City by HMS Rainbow,
which had taken him amongst the crew of a rebel privateer.¹⁶ Warren had the dubious distinction
of being the only Provincial executed at New York during the command of Sir Henry Clinton.¹⁷

Some of the deserters had their new careers in the British Army cut short, literally in the
case of John Crawford. Crawford deserted from the 2nd Connecticut Regiment on 10 June 1778
and enlisted as a sergeant in Emmerick’s Chasseurs 4 days later. In a severe action with Indians
in the Bronx on 31 August 1778, Crawford lost an arm, effectively ending his military career.¹⁸
He continued on as an invalid until the corps was drafted exactly a year later, soon after which he
was discharged from the army and sent to England in quest of a pension at the soldier’s hospital
of Chelsea.¹⁹
By contrast, some deserters not only maintained a new sense of loyalty to King George, but chose the British Army as their career. William Jackson, a soldier in the 2nd Pennsylvania Regiment, was taken prisoner 21 September 1777, at Major General Charles Grey’s victory at Paoli. Not choosing to remain a prisoner, he enlisted in the Queen’s Rangers, with whom he served the remainder of the war. At the termination of the conflict, apparently enjoying a soldier’s life, he enlisted in the British 3rd Regiment of Foot, serving until discharged because of wounds received at St. Vincent in 1798, almost 21 years to the day of his capture at Paoli.

For the purposes of Canadian History, it is relevant to note that some of these Continentals turned provincials would serve faithfully for the remainder of the war and would settle with their corps in the Maritime provinces. Almost every provincial regiment disbanded along the River Saint John or across the Bay of Fundy included Continental Army veterans from the Philadelphia Campaign. One interesting settler was Lieutenant John Bettle, a former officer of the West Jersey Volunteers. Before deserting to the British in January 1778, Bettle was a surveyor and commissary for Pennsylvania. He apparently made a detailed survey of Washington’s position at Valley Forge and headed straight to Philadelphia with it. Continental Congressman William Duer, upon learning of Bettle’s desertion, wrote George Washington that: “before he [Bettle] went in he told a Person confidentially that he could put the Enemy in a way of investing it in such a Manner as to cut off your Communication with the Country, and thereby prevent the Supply of Provisions &c.” For his daring, Bettle was rewarded with a lieutenant’s commission in the West Jersey Volunteers, with whom he served until that corps was drafted in the fall of 1778. Thereafter he put his surveying talents to use in the Guides & Pioneers. For six months in 1781 he was confined as a prisoner in Philadelphia, but somehow escaped being hanged for desertion. The war behind him, by 1786 Bettle was at Saint John, New Brunswick, petitioning the British for his half pay.

Representative of the many rank and file soldiers was James Dyer. Dyer was a soldier of the 2nd Pennsylvania, when he deserted them the day following the bloody defeat at Paoli. About three weeks later, Dyer enlisted out of prison into Captain John F.D. Smyth’s Royal Hunters, which corps was almost immediately absorbed into the Queen’s Rangers. The thirty year old Irishman served with the Rangers throughout the war, surrendering with his corps at Yorktown in 1781. As a deserter, he was able obtain passage to New York on board the Bonetta, where he remained on parole until the final exchange of prisoners in May 1783. After the disbanding of his corps on 10 October 1783, Dyer eventually settled on Regimental Block 5 at Queensbury, New Brunswick. He and his wife Margaret were living in Brighton Township, Carleton County in 1838, when he applied for a pension as an old soldier, being in “indigent circumstances.”

While research into the subject continues, an examination into the rolls of 29 Continentals regiments, and incomplete documents of some others, identifies some 2,078 deserters, prisoners and missing in action from the end of August 1777 until the end of June 1778, the time of the Philadelphia Campaign. By cross-referencing the names of those men, with the times of their desertion or capture, against corresponding enlistments in Provincial units, a fairly accurate picture can be drawn of the men who served both sides. Some common names preclude this process, or at least make it difficult, but even using a conservative approach, some 426 men were identified amongst the provincials raised at Philadelphia. To put this into perspective, it is necessary to know how many men the British raised there at that time. Sir William Howe later testified the number was just under a thousand, while Galloway estimated sixteen hundred. Neither figure is correct, as neither had access to the rolls kept in the muster master’s office. Shortly after the Battle of Brandywine, there were 543 provincials serving with Howe’s Army, divided amongst the Queen’s Rangers, 2nd Battalion, New Jersey Volunteers and Guides &
By the time of the Battle of Monmouth, there were 2,016 Provincials with Clinton’s force, not including detachments of recruits and baggage guards sent on ship to New York. Nor does it include the number of deaths, desertions, prisoners and discharges during that time, which amounted to several hundred men. An examination of the existing rolls identifies by name some 1,920 men, but is incomplete due to the absence of rolls for some units.

For those researching the possibility of their Loyalist ancestors having been in the service of the United States, a variety of resources are available. Courts Martial and prisoner lists often identify those who served with the enemy. Most valuable would be the muster and pay rolls of the Continental Army, held in the National Archives and Records Administration, or NARA. Unlike Provincial muster rolls, which were prepared every 61 days, the Continental Army made out two separate documents, a muster roll and a pay roll, every month. The rolls are somewhat similar to those of the Loyalists, listing a soldier’s date of enlistment, location at time of muster, and any casualties that may have occurred over the preceding month. Soldiers who deserted, were missing in action, or taken prisoner can often provide clues to later Provincial, and answer sometimes confusing question as to why someone from Maryland or Pennsylvania might be serving in a predominantly New York corps.

Another significant collection, also located at NARA, is the pension application files for veterans of the war. Starting in 1818, the United States Congress passed a series of laws providing pensions for veterans, and later widows of veterans, from the Revolution. These files are useful for what they say, imply, or do not say. An example would be the application of Daniel Gill, a soldier of Hartley’s Regiment, who stated “at the battle of Iron hill, I was taken a prisoner by the enemy and was held by them nine months and made my escape from the enemy at Charleston, South Carolina and after having thus escaped again entered into the service of the United States.” At face value, this appears to be a patriotic soldier who served his country, was captured in battle, then escaped from the enemy far from home. But the events described need to be examined for their historical accuracy, then checked against the Provincial Forces for possible references. In Gill’s case, it was not difficult. The Battle of Iron Hill, or Cooch’s Bridge, was fought in Delaware on 3 September 1777. If Gill was truthful and accurate in his statement, he would have effected his escape in South Carolina around June 1778. The problem with this of course was that there were no British in South Carolina in 1778, and prisoners were not removed out of their district. Gill’s tenure as a prisoner actually lasted no more than three months, when he enlisted in the Maryland Loyalists, commanded by Lt. Col. James Chalmers. Gill, promoted to corporal, sailed with his new corps for Pensacola, West Florida, stopping en route at Jamaica, where he deserted on 16 December 1778. Gill disappears but apparently returns to America, where at New York, on 29 July 1780, he enlisted in the 2nd Battalion, New Jersey Volunteers.

The part of Gill’s story that is true is that he left the British service in South Carolina. After joining the New Jersey Volunteers, Gill volunteered for service in the newly-formed light infantry company of the battalion, which company was then attached to the corps of Provincial Light Infantry. This unit, commanded by Lt. Col. John Watson Tadswell Watson, embarked for Virginia in early October 1780 as part of Major General Alexander Leslie’s expedition, staying there but a month or so before moving on by sea to South Carolina. After reaching South Carolina, the corps marched into the High Hills of Santee, where Gill indeed did desert on 27 January 1781. Whether or not he actually re-entered the service of the United States is anyone’s guess. There are many other similar cases found throughout this collection, particularly for those Continentals who surrendered in 1780 at Charleston and Camden and later served at Jamaica as part of the Duke of Cumberland’s Regiment or other similar corps.

By expanding the scope of research, a much more complete picture of the war’s participants may be soon at hand.

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2 “An account of the number of Persons who have taken the Oath of allegiance at Philadelphia from the 30th of September 1777 to the 17th June 1778…” George Germain Papers, Volume 7, item 46, University of Michigan, William L. Clements Library. (hereafter cited as CL.)

3 “An Account of the number of Deserted Soldiers, Gallymen &c from the Rebel Army and Fleet, who have come in to Philadelphia and taken the Oath of Allegiance, with a particular account of the places in which they were born. Philadelphia March 25th 1778.” Germain Papers, 7:31, CL.


6 Hilyard enlisted 15 December 1776 in 1st New Jersey. Muster Roll of Captain William Piatt’s Company, 1st New Jersey Regiment, 31 May 1777. Record Group M246, Revolutionary War Rolls, RG 93, Reel 57, Folder 18-1, National Archives and Records Administration. (hereafter cited as NARA.)

7 Enlistment attestation of Gersham Hilyard, 1st & 19th May 1778. Misc. Manuscripts No. 3616, New York State Library. See also muster roll of Captain Benjamin Ogden’s Troop of Emmerick’s Chasseurs, June 1778. RG 8, “C” Series, Volume 1891, Library and Archives Canada. (hereafter cited as LAC.)

8 Memorial of Gersham Hilyard to the Commissioners for American Claims, 24 March 1784. Audit Office 13/96/492, TNA.


10 Return of the Garrison of Ticonderoga, etc made prisoners, 10-11 May 1775. Thomas Gage Papers, American Series, Volume 129, CL.

11 Court Martial of Richard Jesper, Pennsylvania Loyalists, held at Brooklyn between 24 July and 1 August 1778. War Office 71/83/181-183, TNA.

12 “Return of Prisoners received from Staten Island into New York August 25, 1777.” Sir Henry Clinton Papers, Volume 23, item 19, CL.


14 Pay Lists of Captain Flahaven’s Company of the 1st New Jersey Regiment for May and June, 1778. Record Group M246, Revolutionary War Rolls, RG 93, Reel 56, Folder 10-2, NARA.


19 Discharge of John Crawford, New York, 24 October 1779. War Office 121/6/246, TNA.
20 Muster Roll of Captain Joseph Howell’s Company, 2nd Pennsylvania Regiment, for September 1777. Record Group M246, Revolutionary War Rolls, RG 93, Reel 80, Folder 9-1, NARA.
21 Discharge of William Jackson, London, 24 September 1798. War Office 121/33/340, TNA.
23 Bettle (also spelled Biddle or Bittle) was never put on the half pay list like other reduced officers, the British claiming he ‘having several times desired to resign.’ Memorial of John Biddle to Sir Henry Clinton, New York, 21 September 1780. Clinton Papers, 124:9, CL.
24 Memorial of John Bittle to the Commissioners for American Claims, Saint John, 20 Feb. 1786. Audit Office 13/25/45, TNA.
25 Muster Roll of Captain John Patterson’s Company, 2nd Pennsylvania Regiment, for October 1777. Record Group M246, Revolutionary War Rolls, RG 93, Reel 80, Folder 12-1, NARA.
26 Dyer enlisted in Smyth’s Company on 11 October 1777. This company was permanently made a part of the Queen’s Rangers five days later. Muster Roll of Captain John F.D. Smyth’s Company, Queen’s Rangers, Philadelphia, 30 November 1777. RG 8, “C” Series, Volume 1861, Page 4.
27 “Return of Settlers on Block No. 5 as Surveyed by Mr. Allan.” F-50, Folio 13, No. 5, Collections of the New Brunswick Museum.
29 Howe appears to have used a state of his army prepared on 24 March 1778 for his figure. Colonial Office, Class 5, Volume 95, folio 222, TNA.
30 Pension Application of Daniel Gill, 25 July 1820. Collection M-804, Pension and Bounty Land Application Files, No. S42745, Daniel Gill, Maryland, NARA.
31 His date of enlistment was either 29 November or 10 December 1777. “Muster Roll of Recruits in the First Battalion of Maryland Loyalists Commanded by Lieutenant Colonel James Chalmers Esqr. January 19th 1778.” RG 8, “C” Series, Volume 1904, Page 10, LAC.
32 Muster Roll of Captain Walter Dulaney’s Company, Maryland Loyalists, Pensacola, 22 February 1779. RG 8, “C” Series, Volume 1904, Page 42, LAC.
34 Major John André to Colonel Beverley Robinson et al, New York, 15 August 1780. Clinton Papers, Volume 275, Letter Book of John André, CL.
35 The Provincial Light Infantry was described by Sir Henry Clinton as “well officered & commanded.” Return of the corps commanded by Major General Leslie embarked for Virginia, 6 October 1780. Clinton Papers, 125:18, CL.
36 Muster Roll of Captain Norman McLeod’s Company, Provincial Light Infantry, High Hills of Santee, 23 February 1781. RG 8, “C” Series, Volume 1900, LAC.
37 Between the Duke of Cumberland’s Regiment, Jamaica Corps, and the Loyal American Rangers, some 1,200 or more Continental prisoners or deserters served from 1781-1783 at Jamaica or on the Spanish Main in Honduras and Nicaragua. Many settled in Nova Scotia after the war. See “Recruiting List of the Continental Prisoners of War, Taken at the Surrender of Charlestown, the 12th day of May 1780 and at Gates’s defeat by Cambden, the 16th day of August 1780 Now inlisted in His Majesty’s Service, since the 10th February 1781 For the West Indies, in His Royal Highness the Duke of Cumberland’s Regiment of Carolina Rangers; Commanded by the Right Honble Lord Charles Montagu. The within named Soldiers have been inlisted by me, William Löwe Captain in said Corps.” State Papers, Class 41, Volume 29, TNA.