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Some Observations on the Loyalist Experience: 1770-1780

Susan Abadessa

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COMMON SENSE;

ADDRESSED TO THE

I N H A B I T A N T S

O F

A M E R I C A,

On the following interesting

S U B J E C T S.

I. Of the Origin and Design of Government in general, with concise Remarks on the English Constitution.

II. Of Monarchy and Hereditary Succession.

III. Thoughts on the present State of American Affairs.

IV. Of the present Ability of America, with some miscellaneous Reflections.

A NEW EDITION, with several Additions in the Body of the Work. To which is added an APPENDIX; together with an Address to the People called QUAKERS.

N. B. The New Addition here given increases the Work upwards of One-Third.

*Man knows no Master save creating Heaven,
Or those whom Choice and common Good ordain.*

THOMSON.

PHILADELPHIA, PRINTED;

LONDON, RE-PRINTED,

For J. ALLEN, opposite Burlington-House in Piccadilly. 1776.

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THE COURIER

BICENTENNIAL ISSUE

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*Some Observations on the
Loyalist Experience:
1770-1780*

by Susan Abadessa

Two hundred years after the American Revolution, the conflict is still being represented for the most part as a war between the people of the united colonies and the government of England. The Colonists who were slow to join the revolutionary cause are still regarded by many as traitors. Whether principle or personal gain led so many to remain loyal to England makes no more difference today than it did then. The English patriots among the colonists paid a hard price for their loyalty to the wrong side.

A collection of diaries and letters of the period has been given to the Syracuse University Libraries by Dr. and Mrs. Lyman J. Spire. Many of them, written by American Loyalists, describe their feelings about the revolution and their treatment at the hands of the American revolutionaries. As the conflict began, there were those who dared to raise their voices against the political fervor for independence. For their opinions and actions some, like Judge John Chandler of Worcester, Massachusetts, were deprived of their native land, their family life, their official prominence, the use of their fortunes, and the tranquility of their old age.¹

Many historians have searched for socio-economic, religious, and political reasons to explain why some men became or remained loyal to King George. In general it is agreed that the Loyalists or Tories were comprised of the following groups: royal officials; landed proprietors; the wealthy commercial classes; the professional classes; colonial politicians; conservative farmers; and members of cultural minorities. In July, 1783, the British Parliament developed its own definition of a Loyalist so that there was a uniform procedure for deciding who should receive pension allotments.²

Ms. Abadessa is a recent graduate of the School of Information Studies, Syracuse University. This piece was written especially for *The Courier*.

¹Chandler Bullock, *The Loyalist Side of the American Revolution, as Seen by a Worcester Loyalist, Judge John Chandler* (Worcester, Massachusetts: Worcester Fire Society, 1925) [p. 2]

²Claude Halstead Van Tyne, *The Loyalists in the American Revolution* (New York: Peter Smith, 1929) p. 301.

In their attempts to treat the Loyalists as a group, both American historians and the patriots of the time failed to remember that the Loyalists were not traitors, but were people who, until the time of the Revolution, were respected and loved friends, neighbors, and compatriots.

By a then currently popular (patriotic) definition: "A Tory is a thing whose head is in England and its body in America and its neck ought to be stretched."³ Despite the underlying threat of such a definition, more people were felt to be Loyalists than is generally realized. The Loyalist Reverend Jonathan Boucher, Rector of Annapolis, wrote in his autobiography:

. . .and it is a certain fact, of the truth, which I at least am thoroughly convinced that nine out of ten of the people of America, properly so called, were adverse to the revolt. But how shall a historian prove so extraordinary a fact, or expect to gain credit if he should prove it?⁴

John Adams also had something to say on the subject:

New York and Pennsylvania were so nearly divided—if indeed their propensity was not against independence—that if New England on the one side and Virginia on the other had not kept them in awe, they would have joined the British.⁵

This statement can be substantiated by the fact that the New York Assembly under the influence of the Loyalists refused to send a delegation to the Second Continental Congress.

Despite the large numbers of Loyalists, they never commanded a broad base of support and thus were subject to much harassment by the patriots. Peter Oliver, the Chief Justice for the Supreme Court of Massachusetts and a Loyalist, remarked:

The foundations of Government were subverted and every Loyalist was obliged to submit or to be swept away by the Torrent. Protection was not afforded to them; this rendered their situation most disagreeable. Some indeed dared to say that their Souls were their own but no one could call his Body his own; for that was at the mercy of the Mob. . . .⁶

³*Ibid.*, p. 192.

⁴Jonathan Boucher, *Reminiscences of an American Loyalist, 1738-89, Being an Autobiography of the Revd. Jonathan Boucher, Rector of Annapolis in Maryland and Afterwards Vicar of Epsom, Surrey, England* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1925) p. 121.

⁵John Adams, *Works*, Vol. X, p. 63 quoted in Van Tyne, *The Loyalists*, p. 101-102.

⁶Peter Oliver, *Origin & Progress of the American Rebellion: A Tory View* (San Marino, California: Huntington Library, 1961) p. 97.

Anne Hulton, sister to Henry Hulton, one of the British commissioners of customs at Boston, noted after the Boston Tea Party:

Those who are well disposed toward Government (more from interest than principle it's to be feared as there are few willing to acknowledge the Authority of Parliament) are termed Tories, they daily increase and have made some efforts to take the power out of the Patriots but they are intimidated and overpowered by Numbers, and the Arts, and Machinations of the Leader.⁷

An example of just what the mob was likely to inflict on a Loyalist can be seen from this passage of Frank Moore's, *Diary of the American Revolution*, volume one, page 26:

Dr. Clarke was seized and carried upon a rail about the parish under which cruelty he several times fainted. When dismissed by his tormentors and examined by Dr. Tidmarsh he was found to be injured in a manner unfit for description.⁸

While mob violence existed in many places, the Sons of Liberty, or the Sons of Licentiousness as they were sometimes called, and the violence they precipitated became particularly odious in Loyalists' eyes. When social or political pressure was insufficient to persuade a Loyalist of the error of his ways, he was often visited by the Sons of Liberty. Anne Hulton's observations are taken from a series of letters written to Mrs. Adam Lightbody, wife of a merchant in Liverpool, England, during Miss Hulton's stay in America. From one such letter one gets this account:

. . . mobs. . . act from principle and under countenance no person daring or willing to suppress their outrages or to punish the most notorious offenses for any crimes whatever, These Sons of Violence after attacking Houses, breaking Windows, beating, Stoning, and bruising several Gentlemen belonging to the Customs, [using] the Collector mortally and burning his boat. . . This is a specimen of the Sons of Liberty. . .⁹

Furthermore:

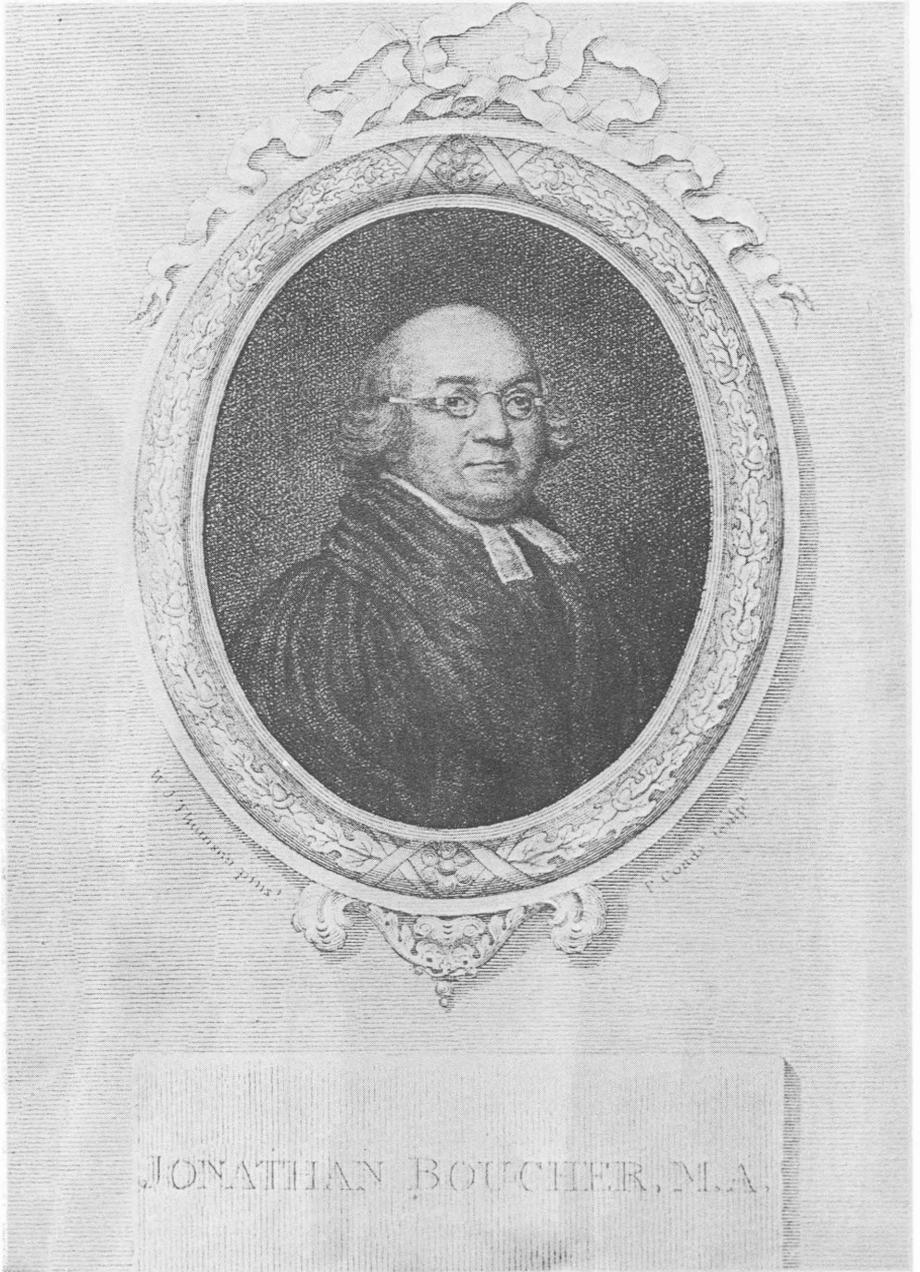
. . . the attacks were always in the dark, several hundred against one man and there's great Reason to believe that the lives of some in particular were aimed at.¹⁰

⁷Ann Hulton, *Letters of a Loyalist Lady, Being the Letters of Ann Hulton, Sister of Henry Hulton, Commissioner of Customs at Boston, 1767-1776* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927) p. 74.

⁸Quoted in James Talman, *Loyalist Narratives from Upper Canada* (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1946) p. xxxii-xxxiii.

⁹Hulton, *Letters*, p. 11-12.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 13.



JONATHAN BOUCHER
Frontispiece from his *Reminiscences of an American Loyalist*,
1738-1789. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1925.

Some men chose to meet violence in their own manner, one of these was Jonathan Boucher, the Rector of Annapolis quoted above:

And for more than six months I preached, when I did preach, with a pair of loaded pistols lying on the cushion; having given notice that if any man or body of men, could possibly be so lost to all sense of decency and propriety as to attempt really to do what had been long threatened, that is to drag me out of my pulpit, I should think myself justified before God and men in repelling violence by violence.¹¹

Another common practice to which the Loyalists were exposed was tarring and feathering. Peter Oliver tells us that this invention was conceived in March of 1770:

The town of Salem, about twenty miles from Boston hath the Honor of this Invention as well as that of Witchcraft in the Year 1692 when many innocent Persons suffered death by Judicial process¹²

.....
In the year 1772 they continued their laudable custom of Tar and Feathers, even the fair Sex threw off their Delicacy, and adopted this new Fashion. . .one of those Ladys of Fashion was so complaisant, as to throw her Pillows out of the Window; as the Mob passed by with their Criminal, in order to help forward the Diversion.¹³

Many of the Loyalists condemned the Stamp Act and other British measures as heartily as the Whigs, but failed to see the need to break completely with Great Britain. After all Great Britain was the:

. . .Parent who protected them (upon their most earnest Entreaties and humble Solicitations) against the Ravages of their Enemies, Great Britain (the parent state) had given her (America) millions in Bounties, to encourage the Growth and Produce of her Plantations,¹⁴

.....
The Issue hath been that a fine Country, like the Land of Canaan, flowing with Milk and Honey, is turned into a dreary Wilderness enstamped withe the Vestiges of War, Famine, &. Pestilence.¹⁵

¹¹Boucher, *Reminiscences*, p. 113.

¹²Oliver, *Origin & Progress*, p. 94.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 97.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 145.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 149.

Some felt as did Ann Hulton that the general population was being duped by the press and the clergy:

The poison of disaffection has been infused and spread by inflammatory writers over the Continent. . .The credulity of the common people here is imposed on by a number of Lies to irritate and inflame them¹⁶. . . .

Ministers are very flaming Preachers, that is they take occasion to inflame the People, both by their Sermons and Prayers against Government and all belonging to it. . . .¹⁷

The Minister from the Pulpit and the Committee of Corruption by writing inflame the Minds of the ignorant Country People.¹⁸

The Loyalists were in general agreement that all natural laws of decency and control had broken down. They also tended to see their former friends and neighbors in terms of stereotypes. Their fellow patriots were an: “incensed soldiery, a people licentious and enthusiastic. . .mad and broken loose from all restraints of law or religion.”¹⁹ Ann Hulton felt that only her fellow Loyalists had kept any sense of proportion:

. . .most of the better sort of People that we’ve conversed with seem sensible of the great want of a reform, or alteration in the Constitution of Government here, for certainly the Tyranny of the Multitude is the most Arbitrary & oppressive; there’s no justice to be obtained in any case, & many Persons awed by the people, are obliged to court Popularity for their own Security, this is only to be done by opposing Government at home. If the People took a dislike to any One they would make nothing of pulling down their houses. . . .²⁰

It was, perhaps, the role of the clergy in condoning and encouraging the revolution that most bothered the Loyalists:

¹⁶Hulton, *Letters*, p. 13.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 74.

¹⁹Samuel Curwen, *Journal and Letters of the Late Samuel Curwen, Judge of Admiralty*, etc. (New York: C. S. Francis, 1842) p. 4.

²⁰Hulton, *Letters*, p. 16.

Sir 757

John Williams

The Dearest M^r Vredenberg

has always been a Loyalist

He has lately come in and

has reported himself. I have

advised him to take out his

Pardon in form as he had

considerable property here -

I am Sir

Yours Hum^l Obed^t

June 8th 1781.

David Matthews

Mayor of New York

Mayor

M^r Simpson

CERTIFICATE OF LOYALTY TO KING GEORGE III

Signed by David Matthews, Mayor of New York, for John W. Vredenberg, June 8, 1781. Ms. in Spire Collection, George Arents Research Library for Special Collections, Syracuse University

Those people who hear and read any out of the great number of Puritan sermons that were printed as well as preached will cease to wonder that so many people were worked into such a frenzy. . . .²¹

.....
One of those Preachers, with the Reputation of Learning preaching upon the sixth Commandment to his large Parish declared to them that it was no sin to kill the Tories.²²

With the inception of hostilities and the ultimate declaration of war the Loyalists were now in the untenable position of being treasonous, and popular sentiment became even more enraged by their existence: “No Tory dared to offer his neighbor a drink of tea unless he was absolutely sure of the neighbor’s political sentiment.”²³ Even General Washington, although concerned with more weighty problems, had occasion to remark on the Loyalists:

“One or two have done,” commented Washington, “what a great number ought to have done long ago, committed suicide.” With little commiseration, he added. “By all accounts there never existed a more miserable set of beings, than those wretched creatures are now.”²⁴

The threat of the Loyalists was handled differently by the respective colonial communities. In many places Loyalists fled to areas of known Loyalist sympathy where they were later contained by the patriots, as was done in Queens County, New York. Some Loyalists were confined to their yards and homes. In some instances Loyalists were relocated by the militia and regular army. New York and New Jersey sent many “dangerous” Loyalists to Connecticut. By 1778 test laws were established to ensure a pledge of loyalty to the new American government and its laws. Failure to comply could result in imprisonment, confiscation of property and banishment, with the added threat of death if one dared to return.

To avoid some of this treatment many Loyalists fled to England. Jonathan Boucher became an exile: “[It was] . . . still plain that to stay would too probably be equally fatal to my property, and my life and undoubtedly to my peace.”²⁵ Samuel Curwen, judge of the Admiralty, left because he was stripped of: “. . . personal security and those rights by the laws of God I ought to have enjoyed undisturbed there.”²⁶

²¹Boucher, *Reminiscences*, p. 118.

²²Oliver, *Origin & Progress*, p. 105.

²³Van Tyne, *The Loyalists*, p. 17.

²⁴Washington, *Letters*, March 31, 1776, in Van Tyne, *The Loyalists*, p. 56-57.

²⁵Boucher, *Reminiscences*, p. 124.

²⁶Curwen, *Journal*, p. 4.

Despite the treatment these men had received and their sympathy for the political rights of George III, in their hearts loyalty to America still existed. Samuel Curwen spent most of his exile deeply concerned for the plight of his country, America:

For my native country, I feel filial fondness, her follies, I lament, her misfortunes I pity; her good I ardently wish, and to be restored to her embrace is the warmest of my desires.²⁷

Jonathan Boucher remarked, as his departure from Maryland drew near, that the amount of activity necessary to prepare for his departure:

. . .prevented my feeling so much pain as if I had the leisure to think of it I certainly should have felt on this leaving a country, where now almost all my attachments were, to go to another now become foreign to me, where I had no friends; knew not how to live for even the six months I expected to be absent.²⁸

Once fighting broke out, not all Loyalists felt as did Peter Oliver after the loss of British soldiers at Bunker hill. He commented that here were a:

. . .Disproportion of heroick Officers than perhaps ever fell in one Battle; owing to that Savage way of fighting, not in open field, but by aiming at their Objects from Houses and behind Walls & Hedges.²⁹

In England, Samuel Curwen, on hearing such attacks on the American soldiers, remarked:

It is no proof of want of bravery in the Americans not to face the regulars, many good reasons may be assigned to justify their conduct and though it be grounds of much reproach here, I see in it the effect of sound judgement—that little dependency can be placed on newly raised troops is well known the world over.³⁰

Ann Hulton's brother, perhaps because he was in fact British had this to say about the fighting:

In this [British] army are many of noble family, many respectable virtuous and amiable characters, and it grieves one that gentlemen, brave British soldiers should fall by the hands of such despicable wretches as compose the bandits of this country; amongst whom there is no one that has the least pretension to be called a gentlemen.³¹

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 231.

²⁸Boucher, *Reminiscences*, p. 127.

²⁹Oliver, *Origin & Progress*, p. 124.

³⁰Curwen, *Journal*, p. 91.

³¹Hulton, *Letters*, p. 99.

Those Loyalists in exile often prayed for the destruction of certain provinces as long as their home provinces were not among them; for example Thomas Hutchinson feared for the destruction of Boston, but prayed for the humbling of Philadelphia.³²

Yet the patriots were not always just reacting hysterically to the threat of Loyalist subversion. Loyalist companies were formed under General Howe. The Loyal American Associates, as they were called were given a commission to make war in armed bands under their own officers. They maintained the right to keep their own plunder and to deal with the rebel patriots as they had treated captured Loyalists. The plots of Benedict Arnold and Tarelton and the Tory Legion (to capture Thomas Jefferson in his house) are notorious. Other Loyalists forces included the Royal Greens and the British Loyal Rangers. Even though the plots of the Loyalists troops eventually resulted in failure the rumors of plots persisted and were even heard as far as England:

It is said that there is a large party in South Carolina, Maryland, Connecticut, and New Hampshire in opposition; these will assist the king's troops when they are well warmed in dispute with their brethern.³³

In New York one so-called plot was uncovered which was reportedly a:

. . . plan for aiding King's troops on arrival, break down King's Bridge, blow up the magazine, spike the guns and massacre all the field officers. Washington was to be killed or delivered up to the enemy.³⁴

While one man for whom the plot is named, Hickey, was hanged for his alleged part in the plot and another man, David, imprisoned, the evidence was so dubious and the trial so secretive it caused David Matthews, mayor of New York, to state:

. . .the people you have thrown into prison were guilty of no other misdeeds than meeting in a social manner and expressing their wishes for the restoration of the old constitution. . . [they] declared their opinions freely during the openness of sociability and wine.³⁵

³²William Nelson, *The American Tory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961) p. 167.

³³Curwen, *Journal*, p. 71.

³⁴*Minutes of a Conspiracy Against the Liberties of America* (Philadelphia: J. Campbell, 1865), p. vi.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 28.

The loyalists had suffered much at the hands of the patriots, but with the British they were scarcely treated better. In England, along with homesickness, they endured the loss of their occupations, the loss of social standing if not social ostracism, and a general apathy and complacency toward the Revolution. The English were quite undiplomatic in their speech about the Americans, or so it seemed to Samuel Curwen:

Lord Howe speaks of the Yankees, as he is pleased to call them, in the most contemptuous terms as cowards, poltroons, cruel and possessing every bad quality the depraved heart can be cursed with. . . . It is my earnest wish the despised Americans may convince these conceited islanders, that without regular standing armies our continent can furnish brave soldiers and judicious and expert commanders. . . . It piques my pride, I confess, to hear us called “our colonies, our plantations” in such terms and with such airs as if our property and persons were absolutely theirs like the “villains” and their cottages in the old feudal system.³⁶

In America much the same attitude was expressed. The British officers and soldiers preserved a cold tolerance of the Loyalists and never gave them a warm and sincere reception. The Loyalists as well as the patriots were “our” colonists, not equals. The British neither trusted nor respected the Loyalists. While about 50,000 Loyalists were drawn into the service of Great Britain, they performed largely menial tasks. Many Loyalists were plundered by British soldiers while they held certificates of protection in their hands.³⁷

Perhaps because the Loyalists were treated with such disdain they in turn felt free to criticize the manner in which the British were waging the war. Peter Oliver had these observations on the lack of initiative the British showed by not using their vessels in Boston harbor to block the retreat of the patriot soldiers at Bunker Hill:

But it seems at this time and during a great part of this American Contest, the King’s Ships were looked upon in too sacred a Light to be destroyed by anything except by Storms, Rocks, and Worms.³⁸

In fact Oliver blamed the whole defeat of the British cause on those elements in Britain who were sympathetic to the patriots:

³⁶Curwen, *Journal*, p. 90.

³⁷Van Tyne, *The Loyalists*, p. 246-7.

³⁸Oliver, *Origin & Progress*, p. 125.

Rebellion never would have happened if there were Loyalists among them sufficient in Number, Sense, & Virtue who could have banked out the Inundation, but a most detestable Opposition offered and lent their Aid to encourage it.³⁹

After hostilities had ended, some, like Alexander Hamilton, suggested leniency for the Loyalists; but the Loyalists' property was seized as contraband of war and sold. Loyalists in the service of Britain were treated as criminals and thrown into common prisons – even into the horrendous Simsbury mines in Connecticut (which consisted of a platform built in a shaft seventy-five feet underground). Some Loyalists were hanged for treason. Others were whipped, branded, had their ears cropped, or were exposed in the pillory. All were deprived of the right to vote. The Loyalists in Delaware were not allowed to become full citizens again. Many who wished to escape this harsh treatment accepted the offers of British protection in Canada.

The history of Isaac Wilkins serves as an example of the life of a Loyalist during the Revolution. Isaac Wilkins was a representative of the borough town of Westchester in the General Assembly of the province of New York. He was forced to flee from the popular fury and take refuge in England in the spring of 1775. In 1776 he returned with General Howe and landed with him on Long Island. He was driven from his farm and estate in Westchester by the rebel army who plundered his farm and house. By September 1, 1776 he had hired a house on Long Island, although he was deeply in debt because of loss of income from his farm which had been rented out by an act of the Legislature of New York. He was subsequently able to receive a pension of 200 pounds a year from the Lords of Treasury, but, after the war, was again forced to flee: this time to Nova Scotia.⁴⁰

The Loyalist cause ultimately ended in failure and with it any hope for the continuance of the lives they had known before the Revolution. Perhaps their innate conservatism did not allow them to fully realize the threat of revolution and the seriousness of their neighbors. Perhaps they never really could grasp the basic problem of constitutional reform. They never developed alternatives to rebellion or united in a strong front or developed a national leadership. The Loyalists were individuals, each with his own reactions and hopes and fears, united only by their beliefs and their unjust treatment at the hands of the patriots. They were persecuted and harassed by former neighbors, forced to flee from their homes and families. They were belittled and ridiculed by those very people to whom they remained loyal. But they did remain loyal to principle despite the hardships they suffered at both hands. Perhaps the Loyalists should be seen as the first in a long line of Americans who suffered for a principle that was not held to be popular at the time.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 150.

⁴⁰Isaac Wilkins, *My Services and Losses in Aid of the King's Cause During the American Revolution* (Brooklyn: Historical Printing Club, 1890)

A List of Materials on the American Loyalists
from the Spire Collection
George Arents Research Library for Special Collections
Syracuse University

This bibliography includes both materials with which the author worked directly and other materials relevant to the topic. The list is not complete, but is representative of the materials in the collection. There are numerous manuscripts in the Spire collection, some of which have been used to illustrate this article. Because some items, such as letters from the noted Loyalists Lord Sterling and Sir John Johnson, are unprocessed, the compiler did not include them in the list but felt they should be mentioned. This essay and list is meant to serve as an introduction to a large collection of American Revolutionary Period materials.

An asterisk indicates those items referred to in the footnotes.

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- *Oliver, Peter. *Origin & Progress of the American Rebellion; a Tory View*. San Marino, California: Huntington Library, 1961.
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- [Seabury, Samuel]. *Free Thoughts on the Proceedings of the Continental Congress, Held at Philadelphia, Sept. 5, 1774: Wherein Their Errors Are Exhibited, Their Reasonings Confuted, and the Fatal Tendency of Their Non-Importation, Non-Exportation, and Non-Consumption Measures, Are Laid Open to the Plainest Understandings; and the Only Means Pointed Out for Preserving and Securing our Present Happy Constitution; in a Letter to the Farmers, and Other Inhabitants of North America in General, and to Those of the Province of New-York in Particular*. [New-York] 1774.

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