

The Infamous British Prison Ships Used During The American Revolution

by Hank Foglino

Certainly not talked about much, and except for my wife's alerting me of a display in the Smithtown Library, I probably would never have heard of them, were the prison ships used to incarcerate American patriots during the Revolution (God bless libraries and may they never succumb to the internet). In the New York City area the prison ships were moored in Wallabout Bay (Figure 1). Estimates of men, most of them in their early twenties, who died in anguish aboard these vessels totaled close to 11,500, nearly triple the 4,400 Americans who died in all the battles of the Revolution.



Wallabout Bay is on the southern shore at the end of the East River (at the center). Map is a copy of original surveyed and drawn by George Taylor & Andrew Skinner, surveyors for his Excellency General Clinton, Commander in Chief. Copied in the Long Island Room of the Smithtown Library, Smithtown, NY

The Battle of Brooklyn and the capture of Fort Mifflin in 1776 placed nearly 4,000 prisoners British hands. The arrest of private citizens sympathetic to the Revolution raised this number to over 5,000. The British had the choice of parole or prison. They opted for prison. At the time, there were only two prisons in the city of New York, certainly inadequate to maintain such a large number of prisoners. This necessitated that the British convert three large sugar houses, several dissenting churches, the hospital and Columbia College into prisons. These facilities soon became inadequate with prisoners being housed in dungeon-like rooms, unlit with no access to outside air, crowded in with hardened criminals, scantily fed with putrid, sometimes uncooked food, and no medical facilities. Thousands of Americans were sickened and died.

Some literature notes that the British aim was to annihilate all prisoners (Burrows E. and Wallace, M - 1990). There seems to have been a conspiracy starting with Provost Marshal William Cunningham and Commissary Joshua Loring, down to the lowly prison guards to do just that. Captain William Cunningham, the son of a British soldier, brought up in Ireland, and a brute by nature, received the same fate as he had bestowed on so many victims; he was hanged for forgery in England in 1791. He became involved in shipping indentured servants to Boston and New York under false pretenses. His last

shipment was released by the New York. This, and a confrontation with the Liberty Boys, who beat him and made him get on his knees and plead for liberty, left him with an unquenchable hate for the Americans. Cunningham was the man who oversaw the hanging of Nathan Hale. Captain Montrossor, the hanging officer, allowed Nathan Hale to write two letters to his mother, Cunningham tore them up. Hale then requested a bible which was turned down. He then made his most famous one-line speech of American patriotism,

"I only regret that I have but one life to give to my country".

In his dying confession, Cunningham acknowledged his brutality and his being an accessory to the many hangings, both with and without orders from the government. He also confessed to stopping the prisoner's rations and selling them. Out of the hundreds of hangings, only about a dozen were public. The rest took place secretly after midnight and when they occurred all citizens were ordered to stay indoors and close their windows under the pain of death.

When the British began seizing hundreds of seamen from privateers, the situation really became desperate and the British began turning aging vessels into floating prisons. The ships were originally the transport ships that carried cattle and other equipment for the British army to America. Some of the aging hulks were anchored in Gravesend Bay and several were moored up the Hudson River housing soldiers captured

in New York, but they were moved to shore to be replaced by captured seaman. The first prison ship to be anchored in the Wallabout was a large transport named the *Whitby*, considered the sickliest of them all. She was moored near Remsen's Mill in October 1776 and was then filled to overflow with prisoners. Bad provisions, bad water, pestilence, disease and no medical help took its toll. In two months the entire beach between the ravine and Remsen's Mill was filled with graves and on May 1st the ravine itself was filled with hundreds of patriots who died of pestilence or starvation.

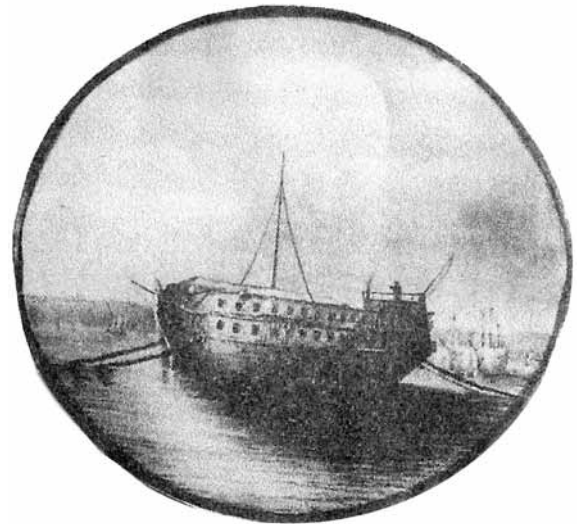
In May of 1777, two more prison ships were anchored in Wallabout Bay and were quickly filled. Many more prisoners were brought aboard and there were no transfers,

"Death made room for all".

On a Sunday afternoon in the middle of October 1777, one of the prison ships burned to the waterline and was followed by a second in February 1778. It was rumored that in their desperation the prisoners had set the fires themselves. These ships were succeeded by *Good Hope*, *Scorpion*, *Prince Wales*, *John Falmouth*, *Hunter*, *Stromboli* and *Old Jersey*.

The old *Jersey*, named "the Hell" by the prisoners, was the most notorious (Figure 2). Built in 1735 as a 64-gun ship, she was converted to a prison ship in the winter of 1779-80. Stripped of all gear except a flagstaff and the bowsprit, which

was used as a derrick to get supplies on board, she was moored in Wallabout Bay, about 100 yards offshore of what is now the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Portholes were closed and in their place four 20-inch holes, 10 feet apart were cut in the sides. These were covered by crossed iron bars.



The prison ship "Jersey" by James Ryder van Brunt. 1876 (General Research. The NY Public Library. Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations). From collections of the Long Island Room, Smithtown Library, Smithtown, NY

The best accommodation on the *Jersey* was a former gunroom, which housed the captive officers. American sailors were kept in two compartments below the main deck. French and Spanish prisoners got the worst quarters, in the hold and probably they had the worse mortality. The prisoners were kept below decks at night and the air coming into the aforementioned apertures never made it below.

On reaching the *Jersey*, a prisoner was signed in and assigned to a regular mess. However, food was distributed in the early morning and the new prisoners got no food on the first and probably not on the second day after their arrival, regardless of long they had been without sustenance. What a crime that young reasonably healthy seamen should begin a time in hell, and for some of them, a road to death. There were more than 1,000 men at a time packed in the *Jersey* and they died with such regularity that when the hatches were open in the morning the first words the prisoners heard were.

"Rebels bring up your dead."

The bodies were then removed as one would discard trash.

One particularly brutal event occurred when the prisoners tried to celebrate the Fourth of July in 1782. The prisoners sang some patriotic songs making every effort not to arouse the guards. However the prisoners were driven below at bayonet point and when they continued their singing, the guards invaded the hold with lanterns and cutlasses, slashing at all who were in reach. The prisoners, including the dead and wounded, lay below until late afternoon the next day without water or food. Several of the prison ships moored nearby were assigned as "hospital ships". However, their main purpose was to take the nearly dead prisoners aboard and eventually sew them up in a blanket for burial ashore.

It is believed that more than half the dead

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buried on the outer side of Mill Pond were washed away at high tide during a Northeaster. After the storm, the bones of the dead could be seen bleaching in the sun until another storm swept them out to sea.

The only way off of these ships was to volunteer to join the British navy; escape, which was rare; or be released by the pleas of relatives, which was even rarer. However, it worked for Zepaniah Platt. At the time, many patriots fled to Connecticut and would raid the coast of Long Island in their whale boats. Platt's barn in Fort

Salonga was used to secrete the whale boats during a raid. He was found out and sent to the Jersey. His daughter pleaded for his release and was heard. However the rigors of captivity were just too much and Mr. Platt died of his prison-caused ailments two weeks after being released.

The suffering, pride and patriotism of these men was not forgotten. Very few, indeed, volunteered to man British ships, preferring to maintain their honor of the Republic.

A monument was erected to honor these brave men in Fort Greene Park, Brooklyn, NY. (Figure 3).



Beneath the base of the Memorial are buried the bones of the martyred patriots that washed up on shore in the years following the Revolution. May they not be forgotten.



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