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Abstract

During the American Revolution, accounts of the experiences of prisoners of war helped those fighting for the cause of independence to create a definition of American liberty. In highlighting the ‘barbarous and cruel’ nature of British treatment of prisoners, these narratives allowed those who supported the patriot cause to highlight the difference between themselves and their former colonial masters. As prisoners’ accounts appeared in newspapers, broadsides, and individual volumes, the plight of captive Americans became a form of shorthand for the struggle of the entire nation as it tried to secure its independence from the ‘savage Britons’.

Keywords

American Revolution, prisoners of war, American identity, British cruelty, propaganda

In late 1776 Charles Herbert of Newburyport, Massachusetts, found himself a captive of the British navy. Herbert, a crewman aboard the American privateer *Dalton*, kept a journal of his experience which ‘was concealed, while writing, in his boots, and as each page became full, it was conveyed to a chest with a double bottom, and there secreted until he left prison’. Herbert’s captivity began on Christmas Eve 1776, when the British man-of-war *Reasonable* tracked down and captured the *Dalton*. Upon capture the British officers ordered Herbert and his fellow crewmen ‘down into the cable-tier’. There the Americans found ‘nothing but bare cable to lay upon, and that very uneven’. Worse still, the captive crew were ‘almost suffocated with heat’ and provided with ‘nothing but a few rags and a dozen old blankets’. In the months that followed, the crew of the *Dalton* saw little improvement in their condition, experiencing

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varying degrees of (dis)comfort, moving among four different vessels in the English port of Plymouth.¹

The frequent relocation of the crew of the *Dalton* was the result of a legal dilemma that was one of the central issues in the American Revolution. From the earliest days of the conflict, American prisoners posed a fundamental problem: if the British were to treat these captives as prisoners of war, it would be seen as an acknowledgement of the sovereignty and independence of the United States. If, however, the captive crewmen were to be treated as rebellious subjects (as British officials were initially inclined to view them), then these rebels were officially being held as civil prisoners. Such a categorization, if they were brought ashore, would allow the crewmen to claim their rights as Englishmen and claim the right of release on bail while awaiting trial. While this dilemma would ultimately be resolved by an Act of Parliament in early 1777, the legal and logistical challenges presented by American prisoners were only one aspect of the uncertainty surrounding captured rebels.²

In addition to the practical issues presented by American captives, the conflict with the colonies raised questions about the very nature of British-American identity. Herbert's experience again proves instructive. Following nearly a month of captivity aboard the *Reasonable*, Herbert watched as the wives of several of the British crewmen were brought aboard the vessel, excited to see the 'American prisoners'. In anticipation of seeing an actual American these women asked, "What sort of people are they?" "Are they white?" "Can they talk?" Upon being pointed to where some of them stood, "Why!" exclaimed they, "they look like our people, and they talk English."³ The surprise of these women at seeing the commonality between themselves and the American prisoners highlights a British perception of Americans as 'other' that pre-dated the American Revolution. While the number of Britons who believed British North American colonists to be something other than white Anglophones may have been relatively small, the process of defining Americans as something other than fully British was begun more than a decade before the Revolution: 'Englishmen began to identify the colonial population as "Americans" persistently after 1763 – a decade before Americans themselves did so.'⁴ The categorization of the colonists as something other than full-fledged Britons was greatly disturbing to many in British North America, especially as it came at a time of increased nationalism following the British victory in the French and Indian War. It

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- 1 Charles Herbert, *Relic of the Revolution, Containing a Full and Particular Account of the Sufferings and Privations of All the American Prisoners Captured on the High Seas and Carried into Plymouth, England, during the Revolution of 1776* (Boston: Charles H. Pierce, 1847), pp. 18–20; Francis Cogliano, *American Maritime Prisoners in the Revolutionary War: The Captivity of William Russell* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2001), pp. 42–7.
 - 2 Herbert, *Relic of the Revolution*, pp. 18–20; Cogliano, *American Maritime Prisoners*, p. 45.
 - 3 Herbert, *Relic of the Revolution*, pp. 18–20.
 - 4 Richard L. Merritt, *Symbols of American Community, 1735–1775* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 58.

was this definition of Americans as not fully British, as Linda Colley and T.H. Breen have noted, that served as a critical precondition of the American Revolution.⁵

While Americans had chafed at the notion of being considered anything other than British in the lead-up to the Revolution, the outbreak of war in 1775 left participants on all sides conflicted in their loyalties. The uncertainties embodied in the definitions of identity characterized one of the great challenges of the American Revolution: while wars against a distinct 'other', based on nationality or religion, had long served to draw the various facets of the British Empire together, the American Revolution lacked any such easy categorizations. Within Britain itself, reaction to the conflict with the colonies was profoundly mixed. In Parliament and in the press, expressions of support for the war often were countered with expressions of opposition to the conflict. Across the Atlantic the colonists themselves were split over how to respond to the growing alienation with the parent country. It is estimated that between one-third and one-fifth of Americans chose to remain loyal, dismissing their rebellious countrymen as traitors who failed to appreciate the blessings of the British Empire. By way of contrast, supporters of the patriot cause believed those who remained loyal to be complicit in British tyranny.⁶

Supporters of the Revolution pointed to prisoner accounts of captivity and suffering as a clear example of the corrupted nature of the British government. Prisoner narratives, like the story of Charles Herbert, became a vital part of defining the patriot cause from the earliest days of the Revolution and would continue as such well after independence. Although published three-quarters of a century after the Revolution, Herbert's journal embodies many of the characteristics of the traditional American captivity narrative. In offering a 'sketch of the author', the editor of the 1847 publication described Herbert as 'a true patriot' who would not be made, through 'frowns' or 'flatteries', to 'abandon his country's interest ... He can endure hunger, confinement or reproach – any thing but the extinguishing of his country's hope.'⁷ The portrayal of Herbert as a patriot who remained true to his country in the face of extreme hardship paralleled the well-established genre of American captivity narratives that stretched back to the seventeenth century and had played an important role in defining a nascent American identity in the second half of the eighteenth century.⁸

The significance of the captivity narrative in helping Americans to make sense of an increasingly strained relationship with Britain is highlighted by the renewed popularity of two Puritan captivity narratives. Between 1770 and 1776, as the American relationship with Britain disintegrated, New England publishers reissued John Williams's *The*

5 T.H. Breen, 'Ideology and Nationalism on the Eve of the American Revolution: Revisions Once More in Need of Revising', *Journal of American History* LXXXIV (1997), pp. 13–39; Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 134–41.

6 For an example of the mixed response to the war in Britain, see Colley, *Britons*, pp. 139–41. On loyalist numbers, see Maya Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary World* (New York: Vintage, 2012), p. 8.

7 Herbert, *Relic of the Revolution*, pp. 15–17.

8 Greg Sieminski, 'The Puritan Captivity Narrative and the Politics of the American Revolution', *American Quarterly* XLII (1990), pp. 35–56.

Redeemed Captive and Mary Rowlandson's *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*, each of which had originally been published almost a century before the American Revolution. In this six-year period both narratives were reprinted nine times. Publishers throughout New England advertised their new editions, promising descriptions of 'a most barbarous and cruel treatment' and a narrative of 'captivity and deliverance'. These themes resonated with Americans who saw their plight reflected in the accounts of Indian captivity. Just as Williams and Rowlandson had maintained their British identity and ultimately been redeemed following their time of trial at the hands of a 'barbarous and cruel' captor, Americans hoped that they too would maintain their spirit of liberty and ultimately achieve independence following their own time of trial.⁹

While consideration of historical violence provided a starting point for Americans as they tried to make sense of the conflict with Britain, it was stories of the sufferings of their fellow countrymen that soon became one of the central themes around which the patriots attempted to understand and build support for their cause. From the prisons came stories of horrid conditions and an endless string of cruelty practised by British guards. News from the frontier proffered a constant stream of newly reported brutality and savagery conducted by the British and their Indian allies. As accounts of British violence appeared in newspapers, broadsides, and individual volumes, the colonial captivity narratives were subsumed into a new body of literature detailing American suffering at the hands of the British. While supporters of the Revolution came from wide-ranging factions, from shoemakers and sailors to New England and Virginian elites, stories of British cruelty and American suffering helped define the patriot cause in a way that could be understood at all levels of society and across the ideological spectrum.¹⁰ Although the experience of every prisoner was unique, taken together these stories of captivity and suffering helped to give definition to what it was that all Americans were fighting for. Stories of captivity offered a negative definition of American liberty, demonstrating what it was *not* by highlighting British violations of the rights of prisoners. The plights of these prisoners during the Revolution became something of a shorthand for what it was, exactly, that supporters of the patriot cause were fighting for as they tried to secure independence from the savage Britons.

Defence of the American prisoners during the Revolution began at the highest level. As early as August 1775 George Washington decried the treatment of American prisoners in a letter to Thomas Gage, commander of British forces in North America. In his communication Washington noted that American soldiers were being detained in 'a common

9 Rowlandson's narrative was advertised in the *Massachusetts Spy* on 12 and 26 September and 3 October 1771, *New London Gazette* (CT), 3 December 1773, and *Newport Mercury* (RI), 7 and 14 March 1774; Williams's narrative in *New London Gazette* (CT), 9 April 1773 and 23 March and 3 May 1776. See also Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York: Vintage, 1998), pp. 186–90; Sieminski, 'Puritan Captivity Narrative', pp. 35–56.

10 For the meaning of the Revolution to a Boston shoemaker, see Alfred Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution* (Boston: Beacon, 1999); on sailors and the Revolution, see Paul Gilje, *Liberty on the Waterfront: American Maritime Culture in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

Gaol appropriate for Felons'. Washington requested that Gage adhere to the 'Obligations arising from the Rights of Humanity' and offer those who had been captured 'a more tender treatment'. He went on to warn that if prison conditions did not improve he would be forced to respond in kind, and, despite his own aversion to such action, British soldiers held by American forces 'would feel its effects'. Gage was quick to reply, claiming no wrongdoing on the part of British jailers and decrying the hardships British soldiers had endured in American prison camps, 'laboring ... to gain their daily subsistence, or reduced to the wretched alternative, to perish by famine or take arms against their King and country'.¹¹

Washington and members of Congress recognized the value of this debate in defining their cause. In September 1775 Congress ordered that the exchange between the two generals be published in newspapers throughout the colonies. The members of Congress understood that their ultimate success was dependent upon the support of the American people, and they believed the best way to achieve such support was to make clear the righteousness of the American cause in the face of a brutal enemy. When, in May 1776, the Continental Congress established its own rules for the treatment of prisoners seized by American forces, it made sure that these guidelines were distributed to newspaper editors throughout the country and published without delay. The Congressional rules gave responsibility for the care of captives to the states in which they had been captured, but required that those detained 'be treated as prisoners of war, but with humanity, and be allowed the same rations as the troops in the service of the United Colonies'.¹²

From the very first, Congress attempted to claim the mantle of moral superiority in the conflict. Although claiming the cause of right was a long-standing practice in European warfare, the American Revolutionaries pushed the limits of this strategy to a level that was 'altogether unusual in eighteenth-century wars'.¹³ One of the key components of these efforts was the consistent and near constant use of the press. Nearly every resolution passed by Congress denouncing British actions, as well as Washington's carefully crafted letters calling for a more humane treatment of captives, found its way to a sympathetic press. Revolutionary elites understood that efforts in support of the American cause needed to be fought not just on the battlefield but in the realm of print as well. The

11 George Washington to Thomas Gage, 11 August 1775, and Thomas Gage to George Washington, 13 August 1775. Both can be found in *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745–1799*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick, vol. 3.

12 *Pennsylvania Evening Post* (Philadelphia), 28 September 1775; *Story and Humphrey's Pennsylvania Mercury* (Philadelphia), 29 September 1775; *Pennsylvania Ledger* (Philadelphia), 30 September 1775. *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 4:370.

13 Linda Colley, *Captives: The Story of Britain's Pursuit of Empire and How Its Soldiers and Civilians Were Held Captive by the Dream of Global Supremacy, 1600–1850* (New York: Pantheon, 2002), pp. 221–4. For more on the importance of the press in the years leading up to and during the American Revolution, see Bernard Bailyn and John Hench, eds, *The Press and the American Revolution* (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1980), and David Copeland, 'America, 1750–1820', in Hannah Barker and Simon Burrows, eds, *Press, Politics and the Public Sphere in Europe and North America, 1760–1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

ordeal faced by American prisoners held by the British military gave Congress plenty of ammunition to continue its fight for the moral high ground throughout the war and served to aid in drawing supporters to the patriot cause.

British officials, despite their long experience with combat operations in North America, found themselves uncertain about how to handle American captives, given the complex circumstances surrounding the American uprising. On the one hand American combatants, in taking up arms against the king, were technically traitors and subject to execution. As it was, a fair number of British officials favoured such action, including Captain Frederick Mackenzie of the Royal Welch Fusiliers, who declared that ‘rebels taken in arms forfeit their lives by the laws of all Countries’. Failure to enforce these laws, Mackenzie argued, ‘encourages them to continue their opposition’, as without punishment of death ‘captivity has nothing dreadful in it’. On the other hand, however, British officials were slow to send these ‘rebels’ to the gallows. Fearful of public reaction to the execution of prisoners, yet overwhelmed by the sheer number of American prisoners, British officials resorted to using makeshift prisons throughout North America. The results for American prisoners were mixed. Although spared execution, captive Americans faced prison conditions far more harsh than those endured by traditional prisoners of war.¹⁴

Traditionally the British held prisoners of war for relatively limited periods of captivity, as their standard practice was to negotiate an exchange of prisoners in short order, thus minimizing the costs of providing for captives and replenishing their own ranks with the return of British soldiers. While in British hands, traditional prisoners of war would have been provided with a two-thirds ration along with basic medical care, shelter, and clothing. Yet to have treated American prisoners in this fashion would have been a de facto recognition of the American cause and rebel authority. Thus, while the British military had a great deal of experience in dealing with captive enemy combatants, there were no clear guidelines on how to address the complex challenge of detaining rebellious Americans. This resulted in an ad hoc approach to dealing with American detainees.¹⁵

The greatest departure from traditional prisoner practice was in the treatment of officers. In spite of Washington’s protest, Gage limited the traditional rights that were offered to captured officers, denying them prisons apart from their enlisted men and refusing them parole, making clear that he would not recognize commissions granted by the Continental Congress or George Washington. Such treatment of American officers helped lend credence to charges of incivility levelled against British prison officials.

14 See Frederick Mackenzie, *Diary of Frederick Mackenzie* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930), vol. 1, p. 44; Larry Bowman, *Captive Americans: Prisoners of War during the American Revolution* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1976); Edwin Burrows, *Forgotten Patriots: The Untold Story of American Prisoners during the Revolutionary War* (New York: Basic, 2008); Charles Metzger, *The Prisoners in the American Revolution* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1971). In several instances members of the British military took it upon themselves to punish treason with death. See David Hackett Fischer, *Washington’s Crossing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 375–9.

15 Colley, *Captives*, pp. 216–20.

Gage eventually abandoned the practice of limiting these rights, but continued a delicate political dance seeking to avoid official recognition of the American cause while dealing with the reality of an ever-growing prison population. A muddled policy resulted, leaving thousands of American captives in deplorable situations without adequate food and supplies, in makeshift prisons, and with a status situated somewhere between traitor and prisoner of war.¹⁶

At the outset of the war, there was little to suggest the level of difficulty that the British were to face in dealing with American prisoners. British forces held the earliest captive Americans in Boston, and their numbers never grew beyond a few dozen. When the British evacuated Boston in March 1776, these relatively few prisoners were granted their freedom. The American incursions into Canada, however, signalled the beginning of the need for a more serious prisoner policy. In relatively short order, both Halifax and Quebec emerged as long-term sites for the incarceration of captive Americans. In both cities the lack of British planning quickly became apparent. Without any formal military housing, public jails, warehouses, abandoned buildings, and a variety of other structures served to hold American prisoners. As the war stretched into several years and the theatre of battle extended deeper into the territory of the United States, British military officials established makeshift prison facilities in the occupied cities of Philadelphia, Charleston, Savannah, and New York.¹⁷

Across the Atlantic, in the earliest years of the war, the uncertain status of American prisoners relegated privateers and members of the Continental and state navies captured by the British navy to prison ships in various British ports. Apprehended in the summer of 1776, the crewmen of the American privateer *Yankee* were among the first Americans to experience life aboard a British prison ship. The 25 crewmen found themselves confined to the very vessel, anchored in the Thames, that they had previously sailed. As their confinement continued through the summer, conditions aboard the *Yankee* quickly deteriorated. Before long, sympathetic Londoners began to decry the 'putrid steams' that emerged from the ship and the suffering of the 'miserable wretches' trapped on board.¹⁸

In a letter addressed to the lord mayor of London, 'Humanitas' called on the 'head of this great city (justly famed for its great humanity even to its enemies)' to work to alleviate the 'truly shocking' and 'barbarous' conditions faced by the 25 American prisoners. Regardless of the detainees' perceived wrongdoing in acting as privateers, Humanitas argued, the prisoners were 'entitled to common humanity' and should not be detained under conditions that bore striking resemblance to 'the memorable black hole at Calcutta'. This treatment of the crew of the *Yankee* was made all the more egregious by the fact that 'English prisoners, taken by the Americans, have been treated with the most remarkable

16 Ibid., pp. 218–24. American prisoners were finally granted prisoner-of-war status in 1782. For more on the issue of citizenship, see Douglas Bradburn, *The Citizenship Revolution: Politics and the Creation of the American Union, 1774–1804* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009); Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); and James H. Kettner, *The Development of American Citizenship* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978).

17 Bowman, *Captive Americans*, pp. 1–31.

18 Burrows, *Forgotten Patriots*, pp. 53–4.

tenderness and generosity.¹⁹ The growing concern over the fate of the American prisoners led Parliament to act in early 1777.

The passage of North's Act in March 1777 temporarily solved the prisoner dilemma in Britain. The Act continued to deny American prisoners in Britain status as prisoners of war, while simultaneously depriving them of the rights of traditional civil prisoners, thus allowing British officials to detain the 'rebels' indefinitely in Britain without trial or bail. Many of the sailors who had previously been held aboard the prison ships soon found themselves in England's Forton and Mill prisons.

Conditions in the English prisons were far better than any in North America. In large part because they were held in established prisons, rather than makeshift structures in North America, prisoners in Forton and Mill received more reasonable treatment than their counterparts on the other side of the Atlantic. The sailors at Forton and Mill were given proper medical care, opportunity to exercise in fresh air and sunshine, and daily access to washing troughs and soap and water. Despite these precautions, smallpox remained a very real threat and the isolation and helplessness of prison life could take a toll on prisoners' mental health. American prisoners also received less in the way of rations than their European counterparts in British prisons. French and Spanish prisoners of war received ten and one-half pounds of bread per week, while the Americans received only seven. The rationale behind this difference lay in the refusal to officially designate Americans as prisoners of war. When the Americans complained about their rations they were informed that as rebels they were to be issued only seven pounds of bread per week, and only officially recognized prisoners of war were to receive ten pounds.

The relatively healthier conditions in English prisons led to a much lower death rate than that of their North American counterparts. Although American officials issued a steady stream of criticism and demands for investigations into conditions at Forton and Mill, there was little grist for the American propaganda mill.²⁰ Prison conditions in New York City stood in stark contrast to those in Britain and evolved in a nearly opposite fashion, as the increasing prison population in North America ultimately led British officials to turn to prison ships to relieve the overcrowding. In New York, as in Halifax and Quebec, British officials first employed public jails in housing captives, but as those sites filled, they began to employ whatever buildings could be found. Before long the sugar houses along New York's waterfront became the primary sites for detention of prisoners. These buildings, designed to store rum, sugar, and molasses, tended to be poorly maintained, oppressively hot in the summer, and draughty in the winter, the latter condition being exacerbated by the lack of fuel for heating. Within a matter of months even the sugar houses were inadequate in number to hold New York's growing prisoner population. Soon churches, buildings at King's College, and even New York's City Hall were pressed into service as prisons.²¹

As the prison population in New York continued to expand, it became increasingly clear that the makeshift prisons onshore were inadequate. British military officials in New York turned to prison ships as an expedient means to deal with the ever-growing

19 *Pennsylvania Evening Post* (Philadelphia), 7 November 1776.

20 Gilje, *Liberty on the Waterfront*, pp. 118–20; Bowman, *Captive Americans*, pp. 51–8.

21 Bowman, *Captive Americans*, pp. 9–16.

prison population. By October 1776 the first of the prison ships to be employed in the 13 colonies appeared in Brooklyn's Wallabout Bay. Located across from the southern tip of Manhattan, the bay provided an ideal place for anchoring these floating detention centres. The proximity of the harbour to the city allowed for easy transport of prisoners from the city, while providing anchorage out of the way of other ship traffic. From a security standpoint the harbour offered a water barrier which, in conjunction with the surrounding mudflats and its location in the heart of British-controlled New York, made prisoner escape extremely difficult. For the prisoners unfortunate enough to find themselves trapped aboard these vessels, the suffering was nearly interminable.²² While the 25-man crew of the *Yankee* had suffered the 'inhumanity' of their 'stinking apartment' in London, captives in New York found conditions far worse. Prison ships in New York often held in excess of 200 men with meagre rations, having little means of medical care. Under such conditions the mortality rate aboard these prison ships was near 40 per cent.²³

Within weeks of the first prisoners' transfer to Wallabout Bay, denunciations of the treatment of prisoners aboard prison ships began to appear in the American press. The first of these was a reprinting of Humanitas's letter to the lord mayor of London. In newspapers in Connecticut, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and New Hampshire the London comparison of British brutality and American 'tenderness and generosity' in dealing with prisoners was reprinted for all to read.²⁴ The experience of the American prisoners in Wallabout Bay in the winter of 1776–7 underscored Humanitas's earlier description of the horrors experienced aboard the prison ship *Yankee*. Reports of the wretched conditions in New York were quickly disseminated through the patriot press. By January 1777, accounts out of New York described how captains and lieutenants, 'many of whom had formerly lived in affluence', were being confined between decks 'with Indians, Mulattoes, and Negro slaves' and denied even the most basic rations, often going 'twelve or sixteen hours without a drop of fresh water', and 'as to their provisions, the allowance is very small and the quality unwholesome'. Most shocking, according to one account, was that the 'prison ship had neither Doctor nor medicine chest' to provide for the care of prisoners. The experience of Americans confined to the prison ships in both England and New York confirmed Americans' worst fears about British brutality.²⁵

Those prisoners who remained onshore found things little better than did their fellow captives aboard the prison ships. While Americans detained onshore managed to avoid some of the wretched conditions of the floating hulks, they were more likely to experience abuse at the hands of their guards. Prisoners who were lucky enough to receive 'any

22 Ibid., p. 43.

23 *Pennsylvania Evening Post* (Philadelphia), 7 November 1776 and 9 January 1777. Data on mortality rates can be found in Cogliano, *American Maritime Prisoners*, pp. 149–50; Howard Peckham, *The Toll of Independence: Engagements and Battle Casualties of the American Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), pp. 131–3; and Burrows, *Forgotten Patriots*, pp. 195–204.

24 *Pennsylvania Evening Post* (Philadelphia), 7 November 1776; *Norwich Packet* (CT), 2 December 1776; *Massachusetts Spy* (Worcester), 2 January 1777; *Freeman's Journal* (Portsmouth, NH), 7 January 1777.

25 *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, 9 January 1777.

trifle of food or drink' often experienced 'the but [*sic*] end of a musket' when their good fortune was observed by British soldiers.²⁶ In reporting these conditions, one prisoner stated that 'the New England people can have no idea of such barbarous policy'. Had the 'Gentleman of Honor and Distinction', who was held in New York, known what awaited him in detention, he wrote, he might have wished to 'fall by the sword of the Hessians', instead of being detained under such conditions. Worse still, the prisoner reported, his fellow captives were dying at a rate of twenty or thirty a day, 'and thrown out upon the highway and open fields, with this impious and horrid expression, "D—n the rebel, he's not worth a grave."'"²⁷

Such accounts fuelled American speculation about the reason for this brutal behaviour on the part of the British. In a letter reprinted in newspapers throughout New England and which eventually made its way to Europe, 'Misercors' argued that British cruelty was a calculated policy designed to punish American prisoners for their role in the rebellion. In his essay Misercors declared that the mouldy bread, the bilge-water-soaked pork, and the lack of drinking water were all a form of retaliation on the part of the British: 'By these means and in this way, above fifteen hundred brave Americans who had nobly gone forth in the defense of their injured, oppressed country ... died in New York.' These deaths were made all the more atrocious given that many of those who suffered in British prisons 'were very amiable, promising youths, of good families, the flower of our land'. Such treatment of American citizens suggested that there were no bounds to British cruelty: 'Where in history can we find an instance of more horrid treatment of prisoners? Even the famous instance of Calcutta is not to be compared with this.' Such treatment, which Misercors believed to have 'been the effect of cool reflection and a preconceived system', ought to raise 'the indignation of every friend to right, to mercy and to mankind'. Thus, he argued, Americans ought not let 'our famished, tortured, murdered fellow citizens to cry for vengeance in vain'.²⁸

Misercors was not alone in his denunciation of British actions. In his January 1777 address to New York's Convention of Representatives, Governor George Clinton decried British policy that left American captives to 'starve and languish, and die in prisons'.²⁹ In that same month the Continental Congress appointed a seven-man committee to investigate the ever-increasing accounts of British cruelty. In the ensuing months the 'committee appointed to enquire into the conduct of the enemy' found ample evidence of British cruelty, and reported back to Congress in April 1777 'that in every place where the enemy has been, there are heavy complaints of oppression, injury, and insult suffered by the inhabitants'. The committee's findings confirmed accounts of the sufferings experienced by American prisoners, who 'were, in general, treated with the greatest barbarity', which stood in marked contrast to the 'humane treatment' offered those 'taken by the United

26 Ibid.

27 *Connecticut Gazette* (New London), 17 January 1777; *New England Chronicle* (Boston), 23 January 1777; *Pennsylvania Evening Post* (Philadelphia), 9 January 1777.

28 *Connecticut Journal* (New Haven), 30 January 1777; *Connecticut Gazette* (New London), 28 February 1777; *Continental Journal* (Boston), 13 March 1777; *Freeman's Journal* (Portsmouth, NH), 22 March 1777; Burrows, *Forgotten Patriots*, pp. 75–7.

29 *Pennsylvania Evening Post* (Philadelphia), 30 January 1777.

States'. On the whole the neglect and abuse experienced by American captives 'was never known to happen in any similar case in a Christian country'.³⁰

Although Congress ordered that the 'committee who brought in the report, publish the same with affidavits', there was no need for the committee itself to take any action. Within a few days the report was serialized in the *Pennsylvania Evening Post* and subsequently reprinted in newspapers around the country. John Adams forwarded one of these copies of the *Evening Post* to his wife, Abigail, noting that the report would 'give you, some Idea, of the Humanity of the present Race of Brittons'. The lesson of this report and the countless other reports of British cruelty, Adams argued, could not be studied enough: 'It would convince every American that a Nation, so great a Part of which is thus deeply depraved, can never again be trusted with Power over Us.' Furthermore, Adams hoped that British actions would excite American passions in their prosecution of the war, for the 'public may be clearly convinced that a War is just, and yet, until their Passions are excited, will carry it languidly on'.³¹

As Adams hoped, the Congressional report was merely one component of the continued wave of reports chronicling British cruelties. In the months that followed, reports of prisoner abuse appeared in newspapers around the nation. From Boston the *Independent Chronicle* reported that captive American sailors were being 'whipped with a wire cat of nine tails that drew blood every stroke'. In Philadelphia the *Pennsylvania Packet* published accounts of 'numerous instances of prisoners of war perishing in all the agonies of hunger, from their severe treatment'. Notably, these accounts were not limited to the English-language press. In May 1777 the German-language newspaper *Wochentliche Philadelphische Staatsbote* reported that a British officer had shot and stabbed American soldier Philip Jones following his capture by British forces in southern New Jersey. Tales of British cruelty continued to echo throughout the newly independent states, providing a foil for an emerging American character and reminding Americans of the cause for which they were fighting.³²

Conditions aboard the prison ships proved a near constant source of propaganda for the American cause, and severe weather in the winter of 1778–9 only exacerbated the issue. Following a Christmas Eve blizzard and a wave of extreme cold, the city of New York was brought to a standstill. As supplies of food and fuel dwindled and with temperatures well below freezing, the prisoners found themselves last in line for limited supplies. In the face of such dire conditions, British officials released 136 prisoners from the prison ships in New York and transported them to New London, Connecticut. Although the release of prisoners might have been viewed as an act of compassion, the act only provided more ammunition for patriot charges of British cruelty. 'In this short run' (from New York to New London), several patriot papers reported, '16 died on board'

30 *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 7:277–9; Burrows, *Forgotten Patriots*, pp. 81–3.

31 *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 7:277–9; John Adams to Abigail Adams, 27 April 1777, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 6:662; John Adams to Abigail Adams, 28 April 1777, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 6:667–8.

32 *Independent Chronicle* (Boston, MA), 29 August 1777; *Pennsylvania Packet, or, The General Advertiser* (Philadelphia), 28 January 1778; *Wochentliche Philadelphische Staatsbote* (Philadelphia), 28 May 1777.

and ‘upwards of 60 when they landed were scarcely able to move’, and the remainder were ‘greatly emaciated and infeebl’d’. The plight of these prisoners, these newspapers declared, stood as yet another example of the ‘inhumanity of the Britons’, which had been carried out ‘from the beginning of this war, & through every stage of it’. Horrified by the prisoners’ condition and their reports of starvation, the Connecticut General Assembly called for local officials to collect testimony from the former prisoners, ‘stating the particulars of the severe usage and sufferings’ from their time in captivity. In a footnote to the legislative act, the Connecticut Assembly called on the ‘printers in this State ... to insert the above resolution in their respective papers’.³³

Throughout the war, official reports and hearings on the treatment of prisoners, and their subsequent publication, continued to be a critical component of the patriots’ efforts to define their cause. In early 1781 the Continental Congress launched another round of hearings on prison conditions. The central focus of these hearings was the British prison ship *Jersey*.³⁴ The investigation into treatment of prisoners aboard the *Jersey* began with the testimony of George Batterman of Rhode Island. He had been taken captive while travelling as a civilian passenger on an American privateer vessel. In his 1781 testimony he described the brutal conditions, including overcrowding, disease, and hunger, endured by those held captive on the prison ships. Although aboard the *Jersey* for only a brief period, Batterman charged that the British

have taken this method of starving us for the want of water to kill us or make us enter into the service. They never allow a man that is sick to go to the hospital ship till they are so weak and low, that they often expire before they get out of the ship.

On the basis of his testimony, as well as other reports of mistreatment, Congress, retreating from its earlier stance that American-held prisoners receive humane treatment, ordered that ‘British prisoners receive the same allowance and treatment; in every respect, as our people, who are prisoners, receive from the enemy.’ Batterman’s evidence, which appeared in newspapers throughout the United States, only added to the growing public concern over the treatment of American prisoners at the hands of the British. As it had throughout the war, Congress again made sure that the proceedings from these hearings made their way into the American press.³⁵

Although British officials had downplayed accusations of brutality throughout the war, the American investigation of the *Jersey* marked the first concerted effort by British officials to refute the charges of abuse. Spearheading the official British response was David Sproat, commissary general for naval prisoners in North America. Sproat was a

33 *Independent Ledger* (Boston, MA), 1 February 1779; *Exeter Journal* (NH), 9 February 1779; *Connecticut Courant* (Hartford), 9 February 1779; Burrows, *Forgotten Patriots*, pp. 143–4.

34 Thomas Dring, *Recollections of the Jersey Prison Ship*, ed. Albert Greene, American Experience (New York: Corinth, 1961).

35 *Pennsylvania Packet* (Philadelphia), 16 January 1781. See also *American Journal and General Advertiser* (Providence, RI), 7 February 1781; *Independent Chronicle and Universal Advertiser* (Boston, MA), 8 February 1781; *New York Gazette and Weekly Mercury* (NY), 12 February 1781.

Philadelphia Tory who had been an outspoken opponent of independence and had lost a self-described 'pritty little fortune' as a result of his loyalty to Britain. In the face of patriot hostility he had fled to New York and eventually managed to earn an appointment in the British bureaucracy. He believed that those caught 'in the very acts of Rebellion and Murder' had no right to kind treatment. To many supporters of the patriot cause, Sproat was the perfect example of British cruelty. His inability or unwillingness to recognize the suffering of the American prisoners was simply an outgrowth of his earlier rejection of the patriot cause of independence and continued identification with the savage British.³⁶

Sproat declared reports of mistreatment to be scurrilous and argued that allegations of abuse were 'not founded on matters of fact, but merely calculated to deceive the world into a belief of the necessity of using our people that fall into their hands ill, and inflame the minds of those already crowded by such impressions'. In fact, the British commissary general noted, he had personally boarded the prison ships in an effort to ensure that each prisoner received 'the full quantity of good, sound, wholesome provisions'. Beyond that, Sproat argued, from the day of his appointment as commissary general, he had worked with British officials to make the prison ships as comfortable as possible for those on board. He highlighted the acquisition of 'two excellent large stoves' to provide heat for the prisoners during the cold winter months. Aboard the hospital ships, he argued, 'every sick or wounded person [was] furnished with a cradle, bedding, and surgeons appointed to take care of them'. Sproat went as far as to argue that British treatment of prisoners was more humane than American treatment of British prisoners. He noted that British soldiers taken captive by American forces had been 'thrown into jail and shackled with heavy irons', that loyalists had fled the country for fear of being 'thrown into a dungeon and there treated with every species of insult, outrage, and cruelties', and that prisoners held in Pennsylvania had been fed on bread and water 'when meat was plenty'. All of this occurred, he noted, 'under the nose of the very people' who had levelled charges of brutality against the British. Most importantly, Sproat concluded, he had tried repeatedly to establish a prisoner exchange, so as to bring an end to the suffering of 'the poor prisoners on both sides in distress', but that American officials had been unwilling to cooperate. According to him, if anyone bore the blame for the suffering of both British and American prisoners, it was those who supported the cause of American independence.³⁷

Sproat's defence of British prison policies was only one aspect of the British effort to refute American charges. In response to the Congressional hearings, British military officials launched their own inquiry into the conditions on board the *Jersey*. Backed by testimony from six *Jersey* prisoners, the inquiry, conducted by four British officers, found little on the ship that could be considered the fault of the British jailers. Ultimately, they concluded, the prisoners had only their own poor hygiene to blame for the conditions on

36 Burrows, *Forgotten Patriots*, pp. 148–54; *Independent Ledger* (Boston, MA), 12 August 1782; *Salem Gazette* (MA), 22 August 1782; *Pennsylvania Packet* (Philadelphia), 29 August 1782.

37 *New York Gazette and Weekly Mercury* (NY), 12 February 1781.

the prison vessel. In support of these findings the British officers pointed to the testimony of the six Americans, 'being the oldest prisoners in [British] possession', who 'collectively and voluntarily' declared that 'they firmly believed their situation was made at all times as comfortable as possible, and that they were in no instance oppressed or ill-treated'. Beyond the living conditions, the prisoners noted that they regularly received 66 ounces of bread, 43 ounces of beef, 22 ounces of pork, 8 ounces of butter, 1 pint of peas, and 2 pints of oatmeal. The prisoners concluded 'their general testimony with an affirmation that they have never been and are not now crowded in the prison ship'.³⁸

In addition to the testimony of the 'oldest' of the *Jersey's* prisoners, a number of British officers in charge of the oversight of the prison ships offered sworn testimony that they had done their best to offer the captives reasonable living conditions. Jeremiah Downer, a 'mariner, a native of Boston, in New England', noted that during his time as commander of

his Majesty's prison ship Strombolo, in the harbour of New York ... the provisions issued to the prisoners confined on board, were of the same goodness and quality as those issued to the seaman belonging to the Strombolo, and the same as that time were issued to the seaman in the Royal Navy.

Peter Robertson, 'acting Purser of his Majesty's prison ship the *Jersey*', testified that all provisions issued to those on board the prison ships 'have always been the same in goodness and quality as were supplied to the crews of his Majesty's said hospital ship and the other King's ships on the North-American station during said period'. Finally, British admiral Mariot Arbuthnot swore an oath that he 'uniformly ordered provisions to be issued to the naval prisoners of the same kind, species, goodness and quality as at the same times were furnished to the Royal Navy'.³⁹

British officials made sure to publicize the results of their findings, highlighting the accounts offered by American prisoners which corroborated their conclusions in the loyalist press.⁴⁰ These newspapers published the complete proceedings, including Sproat's letter and the testimony of the prisoners and the officers. Despite this public relations effort, the veracity of the British claims about the quality of life on the prison ships is dubious, as the 47 per cent death rate suggests. In all likelihood the prisoners who had denied the existence of unsanitary conditions or cruel treatment aboard British prison ships had been offered freedom in exchange for their testimony. Regardless of the truth of these British claims, the fact that the British military went beyond simply denying the charges of prisoner mistreatment and not only commissioned an investigation, but sought out prisoner confirmation of the committee's findings, suggests the impact that the continued reports of prisoner mistreatment were having on the conduct of the war.

Unconvinced and undeterred by the British efforts, the patriot press continued to publish any and all accounts of the mistreatment of American prisoners. Within weeks of the

38 Ibid.; Cogliano, *American Maritime Prisoners*, p. 160.

39 *New York Gazette and Weekly Mercury* (NY), 12 February 1781.

40 *Royal Gazette* (New York, NY), 7, 10, 14 and 17 February 1781; *New York Gazette and Weekly Mercury* (NY), 12 February 1781; and Burrows, *Forgotten Patriots*, p. 176.

release of the official British inquiry into conditions on the *Jersey*, patriot papers countered with an account of 33 British-held prisoners who had been freed as part of a prisoner exchange. The prisoners, according to one report, were 'in a very sickly and emaciated condition, owing to the inhuman treatment they experienced while with the enemy'. The prisoners' conditions and their experience aboard the ships were 'beyond description, and, if possible, exceed the enemy's former refinements in barbarity'. The account offered by the patriot press was a direct attempt to refute much of the testimony that had been produced in the British hearings. Most pointedly the prisoners themselves contradicted the sworn testimony of Arbuthnot, noting that they 'had repeatedly petitioned the Admiral, but their petitions remained unanswered'. With no improvement in their conditions, the prisoners reported that for a lack of water they 'were obliged to allay their thirst with urine ... [and] that latterly about seven or eight die in a day'. Despite a new British awareness of the power of the stories of prisoner mistreatment, by 1781 there was little they could do to stem the rising tide of the perception of British cruelty.⁴¹

While American officials often integrated individual prisoners' stories into a larger single narrative of British cruelty and American virtue, for many prisoners the utility of their suffering to the American cause was at best secondary. For most American prisoners their primary goal was to regain their freedom. The desire for freedom among British-held American prisoners manifested itself in a variety of ways. The delayed recognition of Americans as true prisoners of war meant that for many captives escape was one of the only, albeit extremely dangerous, means to freedom. In the North American prisons the likelihood of success in any escape attempt diminished the longer prisoners remained in captivity. Poor nutrition and sanitary conditions often left prisoners in a weakened state and unable to endure the physical demands of escape. The importance of health to any escape attempt may help to explain the vast difference between the number of prisoners who successfully escaped in North America compared to those in England, where hundreds of prisoners, primarily officers, escaped each year.⁴²

In addition to outright escape, British officials offered another means by which prisoners might end their captivity – enlistment in the British armed forces. British recruitment efforts were by no means subtle. By 1776 recruiters often approached prisoners within days of their confinement and offered assurances that they would protect the identity of any defectors.⁴³ Although the exact numbers of defectors in North America are hard to determine, one historian has calculated that more than 10 per cent of the American prisoners in England petitioned for a royal pardon with the promise to enter the king's service at some point or another and that almost all of these petitions were accepted.⁴⁴ Whatever the North American numbers, American officials filed formal protests against the practice in both 1777 and 1781. Despite prison conditions the vast

41 *American Journal* (Providence, RI), 17 February 1781; also in *Norwich Packet and the Weekly Advertiser* (CT), 20 February 1781, and *New Jersey Gazette* (Elizabethtown), 21 February 1781.

42 Bowman, *Captive Americans*, pp. 93–6.

43 *Ibid.*

44 Gilje, *Liberty on the Waterfront*, p. 119.

majority of surviving prisoners remained in captivity until they were exchanged or paroled.⁴⁵

Although most prisoners refused to enlist in the British military in exchange for their freedom, their actions do not necessarily symbolize a loyalty to the cause of independence. Life in the British military was in many ways less appealing than life in a British prison. Following a wave of enlistments in the British service at Mill prison in December 1778, a petition asserting loyalty to Congress and denouncing those who joined the British military received under half of the remaining prisoners' signatures.⁴⁶ In most cases we have little evidence to provide an insight into the motives behind prisoners' decisions and are left with official inquires and press reports. In a few cases, however, American prisoners provided a full account of their time in British captivity, echoing the captivity narratives of an earlier generation.

The emergence of a Revolutionary captivity literature was spearheaded by Ethan Allen and John Dodge.⁴⁷ Reflecting the earlier narratives of John Williams and Mary Rowlandson, Allen and Dodge presented to the American people individual accounts of their time in captivity. Like their colonial predecessors and reflective of the larger American effort to cast the British as 'other', Allen and Dodge presented narratives that highlighted their own virtue during their captivity while decrying the actions of a savage enemy. With a ready-made audience created by the continued attention to prison conditions, and building on the celebrity of Ethan Allen following his exploits in upstate New York and Canada, publishers reprinted both Allen's and Dodge's narratives several times during the war, including a British edition of Dodge's account. These accounts fit perfectly into the larger American efforts to control the narrative of the conflict with Britain. In both cases Allen and Dodge served as exemplars of American virtue in the face of British cruelty, giving a face to the emerging definition of American liberty. The degree to which these individual accounts conform to the larger narrative of the American struggle suggests possible gaps between actual events and the memoirs.

Both Dodge's and Allen's accounts are possibly hybrids that integrate their actual experiences within the framework of traditional captivity narratives, straddling the line between fiction and reality. Walking that line was part of their effort to connect their stories to the cause of independence, to gain the sympathy of the public, and, of course, to realize a profit from the sale of their work. The variety of motives does not, however,

45 Bowman, *Captive Americans*, pp. 93–6.

46 Gilje, *Liberty on the Waterfront*, pp. 118–29.

47 Ethan Allen, *A Narrative of Colonel Ethan Allen's Captivity* (Philadelphia, 1779); John Dodge, *An Entertaining Narrative of the Cruel and Barbarous Treatment and Extreme Suffering of Mr. John Dodge during his Captivity of Many Months among the British* (Danvers, MA, 1780). Other individual prisoner narratives published following the Revolution include John Blatchford's *Narrative of the Life and Captivity of John Blatchford* (New London: T. Green, 1788); Israel Potter's *Life and remarkable adventures of Israel R. Potter, (a native of Cranston, Rhode-Island) who was a soldier in the American Revolution, after which he was taken prisoner by the British, conveyed to England, where for 30 years he obtained a livelihood, by crying 'Old chairs to mend'* (Providence: printed by H. Trumbull, 1824); and Herbert, *Relic of the Revolution*.

diminish the value of their work. In many ways the effort to conform to the larger narrative of American suffering at British hands suggests just how integral this theme had become to the American cause.⁴⁸

Ethan Allen's ordeal as a prisoner of war began in September 1775. Allen was one of 38 Americans captured in a failed raid on the British position at Montreal. His earlier success in the war, particularly in the seizure of Fort Ticonderoga and in his attempts to encourage the Caughnawaga people and the merchants of Montreal to turn against Britain, made him a primary target for British frustration and anger as the war dragged on. Allen's captivity spanned the Atlantic as British officials eventually transferred him to New York by way of England, Ireland, North Carolina, and Halifax. It was only when he reached British-occupied New York that his captors finally granted him parole, allowing him to split his time between Manhattan and Long Island. Nearly three years passed before he regained his freedom following a prisoner exchange in May 1778.⁴⁹

Allen published his *Narrative of Col. Ethan Allen's Captivity* almost immediately following his release. From the first, it was a success. The narrative went through 8 editions in the first two years after its publication, and another 19 editions in the following half-century. Allen's account contained many of the characteristics of Williams's and Rowlandson's earlier narratives, substituting British for Indian captors. Just as Williams and Rowlandson sought to highlight their ability to cling to their Christian ideals in the face of Indian captivity, Allen went to great lengths to describe his efforts to maintain his moral superiority as an American in the face of British cruelty. He did not miss an opportunity to highlight an instance of British barbarity. From the first moments in British hands, Allen noted, he and several members of his force were 'shackled together by pairs, viz. two men fasted together by one hand-cuff, being closely fixed to one wrist of each of them, and treated with the greatest severity, nay as criminals'. His leg irons were clamped 'very tight' around his ankles and he imagined them to weigh 30 pounds. So restrictive were these irons that he could not lie down except on his back. This severe treatment of prisoners, according to Allen, was no mere oversight but rather the result of 'express orders' given by British officials.⁵⁰

In addition to the cruelty of his captors, Allen highlighted the strenuous nature of his passage to England, again echoing the captivity narratives of the colonial era which had recounted the gruelling march into Canada. Allen told how he and his fellow captives:

were denied fresh water, except a small allowance, which was very inadequate to our wants; and in consequence of the stench of the place, each of us was soon followed with a diarrhea and

48 For more on the issue of the fact and fiction in autobiographies, see Myra Glenn, *Jack Tar's Story: The Autobiographies and Memoirs of Sailors in Antebellum America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 8–12.

49 John Pell, *Ethan Allen* (New York, 1929). See Michael Bellesiles, *Revolutionary Outlaws: Ethan Allen and the Struggle for Independence on the Early American Frontier* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), and Charles A. Jellison, *Ethan Allen: Frontier Rebel* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1969).

50 Ethan Allen, *Narrative of Col. Ethan Allen's Captivity*, 4th edn (Burlington: Chauncey Goodrich, 1846), pp. 32–3.

fever, which occasioned intolerable thirst. When we asked for water, we were, most commonly, instead of obtaining it, insulted and derided; and to add to all the horrors of the place, it was so dark that we could not see each other, and were overspread with body lice.

Despite these conditions Allen not only survived but managed to maintain his commitment to the American cause, just as Rowlandson and Williams had held fast to their British and Christian ideals in the face of French and Indian captors generations before. Despite the near constant threat of being hanged as a rebel, Allen resolved to ‘exhibit a good sample of American fortitude ... [and] that if a cruel death must inevitably be [his] portion, [he] would face it undaunted’. In adopting the style of the traditional captivity narrative, Allen’s account brought together two significant components of the American efforts to deal with the crisis of identity brought on by the war with Britain. Allen simultaneously provided a story of redemption and a model of behaviour in the face of a ‘haughty and cruel nation’. His success inspired others to follow his lead.⁵¹

The only other narrative published as a self-contained volume during the war was John Dodge’s *An Entertaining Narrative of the Cruel and Barbarous Treatment and Extreme Suffering of Mr. John Dodge during his Captivity of Many Months among the British*. This appeared only a year after Allen’s account, which Dodge followed in his condemnation of British cruelty and in recounting his own trials in the face of such brutality. In many ways, however, Dodge presented a more complicated narrative than did Allen. In addition to the cruelty he experienced as a prisoner, Dodge was careful to recount his loss of property and wealth at the hands of his captors on numerous occasions. He also suggested that Native Americans in the Ohio Country might serve as allies in the cause of independence. Such a suggestion marked a complete reordering of the traditional captivity narrative. In his account Native Americans had become potential allies in the face of the threat created by the savage British.⁵²

Dodge’s attitude toward Native Americans marks the beginning of a shift in the traditional form of the American captivity narrative. Even as these stories of captivity and a ‘savage other’ helped to define an emerging American identity, during the Revolution the nature of the narratives themselves began to evolve. In the years immediately following the Revolution, the traditional Puritan narrative (accounts of patriotism or faith in the face of a savage ‘other’) were joined by frontier narratives of acculturation. While the traditional accounts of suffering at the hands of an enemy would continue to play a role in defining American identity, most notably in American interaction with the Barbary States of North Africa, stories of frontier captivity took a decidedly different tack.⁵³

51 Ibid., pp. 40–4. For a more detailed examination of the similarities between colonial captivity narratives and those of the American Revolution, see Sieminski, ‘Puritan Captivity Narrative’.

52 For a slightly different interpretation of Dodge’s narrative, see Daniel Williams’s introduction to *Liberty’s Captives: Narratives of Confinement in the Print Culture of the Early Republic* (Athens: University of Georgia, 2006), pp. 17–18.

53 For more on Barbary captivity, see Lawrence Peskin, *Captives and Countrymen: Barbary Slavery and the American Public, 1785–1816* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

Throughout the Revolution, prisoners' accounts had defined American identity by what it was not; following the Revolution, narratives of Indian captivity began to portray the frontiersman as the 'archetypal American and mediator between civilization and the wilderness'.⁵⁴ Richard Slotkin points to John Filson's *The Adventures of Col. Daniel Boone*, published in 1784, as the earliest and most influential expression of this new identity. In this new style of frontier narrative, American identity is not defined in opposition to a 'savage other', but as a product of acculturation in which the American captive, never relinquishing cultural superiority, learns the skills of his captors and gains their respect. In the end the captive emerges from his trial as 'part-Indian', a hybrid identity that maintains the best of the civilized world, while providing a skill set that enables the American to subdue the natural world as well.⁵⁵

Although Slotkin argues that the Daniel Boone narrative marks the beginning of this shift, John Dodge's account provides the earliest evidence of this evolution of the American captivity narrative. While the majority of Revolutionary tales of captivity mirror the traditional Puritan narratives, where the captive emerges from an ordeal at the hands of a 'savage other' firmly committed to their faith or their country, Dodge's account of redemption offers something of a hybrid between the traditional narrative and the emerging frontier narrative. While much of his story focuses on his suffering at the hands of his British captors, his description of his relationship with Native Americans in the Ohio Country in the earliest days of the Revolution, and his recognition of the role of an Indian guide in his return home account, is a first step toward the new frontier narrative. Although far from a complete rejection of traditional captivity narratives, Dodge's account of his captivity is a first step toward the constructed frontier identity presented by Slotkin.

In his description of his life before captivity, Dodge seems to embody the American frontiersman. Born in Connecticut, he migrated to the Great Lakes region in 1770 and settled in the village of Sandusky on the shores of Lake Erie. Engaged in frontier commerce, Dodge could speak several Indian languages and presented himself as a trusted business partner of the native groups in the region. He described his new home as 'about half way between Pittsburgh and Detroit, where I carried on a very beneficial trade with the natives, until the unhappy dispute between Great-Britain and America reached those pathless wilds, and roused to war Savages in no ways interested in it'. He claimed that a number of the Ohio Country tribes had responded positively to American overtures for peace, and that they 'took up the hatchet' only after the British spread 'evil reports' among the tribes in the Great Lakes region that the Americans 'were going to murder them all and take their lands'. As part of the British efforts to undermine the American presence in the region Dodge was taken from his home on 15 January 1776 and brought to Detroit, where he was held for nearly three years. He argued that he was taken captive by the British exactly because of his level of acculturation to the Native American cultures in the Ohio Country.⁵⁶

54 Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), p. 23.

55 See *ibid.*, pp. 95–6 and 247, and Sieminski, 'Puritan Captivity Narrative', pp. 35–6.

56 Dodge, *Entertaining Narrative*, p. 5.

Upon his capture, Dodge's narrative reverts to a more traditional form. He described his treatment at the hands of the British much as Allen had, labelling his captors 'inhuman' and barbarous, and calling them 'savage adversaries'. Upon his arrival in Detroit he was informed by British officials that he would most likely be executed and then was 'hurried to a loathsome dungeon, ironed and thrown in with three criminals, being allowed neither bedding, straw or fire, although it was in the depth of winter, and so exceeding cold, that [his] toes were froze before morning'. Dodge made sure to point out that not only was he threatened with execution, but that his British captors had also refused to allow him a fair trial. His captors denied requests for a hearing, stating that they were 'not obliged to give any damn'd rebel a trial'.⁵⁷

Living under the constant threat of execution and extreme conditions, Dodge

at last drove almost to despair ... told [his jailor Philip] De Jeane to inform the Governor [he] was readier to die at that time than [he] should ever be, and that [he] would much rather undergo his sentence, than be tortured in the dreadful manner [he] then was.

De Jeane ignored Dodge's request, leaving him to suffer in his cell and eventually to succumb to illness:

The weather had been so extreme cold, and my legs had been bolted in such a manner, that they were so benumbed, and the sinews contracted, that I had not the least use of them; and the severity of my usage had brought on a fever.

During his illness, fearing that he might die in captivity, British officials eventually transported Dodge to better housing and allowed him to be seen by a doctor. After a period of convalescence, however, he was returned to his cell and once again placed in irons.⁵⁸

British officials eventually transported Dodge to Quebec in the spring of 1778 and confined him to a prison ship. In August of that year, when many of his fellow captives were returned to the United States as part of a prisoner exchange, Dodge himself was simply paroled and prohibited from leaving Quebec. Upon inquiring into the reason behind his prolonged captivity, he was told that orders had come from Detroit insisting that he not be freed for fear of his 'damn'd deal of influence with the Indians'. Finally, in October of that year, when his parole expired, Dodge hired an Indian guide and made the month-long trek from Quebec to Boston, where General Horatio Gates received him and recommended him to Congress as 'having some matters ... worthy of their hearing'. Dodge's return home, a wilderness trek led by an Indian guide, was a final comment on the brutality of his British captors. In the colonial captivity narratives the Indian-led journey through the woods away from British settlement was the opening of the ordeal. For Dodge, a wilderness journey alongside an Indian guide marked his return to freedom. This upending of the traditional narrative structure underscored a larger point of his narrative. So far had the British fallen that Native Americans, once feared as a 'barbarous

57 Ibid., pp. 10–12.

58 Ibid., pp. 12–18.

other', had come to be potential allies. Dodge ended his narrative leaving to 'the world to judge whether I have not a right to revolt from under the dominion of such tyrants'. His conclusion represented a hybrid of the old and new style, contrasting his journey to freedom alongside an Indian ally with the continued cruelty of his British captors.⁵⁹

The success of these narratives inspired other literary indictments of British cruelty, including Philip Freneau's 'The British Prison Ship', first published in 1781, by the same publisher that had printed Allen's captivity narrative. The arc of Freneau's poem echoes Allen and Dodge, relating the fate of Americans brought low by the brutal savagery of British captors and ultimately turning to thoughts of a future American victory. Freneau began his poem with a description of the beauty of the American merchant ship *Aurora*, crafted 'with wonderous skill, and excellence of art', as it sailed from port in Philadelphia. It was not long, however, before the ship fell prey to the 'ungenerous Britons', who descended like 'famish'd wolves', taking this 'gay ship' and her crew captive. In stark contrast to the description of the *Aurora*, the British 'knaves, subservient to a bankrupt throne', forced the crew of the *Aurora* into the 'dark hulks' of the British prison ships in New York, 'rotten and old, replete with sighs and groans'. On being transferred to these vessels, the once-proud crew of the *Aurora* received only 'putrid water' to drink and 'mouldy bread' along with 'the flesh of rotten swine' to eat. Those who took ill were moved to the *Hunter*, a 'slaughter-house, yet *hospital* in name'. The only medical treatment was then provided by a Hessian doctor who was 'not chief Physician', but rather 'master o'er the murdering tribe'. In response to such treatment of Americans who had 'in Freedom's sacred cause allied', Freneau called on his fellow citizens to 'a just resentment shew, and glut revenge on this detested foe'. Ultimately he had no doubt of an American victory, and announced to his British enemies, 'the years approach that shall ruin bring your lords, your chiefs, your desolating king, whose murderous acts shall stamp his name accurs'd'.⁶⁰ His poem provided a compressed account of British cruelty toward American prisoners throughout the war. As the reprinting of Rowlandson's and Williams's narratives had done in the earliest days of the war, the narratives of Allen, Dodge, and Freneau provided stories of suffering and redemption that helped define and give meaning to their cause.

Although Allen's and Dodge's narratives were the only individual volumes of captivity, their success would spark a wave of captivity narratives in the decades that followed the Revolution. In addition to the Revolutionary prison narratives, frontier captivity and Barbary enslavement captured the imagination of the American public. Charles Herbert's diary, published in 1847, provides an example of the ongoing interest and the evolving role of the Revolutionary narratives. The publication of Herbert's account came as part of a renewed wave of interest in the sacrifices of the Revolutionary generation in 1847. That year, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, local officials appointed a committee to solicit funds to erect a monument over the remains of 12 veterans 'who fell martyrs to the cause

59 Ibid., pp. 12–18.

60 Philip Freneau, *Poems Relating to the American Revolution* (New York: W.J. Widdleton, 1865), pp. 78–101. See Burrows, *Forgotten Patriots*, for an extended examination of Freneau's wartime experience.

of liberty and independence ... in the battle of Bunker Hill'. In New York, Walt Whitman led the charge for the creation of a 'lofty monument' that might stand above the graves of those who had died aboard the city's prison ships. In Chicago the people of the booming urban centre were so desperate for a link to the Revolution they seized on the dubious claims of David Kennison, who declared himself to be 112 years old and a veteran of every battle from Lexington to Yorktown.⁶¹ Building on this popular interest, the publisher of Herbert's journal promised that a 'liberal share' of the proceeds from the sale of the volume would be donated to Herbert's widow, who had been unable to 'obtain either the pension allowed by the law of our land to widows of Revolutionary soldiers and sailors' and was now 'at the advanced age of eighty-four, lingering among us as a relic of a people precious in our memory'.⁶²

In many ways the renewed interest in the Revolution in 1847 paralleled American interest in the Puritan captivity narrative in the lead-up to the Revolution 75 years before. Engaged in a controversial war with Mexico and struggling with the great debate over slavery, the nation looked to its history for examples of patriots who sacrificed their own interests for the general good of the country. Just as Williams's and Rowlandson's narratives had provided comfort to Americans in the lead-up to the American Revolution, stories of American sacrifice served as an example to the citizens of the United States as they stretched across the continent. Whether individual volumes, official testimony presented before Congress, or press reports, these accounts of patriotism helped to define the cause for which Americans had fought and the boundaries of political participation in the new nation. Because any American could be a captive, any American could join in the debate about the nature of their cause. In the decades that followed the Revolution, as Americans continued their process of self-definition, stories of Americans held captive by a foreign power, just as they had during the Revolution, continued to inform the meaning of what it was to be an American.

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61 *Morning News* (New London, CT), 16 June and 19 August 1847; *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (NY), 2 July 1846. For more on events in New York, see Burrows, *Forgotten Patriots*, pp. 229–37. On David Kennison in Chicago, see Young, *Shoemaker and the Tea Party*, pp. 180–1.

62 Herbert, *Relic of the Revolution*, pp. 15–17.