

UELAC Honorary Vice-President Todd Braisted - 2007

My career in Loyalist studies started at the age of thirteen. Back in 1977, my family and I had been involved in Revolutionary War reenacting for about a year when we started doing more reading on local history. A lifelong resident of Bergen County, New Jersey, I discovered that area of New Jersey was primarily Loyalist during the war. Further reading showed the area supported the British not just in a political sense, but in a military one as well, with the raising in 1776 of the 4th Battalion, New Jersey Volunteers. We decided this side of history needed representation, so about seven of us founded the group that year. Founding the group was the easy part. Making it a reality and accurately taking the field was another.

The task of figuring out what the unit wore and making it fell to my cousin Steve Krentler and myself. Steve was in a technical high school at the time, and I was a bit of a book worm, so we created a division of labor: I would do the research, and Steve would make what I found. Our research bible, as it were, was Adrian Leiby's early 1960's book, *The Revolutionary War in the Hackensack Valley*.

Leiby had been a renowned local historian, and his research was noted for its extensive use of primary sources. It was then that I realized that these historical documents were actually still in existence. When you are a teenager, history that is 200 years old sometimes seems 2000 years old, so the thought of these documents still being around was indeed a revelation.

Since I was a mere adolescent, I believed these documents were the sole domain of learned scholars, and not to more plebian sorts such as me. So I took a shortcut, writing to another author, who had a picture of a New Jersey Volunteer in a book, but without any references to where he had gotten the information. The author wrote me back, six months later, saying that information could only be found by extensive research in archives, which he had no time to do for me. So, by the summer of 1979, I had written to the four main repositories cited by Leiby in his work: the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., the William L. Clements Library at the University of Michigan, the Public Record Office in England, and of course Ottawa's National Archives Canada. What I actually did not expect is that they would write back. They all did.

The rest, as they say, is history. I took jobs after school to finance obtaining documents from the Clements Library and hiring a researcher in England. I became a regular at the town library, ordering microfilm on inter-library loan from Ottawa and Washington, D.C. By college, I was ducking out of boring classes to head over to Newark's public library, where they had the Audit Office Papers on microfilm. At 16, I had already visited Ottawa and the New Brunswick Museum in Saint John, where I got to do radio on the CBC, discussing Loyalist research. This was very cool...

The best part of all the experiences was that of meeting others doing period research, such as Don Hagist of Rhode Island, and Don Londahl-Smidt of New Jersey. It expanded my horizons past the New Jersey Volunteers, to see the void that existed in Loyalist studies everywhere, particularly in a military sense. In an age before the internet, research was a bit of a more hands on approach, and that meant lots of travel. Trips to the Clements Library, Ottawa and Saint John were an annual affair. Two weeks in



London on a shoestring budget. Day trips to Washington, driving off from home at 3:00 AM to get started at the Library of Congress or National Archives by 8:30. Accommodations were sometimes the hatch of my 1977 Pinto, but copies cost money, so certain sacrifices in the area of comfort had to be made. It was all a great adventure.

By 1989 I had been approached by the UELAC to speak at their annual meeting in Lennoxville, Quebec. I had met Peter Johnson some years before, and he was truly my man in Ontario, guiding me to new people to meet, and expanding my circle of research acquaintances. The Lennoxville meeting was incredible, so many Loyalist descendents to meet! And of course getting to meet HRH Prince Philip, the keynote speaker.

Lectures, research and writing continued into the nineties. By now my name had gotten around some, and many descendents would drop me a line, telling tales of their ancestors, and hoping to glean some new information. What struck me was how far and wide these people came from. While I expected many from Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Ontario, I received letters from all over Canada, the United States and as far away as Australia! Trying to find all these ancestors in a timely manner was a bit of a challenge, but luckily the personal computer was just starting to make the scene. Learning database software, I undertook to create a file that would provide information in a few keystrokes on all military Loyalists. That work continues to this day, with nearly 30,000 entries, and many more to go.

Computers also led to the rapidly evolving technology of e-mails and the internet. Suddenly one could communicate instantly, and cheaply, across the globe. The resulting flood of queries was enjoyable, but very time consuming, particularly as much of the basic information was the same from one query to the next. I definitely needed a web presence, something to direct people to that could provide accurate information, and be a jumping off point to their own research, much like Leiby's book was to me so many years before. The solution was to create a website. The only problem preventing that happening was my being completely web illiterate.

In the late 1990's I was very fortunate to make the cyber-acquaintance of a woman named Nan Cole. Nan was an executive with Kraft Foods in Chicago and a genealogist with Loyalist lines. She did some volunteer work with Golden Gate Genealogy on Loyalist forums and convinced me to start giving "cyber lectures" where people all over the world could attend in real time to watch a lecture scroll in front of them, and then ask questions afterwards. This was quite fun, and we became good friends. Nan certainly realized my need for a website and amazingly taught herself html, setting us on the path to the internet. After nine months of ideas, tests, uploads and lots of patience, our website, www.royalprovincial.com went live in February 2000.

Combining military research with genealogy and reenacting, the hope was to combine all facets of Loyalist study and heritage. The centerpiece of the site would be a selection of my research. To date, I have amassed a library of about 39,000 pages of primary research, transcribed mostly by myself. The research is divided to subject matter into about 100 notebooks. There was no inclination to put everything out there, but rather a selection to show people what type of material was available, maybe answer a few questions, and give people a start in the right direction.

The website was successful in ways I could only have dreamed about. We became a research tool for elementary, secondary and high schools, as well as universities. The site was listed as a resource by both government and private institutions. People from around the world offered images of treasures from their attics, happy to finally have an outlet to discuss Loyalist issues. Each month hundreds, or even thousands more visitors peruse the pages of our site. With some 1,600+ pages on-line, there is much to explore, and we still try to add some new things as time allows. Nan has retired from active service, but I am pleased

to now be teamed up with John Korchok, a website designer and fellow Loyalist reenactor here in Bergen County.

Since that time, research and lectures continue apace. My main goal now is to do more original writing, putting the research I have amassed to good use. My current project is to write a comprehensive history of the Provincial Corps.

Organizations:

4th Battalion, New Jersey Volunteers reenactment group, 1977-present, executive director .
Brigade of the American Revolution, 1979-present, past-president.
Company of Military Historians, 1987-present, former chairman, West Point Chapter.
Bergen County Historical Society, 1997-present, past-president.
Bergen County Revolutionary War Roundtable, 1984-present, member.
1759 Historic Vought House Association, 2006-present, trustee.
United Empire Loyalist Association of Canada, 2007-present, honorary vice-president.

Co-author:

Moving On: Black Loyalists in the Afro-Atlantic World (Garland: 1999.)
The Revolutionary War in Bergen County (History Press: 2007.)
Revolutionary Bergen County (History Press: 2009.)
The Loyalist Corps (Fox Acre Press: to be released 2011)

Author of numerous journal articles.

Editorial Board Member & contributing author *American Revolution Magazine*.

Guest Historian:

PBS *History Detectives*
CBC *Who Do You Think You Are?*

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