

Robert Leake Major KRRNY

[In the summer of 2008 issue of "New York Archives", Volume 8, Number 1, appears the following titled "Soldier of the First Civil War" by David Bosse. Mentioned within are the names of John and Henry Ruiter of Hoosick and Pittstown respectively. Names connected with Phillipsburg in Quebec near the Vermont border.]

"Historians today recognize the American Revolution as the first civil war fought in this country. Late eighteenth century American colonists who adopted a political position divided into two camps: those who favored rebellion against Britain (Whigs) and those who supported the King and his colonial agents (Tories or Loyalists). This fragmentation affected virtually every segment of the colonial population, with little regard for geography or social, economic, or religious affiliation. Often the divide between Whigs and Loyalists turned to personal violence and even military action on the part of Loyalists, who organized regiments that fought alongside British regulars.

The number of Loyalists is estimated at roughly half a million - nearly 20% of the colonial population at the beginning of the Revolution. New York surpassed all other colonies in its Loyalist sympathizers, and has been often called a Loyalist stronghold. The occupation of New York City by British forces in the fall of 1776 unquestionably helped bolster the Loyalist cause in the province, and a considerable number of Loyalists also resided upstate in Westchester, Dutchess, Albany, Tryon and Charlotte Counties. (Charlotte County later became Washington County; and then subdivided into Clinton, Essex, Warren and Washington Counties).

Although not the first colony to pass anti-Loyalist laws, New York's were among the most severe. Early in 1777 the provincial legislature established a Commission of Sequestration with the authority to confiscate and sell the property of individuals allied with the British cause. Two years later, on October 22, 1779, the legislature passed the Act of Attainder, which provided for the forfeiture and subsequent sale of lands owned by persons "adherent to the King". This act named fifty-nine men and women from throughout the colony who had been "convicted and attained" of loyalty to the King, directed their real and personal property to become "vested in the people of the state", pronounced them guilty of a felony punishable by death if apprehended in New York, and banished them from the colony.

These individuals included the former governor and attorney general, justices of the Supreme Court, members of the provincial council, and the mayor of New York. The remainder consisted of assorted esquires, merchants, wives, clerks, yeomen and gentlemen. Among the latter was Robert William Leake of Albany County.

An Overlooked Loyalist

Leake has largely remained hidden from history, since most documentation regarding New York Loyalists relates to individuals and events in the greater New York City area and lower Hudson Valley. But a preservation program at the New York State Archives has brought to light a large cadre of letters and documents relating to Leake and others in Albany County, through efforts to conserve the Revolutionary-era Second Series of Land

Papers. These papers establish many of the parameters of Leake's life and those of his immediate family.

A copy of Robert William Leake's baptismal record shows that he was born on May 15, 1750, and baptized five days later, presumably in Bedington, County Durham, England. The family later moved to New York, where his father, Robert Leake, Esq., held the office of Commissary General of North America. A younger son, John George Leake, born in 1752, resided near his father and his stepmother, Ann, in New York City, where he studied law and eventually became a prominent attorney.

Between 1747 and 1749, Robert Leake, Esq., had served as commissary at Louisburg, Nova Scotia, and he returned to North America in 1754 as commissary to Major-General Edward Braddock's ill-fated campaign in western Pennsylvania. As a senior colonial government agent, he was well positioned to acquire extensive tracts of land. His commissary correspondence with Indian agent Sir William Johnson suggests that Johnson advised Leake on the availability and price of property in the Mohawk and upper Hudson Valleys. In all, Leake owned real estate in New York, New Jersey, and even Florida.

Upstate

By 1771, Robert William had gone north to manage his father's holdings in Pittstown (Rensselaer County), across the Hudson from Albany. Surviving letters provide a glimpse of his relationship with an affectionate stepmother and stern father. In the same letter in which he gave his son permission to sell lots and draw up deeds for land in Pittstown, Robert Sr. accused Robert William of being "lazy or forgetful". John also corresponded with brother Robert about family and business matters, and occasionally informed him of their father's displeasure with his land transactions and advised him to "take care in any future Agreement you make".

Upon the death of their father in December, 1773, John and Robert inherited considerable landholdings. The brothers shared lands near the confluence of the Hudson and Mohawk Rivers near "the halfmoon" (in the proximity of Waterford in Saratoga County), as well as in the Bedington Patent in present-day Delaware County. John became owner of a farm in Claverack, Columbia County, and of land in German Flatts, south of the Mohawk River, while Robert gained title to more than 4000 acres of property in Pittstown, which was his father's share of the township divided among the original proprietors.

To develop his property and create income, in 1772 Robert erected a mill on the upper falls of the east branch of Sankanisick Creek. When petitioning for restitution from the British government in 1787, Robert claimed that by 1776 he had cleared eighty acres on which he grew Indian corn and other grain, owned a dwelling house, stable, barns, and other out-buildings, and operated two sawmills and a grist mill. He also sold food and goods such as shoes, cloth, cutlery, dishes, salt, wheat, and fish to the Pittstown neighbors.

Beyond providing evidence of his business dealings, Leake's papers also show that he was a slaveowner in 1773. Robert's stepmother, Ann, gave him a slave named Nano. According to brother John, "a little spurring" would make her a useful addition to "a family where female labour is so much wanted." John went on to add, "the Messenger dispatched to Secaucus for yr Wench's Clothes & Bedding returned this morning empty

handed. She is therefore sent with what she brought from home with ye. Addition of a striped Blanket." Shortly, thereafter, Ann wrote to ask Robert if he would like to purchase another slave, Dublin, for a "trifle" or she could make Dublin think that her recently deceased husband had willed him to Robert.

The Lines Are Drawn

Just days before the battles at Lexington and Concord signaled the beginning of the American Revolution in 1775, a discouraged Robert wrote to John expressing a desire to "settle his affairs" in Pittstown and return to New York. But for whatever reason, this did not occur. Later in April, Ann wrote to Robert. "Terrible Times, My heart almost broke do come down to us." She also noted that "poor Bob Harding is tomorrow to make his concession at the Liberty Pole for sending Bords for Boston poor fellow when he told us I said to be resolute tho I believe the Lump in his throat as big as an Egg". Harding was one of the New York merchants who attempted to provision General Thomas Gage's troops, only to back down in the face of an angry mob of Whigs.

Once independence had been declared, Robert's Loyalist leanings put him at odds with his military obligations. Each adult white male above the age of sixteen was required to report for the local militia's training day, and then serve as needed in times of conflict. But in August, 1776, Robert, along with Pittstown neighbors, William and Thomas Lamson, failed to appear for duty. Consequently they were each fined ten shillings, payable as "goods and chattels", and subject to arrest in default of payment. In Robert's case, a cart was seized and sold at public auction on August 31. Years later, when he applied for compensation from the British government, Robert stated that he encouraged his neighbors to maintain their allegiance by refusing to take up arms against the Crown, possibly in reference to the non-compliance.

In the summer of 1777, when General John Burgoyne left Canada to begin his campaign of capturing and controlling the Hudson Valley and New York City, Robert Leake and John Macomb of Pittstown, and Francis Pfister, a veteran of the French and Indian War who lived just north of Pittstown in Hoosick, recruited Loyalist troops in support of Burgoyne. Pfister, who had held the rank of colonel in the British army, commanded one of two Loyalist units that accompanied Lieutenant Colonel Fredrich Baum's detachment, sent by Burgoyne to destroy rebel supplies stored at Bennington, Vermont.

The ill-equipped and untrained Loyalists did little to prevent Baum's utter defeat on August 16, 1777 (The Battle of Bennington). Pfister died of his wounds, and two-thirds of his troops were killed, captured, or unaccounted for. Leake escaped and joined Burgoyne's army at Saratoga, where he was taken prisoner, and paroled to Canada. Prisoners taken at Bennington and Saratoga reorganized as a corps under the command of Samuel McKay. Leake, along with John and Henry Ruitter of Hoosick and Pittstown respectively, served as captains under McKay. Leake ultimately achieved the rank of Major in the Second Battalion of the Royal Regiment of New York.

Ruin and Rediscovery

Having been declared an enemy of the state, and suffering confiscation of his lands after taking up arms against fellow Americans, Robert Leake was banished from New York -- which meant permanent separation from his beloved brother John and stepmother Ann. He returned to England at the Revolution's end and married Margaret Watts, daughter of New York Loyalist John Watts (1715-1789), who had moved to England in 1775. The pain of Robert's forced exile may have been alleviated somewhat by the reunion with his older sister, Margareta, who had remained in England and by his marriage, but Robert valued the loss of his property in Pittstown and elsewhere in New York at more than 8000 Pounds, only a portion of which the Crown reimbursed. Interestingly, the connection between the Leake and Watts families has endured. John's lands, unlike Robert's, were not confiscated, and he accumulated a personal fortune of \$300,000 and real estate holdings of roughly equivalent value at the time of his death in 1827. John, who never married, bequeathed his estate to his nephew by Robert's marriage, Robert J. Watts, if Watts would legally take the name Leake. Watts agreed, but died soon thereafter. The Watts family then honored John's wish to establish a home for boys in Manhattan, incorporated in 1831 as the Leake and Watts Orphan House. It operates to this day as a social service agency in Yonkers, called Leake and Watts Services, Inc.

Robert William Leake died on June 15, 1788 in Cardiff, Wales, at age thirty-eight. Nineteenth century published histories of Rensselaer County expunged his presence from Pittstown's narrative, but his activities in the town, and the role he played in the upper Hudson Valley's Loyalist drama, can now be rediscovered."

Submitted by Bill Glidden, Historian of the Valcour Battle Chapter, Sons of the American Revolution.