

Benjamin Willson, Quaker Loyalist from New Jersey

Benjamin Willson (1739-1805), son of a Scottish immigrant, was raised in Wantage, Sussex County, New Jersey, located at the northern tip of New Jersey, about 30 miles west of the Hudson and 60 miles northwest of New York City. Benjamin was a Quaker and a member of the Hardwick Monthly Meeting in Sussex.

The Revolutionary War presented a quandary for Quakers in America. Early in the religion's history, Quakers believed that fighting was permissible if the cause was just. However, by 1776 most Quakers believed in either passive resistance or outright pacifism. Benjamin Willson opposed the armed rebellion against England, and acted by recruiting colonists to join the British Army. His activities were based on Staten Island, a British stronghold during most of the war. In 1776, Willson was arrested by Colonial authorities, charged with boarding a British ship, and was sent to a prison for Loyalists in Frederick, Maryland.

In March 1777, Willson was released on a summons by the Council of Safety of New Jersey. He returned to Wantage where his movements were carefully watched for the duration of the war. There is a record of his appearance before the Sussex County Court in May 1778 when the court required that he post a bond of £300, agree to obtain court permission to leave the county, and continue to appear at each quarterly court session. Such cases were common on the dockets of County courts during the Revolution. In New Jersey, if a defendant failed to appear before the court as required, he was indicted for treason, and his property was confiscated.

After the Revolution, Loyalists continued to suffer in the new United States. The Treaty of Paris that ended the war in 1783 required that Loyalists would no longer be subject to land confiscation or other persecution, but many states did not feel bound by the terms of the treaty. At the same time, England offered a tempting refuge for Loyalists: any man or woman who could prove their support of the Crown during the war could move to Canada and receive a grant of 200 acres of land, or more. France had ceded Canada to England just 20 years earlier, at the end of the French and Indian War, and the English were anxious to populate Ontario as a bulwark against expansion of the new United States.

In 1787, Benjamin Willson, his wife Sarah Crowell, and their young family joined a large group of Quakers to move to Bertie, Ontario, near Niagara Falls, to start a new life. Benjamin was granted a total of 1,200 acres of land in Bertie. Not long afterward, Benjamin's son Gilman met and married Hannah Sypes, the daughter of the Loyalist icon Hannah Schauer Sypes (Mrs. Edward Stokes).

Gilman Willson continued his father's legacy as a Loyalist to the Crown: he served as a Captain in the Middlesex (Ontario) militia during the War of 1812. Gilman was present at the surrender of Detroit in August 1812, and fought in numerous battles during the war including the Battle of Lundy's Lane in 1814.

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