



The Hessians

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Two hundred and thirty one years ago, soldiers from the central German principality of Hesse-Cassel died of illness in St. Paul's Church, and were buried in a common grave at the back of the churchyard. Young privates, they were fighting against the American Revolution through the common 18th century European soldier trade -- small states with good armies like Hesse loaned their forces, for a price, to larger powers like Great Britain

The soldiers had landed on Staten Island in the summer of 1776 with the First Hessian division, part of a large British-Hessian force dispatched to crush the American rebellion. Indeed, in August and September, those Hessian troops were part of a determined campaign that rolled over the fledgling American army in Brooklyn and Manhattan.

On October 18, their forces were engaged in the Battle of Pell's Point about a mile from St. Paul's in today's Pelham Bay Park. Following the engagement, wounded and sick Hessian soldiers were moved into the half completed extant St. Paul's Church, which was transformed into a field hospital. Construction of the stone and brick church had begun in 1763. A contemporary account of the half completed church during the Hessian occupation reported there was "no floor, the sleepers are not even down, but along the sides of the building are seen large pieces of timber upon which the sick are sitting or reclining." An open sand pit at the rear of the yard, which was being used to make mortar, soon became a burial site for the Hessian men who died in the church.

Hessian records indicate the likely identity of five of those casualties. They were privates, ranging from 21 to 28 years old, serving with the Regiment von Knyphausen -- Heinrich Euler, Conrad Roth, Johann Heinrich Grein, Daniel Schaefer, and Ludwig Juppert. The men were not students, landowners, or skilled craftsmen -- all of those categories were barred from service in the Hessian expeditionary force to protect the more productive elements of society from the perils of warfare. In 1776, the Hessians usually also barred a family's only son from foreign service. Most likely, the five Hessians were second or third sons of rural farm families of modest means.

The world of the Hessians, emphasizing strict loyalty to the sovereign and traditional values of hierarchy, honor and service, was far removed from the ideals of the American Revolution. But the burial of those German privates in the St. Paul's graveyard remains one of the most resonant links in the area to the great struggle for freedom and independence that launched this republic.