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## The Ward Family and the American Revolution

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The experiences of two brothers and one of their wives, all buried in the cemetery at St. Paul's Church National Historic Site, highlight the consequences of difficult decisions reached during the American Revolution.

Stephen and Edmund Ward were members of one of Eastchester's leading families, who chose different paths at the crucial crossroads of 1775-6, and those decisions made all the difference. Edmund was the older brother, a town official, one of the area's wealthiest landowners, and he chose the King, or Loyalism. Stephen was also an Eastchester official, but, younger and perhaps more ambitious, he embraced the Patriot movement and the path of Revolution.

Edmund was among many prominent men in Westchester County who perceived the Revolution as dangerous folly, and worked in 1774-5 to seek a peaceful settlement, carefully avoiding entanglement with the Patriot movement. The surge in support for the Revolution stirred by the onset of fighting in Massachusetts in April 1775 relegated their conservative views to the minority, forcing them to maintain a low profile. But the invasion of New York by British forces in the summer of 1776 transformed them into a dangerous element capable of collaborating with the enemy, in Patriot eyes. In August of 1776, Ward was imprisoned in White Plains by local vigilance committees, and later confined in buildings along the Hudson River and in Massachusetts. The 48-year-old former Eastchester resident escaped in March 1777, reaching the safety of British lines in New York City, where he spent the rest of the war "at his own great Expense," awaiting what he and other Loyalists presumed would be a British victory and a return to their former stations in life.

It's possible he visited the St. Paul's neighborhood during the war, if only to check on his family. Phoebe Ward and her children stayed on the family farm, scraping out a meager existence on the notorious "neutral ground," caught in a no man's land, between the British in Manhattan and the Americans in the Hudson Highlands, where no government had firm control. Seeking supplies and forage, soldiers from both sides raided the area and fought numerous skirmishes.

Precarious as it was, Phoebe's life on the neutral ground was secured, it would seem, through the protection of her brother-in-law Stephen Ward, who became a trusted official in the Patriot cause, taking on several political and military roles. He gathered army supplies as a Commissary and represented Eastchester in various state assemblies. Most significantly for the family history, he was appointed Sequestration officer, confiscating lands of Loyalists who fled to join the British. Stephen apparently permitted his

connection with the Wards - he was, after all, Phoebe's brother in law and uncle of her children -- to influence his decisions, since some, but not all, of Edmund Ward's 300-acre estate was seized during the war.

Phoebe and her children remained on the rest of the land. Did she share her husband's political sympathies, or was she resentful because of the predicament in which his departure left her? It's difficult to know, but at some point during the war she distanced herself from Edmund's support for British to the extent that it might bring relief for her family. Reporting her grave condition in a petition to New York Governor George Clinton and the assembly for support, she acknowledged that while Edmund had sided with the Crown, "a Wife cannot alter Principles or Dictate a Husband so far as to change his present conduct in Matters of so great moment and of so great Importance as this present or past Revolutions." There's no record that she received assistance from the state.

While Phoebe struggled, Stephen Ward's position in the Patriot cause was insufficient to safeguard his property in the dangerous setting of the neutral ground. His fine home located three miles north of St. Paul's Church was destroyed in 1778 by British forces on order of Lord Tryon, part of an effort to punish the Americans, especially their leaders, for the refusal of the Continental Congress to meet with a British peace commission headed by Lord Carlisle.

The end of the war brought even more trouble for Edmund and Phoebe Ward. June 1783 was a vicious month in Westchester, with the fighting over, but civil government not restored, anger at the Loyalists reached a crescendo, and even a leading figure like Stephen couldn't prevent the final confiscation of his brother's land. Written in desperation, Phoebe's June 6 letter to her husband Edmund in New York City is worth quoting in full:

*"Kind Husband: I am sorry to acquaint you that our farme is sold. They said if I did not quit poseion that that had aright to take any thing on the farme or in the house to pay the cost of a law sute and imprisen me I have suffered most Every thing but death it self in your long absens pray Grant me spedy Relaeef (relief) or God only knows what will be come of me and my frendsles (friendless) Children. That say my poseion was nothing youre husband has forfeted his estate by joining the British enemy with a free and vollentary (voluntary) will and thereby was forfeted to the Stat and sold. All at present from you cind and Loveing Wife, phebe Ward. Pray send me speday anser.*

Edmund, Phoebe and their children joined thousands of Loyalists evacuees, sailing to Nova Scotia, Canada for a new life under British protection. Meanwhile, Stephen emerged from the war with an excellent reputation, and his public career advanced accordingly. He was selected as Town Supervisor in the 1780s, and also earned distinction as a State Senator, Judge, Presidential elector and was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1796, dying the following year at age 67. Large, expensive, and prominently located, Ward's pew in St. Paul's Church in 1787 reflected his status in the society.

Sharing the experience of many Loyalists, the Wards struggled with the harsh climate and limited economic opportunity in Canada. By the 1790s, as the strongest passions of the war had subsided, they joined a small but steady trickle of returnees. Given Stephen Ward's stature in the community, it's difficult to believe that his brother and Phoebe would have returned to the parish without the judge's acceptance, so we can presume some kind of reconciliation occurred. Edmund's pre-war estate had been partitioned and auctioned off, but the family returned to a much smaller piece of land in the community and quietly resumed their lives.

So who had the last word? Interred behind the church, Stephen Ward is memorialized through a tall white marble gravestone, whose epitaph gloriously reads: "Sons of America, Mourn for your country, she has lost a friend Who did her rights and liberties defend. May rising patriots keep those rights secure, And hand them down to latest ages pure. Mourn too, ye friends and relatives who knew His worth, his kindness and his love to you. But duty bids us all resign, and say, Thy will be done who gave and took away." Yet, the corrosive impact of acid rain beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century has obliterated the original inscription. Buried 20 yards away, the gravestone of Phoebe Ward, who lived until 1801, includes a modest epitaph: "Piety and Benevolence constituted the chief Excellencies of her character; But in no duty was she wanting." Edmund died in 1807, at age 78, but graves for him and Phoebe are marked by sandstone grave markers, which, for a variety of geological reasons, have withstood the test of time and the elements, and the inscriptions can be appreciated by today's visitors to St. Paul's.