



## *The Ghost Ship of Brooklyn: An Untold Story of the American Revolution*

by Robert P. Watson.

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Journalist and political analyst Robert Watson begins *The Ghost Ship of Brooklyn* by reminding readers that, from antiquity to the present, grateful nations have honored their fallen soldiers. But in the United States honoring those who died to establish the nation was not a priority during the Early Republic. In particular, men who died as prisoners of war on British prison ships, including the infamous HMS *Jersey*, during the Revolutionary War were not honored for many decades. Buried in shallow, unmarked graves on beaches and dunes on the Brooklyn shoreline, their remains were exposed by tides and winds only hours after their hasty interment. Others remained buried, forgotten, and undiscovered for over a century until construction projects in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries exhumed them.

Watson examines the sometimes bumbling, half-hearted, well-intentioned, and politically hijacked efforts to commemorate some eleven thousand unknown men who died onboard HMS *Jersey*. Only in the first decades of the twentieth century were their remains reinterred and their collective sacrifice recognized by their countrymen. The author tells the appalling tale of POW life on the floating dungeon, drawing on survivors' memoirs and newspaper accounts to contextualize the history of the *Jersey*, the battles that led to the British occupation of New York City, and the personal stories of young POWs.

Launched in 1736 and armed with sixty cannons, the *Jersey* began its career in the British navy during the War of Jenkins' Ear (1739-48). Converted to a hospital ship in 1771, it was refitted as a prison ship in 1779 and stripped of its cannons, figurehead, masts, and sails. In spring 1780, it was towed to a new location in Wallabout Bay near the village of Brooklyn and joined a small flotilla of other decrepit hulks serving the same purpose.

Watson recounts the seizure by British forces (under brothers Gen. John and Adm. Sir William Howe) of New York City from the beleaguered Continental Army (mid-Sept. 1776). Besides serving as the location of British headquarters for the entire war, New York soon became a city of makeshift, overcrowded prisons filled with captured enemy combatants, spies real and imagined, and anyone thought to be sympathetic to the American cause or who otherwise ran afoul of his majesty's forces. Conditions in congested temporary jails located in churches of dissenting sects, the buildings of King's College, sugar houses, and other commandeered structures swiftly degenerated as British troops and Loyalist sympathizers brought in more and more "rebels" for incarceration. Neither side had anticipated having to detain large numbers of POWs' in what was expected to be a short conflict. But as the war dragged on through 1783, the problem of overcrowded and filthy detention centers became acute. Although not specifically designed to address

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1. See, further, Ken Miller, *Dangerous Guests: Enemy Captives and Revolutionary Communities during the War for Independence* (Ithaca: Cornell U Pr, 2014), and Daniel Krebs, *A Generous and Merciful Enemy: Life for German Prisoners of War during the American Revolution* (Norman: U Okla Pr, 2013).

the POW situation in America, Parliament's Hulk Act of 1776 (renewed every two years) provided British military leaders with a handy solution to the POW problem. The Howe brothers decommissioned, hulked, and repurposed ships as massive buoyant jails. But conditions on the *Jersey* and other British prison ships soon became far worse than those in land-based prisons.

Watson next sketches the biographies of the young men whose reminiscences are his key primary sources: Thomas Andros, Thomas Dring, Ebenezer Fox, Christopher Hawkins, and Andrew Sherburne. They were mostly New Englanders embarked on privateering voyages for adventure, fortune, and to assist in the American war effort. Such crewmen made up the bulk of the sad denizens of the floating hell in Wallabout Bay.

American POWs on the *Jersey* and the seven other prison ships endured nearly every conceivable indignity. British jailers treated their former colonial brethren with casual brutality, hostility, and neglect. A thousand or more men packed in the three-tiered hellhole lived in dark, foul spaces, breathing fetid air that reeked of infection, urine, feces, and vomit throughout hot and humid summers and dank and freezing winters. Intentional and unintentional cruelties reduced the inmates to diseased, lice-ridden, skeletal figures clad in filthy rags. Additional torments included innumerable rats, inadequate drinking water, and minimal rations of (often spoiled) food, all garnished with plentiful helpings of verbal and physical abuse.

That anyone lived through such experiences is astonishing. One survivor of the *Jersey* recalled that often as many as dozen men died daily. Even so, Watson also includes tales of defiant endurance, invincible hope, escapes, near escapes, and even a rebellion. Compounding the prisoners' anguish, the author observes, was the absence of international rules regarding POWs or their exchange; the assumption that warring nations would contribute to the care and feeding of their own captured troops; and the theft of supplies sent by Congress and families for detainees. States, towns, and individuals had to form cartels to pay bribes and negotiate freedom for prisoners, because the British considered dealing directly with representatives of the Congress or Continental Army to be tantamount to recognizing the United States.

While the author skillfully reconstructs the horrific, little known story of the *Jersey* and its prisoners, he is prone to exaggeration and sensationalism. He suggests, for example, that the prison ship's missing records were likely destroyed by British authorities. But a thorough examination of official British records in the 1960s, proved that misfiled or undiscovered records might still exist in manuscript collections overseas. Jesse Lemisch has suggested that the *Jersey's* log keepers were "far from faithful."<sup>2</sup> Regardless, records may still exist and, since eighteenth-century royal officials were in no danger of survivors' lawsuits or war crimes trials, why would they purposely destroy reports they were supposed to send up the chain of command.?

Watson states that the British provided POWs with insufficient and spoiled rations. While this is true and fits the overarching theme of British cruelty to colonials, the king's soldiers, too, regularly received too few and rotten rations.<sup>3</sup> British administrators saw no need to provide decent food to American POWs, whom they considered the worst kinds of criminals—rebels and privateers—when their own troops had very little wholesome chow. Watson stresses that American POWs had no fresh provisions, then contradicts himself with the stories of two women,

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2. "Listening to the 'Inarticulate': William Widger's Dream and the Loyalties of American Revolutionary Seamen in British Prisons," *Journal of Social History* 3.1 (1969) 1-29.

3. See, esp., Arthur Bowler, *Logistics and the Failure of the British Army in America, 1775-1783* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Pr, 1975; rpt. 2015).

“Dame” Grant and Elizabeth Burgin, who sold fruit, vegetables, and notions to both POWs and their guards.

Watson makes a surprising historical error in writing that “In April 1782, the Continental Congress dispatched John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, John Jay, and Henry Laurens to Paris to open negotiations” (206). In fact, Congress had created a joint commission consisting of these men (and Thomas Jefferson, who never joined the group), to negotiate a peace with Britain in June 1781. Moreover, Franklin had been in Paris since late 1776 and Jay in Madrid since 1779. It was Franklin who summoned Jay to the French capital in April 1782. Although Adams arrived in Paris in February 1780, in June, Congress assigned him the task of securing loans from the Dutch. He arrived in Amsterdam in August but returned to the French capital for the peace talks in late October 1782.<sup>4</sup>

The book’s subtitle asserts that the story of the *Jersey* has not been told. But its author’s principal contemporary sources—Andros, Dring, Fox, Hawkins, and Sherburne—all published their nightmarish stories, and two excellent present-day histories cover much the same territory.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, *The Ghost Ship of Brooklyn* is a welcome, if not unique, reminder that many unknown patriots suffered greatly and gave their lives to establish the United States and that we should keep their memory alive.

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4. The book also has some small proofreading errors. We read, e.g., that “The region [Manhattan and Long Island] had originally been home to the Iroquois [read Lenape], Algonquin, and other native peoples” (76). The index lists Samuel [read Andrew] Sherburne. The bibliography lists John Fanning Watson’s 1846 book as *Annals and Occurrences of New York City and State, in the Olden* [read *Older*] *Time*.

5. Edwin G. Burrows, *Forgotten Patriots: The Untold Story of American Prisoners during the Revolutionary War* (NY: Basic Books, 2008), and Larry Lowenthal, *Hell on the East River: British Prison Ships in the American Revolution* (Fleischmanns, NY: Purple Mtn Pr, 2009).