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Citation for published version:

Cogliano, F 1998, "We All Hoisted the American Flag:" National Identity among American Prisoners in Britain during the American Revolution' *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 32, pp. 19-37.

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Journal of American Studies

Publisher Rights Statement:

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Author(s): Francis D. Cogliano

Source: *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Apr., 1998), pp. 19-37

Published by: [Cambridge University Press](#) on behalf of the [British Association for American Studies](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27556322>

Accessed: 16/12/2013 08:01

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“We All Hoisted the American Flag:” National identity among American Prisoners in Britain during the American Revolution

FRANCIS D. COGLIANO

I

“What is an American?” asked the French émigré Hector St. John Crèvecoeur in 1782. In so doing, Crèvecoeur posed one of the fundamental questions of the revolutionary era. When the colonists overthrew imperial authority; declared independence; formed an independent confederation of states; and waged war for its existence; they created a new nation and a new nationality. To be sure, colonists and Britons alike had long used the term “American,” none the less, a complete sense of American national identity was largely inchoate before the American Revolution. Before the Revolution, most Americans identified more with their individual colonies than with an abstract geographic concept like “America.”¹ While the Revolution did not completely supplant regional loyalties, it introduced a new, compelling loyalty: to the United States of America. The Revolution forced Americans to choose between loyalty to Britain or the United States. Ultimately, the majority opted for the United States. Those who did, helped define what it meant to be American by their words and actions. The purpose of this article is to examine the development of loyalty to the United States and the development of an American national identity among one group of Americans: sailors imprisoned in Britain during the Revolution.²

Francis D. Cogliano is a Lecturer in the Department of History, University of Edinburgh, William Robertson Building, 50 George Square, Edinburgh EH8 9JY. The author wishes to thank Commander Paddy Johnston, R.N. (ret), Len Travors and Charles Hanson for their comments and advice.

¹ Judith A. Wilson “My Country is My Colony: A Study in Anglo-American Patriotism, 1739–1760,” *The Historian*, 30 (1968), 333–49.

² There is a vast literature on nationalism and national identity. Perhaps the best starting-point is Anthony D. Smith’s, *National Identity* (London, 1991). Also useful for this study is “War and Ethnicity: The Role of Warfare in the Formation, Self-Images and

During the Revolutionary War, between two and three thousand American privateers roamed the seas preying on British shipping. These ships, of varying size and quality, required in total approximately 70,000 sailors. During the course of the conflict, more than 2,400 American sailors were captured and imprisoned as pirates in England. Most of them were incarcerated in two places: Mill Prison in Plymouth, and Forton Prison in Portsmouth.³ The study of these mariners provides an opportunity to view the forging of an American identity from the perspective of those at the bottom of the American social hierarchy. Despite their lack of status, mariners played a critical role in making the Revolution. Jesse Lemisch and, more recently, Marcus Rediker, have demonstrated the key contributions of sailors to the ideology of the American Revolution and to the struggle for independence.⁴ Consideration of the sailors while in captivity is especially rewarding because it makes possible an examination of the thoughts and feelings of those normally considered “inarticulate.” As Lemisch wrote, “The naval prisons of the American Revolution are an especially rewarding place to look for evidence of the inarticulate. A rich concentration of sources from conflicting points of view enables us to look into the mind of the common

Cohesion of Ethnic Communities,” by the same author which appeared in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 4 (1981), 375–97. For a concise discussion of the recent literature on nationalism see Michael Hughes *Nationalism and Society: Germany, 1800–1945* (London, 1988, repr. 1991), Ch. 1. Hughes argued that a nation must have four essential ingredients: defined territory, criteria to distinguish members of the nation from non-members, consciousness of membership in a community, and a desire for independent self-determination. (p. 9) According to these criteria, the prison experience certainly fostered a sense of national identity among the revolutionary sailors.

- ³ Philip Chadwick Foster Smith, “The Privateering Impulse of the American Revolution,” *Essex Institute Historical Collections*, 119 (1983), 49–62, esp. pp. 50–51. For the number of Americans imprisoned in England see Lemisch, “Listening to the ‘Inarticulate’: William Widger’s Dream and the Loyalties of American Revolutionary Seamen in British Prisons,” *Journal of Social History*, 3 (1969–70), 1–29, n15. For a list of Americans imprisoned in the Plymouth see Francis D. Cogliano and Young-Mi S. Cogliano, “A Register of Americans Imprisoned in the Old Mill Prison, Plymouth, England, 1777–1782,” manuscript in the library of the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts. The most complete study of the prisons is Sheldon S. Cohen, *Yankee Sailors in British Gaols: Prisoners of War at Forton and Mill, 1777–1783* (Newark, 1995).
- ⁴ See Jesse Lemisch, “Jack Tar in the Streets: Merchant Seamen in the Politics of Revolutionary America,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., 25 (1968), 371–407; repr. in Michael McGiffert, ed., *In Search of Early America: The William and Mary Quarterly, 1943–1993* (Richmond, 1993), 109–37; and Marcus Rediker, “A Motley Crew of Rebels: Sailors, Slaves, and the Coming of the American Revolution,” in Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert, eds., *The Transforming Hand of Revolution: Reconsidering the Revolution as a Social Movement* (Charlottesville, 1996), 155–98.

seaman; here, we can begin to say meaningful things about what the significance the Revolution had for at least some of the inarticulate."⁵

Several captive sailors left diaries which detail their lives in prison and their attitudes toward the Revolution.⁶ Others wrote memoirs about their experiences which were published in the years after the Revolution.⁷ These diaries and memoirs are an invaluable source for reconstructing what one segment of the American population thought about the Revolution. The diaries left by prisoners reveal that the emergence of a sense of national identity was both reactive – the circumstances of incarceration encouraged national feeling amongst the prisoners; and proactive – the prisoners themselves took actions which strengthened their national identity.⁸ The evidence left by the diarists, however, is limited.

⁵ Lemisch, "Listening to the Inarticulate," 6.

⁶ Timothy Connor, "A Yankee Privateersman in Prison in England, 1777-1779," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, 30 (1876), 174-77, 343-2; 31 (1877), 18-20, 212-13, 284-88; 32 (1878), 70-73, 165-68, 280-86; Samuel Cutler, "Prison Ships and the 'Old Mill Prison,' Plymouth, England, 1777," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, 32 (1878), 42-44, 184-88, 305-08, 395-98; Jonathan Haskins, "A Revolutionary Prison Diary: The Journal of Dr. Jonathan Haskins," ed. Marion S. Coan, *New England Quarterly*, 17 (1944), 290-309, 424-42; Charles Herbert, *Relic of the Revolution, Containing a Full and Particular Account of the Sufferings and Privations of all the American Prisoners Captured on the High Seas and Carried into Plymouth, England, During the Revolution of 1776* (Boston, 1847); William Russell, "Privateers' men in the War of the Revolution: A Journal Giving and Account of the Sufferings and Privations of the American Prisoners Confined in the 'Old Mill Prison,' Plymouth England," Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Mass.; George Thompson, "Diary of George Thompson of Newburyport, Kept at Forton Prison, England, 1777-1781," *Essex Institute Historical Collections*, 76 (1940); William Widger, "Diary of William Widger of Marblehead, Kept at Mill Prison, England, 1781," *Essex Institute Historical Collections*, 73 (1937), 311-47, 74 (1938), 22-48, 142-58. The diaries of Herbert and Russell are the most detailed. The diaries must be used carefully. John K. Alexander has discovered several instances of plagiarism among them. See John K. Alexander, "'American Privateersmen in the Mill Prison During 1777-1782': An Evaluation," *Essex Institute Historical Collections*, 102 (1966), 322-26; and John K. Alexander, "Jonathan Haskins' Mill Prison 'Diary': Can it Be Accepted at Face Value?" *New England Quarterly*, 40 (1967), 561-64.

⁷ Joshua Barney, *A Biographical Memoir of Commodore Joshua Barney*, ed. Mary Barney (Boston, 1832); Nathaniel Fanning, *The Life of Commodore John Paul Jones; and Memoirs of Captain Nathaniel Fanning* (Lexington, Ky., 1826); Andrew Sherburne, *Memoirs of Andrew Sherburne: A Pensioner of the Navy of the Revolution* (Providence, 1831). Where possible, I have given priority to the diaries over the memoirs as sources which are contemporary to the events they describe whereas the memoirs were written years later.

⁸ My thinking on these matters has been influenced by the work of Jesse Lemisch. His justly famous article "Jack Tar in the Streets" interested me in revolutionary sailors. His less well-known "Listening to the 'Inarticulate,'" interested me in the question of nationalism among imprisoned sailors. In "Listening to the Inarticulate," Lemisch persuasively demonstrated that the revolutionary prisons provide a "laboratory" for examining the views of common seamen. He argued "to an extraordinary degree, captured American seamen remained Americans. ... The men's conduct seems to have

The sources are few and their information is largely anecdotal. There are two ways to assess the feelings and motivations of the majority of prisoners who did not keep diaries or write memoirs. After examining the evidence in the diaries and memoirs left by the prisoners, this article will consider the songs sung by the imprisoned sailors. The prisoners used song, which reflected the oral culture of the prisons, to give expression to their national identity. Finally, it is possible to quantitatively measure the loyalty of the prisoners by considering how many defected to the British and obtained their freedom by joining the crews of British warships. Throughout the war, this option was open to all prisoners who would renounce their allegiance to the United States. Such a choice was viewed by the prisoners who remained in custody as an explicit rejection of the national identity they had created.

II

The men who comprised the crews of the revolutionary privateers were motivated by a variety of factors. Some were fired by patriotism and devotion to the revolutionary cause. Others sought adventure. Still others were lured by the promise of the prize money which was split amongst the crew when a privateer successfully captured an enemy ship. Most of the sailors were probably motivated by a combination of these factors. Whatever their initial motivations, the prison experience encouraged the sailors to think of themselves as Americans. National identity emerged as an important issue the moment a ship struck its colors and its crewmen became prisoners of the Royal Navy. British ships were constantly short of hands and British officers were eager to find any British-born seamen, “old countrymen” as the Americans called them, whom they could impress into the Royal Navy. Most American-born crewmen were imprisoned. The crews of American ships, therefore, were carefully examined, and most old countrymen or suspected old countrymen were impressed.⁹

been rooted more in who they were, and what their loyalties were than in the material circumstances of their imprisonment” (pp. 17, 18). Lemisch assumed a static nationalism among the prisoners, the sailors *remained* Americans. I will demonstrate that the prison experiment was a dynamic one which encouraged a sense of nationalism among some prisoners who then tested the loyalty of their peers. By this process, the prison population was winnowed between those who were loyal to the Revolution and those who were not.

⁹ Americans were sometimes impressed despite their protestations that they should be

The process of sorting prisoners by nationality continued once the captives were transported to England. The British did not consider captured American sailors prisoners of war but as rebels. Consequently they were brought before magistrates to answer to charges of treason and piracy before their incarceration. Issues of national identification were at the heart of these committal hearings. Andrew Sherburne of Portsmouth, New Hampshire remembered his hearing:

The judges in their examinations were careful to select all Englishmen and Irishmen for his Majesty’s service; and it was sometimes the case... to challenge Americans, and to insist that they were British subjects, and send them on board one of his Majesty’s ships of war.¹⁰

Nicholas Fanning of New London, Connecticut was captain of the privateer *Ranger* when it was captured in the English Channel in October 1781. Fanning was brought before two British officials in Dover who first insisted he was English and then that he was Irish. When Fanning told them where he was born, “they made a great deal of diversion... and the regulating captain told several yankee stories, relative to the town and people where I said I was born.” Fanning was then asked a series of detailed questions about New London, “to all which I gave such answers as appeared to convince these officers that I was an American by birth.”¹¹ There was sometimes more at stake in these interrogations than whether a sailor would go to prison or serve on board a man-of-war. When the crew members of the privateer *Aurora* were captured off Penzance in May 1781, all were imprisoned except three officers who were identified as deserters from the Royal Navy and hanged.¹²

Whether subject to the threat of impressment or insulting “yankee stories,” the process of sorting by nationality, which occurred upon capture, encouraged American seamen to identify with their country. Charles Herbert of Newburyport remembered that when magistrates accused him and his shipmates of piracy in June 1777 they defiantly told the judges, “we were out to fight the enemies of the thirteen United States.”¹³ Ordinary Britons also encouraged a sense of national distinctiveness among the captured Americans. Before he was brought ashore, Herbert remembered:

considered prisoners of war. See Joshua Davis, *A Narrative of Joshua Davis an American Citizen, Who was Pressed and Served on Board Six Ships of the British Navy* (Boston, 1811), 14.

¹⁰ Sherburne, *Memoirs*, 79. ¹¹ Fanning, *Memoirs*, 220.

¹² *Ibid.*, 125. ¹³ Herbert, *Relic of the Revolution* 43–44.

A number of the seamen's wives came on board to-day, upon being told that they had American prisoners on board. "Have you?" said one to the other; "What sort of people are they?" "Are they white?" "Can they talk?" Upon being pointed to where some of them stood, "Why," they exclaimed, "they look like our people and they talk English."¹⁴

Such attitudes were reinforced on Sundays when civilians paid money to visit Forton and the Mill in order to view the American prisoners. As one sailor imprisoned at Forton tersely recorded in his journal on 19 July, 1778, "Very hot weather. Great numbers of both sex here to day to see the American monsters."¹⁵

Circumstances within the prisons themselves encouraged ethnic and national divisions. After the conclusion of the French Alliance in 1778, French prisoners were kept segregated from their American allies. Occasionally the groups would mix, sometimes for athletic competitions, which reinforced national divisions. At times these competitions were a source of violent confrontation. Bostonian William Russell recorded in his Mill Prison journal of 21 September 1780, "A quarrel arose in the yard today between the French and our people concerning a play which ended in blows, we were however too much for them, tho' they drew their knives, flung stones, and used clubs."¹⁶ While American and French prisoners frequently co-operated with each other – sharing rations, planning escapes, celebrating victories – such infrequent violent altercations underscored the national distinctiveness of the prisoners.

More significant than the division between American and French prisoners, were the ethnic and national divisions amongst the American prisoners. The American prisoners were a remarkably homogeneous group. More than two-thirds of them were from New England. Almost 60 percent were from Massachusetts. Essex County alone provided 31 percent of the prisoners in Mill Prison. The common origins of the majority of the inmates encouraged a common outlook and a remarkable degree of group solidarity. None the less, as many as 10 percent of the prisoners taken from American ships were foreign-born.¹⁷ Although some were continental Europeans, most were British-born old countrymen who had avoided impressment when they were captured. Despite their service to the rebel cause, the old countrymen and the American-

¹⁴ Ibid., 19–20. Nicholas Fanning recalled a similar experience, Fanning, *Memoirs*, 11.

¹⁵ Connor, "Yankee Privateersman," 31: 286. ¹⁶ Russell, "Journal," 1: 23.

¹⁷ These figures are based on Cogliano and Cogliano, "Register of Americans Imprisoned in the Old Mill Prison," esp. 23–24. In the sample of prisoners from the Mill Prison, 8.4 percent of the prisoners were foreign born and 2.4 percent were of unknown origin.

born prisoners regularly came into violent conflict. On 7 May 1778 Charles Herbert wrote from the Mill Prison, “there has been a wrangle between the old countrymen and the Americans. The Americans unanimously hang together, and endeavor to keep peace in prison, but if the former party were stronger than the latter, we should have hell on earth.” Several months later, Timothy Connor reported similar ethnic conflict in Forton Prison, “Nothing but wrangling and fighting with Blee, Carny and Reed in the afternoon (as they are the Dublin bullies), the boys fell on them and gave them a good basting.”¹⁸

Just as prisoners who were not American-born encountered difficulties, evidence suggests that non-white prisoners experienced similar problems. It is certain that some of the prisoners were African Americans and American Indians. Unfortunately, the sources do not allow for an accurate determination of the racial make-up of the prison population. None the less, it seems that these prisoners were given more onerous tasks to perform than their white counterparts. For example, when smallpox broke out among Mill prisoners in June of 1777, a black prisoner named Will was sent to the hospital to act as nurse to the afflicted. When the sickness continued to spread, Jonathan Haskins noted on 26 July that “Danl. Cottle (a black) nurse for the prisoners, so many sick with the s. pox that Will is not sufficient.” A month later Haskins reported, “Daniel Cottle died (a nurse) of the small pox.”¹⁹ The ill-treatment of British-born and African American prisoners by the majority of American-born, white prisoners (primarily from New England) undoubtedly encouraged a sense of national distinctiveness and group solidarity among majority of the prisoners. It also suggests the limits of the national identity fashioned by the prisoners. While old countrymen and non-whites would not be excluded from that identity, their maltreatment would make it more difficult for them to embrace it.

The circumstances of their incarceration encouraged the American prisoners to identify with their nationality. On a superficial level, the nationalism of the American sailors is easily explicable. As strangers held against their will in a foreign country, it is not surprising that the prisoners should experience a heightened sense of national identity. The prisoners’ feeling of national loyalty, however, were more than a simple

¹⁸ Herbert, *Relic of the Revolution*, 119. See a similar entry in Haskins, “Journal,” 307. Connor, “Yankee Privateersman,” 32: 165.

¹⁹ Haskins, “Journal,” 297, 299, 300; see also Cutler, “Journal,” 188. For African American seamen during the period see W. Jeffrey Bolstor, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), esp. 153–57.

reaction to their incarceration far from home. This is revealed in an incident which took place in Mill Prison. On the evening of 26 July 1780 as the guards were locking the prisoners in for the night, they began to taunt the inmates calling them “English” and using “uncivil language.” In response, an old countryman who had deserted from British service to the Americans declared he “would fight for them as long as they had a vessel afloat.” When the guards came to find the recalcitrant prisoner for punishment William Russell recalled, “we told them if they confined one they should all, they went out again and we clapped our hands at them and gave 3 cheers.”²⁰ That the guards used “English” as an epithet with which to taunt the inmates, and the prisoners responded with collective action, indicates the question of nationality had a profound meaning to the inmates. At issue was the meaning of the Revolution. When the prisoners identified themselves as American, they asserted they were not British and hence they were independent. Both the guards and the prisoners understood this. Consequently, the American prisoners adopted pro-active measures to assert their nationality and support for the revolution.

By their actions while imprisoned, the American prisoners identified with and demonstrated their support for the revolutionary cause. For example, the prisoners carefully followed news of the war in America both by word-of-mouth and by their infrequent reading of English newspapers. The campaign of 1777 is a case in point. In August, the prisoners were disheartened to learn of the British captures of Fort Ticonderoga and Philadelphia, though Charles Herbert wrote optimistically, “as to [their] conquering the country it never disturbed, for me, an hour’s rest, though it appears that they are in a fairer way of doing it now than ever before.” The campaign ended on a positive note for the Americans. Herbert recorded that when the prisoners learned of the rebel victory at Saratoga in December 1777, “joy is plainly seen in the countenance of every American here.”²¹

The prisoners used the occasion of rebel victories to demonstrate their support for the American cause. For example, upon hearing the news of the surrender at Yorktown, the prisoners at Mill Prison gathered in the yard under a home-made American flag in a cold November rain and

²⁰ Russell, “Journal,” 1: 12–13.

²¹ Herbert, *Relic of the Revolution*, 58–59, 81. There are many examples in the prison diaries of inmates following war news, both accurate and inaccurate. See, for example, Connor, “Yankee Privateersman,” 32: 72 for news of the Battle of Monmouth and Russell, “Journal,” 4: 4–5, for the American reaction to the news of the Franco-American victory at Yorktown.

“gave thirteen cheers which was answered by our Good allies the French.”²² Similar celebrations were held at the prisons to commemorate other rebel victories, the anniversaries of rebel victories, the birthday of the King of France, and the entrance into the war against Britain of Spain and the Netherlands.²³ The symbolism of such celebrations – gathering under the American flag and giving one cheer for each of the thirteen states – was intended as a declaration of national loyalty by the prisoners.²⁴ In making such symbolic declarations, the prisoners not only affirmed that they were Americans, but they declared that, to be an American, one had to be loyal to the revolutionary cause.

Unquestionably the most important occasion for demonstrating support for the revolution amongst the prisoners was the fourth of July. Each year the prisoners commemorated the anniversary of American independence with cheering, flag-waving, and toasts to the United States. The sailors prepared for the celebrations in advance, making flags, banners, and cockades for their hats, and saving money to buy liquor.²⁵ Charles Herbert described the fourth of July, 1778 in his diary:

This morning when we were let out, we all hoisted the American flag upon our hats, except about five or six who did not choose to wear them. The agent, seeing us all with those papers on our hats, asked for one to look at, which was sent to him, and it happened to be one with “Independence” written on the top, and at the bottom “Liberty or Death.” He, not knowing the meaning of it, and thinking we were going to force the guard, directly ordered a double sentry at the gate. Nothing happened till one o’clock; we then drew up thirteen divisions, and each division gave three cheers, till at last we all cheered together, all of which was conducted with the greatest regularity. We kept our colors hoisted till sunset, and then took them down.²⁶

The celebration was an affirmation of loyalty to the fledgling United States as represented by the flags, the thirteen groups, and the use of the revolutionary slogans “Independence” and “Liberty or Death.” In the celebration there was a strong element of group solidarity as well. Only a handful, which Herbert was careful to note, failed to participate. Moreover, the celebration utilized symbols and rhetoric which were

²² Russell, “Journal,” 4: 5.

²³ See Russell, “Journal,” 1: 43; Connor, “Yankee Privateersman,” 32: 72; and Herbert, *Relic of the Revolution*, 175, for examples.

²⁴ By contrast, the prisoners at Mill Prison gave three cheers for France and Spain and seven for the seven states of The Netherlands. Russell, “Journal,” 1: 43.

²⁵ For fourth of July celebrations see Cutler, “Prison Ships and the Old Mill Prison,” 32: 305; Russell, “Journal,” 1: 10, 3: 10; and Herbert, *Relic of the Revolution*, 141–42.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 142.

familiar to the prisoners but not to the jailers, thereby emphasizing their distinctiveness.

While it is clear that the prisoners demonstrated a pronounced sense of themselves as Americans, what did it mean to them to be American? To the prisoners, Americans were independent and self-governing. In July 1778, the American prisoners at Mill Prison posted and read a series of “articles,” a code of conduct for themselves apart from those in the prison. The articles concerned a range of moral offenses including gambling, blackguarding, and the use of improper language. The articles were read before all the prisoners, posted in the yard, and two men from each ship’s company “were appointed to see them put into execution.”²⁷ In establishing their code of conduct, the prisoners were attempting to put into practice one of the fundamental principles of the Revolution, republican self-government.

The prisoners took their self-government seriously. They used it not only to promote order, but also to encourage loyalty. Courts martial were convened to punish offenders who were subject to physical punishment. In March of 1778, Irish-born James Dick was tried for “the crime of profanely damning of the Honrbl. Continental congress of the United States of America” for which he received a dozen lashes.²⁸ The physical punishments themselves had a patriotic theme. William Russell recorded that, on the morning of 21 January 1782, one Samuel Smith “was taken to the Lamp Post and ‘Cobbed’ on the naked Breech for making a disturbance whilst the Parson was preaching.” Russell carefully noted that the unfortunate Smith received “13 strokes one for each state.”²⁹ In the case of conduct established by the inmates and its implementation, the prisoners associated being American with self-government. At a basic level, the prisoners endeavored to practice the republicanism for which they had fought and been imprisoned. In so doing, they aspired to a degree of independence and autonomy which was at odds with their status as prisoners.

Perhaps more important to the prisoners’ conception of their nationality than republicanism, was loyalty. The prisoners expected loyalty to shipmates, to fellow-prisoners, and, most importantly, to the United States. Loyalty represented sacrifice to the common good. It was in the

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 145–46; Sherburne, *Memoirs*, 85. See the Commissioners for Sick and Hurt Seamen to the Lords of the Admiralty, 27 January 1779, ADM 98/11/442–44, Public Record Office, London.

²⁸ Haskins, “Prison Diary,” 305.

²⁹ Russell, “Journal,” 4: 19–20. For another example of punishments being administered in units of thirteen see Russell, “Journal,” 4: 15.

demonstration of such loyalty that the true American was revealed. In such cases birth was not as important as actions. American-born prisoners could be disloyal and old countrymen loyal. As Charles Herbert recorded in his diary on 12 September 1778: “Captain Burnel who is a prisoner here ... and has a wife and family in England, has received a letter from his wife, informing him that she has been turned out of doors, wholly on account his being in the American service. The prisoners are about raising money for her relief.”³⁰ Because of his loyalty, Captain Burnel’s family suffered. That loyalty won him the financial and moral support of his fellow prisoners.

III

The rebel prisoners in England had a clear conception of themselves as nationally distinct. They also had a clear understanding of what the chief characteristics of an American should be: especially republican, independent, and loyal. The evidence for such conclusions is largely anecdotal, drawn from the extant diaries of a few exceptional prisoners who were willing and able to keep diaries or produce memoirs after the war. However, one of those prisoners, Timothy Connor, kept not only a diary, but also a record of the songs in circulation during his two years in Forton. It seems likely he collected the songs, derived from American and British broadsides as well compositions by the prisoners, as a diversion from the boredom of imprisonment. His songbook records the lyrics of songs probably sung by prisoners at the prison. According to George Carey, who edited Connor’s songbook for publication, the sailors “sang about a variety of things: about drinking and love, about forsaken women, about sex, violence, and life at sea.”³¹ They also sang about the Revolution. It is these songs in particular which reflected the attitudes and feelings of the inmates about the United States.

On 5 September 1778, Connor recorded the words of “A [*sic*] American New Song No 39” which in ten verses summed up the history of the Revolution to that point. The song culminates in an account of heroic

³⁰ Herbert, *Relic of the Revolution*, 163.

³¹ The lyrics recorded by Connor are published in George G. Carey, ed., *A Sailor’s Songbag: An American Rebel in an English Prison, 1777–1779* (Amherst, Mass., 1976). Carey quotation, p. 13. The information in this paragraph is based on Carey’s excellent introduction to Connor’s songs, pp. 1–22. Connor was a crewman aboard the privateer *Rising States* which was captured by H.M.S. *Terrible* on April 15, 1777. He was committed to Forton Prison on 14 June 1777 where he remained for over two years until exchanged in a cartel on 2 July 1779.

rebel resistance of Bunker Hill and concludes with a statement of the lessons to be learned from tale:

We are the boys that fear no noise Huzza America
May the Heavens above protect our love the Sons of Liberty.

...

If these acts were once repeated how cheerfully we'd sing
Success unto America, likewise to Washington
Long may be rain in New-England his mighty acts to See
For its true and faithful Subjects are the Sons of Liberty

In ending of my ditty come fill us up to a bowl
Here is a health unto America that scorns to be control'd
Likewise to George Washington, Adams, Hancock and Lee
In ending of my ditty Success to Liberty.

George Carey believes this particular song probably came to Forton with a group of newly captured prisoners.³² The message of the song was clear to those who sang it: American independence and liberty could only be preserved through stout resistance like that at Bunker Hill. Moreover America is, by definition, independent and “scorns to be control'd” and its “true and faithful Subjects are Sons of Liberty.” The song concisely expressed a conception of American identity congruent with that which emerges from the prison diaries and memoirs.

It is not certain that the prisoners at Forton ever sang “A American New Song No 39.” Moreover that song is but one of nearly sixty compositions recorded by Timothy Connor. Not all the songs embraced the definition of American identity outlined in this article. Those which were of English origin, for example, while criticizing the war, often expressed a hope of reconciliation between Britain and the colonies.³³ The eclectic and contradictory content of Connor’s songbook would seem to cast doubt on its value as a gauge of the sentiments of the American prisoners. Fortunately, there is one song, which was certainly composed by a Forton prisoner, which directly addresses the issues of imprisonment and the meaning of the Revolution.

Jonathan Carpenter, a native of Rehoboth, Massachusetts, was a member of the crew of the privateer *Reprisal*, a sixteen-gun vessel which sailed out of Boston in January of 1778. After a short voyage, the *Reprisal* was captured by HMS *Unicorn* on 20 February 1778. Carpenter and his crewmates were held on a prison ship in Newport, Rhode Island until they

³² *A Sailor’s Songbag*, 110–11.

³³ For example, see, “A New Song No 33,” and “The Widow’s Lamentation for the Loss of Her Husband in America No 22,” in *A Sailor’s Songbag*, 96–97 and 67–68.

were sent to England in April 1778. Carpenter arrived in Portsmouth on 12 May and was committed to Forton on 19 June – his twenty-first birthday. Carpenter spent one year and twelve days in Forton until he, like Timothy Connor, was released in a prisoner exchange on 2 July 1779.³⁴

Carpenter arrived in France on 18 July 1779 and immediately joined the crew of the American privateer, *General Mifflin*, with an eye towards returning to America. On 22 July, he recorded in his journal the lyrics of a song he had written to be sung “over a bottle or two of wine.” Because the song directly addressed Carpenter’s experience during his seventeen months in captivity it is appropriate to quote its lyrics in full:

Come now my jolly hearts of Gold
Now from prison we are freed
Come fill us up a flowing bowl
That we may drink with Speed
And let us now the bumpers flow
for we’ve obtained our Liberty
Success unto our Allies now
That live here o’er the Atlantic sea
Likewise to all that for their rights
Do now oppose our British foe.
For to Maintain those 13 Stripes
Which makes so grand a show
In supporting of the thirteen States
For which we indured Captivity
the motto now that cures all fates
For me, is Death or Liberty
Come now let’s take our thundering arms
And follow that Magnanimous Son
We are no strangers to alarms
Nor he whose name is Washington
And lets be resolute and brave
O! se[e] how just our cause appears
For Independence we will have
If we fight for it fifty years.³⁵

For Carpenter, and the men who joined him in singing this song, there was a direct correlation between the suffering they endured in captivity and the cause for which they were imprisoned. The mariners were

³⁴ The information in this paragraph is based on Miriam Herwig and Wes Herwig, eds., *Jonathan Carpenter’s Journal: Being the Diary of a Revolutionary War Soldier and Pioneer Settler of Vermont* (Randolph Center, Vt., 1994). Also see John K. Alexander, “Jonathan Carpenter and the American Revolution: The Journal of an American Naval Prisoner and Vermont Indian Fighter,” *Vermont History*, 36 (1968), 74–90. The original of the Carpenter Journal is in the Vermont Historical Society in Montpelier.

³⁵ *Jonathan Carpenter’s Journal*, 57.

imprisoned on behalf of their country, “the thirteen States” and its cause “Liberty.” The definition of America implicit in Carpenter’s song was that of a liberty-loving republic. It was a republic whose independence the prisoners helped win by their suffering in captivity. The nationalist feelings expressed by the sailors in song are revealed more explicitly in the reaction of the prisoners towards those they felt had betrayed their cause.

IV

On 12 December 1777, the commissioners of the United States in Paris wrote to Lord North. Among other topics, the Americans complained about the treatment their imprisoned countrymen were receiving in England. The American representatives wrote, “in England the severities which the American prisoners suffer are, according to the testimony of every one we have seen, of the most grievous kind.” Specifically, the commissioners complained, “stripes have been inflicted upon some, to make them commit the deepest of all crimes, the fighting against the liberties of their country.”³⁶ Although there is no evidence to suggest that prisoners were forced into British service under the lash, there is ample evidence to show that the British actively encouraged American prisoners to switch allegiances. Almost 16 percent of the prisoners in Mill Prison won release from captivity by enlisting in the Royal Navy. This is twice the number of prisoners who successfully escaped from the prison.³⁷ Those who remained in prison agreed with the commissioners that the defectors had committed the “deepest of crimes” by betraying their country. Prison

³⁶ Leonard W. Labaree, Whitfield J. Bell, and W. B. Wilcox, eds. *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 32 volumes to date (New Haven, 1959), “American Commissioners to Lord North, December 12, 1777”, 24: 275. The plight of the American prisoners in England was an abiding concern for American diplomats in Europe, especially Benjamin Franklin. See Catherine M. Prelinger, “Benjamin Franklin and the American Prisoners of War in England during the American Revolution,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 32 (1975), 261–94.

³⁷ Between 1777 and 1782, 173 prisoners from Mill Prison joined the British service. This is 15.7 percent of the total number of prisoners. During the same period 88 prisoners, 8 percent of the total, successfully escaped. See Cogliano and Cogliano, “Register of Americans Imprisoned in the Old Mill Prison,” table 2, 27. Jesse Lemisch estimates that between 17 and 30 percent of prisoners escaped from Forton and Mill Prisons. Lemisch, “Listening to the Inarticulate,” 18 n59. I think the disparity derives from the definition of the word “escape.” I have only counted successful escapes, which were rare as opposed to attempted escapes and instances when prisoners obtained their freedom for a short time and were soon recaptured. Additionally, mine are preliminary figures. The issue of prison escapes is an important one which requires more detailed study. For a brief preliminary study see, Olive Anderson, “American Escapes from British naval Prisons During the War of Independence,” *Mariners Mirror*, 41 (1955), 238–40.

defections represented the gravest threat to the national identity constructed by the prisoners. They do, however, present an opportunity to measure the strength of the loyalty and commitment of the American prisoners.

Throughout the war, naval prisoners could secure their release by enlisting in the Royal Navy which always had a need for experienced hands. The British actively recruited among the American prisoners. For example, in the autumn of 1778 as Admiral Keppel prepared his fleet, American-born officers and sailors already serving in the Royal Navy were sent to the prisons with money provided by their captains to buy drinks for their countrymen in order to lure them out of prison.³⁸ When the recruiters came they usually could find a few prisoners willing to exchange life in prison for that on board a man-of-war. The prisoners who defected did so for a variety of reasons. Some enlisted because they were only lukewarm supporters of the Revolution; others because they could not abide the conditions in the prisons. Still others did so for personal reasons.³⁹ Some enlisted because they believed their chances of deserting from a man-of-war were better than those of escape from Forton or Mill.⁴⁰

The question of national allegiance was at the heart of the decision to enlist in the British service. From the time that American prisoners first entered Mill Prison in the spring of 1777 until the prisoners were released in 1782, 173 prisoners from that facility entered British service. Of that number, fifty-five (32 percent) were British or European-born. Thus, although less than one-tenth of the inmates were foreign-born, they constituted almost one-third of the defectors. Put another way, 59 percent of all foreign-born prisoners enlisted in the Royal Navy. By contrast only 12 percent of American-born seamen defected.⁴¹ It is certain that the majority of the foreign-born prisoners were less devoted to the rebel cause

³⁸ “Intelligence from Havana and Other Places,” *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 28: 101–02; Herbert, *Relic of the Revolution*, 155, 191–92; Connor, “Yankee Privateersman,” 32: 281–82; Russell, “Journal,” 4: 14–15.

³⁹ For examples of prisoners entering British service for a variety of reasons see Connor, “Yankee Privateersman,” 31: 287–88; Herbert, *Relic of the Revolution*, 201; Russell, “Journal,” 1: 29–30, 3: 26, 4: 25, 28.

⁴⁰ A good example of a man who enlisted in the Royal Navy in order to escape is Samuel Knapp of Salem. Knapp was committed to Mill Prison in June 1778 as part of the crew of the privateer *Warren*. In October 1780, he boarded the H.M.S. *Eagle*. He deserted and joined the crew of the rebel privateer *Black Prince*. When the *Black Prince* was captured in October 1781, he faced a court martial on charges of desertion “to be tried for his life.” Rather than execute Knapp, the court decided to return him to prison “dstitute and naked.” Russell, “Journal,” 1: 30, 3: 40–41, 4: 3; quotation 4: 3.

⁴¹ The figures for this paragraph are derived from Cogliano and Cogliano, “Register of

and American nationalism than their American-born counterparts. Given the ethnic tensions which existed in the American quarters between Americans and old countrymen, it is possible that the old countrymen felt little compulsion to remain incarcerated on behalf of their tormenters. As a marginal group within the prison population, the old countrymen probably felt the least attachment to the revolutionary cause, and consequently defected in the largest numbers.⁴²

Other minority groups experienced alienation similar to that of the old countrymen. Although it is impossible to determine the number of black prisoners (and, consequently the number who enlisted) the experiences of a few reveal the difficulties the rest must have faced. In early 1778, prisoners at Mill Prison suspected there was an informer in their midst who betrayed their escape plans to the British. They blamed one man who protested his innocence and “took no rest day or night until he had found the two traitors.” On 26 April 1778 the accused man identified the two informers. According to Charles Herbert:

we discovered them to be two negroes, a man and a boy. Accordingly they were tied up and whipped – the boy was whipped by a boy, two dozen and a half lashes, on his bare back; and we thought it the man’s prerogative who had borne the blame as being a traitor and was innocent, to lay the stripes upon the negro man. Accordingly, he gave him three dozen upon his bare back, and spared not; had the negro stayed till night he would have left his ears; but I suppose that he was suspicious of that, so he went and jumped over the gate and delivered himself up to the guard and told his story. The negro boy was sent for; so now they are both separated from us in another yard, and it is well for them that they are so.⁴³

Two days after the whippings Herbert reported, “all the negroes were taken out of this prison, and put into a separate building.”⁴⁴ Rage at the

Americans Imprisoned in the Old Mill Prison.” While I do not have comparable figures for Forton Prison, anecdotal evidence, indicates a similar pattern there. See Connor, “Yankee Privateersman,” 32: 282, 284.

⁴² Although New Englanders were 68 percent of the prison population, in the Mill Prison they were only 40 percent of the defectors. Non-New England-born Americans were only 22 percent of the population yet they contributed 28 percent of the defectors. At most, 32 percent of the prisoners in the Mill Prison were non-New Englanders yet they accounted for 60 percent of the defectors. The New Englanders were probably the most loyal prisoners in part because they were the dominant group. The high percentage of foreign-born defectors does not necessarily mean that old countrymen were excluded by birth from the national identity which the prisoners were constructing. More than 40 percent of the old countrymen were loyal to the rebel cause and remained in prison. Rather the evidence suggests that foreign-born prisoners found that identity less compelling than their American counterparts.

⁴³ Herbert, *Relic of the Revolution*, 116.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 117.

individuals as “traitors” to the American cause had led to the segregation of *all* black prisoners. Such physical exclusion was symbolic of the exclusion of African Americans from the national identity constructed by the majority within the prisons. Just as old countrymen failed to embrace the national identity prominent among the majority of prisoners, it is possible that a disproportionate number of African American prisoners, similarly excluded and abused by the majority, sought release from captivity by joining the Royal Navy. On 14 February 1782 William Russell recorded in his diary, “This morning Richard Slater (Boy, Negro) alias Chew Tobac[c]o, was taken to the Lamp post and recd 3 times 13 stripes on the naked Breech, for stealing $\frac{1}{2}$ crown.” Three days later he noted that Slater had enlisted in the Royal Navy.⁴⁵

The inmates who remained in prison regarded those who enlisted in the British service as traitors. When forty-five men from Mill Prison entered British service in October 1778, Charles Herbert noted bitterly, “those who remain, are true sons of America.” Several months later, when twelve more prisoners defected, Herbert wrote incredulously: “It is astonishing to me, that men who have been used by the English as we have been, with all the severity they have been masters of, should afterwards voluntarily enter their service.”⁴⁶ When the prisoners at Mill Prison received a letter from one of their former comrades, Joseph Minck of Nantucket, urging them to follow his example and enlist in the Royal Navy, William Russell wrote angrily in his diary, “[he] says that he has lost the use of one arm. It is a pity it is not his *neck*, for what business had he to sell his Country and go to the worst of Enemies; for my part I wish that everyone that joins them, may meet with a worse fate.”⁴⁷ In Russell’s eyes, Minck and the other defectors betrayed the nationalist cause for which the prisoners sacrificed their freedom.

In order to preserve their version of the Revolution, the loyal prisoners resorted to collected action. Prisoners who sought to enlist in the Royal Navy had to present their names to a British official, then they had to wait weeks and even months for a royal pardon from the charges of treason

⁴⁵ Russell, “Journal,” 4: 25, 28. Although Slater had been punished previously for theft according to Russell, it seems that his punishment (39 stripes) was harsher than that usually meted out for theft. Russell notes examples of six strokes and public humiliation for theft of a pair of shoes [3: 37] and twenty-six strokes and public humiliation for theft of bread [4: 15]. Similarly Timothy Connor reported that a prisoner at Forton received twelve lashes for stealing silver knee-buckles. Connor, “Journal,” 32: 71. These incidents raise the possibility that black sailors were given harsher punishments than their white counterparts.

⁴⁶ Herbert, *Relic of the Revolution*, 177, 216.

⁴⁷ Russell, “Journal,” 4: 14–15.

and piracy for which they were held. During this period, the would-be defectors were exposed, in the words of one British admiral, “to the Resentment of the other Prisoners, who threaten the lives of those who offer to serve in the Navy.”⁴⁸ While there are no recorded instances of prisoners killing putative defectors, they could make life difficult for them; harassing them mentally and physically. When a group of defectors spent the night of 4 October 1778 noisily celebrating their imminent release from Mill Prison, the other prisoners retaliated. In the words of Charles Herbert, “as they would not let us sleep the first part of the night, we would not let them sleep the latter; accordingly, we all turned out and had an Indian Pow-wow, and as solid as the prison is, we made it shake. In this manner we spent the night.”⁴⁹ In August 1778, the prisoners turned out in the yard of Mill Prison to protect five Americans from being taken against their will and impressed. None the less, the five men, “brave Americans” were forcibly removed by British soldiers.⁵⁰ Although autonomy and independence were important elements in the national identity of the prisoners, such incidents reveal that the prisoners felt collective action was the most viable means of protecting their national interests.

Given the hostile reception they received, it is not surprising that would-be defectors acted with caution. Rather than wait for their pardons, and endure the torment of their peers, some defectors attempted to escape from prison and enter British service directly. Others attempted to defect without arousing the suspicion of their fellow inmates. In November 1778, after forty-five men had entered British service the previous month, Charles Herbert complained, “I thought that all who had any idea of going on the men-of-war had gone; but I understand that a number have sent their names out to go; how many I cannot tell, as they did it very slyly.”⁵¹ When the defections continued the loyal prisoners resolved to act. On 24 December 1778, according to Herbert, “a paper was drawn up in prison, to discover who and how many were on a side, and to hasten those who have a desire to petition [to enter the Royal Navy], and to prevent petitioning hereafter; for we have reason to believe it has already

⁴⁸ Sir Thomas Pye to the Admiralty, ADM/M/405, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, England. ⁴⁹ Herbert, *Relic of the Revolution*, 171–72.

⁵⁰ British officials believed the men in question had already been pressed into the navy and thus should not have been committed to prison. When they were removed from Mill Prison, the men declared “they would never lift a hand to do anything on board of King George’s ships.” The men refused to enter the Royal Navy and were sent back to prison after a week. See Herbert, *Relic of the Revolution*, 155–59.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 183.

been of great damage to us." The paper which the prisoners circulated was a pledge of loyalty which stated:

We, whose names are hereunto subscribed, do, of our own free and voluntary consent, agree firmly with each other, and hereby solemnly swear, that we are fully determined to stand, and so remain as long as we live, true and loyal to our Congress, our country, our wives, children, and friends, and never petition to enter on board any of His Majesty's ships or vessels or into any of service whatsoever.

Here was a concise summary of what the prisoners believed in. They sacrificed their independence for the Revolution, their country, and their families. Those who entered British service were opposed to their cause. According to Herbert, "the above was signed by upwards of a hundred. I was one of the number. Some of the number that did not sign this, would not go on board of a man-of-war any sooner than those who did sign it."⁵²

V

The majority of white Americans imprisoned in Britain during the War of Independence developed a clear national identity while in British custody. They came to believe that they were nationally distinct. They defined themselves as Americans by their actions, words, and songs. According to the prisoners an American was: committed to the Revolution, especially republican self-government; loyal to his peers and the United States; and independent (though capable of collective action). William Russell explained what the prisoners sacrificed their freedom for when he wrote the following entry in his diary on New Year's Eve, 1781:

I am 29 months from my Dear Wife & Family, & 27 months in Captivity. May the Great and Allwise God, in the midst of His Judgements remember mercy and like Israel (of Old) enjoy the Promised Land (America) w[h]ere we may sit down with our Wives and Families, each under their own vine and Fig tree, and the Sons of Violence not make them afraid.⁵³

The seamen imprisoned in Britain had fought for Russell's vision of national and personal autonomy. They sacrificed their freedom to achieve it. That more than four-fifths of them were willing to remain incarcerated rather than betray their country is testimony to the strength of their national vision. While the prisoners are not representative of all Americans during the revolutionary era, it is likely that the struggle for independence fostered a similar national vision among the other common men and women who contributed to the revolutionary cause.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 202. The prisoners at Forton circulated a similar pledge see Thompson, "Diary," 225.

⁵³ Russell, "Journal," 4: 14-15.