



The American Revolution as Civil War

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Framing Question

How was the American Revolution a civil war that turned neighbors into enemies?

Understanding

Before becoming a war against the British, the American war for independence was a civil war, a street-level conflict that pitted neighbor against neighbor.

Text

Janet Schaw, [account of Patriot–Loyalist conflict in North Carolina, 1775](#) (excerpts).

Background

Janet Schaw was a young, well-educated Scottish woman who, in March of 1775, traveled to North Carolina to visit her older brother Robert, the owner of a plantation on the Cape Fear River near the town of Wilmington. While there she witnessed, among other things, land clearing through controlled burning and the killing of an alligator. More important, she observed a society that was splitting asunder under the stress of revolutionary politics.

Resistance to the British crown was strong in the region. In 1765 Wilmington residents launched the first successful armed resistance to the Stamp Act. By 1775 anti-British sentiment had intensified.

Wilmington had established a vigorous Committees of Safety that demanded allegiance to the Continental Congress and enforced the Congress's call to boycott British goods. Decisions of the Wilmington Committee forced men and women along the Cape Fear to take sides. Patriots employed violence and intimidation and, Schaw suggests, even faked a slave revolt to unite their countrymen in opposition to the British.



Contextualizing Questions

1. What kind of text are we dealing with?
2. When was it written?
3. Who wrote it?
4. For what audience was it intended?
5. For what purpose was it written?

Schaw recorded her experiences and observations in a series of travel letters, which were published in 1921. As the editor of Schaw's journal reminds us, "such contemporary evidence makes us realize that our forefathers, however worthy their object, were engaged in real rebellion and revolution, characterized by the extremes of thought and action that always accompany such movements, and not in the kind of parlour warfare, described in many of our text books." [*Journal of a Lady of Quality*, eds. E.W. Andres and C.M. Andrews, 1921]

Text Analysis

Excerpt 1 from Janet Schaw's travel journal: North Carolina, 1775

We came down in the morning in time for the review [of the local Patriot militia] which the heat made as terrible to the spectators as to the soldiers, or what you please to call them. They had certainly fainted under it, had not the constant draughts of grog [watered-down rum] supported them. Their exercise was that of bush-fighting, but it appeared so confused and so perfectly different from anything I ever saw, I cannot say whether they performed it well or not; but this I know, that they were heated with rum till capable of committing the most shocking outrages. We stood in the balcony of Doctor Cobham's house and they were reviewed on a field mostly covered with what are called here scrubby oaks, which are only a little better than brushwood. They at last however assembled on the plain field, and I must really laugh while I recollect their figures: 2000 men in their shirts and trousers, preceded by a very ill beat-drum and a fiddler, who was also in his shirt with a long sword and a cue at his hair, who played with all his might. They made indeed a most unmartial appearance. But the worst figure there can shoot from behind a bush and kill even a General Wolfe [British general killed in the French and Indian War].

Before the review was over, I heard a cry of tar and feather. I was ready to faint at the idea of this dreadful operation. I would have gladly quitted the balcony, but was so much afraid the Victim was one of my friends that I was not able to move, and he indeed proved to be one, tho' in a humble station [lower social class]. For it was Mr. Neilson's poor English groom [stable man; caretaker of horses]. You can hardly conceive what I felt when I saw him dragged forward, poor devil, frightened out of his wits. However, at the request of some of the officers, who had been Neilson's friends, his punishment was changed into that of mounting on a table and begging pardon for having smiled at the regiment. He was then drummed and fiddled out of the town, with a strict prohibition of ever being seen in it again.

1. Where are the maneuvers held? Why might the Patriots have chosen this space?

2. What messages do the Patriots intend to send with the maneuvers?

3. How does Schaw's account reveal the militia's strength? Cite specific language.

4. What did the groom do to anger the Patriots? How does Schaw characterize his offense?

5. What does it suggest about the Patriots that they found the groom's behavior offensive?

6. Is Mr. Neilson, the groom's master, a Loyalist or a Patriot?

7. What does the action of the officers suggest about relations in the town?

8. What makes the groom an especially likely and vulnerable target?

9. What message does the groom's punishment send to the community, and how do the Patriots make sure the message is widely heard?

Excerpt 2

I went into the town, the entry of which I found closed up by a detachment of the soldiers; but as the officer immediately made way for me, I took no further notice of it but advanced to the middle of the street where I found a number of the first people [elite, highest class] in town standing together, who... seemed much impassioned. As most of them were my acquaintances, I stopped to speak to them, but they with one voice begged me for heaven's sake to get off the street, making me observe they were prisoners, adding that every avenue of the town was shut up, and that in all human probability some scene would be acted very unfit for me to witness. I could not take the friendly advice, for I became unable to move and absolutely petrified with horror. Observing however an officer with whom I had just dined, I beckoned him to me. He came, but with no very agreeable look, and on my asking him what was the matter, he presented a paper he had folded in his hand. If you will persuade them to sign this [a pledge to support anti-British actions] they are at liberty, said he, but till then must remain under this guard, as they must suffer the penalties they have justly incurred. "And we will suffer everything," replied one of them, "before we abjure [reject] our king, our country and our principles." "This, Ladies," said he turning to me, who was now joined by several Ladies, "is what they call their Test, but by what authority this Gentleman forces it on us, we are yet to learn." "There is my Authority," pointing to the Soldiers with the most insolent air, "dispute it, if you can."...

The prisoners stood firm to their resolution of not signing the Test, till past two in the morning, tho' every threatening was used to make them comply; at which time a Message from the [Patriot's] committee compromised [ended] the affair, and they were suffered [allowed] to retire on their parole [responsible for themselves] to appear next morning before them. This was not a step of mercy or out of regard to the Gentlemen; but they understood that a number of their friends were arming in their defense, and tho' they had kept about 150 ragamuffins still in town, they were not sure even of them; for to the credit of that town be it spoke there are not five men of property and credit [men of wealth] in it that are infected by this unfortunate disease [support for anti-British action and independence].

10. Why have the Patriots decided to hold their prisoners in the middle of a street?

11. What message does this public punishment send to the town?

12. Why do the Patriots not punish these Loyalists as they did the English groom?

13. How does this passage illustrate how tight-knit the community of Wilmington is? Cite specific evidence from the text.

14. How does Schaw indicate that the rebellion is sustained only through violence and intimidation? Cite specific language.

15. Compare the image of the militiamen in this excerpt with the description of them Schaw offers in the first.

16. Compare Schaw's response to the Patriots in the first excerpt with her response to them in the second. Cite specific language.

17. How do these two passages illustrate the way in which the American Revolution was a civil war?

Glossary

unmartial: unmilitary, unprepared for war

tar and feather: an attack in which a crowd strips the victim, pours hot tar over his/her body, and then rolls the victim in feathers that adhere to the tar, after which the victim might be paraded around in a cart; done to intimidate and threaten the victim and others like him/her

prohibition: ban

Text

- *Journal of a Lady of Quality: Being the Narrative of a Journey from Scotland to the West Indies, North Carolina, and Portugal, in the Years 1774 to 1776*, eds. Evangeline Walker Andrews & Charles McLean Andrews (Yale University Press, 1921), 189-194. Full text online in Documenting the American South, Internet Archive, and Google Books.

Image

- "A New Method of Macarony Making, as practised at Boston," colored aquatint, British print, 1774. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London, PAF3919. Reproduced by permission.