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American Prisoners of the Revolution

BY

DANSKE DANDRIDGE

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“George Michael Bedinger: A Kentucky Pioneer,”
“Joy and Other Poems,” “Historic
Shepherdstown,” etc.

“And God requireth that which is past.”---*Eccles. iii, 15.*

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PREFACE

THE writer of this book has been interested for many years in the subject of the sufferings of the American prisoners of the Revolution. Finding the information she sought widely scattered, she has, for her own use, and for that of all students of the subject, gathered all the facts she could obtain within the covers of this volume. There is little that is original in the compilation. The reader will find that extensive use has been made of such narratives as that Captain Dring has left us. The accounts could have been given in the compiler's own words, but they would only, thereby, have lost in strength. The original narratives are all out of print, very scarce and hard to obtain, and the writer feels justified in reprinting them in this collection, for the sake of the general reader interested in the subject, and not able to search for himself through the mass of original material, some of which she has only discovered after months of research. Her work has mainly consisted in abridging these records, collected from so many different sources.

The writer desires to express her thanks to the courteous librarians of the Library of Congress and of the War and Navy Departments; to Dr. Langworthy for permission to publish his able and interesting paper on the subject of the prisons in New York, and to many others who have helped her in her task.

DANSKE DANDRIDGE.

December 6th, 1910.

The dead were carried ashore and thrown into shallow graves or trenches of sand and these conditions of horror continued from the beginning of the war until after peace was declared. Few prisoners escaped and not many were exchanged, for their conditions were such that commanding officers hesitated to exchange healthy British prisoners in fine condition for the wasted, worn-out, human wrecks from the prison ships. A very large proportion of the total number of these prisoners perished. Of the survivors, many never fully recovered from their sufferings.

In 1808, it was said of the prison ship martyrs: "Dreadful, beyond description, was the condition of these unfortunate prisoners of war. Their sufferings and their sorrows were great, and unbounded was their fortitude. Under every privation and every anguish of life, they firmly encountered the terrors of death, rather than desert the cause of their country. * * *

"There was no morsel of wholesome food, nor one drop of pure water. In these black abodes of wretchedness and woe, the grief worn prisoner lay, without a bed to rest his weary limbs, without a pillow to support his aching head—the tattered garment torn from his meager frame, and vermin preying on his flesh—his food was carrion, and his drink foul as the bilge-water—there was no balm for his wounds, no cordial to revive his fainting spirits, no friend to comfort his heart, nor the soft hand of affection to close his dying eyes—heaped amongst the dead, while yet the spark of life lingered in his frame, and hurried to the grave before the cold arms of death had embraced him. * * *

"'But,' you will ask, 'was there no relief for these victims of misery?' No—there was no relief—their astonishing sufferings were concealed from the view of the world—and it was only from the few witnesses of the scene who afterwards lived to tell the cruelties they had endured, that our country became acquainted with their deplorable condition. The grim sentinels, faithful to their charge as the fiends of the nether world, barred the doors against the hand of charity, and godlike benevolence never entered there—compassion had fled from these mansions of despair, and pity wept over other woes."

Numerous accounts of survivors of the prison ships

have been preserved and some of them have been published. So great was popular sympathy for them that immediately after the close of the Revolutionary War an attempt was made to gather the testimony of the survivors and to provide a fitting memorial for those who had perished. So far as I have been able to learn most of the diaries and journals and other testimony of the prison ship victims relates to the later years of the war and particularly to the Jersey, the largest, most conspicuous, and most horrible of all the prison ships.

I have been so fortunate as to have access to a journal or diary kept by William Slade, of New Canaan, Conn., a young New Englander, who early responded to the call of his country and was captured by the British in 1776, shortly after his enlistment, and confined on one of the prison ships, the *Grovner* (or *Grovesner*). From internal evidence it would appear that this was the first or one of the first vessels used for the purpose and that Slade and the other prisoners with him were the first of the American soldiers thus confined. At any rate, throughout his diary he makes no mention of other bands of prisoners in the same condition. The few small pages of this little diary, which was always kept in the possession of his family until it was deposited in the Sheldon Museum, of Middlebury, Vt., contain a plain record of every-day life throughout a period of great suffering. They do not discuss questions of State and policy, but they do seem to me to bring clearly before the mind's eye conditions as they existed, and perhaps more clearly than elaborate treatises to give a picture of the sufferings of soldiers and sailors who preferred to endure all privations, hardships, and death itself rather than to renounce their allegiance to their country and enlist under the British flag.

The first entry in the Slade diary was made November 16, 1776, and the last January 28, 1777, so it covers about ten weeks.

The entries were as follows:

Fort Washington the 16th day November A. D. 1776. This day I, William Slade was taken with 2,800 more. We was allowed honours of War. We then marched to Harlem under guard, where we were turned into a barn. We

got little rest that night being verry much crowded, as some trouble [illegible]. * * *

Sunday 17th. Such a Sabbath I never saw. We spent it in sorrow and hunger, having no mercy showd.

Munday 18th. We were called out while it was still dark, but was soon marchd to New York, four deep, verry much frownd upon by all we saw. We was called Yankey Rebbels a going to the gallows. We got to York at 9 o'clock, were paraded, counted off and marched to the North Church, where we were confind under guard.

Tuesday 19th. Still confind without provisions till almost night, when we got a little mouldy bisd [biscuit] about four per man. These four days we spent in hunger and sorrow being derided by everry one and calld Rebs.

Wednesday, 20th. We was reinforsd by 300 more. We had 500 before. This causd a continual noise and verry big huddle. Jest at night drawd 6 oz of pork per man. This we eat alone and raw.

Thursday, 21st. We passd the day in sorrow haveing nothing to eat or drink but pump water.

Friday, 22nd. We drawd $\frac{3}{4}$ lb of pork, $\frac{3}{4}$ lb of bisd, one gil of peas, a little rice and some kittels to cook in. Wet and cold.

Saturday, 23rd. We had camps stews plenty, it being all we had. We had now spent one week under confinement. Sad condition.

Munday, 25th. We drawd $\frac{1}{2}$ lb of pork a man, $\frac{3}{4}$ of bisd, a little peas and rice, and butter now plenty but not of the right kind.

Tuesday, 26th. We spent in cooking for wood was scarce and the church was verry well broke when done, but verry little to eat.

Wednesday, 27th. Was spent in hunger. We are now dirty as hogs, lying any and every whare. Joys gone, sorrows increase.

Thursday, 28th. Drawd 2 lbs of bread per man, $\frac{3}{4}$ lb of pork. A little butter, rice and peas. This we cooked and eat with sorrow and sadness.

Friday, 29th. We bussd [busied] ourselves with trifels haveing but little to do, time spent in vain.

Saturday, 30th. We drawd 1 lb of bread, $\frac{1}{2}$ lb of pork, a

little butter, rice and peas. This we eat with sorrow, discouragd.

Sunday, 1st of Decembere 1776. About 300 men was took out and carried on board the shipping. Sunday spent in vain.

Munday, 2nd. Early in the morning we was calld out and stood in the cold, about one hour and then marchd to the North River and went on board The Grovnor transport ship. Their was now 500 men on board, this made much confusion. We had to go to bed without supper. This night was verry long, hunger prevaild much. Sorrow more.

Tuesday, 3rd. The whole was made in six men messes. Our mess drawd 4 lb of bisd, 4 oz of butter. Short allow. We now begin to feel like prisoners.

Wednesday, 4th. We drawd 4 lb of bisd. After noon drawd 2 quarts of peas and broth without salt, verry weak.

Thursday, 5th. We drawd 4 lb of bisd at noon, a little meat at night. Some pea broth, about one mouthful per man. We now feel like prisoners.

Friday, 6th. of Decr. 1776. We drawd $\frac{1}{2}$ of bisd, 4 oz of butter at noon and 2 quarts of provinder. Called burgo, poor stuff indeed.

Saturday, 7th. We drawd 4 lb of bisd at noon, a piece of meat and rice. This day drawd 2 bisd per man for back allowance (viz) for last Saturday at the church. This day the ships crew weighd anchor and fell down the river below Govnors Island and saild up the East River to Turcle Bay [Turtle Bay is at the foot of 23rd street], and cast anchor for winter months.

Sunday, 8th. This day we were almost discouraged, but considered that would not do. Cast off such thoughts. We drawd our bread and eat with sadness. At noon drawd meat and peas. We spent the day reading and in meditation, hoping for good news.

Munday, 9th. We drawd bisd and butter at noon, burgo [a kind of porrige] the poorest trade ever man eat. Not so good as provinder or swill.

Tuesday, 10th. We drawd bisd at noon, a little meat and rice. Good news. We hear we are to be exchange soon. Corpl. Hawl verry bad with small pox.

Wednesday, 11th. We drawd bisd. Last night Corpl Hawl died and this morning is buryd. At noon drawd peas, I mean broth. Still in hopes.

Thursday, 12th. We drawd bisd. This morning is the first time we see snow. At noon drawd a little meat and pea broth. Verry thin. We almost despair of being exchangd.

Friday, 13th. of Decr. 1776. We drawd bisd and butter. A little water broth. We now see nothing but the mercy of God to intercede for us. Sorrowful times, all faces look pale, discouraged, discouraged.

Saturday, 14th. We drawd bisd, times look dark. Deaths prevail among us, also hunger and naked. We almost conclude (that we will have) to stay all winter. At noon drawd meat and rice. Cold increases. At night suffer with cold and hunger. Nights verry long and tiresome, weakness prevails.

Sunday, 15th. Drawd bisd, paleness attends all faces, the melancholyst day I ever saw. At noon drawd meat and peas. Sunday gone and comfort. As sorrowfull times as I ever saw.

Munday, 16th of Decr. 1776. Drawd bisd and butter at noon. Burgo poor. Sorrow increases. The tender mercys of men are cruelty.

Tuesday, 17th. Drawd bisd. At noon meat and rice. No fire. Suffer with cold and hunger. We are treated worse than cattle and hogs.

Wednesday, 18th. Drawd bisd and butter. At noon peas. I went and got a bole of peas for 4. Cole increases. Hunger prevails. Sorrow comes on.

Thursday, 19th., Drawd bisd the ship halld in for winter quarters. At noon drawd meat and peas. People grow sick verry fast. Prisoners verry much frownd upon by all.

Friday, 20th. of Decr. 1776. Drawd bisd and butter this morn. Snow and cold. 2 persons dead on deck. Last night verry long and tiresom. At noon drawd burgo. Prisoners hang their heads and look pale. No comfort. All sorrow.

Saturday, 21st. Drawd bisd. Last night one of our regt. got on shore. but got catched. Troubles come on com-

fort gone. At noon drawd meat and rice. Verry cold. Soldiers and sailors verry cross. Such melancholy times I never saw.

Sunday, 22nd. Last night nothing but grones all night of sick and dying. Men amazeing to behold. Such hardness, sickness prevails fast. Deaths multiply. Drawd bisd. At noon meat and peas. Weather cold. Sunday gone and no comfort. Had nothing but sorrow and sadness. All faces sad.

Munday, 23rd. Drawd bisd and butter. This morning Sergt Kieth, Job March and several others broke out with the small pox. About 20 gone from here today that listed in the king's service. Times look verry dark. But we are in hopes of an exchange. One dies almost every day. Cold but pleasant. Burgo for dinner. People gone bad with the pox.

Tuesday, 24th. Last night verry long and tiresom. Bisd. At noon rice and cornmeal. About 30 sick. (They) Were carried to town. Cold but pleasant. No news. All faces gro pale and sad.

Wednesday, 25th. Lastnight was a sorrowful night. Nothing but grones and cries all night. Drawd bisd and butter. At noon peas. Capt. Benedict, Leicut Clark and Ensn Smith come on board and brought money for the prisoners. Sad times.

Thursday, 26th. Last night was spent in dying grones and cries. I now gro poorly. Terrible storm as ever I saw. High wind. Drawd bisd. At noon meat and peas. Verry cold and stormey.

Friday, 27th. Three men of our battalion died last night. The most malencholyest night I ever saw. Small pox increases fast. This day I was blooded. Drawd bisd and butter. Stomach all gone. At noon, burgo. Basset is verry sick. Not like to live I think.

Saturday, 28th. Drawd bisd. This morning about 10 cl. Josiah Basset died. Ensn Smith come here about noon with orders to take me a shore. We got to shore about sunset. I now feel glad. Coffee and bread and cheese.

Sunday, 29th. Cof. and bread and cheese. This day washed my blanket and bkd my cloathes. The small pox now begins to come out.

Munday, 30th. Nothing but bread to eat and coffee to drink. This day got a glass of wine and drinkd. Got some gingerbread and appels to eat.

Tuesday, 31st. Nothing good for breakt. At noon verry good. I grow something poorly all day. No fire and tis cold. Pcx comes out verry full for the time. The folks being gone i went into another house and got the man of the same to go and call my brother. When he came he said I wanted looking after. The man concluded to let me stay at his house.

Wednesday 1st of Jany. 1777. Pox come out almost full. About this time Job March and Daniel Smith died with the small pox.

Thursday, 2nd. Ensn Smith lookd about and got something to ly on and in. A good deal poorly, but I endeavoured to keep up a good heart, considering that I should have it [the small pox] light for it was verry thin and almost full.

Friday 3d. This morning the pox looks black in my face. This day Robert Arnold and Joshua Hurd died with the small pox. This day Ensn Smith got liberty to go home next morning, but omitted going till Sunday on account of the prisoners going home.

Saturday, 4th. Felt more poor than common. This day the prisoners come on shore so many as was able to travel which was not near all.

Sunday, 5th. This morning Ensn Smith and about 150 prisoners were set out for home. The prisoners lookd verry thin and poor.

Monday 6th. Pox turnd a good deal but I was very poorly, eat but litte. Drink much. Something vapery. Coughd all night.

Tuesday 7th. Nothing reml [remarkable] to write. No stomach to eat at all. Got some bacon.

Wednesday, 8th. Feel better. This day I went out of doors twice. Nothing remarkl to write.

Thursday, 9th. Tryd to git some salts to take but could not. Begin to eat a little better.

Friday, 10th. Took a portion of salts. Eat water porrage. Gain in strength fast.

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Saturday, 11th. Walk out. Went and see our Connecticut officers. Travld round. Felt a good deal better.

Sunday, 12th. Went and bought a pint of milk for bread. Verry good dinner. Gain strength fast. Verry fine weather. Went and see the small-pox men and Samll.

Munday, 13th. Feel better. Went and see the officer. Talk about going home.

Tuesday, 14th. Went to Fulton market and spent seven coppers for cakes. Eat them up. Washd my blanket.

Wednesday 15. Cleand up all my cloathes. Left Mr. Fenixes and went to the widow Schuylers. Board myself.

Thursday, 16th. Went to Commesary Loring. Have encouragment of going home. Signd the parole.

Friday, 17th. In expectation of going out a Sunday. Verry cold. Buy milk and make milk porrage. Verry good liveing. Had my dinner give.

Saturday, 18t. Verry cold. Went to see Katy and got my dinner. Went to Mr. Loring. Some encouragment of going hom a Munday, to have an answer tomorrow morning. Bought suppawn (some corn?) meal and Yankey.

Sunday, 19th. Went to Mr. Lorings. He sd we should go out in 2 or 3 days. The reason of not going out now is they are a fighting at Kingsbridge. Went to Phenixes and got my dinner. Almost discouraged about going home. To have answer tomorrow.

Munday, 20th. Nothing remarkable. Mr. Loring sd we should have an answer tomorrow. An old story.

Tuesday, 21st. Still follow going to Mr. Lorings. No success. He keeps a saying come tomorrow. Nothing remarkable.

Wednesday, 22. Mr. Loring says we should have a guard tomorrow, but it fell through. The word is we shall go out in 2 or 3 days.

Thursday, 23d. Nothing remarkl. Almost conclude to stay all winter.

Friday, 24th. Encouragement. Mr. Loring say that we shall go tomorrow. We must parade at his quaters tomorrow by 8 oclok.

Saturday, 25th. We paraded at Mr. Lorings by 8 or

9 oclk. Marchd off about 10 oclk. Marchd about 6 miles and the officers got a waggon and 4 or 5 of us rid about 4 miles, then travl'd about 1½, then the offr got a waggon and brcgt us to the lines. We were blindfolded when we come by Fort. Independency. Come about 4/5 of a mile whare we stay all night. Lay on the floor in our cloathes but little rest.

Sunday, 26th. We marchd by sun rise. March but 8 miles whare we got supper and lodging on free cost. This day gave 18 pence for breekft, 19 pence for dinner.

Munday, 27th. Marchd 2 miles. Got breekft cost 19 pence. Travld 2 or 3 miles and a waggon overtook us a going to Stamford. We now got chance to ride. Our dinner cost 11 count lawful. About 3 oclok met with Capt Hinmans company. See Judea folks and heard from home. This day come 13 miles to Horse neck. Supper cost 16. Lodging free.

Tuesday, 28th. Breckft cost 11. Rode to Stamford. Dinner 16. Travld 3 miles. supr and lodg free.

Here the diary ends when Slade was within a few miles of his home at New Canaan, Conn., which he reached next day.

Perhaps a few words of his future life are not without interest. He was one of the early settlers who went from Connecticut to Vermont and made a home in what was then a frontier settlement. He lived and died at Cornwall, Vt., and was successful and respected in the community. From 1801 to 1810 he was sheriff of Addison County. Of his sons, one, William, was especially conspicuous among the men of his generation for his abilities and attainments. After graduation from Middlebury College in 1810, he studied law, was admitted to the bar, and filled many offices in his town and county. After some business reverses he secured a position in the State Department in Washington in 1821. He was on the wrong side politically in General Jackson's campaign for the presidency, being like most Vermonters a supporter of John Quincy Adams. Some time after Jackson's inauguration, Slade was removed from his position in the State Department and this so incensed his friends in Vermont that as soon as a vacancy arose he was elected