

Treatment of Joel Green and Other Colonial Revolutionary Prisoners in Great Britain

The Americans captured in European waters and many also from the American side of the ocean were sent to prisons in England. The commonly held opinion in the Colonies was that their prisoners would be treated in the same manner as was the custom in the European countries, namely, to send every person, soldier or sailor, under the degree of a commissioned officer, to some inland place, where confinement took place in some old castle. The castle was generally surrounded by a high stone wall, oftentimes with a moat. The prisoners were confined as in a debtor's jail, with a strong guard of militia on the inside and a group of sentries on the outside. They were fed and maintained by a Commissary, who would contract for their support. The usual practice was to place officers on parole to some inland town at a distance far removed from their men. They were to be allowed to negotiate their bills of exchange, but could be confined in a jail if they did not meet those obligations¹.

The Americans also believed that their prisoners would not be confined to the prisons for long because, in the other wars of the eighteenth century, the western powers exchanged prisoners by a regular cartel. The reason for the agreement was that trained manpower was at a premium, and, consequently, the interest of the captor power usually required that its prisoners be exchanged. Thus, an exchange- or-providing-ransom cartel- would be instituted. All prisoners would be automatically returned, and a cash ransom paid at stated interval by whichever power received more prisoners than it required².

All of these beliefs were well intended, but one major problem entered into the treatment of American prisoners, e. g., the fact that **the British government did not recognize the American colonials as belligerents but only as rebels against the King**³. Thus, "the British government naturally refused to entertain American proposals for 'a cartel between nations at war,' but it allowed Americans to be exchanged informally against those few British prisoners whose return could be secured in no other way⁴.

The majority of Americans taken captive on the high seas was confined in two major prisons, Mill Prison near Plymouth and Forton Prison near Portsmouth⁵. Prisoners were also confined at smaller prisons near Liverpool, Deal, and Weymouth, and in the prison ship at Chatham⁶. "Prisoners were also confined in other prisons outside of England: Kinsale, Ireland,⁷ Antigua in the West Indies⁸, and the prisoners detained as slave labor in the coal-pits on Cape Breton, Newfoundland⁹.

¹ Force, Atchiucs, 4th Series, vol. 6, 425-426.

² Anderson, "Treatment of Prisoners in Britain," pp. '69-70.

³ Alexander, "Forton Prison," p. 367.

⁴ Anderson, "Treatment of Prisoners in Britain," p. 70.

⁵ Francis Abell, *Prisoners of War in Britain, 1756-1815* (London: Oxford University Press, 1914), pp. 215-220.

⁶ John K. Alexander, "American Privateersmen in the Mill Prison During 1777-1782," *The Essex Institute Historical Collections*, CII (1966), 320.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Allen, *Naval History*, 11, 651.

⁹ Force, Archives, 5th Series, vol. 2, 1105, 1226, 1303.

Men taken prisoner at sea or on shore were transported to the foreign prisons by ship. It was aboard these ships going to prison that men received their first taste of prison life. They were confined aboard ship for different lengths of time, depending on the place of capture.

For example, Ethan Allen was confined aboard ship forty days while on the way to prison. There were thirty-three prisoners confined with him. They stood elbow to elbow in a poorly ventilated and almost totally dark pen no larger than twenty square feet. The congestion was almost unbearable, and the men were forced to sleep on the deck. The close confinement led to most unhealthy conditions. Water was in short supply, and none could be used for washing. Many were afflicted with diarrhea, and only two excrement tubs were on hand to serve nearly three dozen men. Soon their little prison became a horrible hell with filth and vermin present, and added to this was the putrid smell of vomit¹⁰.

Treatment of this nature was geared to encourage defection. The British hoped that such severe treatment would challenge the loyalty of the Americans. As if this harsh treatment were not enough, the sailors aboard the vessels would take the clothes of the prisoners and give them only a frock and trousers to wear. They were then told, "Those will be good enough for you to be hanged in!"¹¹ One American rejoiced at the opportunity to go to prison after his confinement aboard a man-of-war. Prison seemed "like coming out of Hell and going into Paradise."¹² The promise was often misleading.

Charles Herbert wrote of his imprisonment at Mill Prison: Many are strongly tempted to pick up the grass in the yard and eat it and some pick up old bones in the yard that have been laying in the dirt a week or ten days and pound them to pieces and suck them. Some will pick up snails out of the holes in the wall and from among the grass and weeds in the yard, boil them and eat them and drink the broth Our meat is very poor in general; we scarcely see a good piece once in a month. Many are driven to such necessity by want of provisions that they have sold most of the clothes off their backs for the sake of getting a little money to buy them some bread.¹³

When the English people became aware of this treatment, there were organized protests for better prison conditions. **Benjamin Franklin** was instrumental in so informing the people of England, and he also continued to apply pressure on the British for exchange.¹⁴ A letter printed in a London paper and signed by "Humanities" probably did much to arouse the English. It stated that the prisoners . . . are 25 in number, and all inhumanly shut close down, like wild beasts, in a small stinking apartment in the hold of a sloop, about seventy tons burden, without a breath of air, in this sultry season, but what they receive through a small grating over head, the opening in which are not more than two inches square in any part, and through which the sun beats intensely hot all day; only two or three being permitted to come on deck at a time; and they are exposed in the open sun, which is reflected from the deck and water like a burning glass. I do not at all exaggerate, my Lord, I speak the truth; and the resemblance that this barbarity bears to the memorable black-hole at Calcutta, as a gentleman present on Saturday observed, strikes everyone at the sight. All England ought to know that the same game is now acting upon the Thames on board this privateer, that all the world cries out against and shuddered at the mention of in India. . . .

¹⁰ Jellison, Ethan Allot, p. 162.

¹¹ Alexander, "Forton Prison." pp. 367-368.

¹² Anderson, "Treatment of Prisoners in Britain," p. 76; Alexander, "Forton Prison," p. 368.

¹³ Allen, Nacal History, 11, 642-643.

¹⁴ Francis Wharton, ed., The Revolutionary Diplomatic Correspondence (7 vols.; Washington: Government Printing Office, 1889), 11, 409-410, 448; VI, 375.

The putrid streams issuing from the hole are so hot and offensive, that one cannot, without the utmost danger, breath over it; and I should not be at all surprised if it should cause a plague to spread. The miserable wretches below look like persons in a hot bath, panting, sweating, and fainting for want of air; and the surgeon declares that they must all soon perish in that situation, especially as they are almost all in a sickly state with bilious disorders.¹⁵

In September, 1777, conditions began to improve. The Reverend Thomas wren of Portsmouth took a great interest in the prisoners. He organized local charitable groups to give aid. The Americans also benefitted greatly in 1778 and 1779 from a general subscription organized on their behalf by merchants in England. Wren even gave escapees clothing and information on how to get to London and from there to France. Besides the fund raised in England, Franklin sent over what money he could spare for the benefit of prisoners¹⁶. Much of this was entrusted to an American merchant in London named Diggs, who turned out to be a British spy and who embezzled nearly all the money he had received for the use of the prisoners¹⁷.

The improvements within the British prisons were directed by the Commission of Sick and Hurt Seamen. This office set regulations to lessen the rigors of captivity.¹⁸ The prisons were divided into large rectangular wards. The officers' quarters were separated from those for the enlisted men, and the officers were supplied-with hammocks or a straw bed.¹⁹ The enlisted men, however, received no such accommodations.

Their supplies were adequate water, sanitary arrangements, and exercise grounds²⁰. Their rations were to be cooked in a separate cookhouse, and the official weekly allotment for each man was adequate.

For clothing, each man was given a jacket, waistcoat, pair of breeches, shoes and ca-p , and two shirts and two pairs of stockings.

This research was done in order to better understand the deprivation and suffering of Patriots like Joel Green, who, born in East Haddam, Connecticut in 1757, enlisted at the beginning of the Revolutionary War in Captain John Wiley's company in the 25th Connecticut Regiment under Colonel Joseph Spencer. After several engagements he was taken prisoner at the battle of Long Island, and with many others, sent to England and confined in Dartmouth Prison. eventually was able to escape and return home to America where he lived before he died and was buried in the Old Irish Cemetery at Liberty & Vine Streets in Cincinnati, Ohio.

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¹⁵ Force, Archiues, 5th Series, vol. 1, 754-755.

¹⁶ Alexander, "Forton Prison," pp. 378-383.

¹⁷ Wharton, Diplomatic Correspondence, V, 512.

¹⁸ Abell, Prisoners in Britain, pp. 3-4.

¹⁹ Alexander, "Forton Prison," pp. 377-378.

²⁰ George Thompson, "Diary of George Thompson of Newburyport, Kept at Forton Prison, England 1777-1781," The Essex Institute Historical Collections, LXXVI (1940), 240.