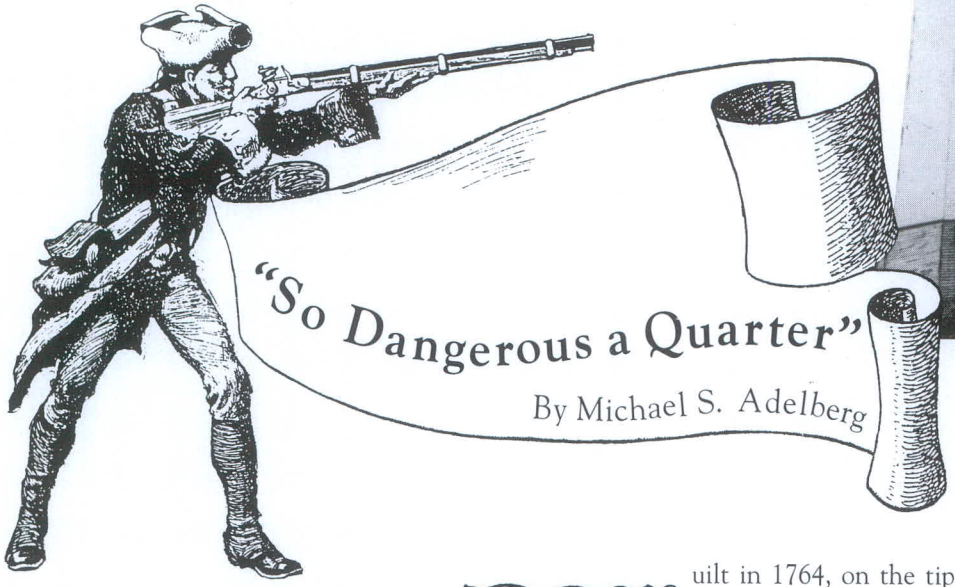
The Sandy Hook Lighthouse During The American Revolution



"So Dangerous a Quarter"

By Michael S. Adelberg



Drawing of Sandy Hook Lighthouse circa 1790. Note the small panes of the lantern room. USLHS drawing.

Built in 1764, on the tip of the Sandy Hook Peninsula, near the head of New York Harbor, the Sandy Hook Lighthouse predates the birth of the United States by more than a decade and still stands today, making it the nation's oldest standing lighthouse. It was built with private funds raised from two New York City lotteries on four acres of land purchased from New Jersey's Robert Hartshorne. Its construction demonstrated newfound commercial and political maturity of the greater New York City area and the resolve of the area's leaders to take on great projects without British guidance.

Yet far from being a great patriotic symbol during the Revolution, the Sandy Hook Lighthouse was the center of a menacing British presence throughout the war. It is a little known irony that the lighthouse would not be standing today if America's patriots had had their way. During the American Revolution, American patriots launched numerous attacks on the British-held lighthouse, and assaulted the Sandy Hook Peninsula literally dozens of times. Equally interesting, the lighthouse became the centerpiece of a local civil war, serving as a safe haven and trading post for a diverse group of Tory partisans whose raids terrorized the surrounding New Jersey countryside. This is the story of the Sandy Hook Lighthouse during the American Revolution, and its role as the centerpiece in a local war.

The British Conquest of the Lighthouse

The first half of 1776 was a very unusual time. Americans and British had already fought what was the bloodiest battle of the Revolution, the so-called Battle of Bunker Hill, yet most Americans outside of New England still considered themselves loyal English citizens. In New York City, this unusual situation translated into an awkward stalemate between the local patriots who controlled the docks of the city, and Rear Admiral Peter Parker's small squadron of British naval vessels. By spring, a tense standoff existed between the two sides, aggravated greatly by the constant rumors of a British invasion of New York and a steady influx of Continental soldiers from New England.

Rumors of the British invasion focused the attention of New Yorkers and New Jerseyians on Sandy Hook. The large British ships, most of which would be navigating the tricky waters around Sandy Hook for the first time, would need the Sandy Hook Lighthouse and the pilots who stayed there to avoid grounding on the sandbars at the head of New York Harbor. Lacking the naval power to resist a British invasion, patriot leaders hoped to hamper the British invasion by destroying the Sandy Hook Lighthouse. On March 4, 1776, the New Jersey Provincial Congress resolved to dismantle the Sandy Hook Lighthouse, and designated Colonel George Taylor, of the local Monmouth County Militia, to lead the operation. Just two days later, the New York Convention of Delegates finalized its plans to send Major William Malcolm to Sandy Hook to accomplish the same task. Malcolm's orders were explicit. He was to proceed to Middletown, New Jersey, link up with Taylor, and then go to the lighthouse. Once there, he was instructed to:

> "You will endevour to take the light out of the lantern, and save it if possible; but if you find it impossible, you will break all the glass. You will endevour to pump the oil out of the cisterns into casks and bring it off; but if you should be obstructed in your tasks by the enemy, you will pump it on the ground. In short, you will use your best discretion to render the lighthouse entirely useless."

On March 8, Malcolm's party, escorted by Taylor and a few local militiamen, landed at Horseshoe Bay, halfway up the Sandy Hook Peninsula, and proceeded to the lighthouse. Once there, they accomplished their task, and Colonel Taylor returned home with a number of items vital to the lighthouse, including: eight copper lamps, two tackle falls and blocks, three and a half casks of oil, and other sundry items. The lantern glass proved to be more difficult to handle. Winthrop Sargent, in his report to George Washington on the lighthouse mission, noted that, "Major Malcolm found it impossible to take out and save the glass, for want of tools and by reason of the time necessary for that purpose, and was therefore obliged to break it." However, neither Taylor nor Malcolm stayed at the Hook and the lighthouse, now crippled, was left unguarded.

Meanwhile, life grew ever more miserable for Rear Admiral Parker's small naval squadron. Though bristling with cannon, the warships were no match for the coordinated boycott and daily harassment of the New Yorkers. Equally alarming for the British, was the ever-growing presence of Continental soldiers who, on April 7, attacked and captured most of a British party sent to Staten Island to get fresh water. Unable to dock or draw provisions from New York, Parker moved his squadron across to the New Jersey side of the harbor. His squadron relocated to Sandy Hook on April 8, 1776.

Desperate for fresh water, parties of British sailors started coming ashore on the Sandy Hook Peninsula in April. It is unclear how many British watering parties landed and departed safely in early April, but this grace period did not last long. On April 23, 1776 a company of New Jersey State Troops, under Captain Vandeput, surprised and captured a thirty-five man watering party from the HMS *Asia* as they camped below the



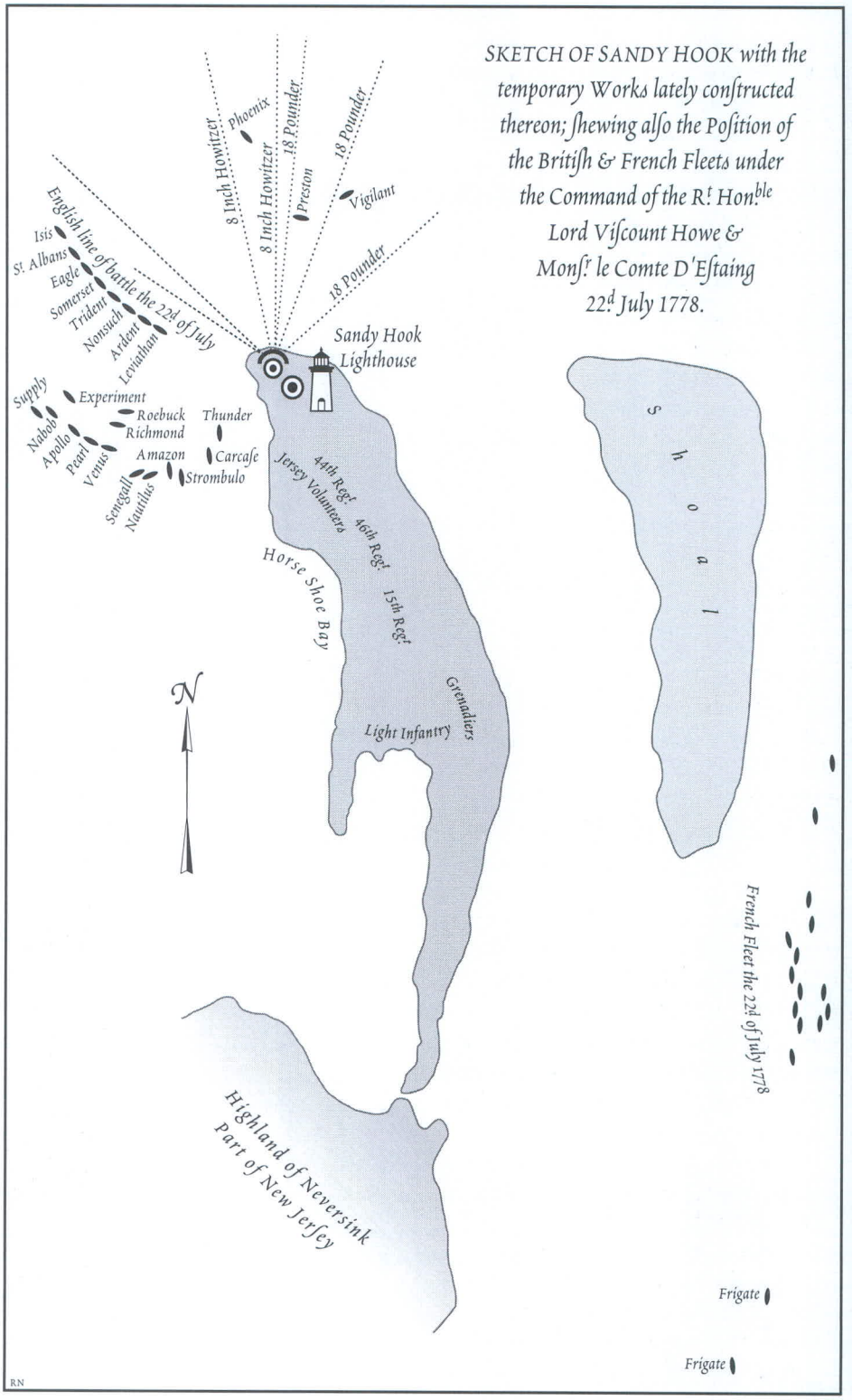
lighthouse. The next day another smaller British watering party was also captured; the New York Journal reported the incident:

> We hear from Sandy Hook, that 16 men from one of the ships of war, having landed there in order to get some water, they all had gotten into the upper room of the lighthouse, where they were carousing; when a party of New Jersey Militia surprised them, taking away the lower part of the stairs, made them prisoners, burned their boat and filled up the well.

These humiliating little defeats prompted the British to take action. Some time shortly after the capture of the watering parties, Rear Admiral Molyneaux Shuldham, now commanding the Sandy Hook squadron, landed a large body of marines and captured the lighthouse, apparently without a fight. On April 29, Captain Hyde Parker of the Royal Marines wrote to Shuldham that he had "put the lighthouse in a state of defence." The British did more than just capture the lighthouse. On May 1, the Pennsylvania Journal reported that the British were taking a number of steps to secure Sandy Hook. These included moving a frigate, the HMS *Duchess of Gordon*, close enough to the lighthouse so that its cannon could drive off would-be attackers. Also, to better protect the lighthouse by depriving would-be attackers of cover, a party of marines under Captain Parker "found it expedient to burn down the Pilot House at the Hook." All of these precautions apparently paid off, for when the Jersey State Troops attacked a watering party again on May 13, they were driven off by the guns of the British warships and the appearance of a party of marines, from the nearby lighthouse.

This skirmish of May 13, 1776, demonstrated that the lighthouse and the Sandy Hook Peninsula were now firmly controlled by the British. Sometime that month a beacon was built one hundred yards from the lighthouse, to substitute for the lighthouse until the light could be repaired. Yet the beacon was not needed for long, for by June the lighthouse was operating again. And by the time the invading British armada began arriving from Halifax at the end of June, the lighthouse was again fully operational.

Meanwhile, the British continued to secure their position on the Hook. Most importantly, the British kept at least one large naval vessel at Horseshoe Bay virtually all of the time, a wise precaution they continued throughout the entire war. The British further strengthened their position on 'the Hook' by keeping a company of marines stationed in the lighthouse and a corporal's guard of twelve marines camped by the fresh water well near the southern end of the peninsula. Lighthouse keeper, Adam Dobbs, an employee of the New York



City and presumably a patriot, was placed under house arrest and confined to the lighthouse. His services were probably needed in running the lighthouse and the British certainly were not eager to have him inform the Continental Army as to the strength of the British garrison on the Hook. The first phase of the battle for Sandy Hook was over.

American Attacks on the Lighthouse

While the British were masters of the lighthouse by May, 1776, their hold on the Hook faced a series of challenges—some formidable, some inept—from a wide variety of patriot opponents: Continental soldiers, local militia, privateer sailors, and even a mighty French fleet.

The first of these attacks on the lighthouse was launched by three hundred Continentals under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin Tupper on June 21, 1776. One of Tupper's men, Solomon Nash, described the event, noting that the first part of the expedition went well: "Set out towards the lighthous (sic) and marched slowly, undiscovered by the Enemy, we were all present and in high spirits." Tupper's men embarked at dawn and marched within 150 yards of the lighthouse. In the morning sunlight and without opposition, they trained their two cannon on the lighthouse. Then Tupper, demonstrating the over-confidence of an inexperienced commander, marched forward to demand the surrender of the lighthouse. What happened next is recorded in a letter he composed to George Washington the day after the action:

> I advanced within 150 yards of the light-house in so secret a manner that my party was undiscovered, I advanced with an officer and desired to speak with the commanding officer, and after a few words he fired several shots at me, but as God would have it, he mist (sic) me. I returned to my party and ordered the artillery to play, which continued for about an hour, but found the walls [of the lighthouse] so thick as to make no impression.

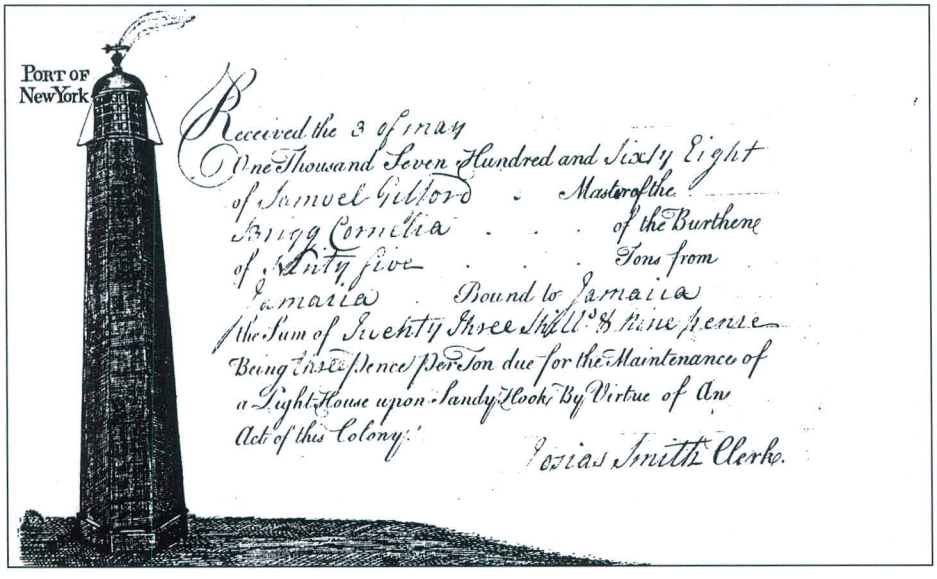
Tupper's party retreated when the nearby HMS *Phoenix* joined the fight. Despite being out in the open and taking fire on two sides, Tupper's party suffered only two casualties.

A larger party of five hundred men, presumably New Jersey Militia, attacked the Hook on July 3 but fared even worse than Tupper's party. Again, the party was able to get two cannon (firing six pound balls) within firing range of the lighthouse, and again the party was driven off after discharging several shots on the lighthouse. This time the attackers sustained more severe losses, a British officer noted, "they killed 14 of the rebels, one of whom we hear is a Major." The two attacks on the lighthouse apparently did not shake the confidence of the defenders; the same British officer noted, "We expect it (the lighthouse) will be attacked again soon, but we are well prepared for them." Over the next year, New Jersey Militia detachments attacked the lighthouse four more times, each time being driven off without damaging the lighthouse.

What accounted for the great success of the British defenders? Perhaps the greatest reason for British success had to do with weakness of the American attackers, who rarely had the heavy cannon necessary to damage the lighthouse, and never showed the discipline to endure a sustained counter-attack. Nearly as important a factor in assuring British victory was the geography of Sandy Hook. The Sandy Hook Lighthouse sits at the end of the long and thin Sandy Hook Peninsula; this allowed British naval vessels to move in close to the attackers and pepper them with cannon fire. Furthermore, attackers had to venture out into the open to make their assault. Lawrence Hartwick, a carpenter in the British navy, noted that the lighthouse was 525 yards from the nearest tall grass meadow, and 735 yards from the nearest stand of trees. Finally, the lighthouse itself was a major reason for the success of the defenders. Hartwick measured that, at its base, the walls of the lighthouse were more than six feet thick,



Above — Sandy Hook tower sometime after 1870s, due to the presence of the oil house at the base of the tower. Note the smaller, "modern" lantern and the keeper. Below — A drawing of the Sandy Hook tower on a receipt for "light dues" paid by all ships entering New York Harbor prior to 1789.



and even near the top, the walls of the lighthouse were two feet thick. As such, it is little wonder that the lighthouse easily endured several hits from the relatively small cannon of the attackers. And the British took several steps to make the lighthouse even more imposing, the German officer Johann Ewald noted:

> The lighthouse has been fortified with a stone breast work, in which loop holes have been constructed. In the tower itself, port holes have been cut on all four sides [for placing cannon], four of which are on the first floor for defense. The army furnished a Captain, one other officer, and fifty men for the guard.

Indeed, the lighthouse was invulnerable to American attacks.

The French Menace

While the Sandy Hook Lighthouse may have seemed like Gibraltar to the Americans, the mighty French fleet, which arrived in American waters July 5, 1778, had little reason to show the same level of respect. This French fleet, under command of Count D'Estaing, was large enough to intimidate the British into a defensive posture in America even before it arrived. In June, 1778, the British Army retreated from Philadelphia across New Jersey to avoid battling a combined Franco-American force. On July 5, 1778, the British army, though badly fatigued from its exhausting march and bloodied at the Battle of Monmouth, completed its retreat to the New York area. The Sandy Hook Peninsula, temporarily separated from the mainland by the storms of the preceding winter, served as the principal depot for ferrying the British Army from New Jersey to New York.

Despite the successful movement of the army, the British were far from safe in New York. This was made apparent when the French—who had mistakenly arrived in Virginia on July 5—finally arrived in the New York area on July 11, anchoring off Shrewsbury Inlet, four miles south of the lighthouse. The French fleet was considerably larger than the local British fleet, possessing a fourteen to nine advantage in large warships and a great deal more overall firepower. Admiral Richard Howe, knowing his forces could not match the French in terms of firepower, drew a defensive line across New York Harbor and hoped the French would not attack. For this plan to work, Sandy Hook, at the head of the harbor, needed to be secure. The British made certain it was.

Between July 11 and July 25, when the French fleet left for Rhode Island, the British made several moves to turn Sandy Hook into a fortress. One of Admiral Howe's officers, Thomas O'Bierne, described some of the steps taken to secure the Hook:

> A battery of two howitzers, and three eighteen pounders, were erected on the point which the enemy must have to pass to enter the channel; while four regiments, under the command of Colonel O'Hara, were ordered by General (Henry) Clinton to the Hook, lest the Enemy should attempt to possess it, and annoy us from so dangerous a Quarter.

In all, the British stationed a total of 1,800 men on Sandy Hook during the July standoff. They also converted the HMS *Leviathan* into a floating battery set at the tip of the Hook.

As might be expected, all of this activity took its toll on the Hook and the lighthouse. All of the extra activity must have resulted in the trampling of Sandy Hook's meadows and the overgrazing of its fragile vegetation. And the excess of human debris crowded around the lighthouse in the summer heat must have been unpleasant and unhealthy. No wonder then, that when Ambrose Serle, a British officer, visited Hook and the lighthouse during this tense period, he dubbed Sandy Hook, "a dismal, barren spot" and referred to the lighthouse as "a stinking edifice."

Whatever the aesthetic costs, the military precautions taken by the British apparently paid off. The French, lacking reliable pilots and fearing the treacherous sandbars which surrounded the Hook, never attacked. The mighty fleet sailed off on July 25 without firing a shot at the Hook, and the Sandy Hook Lighthouse survived its most severe threat. The French would again menace New York in May, 1780, but never again was the threat to the lighthouse so great.

Sandy Hook and a Civil War

Throughout the Revolution, and especially during the later years of the war, Sandy Hook—the lone British outpost in New Jersey—acted as the catalyst for a vicious civil war between New Jerseyians. Tory partisans, many of whom were loyalists 'refugees' from nearby Monmouth County, used Sandy Hook as the launching place for their raids into the New Jersey countryside. By April, 1779, so many partisans were using the Hook that their ramshackle settlement of semi-permanent buildings at the foot of the lighthouse earned the name "Refugeetown." Meanwhile, the lighthouse, which housed the Commissary for Refugees, a British officer in charge of promoting raids into the New Jersey countryside, was dubbed "Refugee tower." It also served as a trading post at which raiders sold their plunder and purchased war materials from the British Army.

The collection of Tory raiders was exceptionally diverse. The Tories of Refugeetown were everything from murderous ruffians who plundered the homes of New Jersey almost indiscriminantly to gentlemanly businessmen engaging in counterfeiting and smuggling. The best organized of the Tory raiders were the New Jersey Volunteers, a formally recognized Provincial Corps of the British Army. Throughout the war, companies of New Jersey Volunteers were stationed at the Hook and often guarded the lighthouse when British troops were needed elsewhere. They also launched at least nine raids into the New Jersey countryside from the Hook (ironically, two of these raids were led by the turncoat, George Taylor, the same man who helped disable the lighthouse in 1776). And there is good reason to expect that individual New Jersey Volunteers participated 'unofficially' in a great many more such actions. Muster rolls from the later years of the war, show that companies of New Jersey Volunteers, while stationed in New York, occasionally detached junior officers with seven to ten men

(the ideal number for nocturnal raiding) to Sandy Hook without explaining the nature of this unusual assignment. This strongly suggests raiding activity, especially since other military units were simultaneously stationed as guards at the lighthouse, and there is no reason to think that the lighthouse required extra guards. Thus, the New Jersey Volunteers, composed of New Jersey loyalists eager for revenge against the patriots who drove them into exile, were probably the most prolific of the Sandy Hook raiders.

The other groups who used Sandy hook as the staging ground for their raids into New Jersey are more difficult to pin down. Perhaps the most interesting of these groups was the "Black Pioneers," a collection of runaway slaves from New Jersey who were organized, armed, and turned loose on their former masters in 1779 by the British. Under the leadership of the legendary runaway, Colonel Tye, this group of perhaps fifty loosely associated runaway slaves and free black refugees led several highly successful raids into New Jersey in 1779 and 1780. However, after the death of Tye in September, 1780, the group lost momentum, and apparently dissolved entirely by 1782. Other shadowy Tory groups, especially the Pine Robber gangs of New Jersey's coastal wetlands, relied on Sandy Hook less than the Volunteers and the Black Pioneers. These groups carried out their partisan activities inside New Jersey. Yet even for them, Sandy Hook was of critical importance, serving as a refuge in times of severe distress and a much needed place to exchange their plunder for the tools of war.

For the patriots of New Jersey, the disruptive influence of Sandy Hook was at once obvious. "Refugeetown near Sandy Hook," the New Jersey Gazette, once observed was "where horse thieves resort." Yet there was little they could do. The uniformly unsuccessful attacks on the lighthouse in 1776 and 1777 demonstrated that local forces could not even damage the lighthouse, much less dislodge the British from the Hook. A large detachment of Continental soldiers and ships might fare better, but such forces were not available. With no other alternative, New Jersey patriots took to attacking the Hook via the only possible method—privateer raids.

The privateer threat to Sandy Hook and the lighthouse was simultaneously impressive and inconsequential. On the one hand, privateers took advantage of the weakened Royal Navy by growing ever bolder in their descents upon Sandy hook. Over the course of the war, numerous British and Tory merchant ships were captured within sight of the lighthouse. Usually, these quick and small privateer vessels—some of which were nothing more than oar-powered whale boats—disappeared into New Jersey's numerous shallow river inlets before the slower British frigates could engage them. One especially daring privateer captain, Adam Hyler, made six assaults on the Hook, typically carrying off Tory boats docked in Horseshoe Bay and capturing prisoners at Refugeetown. In one particularly bold expedition, his men swiped a number Horseshoe Bay's harbor buoys as a British frigate stood guard nearby. By summer, 1782, Hyler and other privateers were making descents on Sandy Hook a nearly weekly occurrence. And, in the ultimate humiliation, Hyler's fourteen man party lured a party of twenty-five marines from the lighthouse and successfully ambushed them.

Yet despite all of their considerable bravery and cunning, the privateer threat to Sandy Hook should not be overestimated. Privateers assaulted the periphery of the British base on Sandy Hook, but never threatened the existence of the base itself. The vast majority of the privateer vessels which were active around Sandy Hook did not even have the heavy cannon necessary to damage the lighthouse, and there is no record of any privateer ever firing on the lighthouse. Furthermore, the uncoordinated nature of privateering—where every captain is essentially autonomous—made any kind of coordinated attack on Sandy Hook an impossibility. Although there are a few examples of privateers acting in concert on particular expeditions against Sandy Hook, none of these alliances were more than short-term, and most were probably ad hoc in nature. Finally and perhaps most importantly, the hit and run tactics of the privateers was, in itself, an admission of American weakness. Seldom, if ever, could the small New Jersey privateers hope to prevail in a duel with a British frigate, especially when that frigate was being assisted by the shore battery near the lighthouse.

Conclusion: the Lighthouse as the Linchpin of a Local War

It is sometimes easy to forget the importance of a single person or object in the lives of a particular group of people. Historians, especially in the present 'Social History' environment, often dwell on macro-level forces without noting impact of special people or objects. The Sandy Hook lighthouse was a one of those special objects. Its mere presence set in motion a series of measures and counter-measures which brought glory and riches to some, death and misery to many more.

The lighthouse was the linchpin on which a local war turned and turned again. From the earliest months of 1776, when patriots successfully attacked British watering parties and disabled the lighthouse lantern, to the British conquest and defense of the Hook, to the partisan and privateer warfare of the later years of the war, the lighthouse was the only constant in a violently volatile environment. If it had not been built, the local war certainly would not have been so long or bloody, as it is doubtful that the British ever would have expended so many resources defending an otherwise barren neck of land. The battles and raids in and around the Hook would never have taken place, certainly not in the same number, if the lighthouse was simply not there. It is a cruel irony that the Americans who a generation earlier had proudly built the lighthouse as an assertion of their economic and even political independence from Great Britain, were now devoting their utmost efforts to destroying that same edifice. It is an even crueler irony that this great structure became the epicenter of a ruinous civil war. Indeed for the patriots and Tories of Revolutionary New Jersey, there never was "so dangerous a Quarter" as the Sandy Hook lighthouse.