Helping Overcome the Hurdles to Revolutionary War Research in New York State

by Eric G. Grundset

Anyone who has attempted to research the life and wartime service of a New Yorker during the American Revolution will likely tell you that it can be a challenging undertaking. Many factors combine to complicate such investigations in the Empire State. A very diverse geography — spreading from the southern coastal islands, up the Hudson Valley into the Mohawk, through and beyond the Catskills and Adirondacks, and north to Lakes Champlain, George, and Ontario — made for a complex European settlement pattern. Not surprisingly, this in turn led to a wide scattering of documents and sources and considerable regionalism and localism in their keeping and availability. The bottom line is that there is no one central research facility that can claim to be the place to conduct research. A few major ones do, however, come close.

For the past thirty years, as Library Director for the Daughters of the American Revolution in Washington, D.C., I have observed the trials and tribulations of many researchers — both members of the public and DAR employees — who have moaned about research in New York State. Establishing proof of Revolutionary War service and clear lineages from an ancestor to a prospective DAR member is often difficult under good circumstances, but researchers with New York ancestors seem to face additional problems. The pre- and post-Revolution migrations of thousands of New Englanders into various parts of New York State adds even more complexity to a general situation disrupted by the often intense warfare that raged throughout major regions of the state during the War for Independence.

John Trumbull. Surrender of General Burgoyne, *1821. U.S. Capitol Rotunda, Washington, D. C. British General John Burgoyne surrendered to American General Horatio Gates at Saratoga, N.Y., on October 17, 1777. The event is seen as a turning point in the war.*

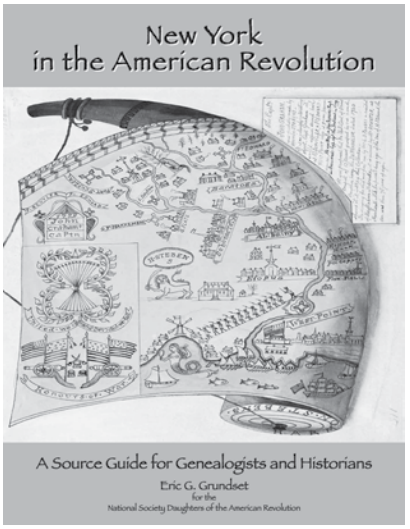
New York State does have a wealth of materials for research, but many genealogists do not always know where to find the types of New York sources needed to meet DAR or related genealogical and historical standards of proof. That said, many New York documents no longer exist, largely due to the infamous 1911 fire in the State Capitol in Albany that destroyed the contents of the State Library and large quantities of its archival material. Fortunately for modern researchers, some individuals laboring in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had transcribed, abstracted, indexed, or calendared many early New York records before many of those documents were destroyed in that fire. The lost originals are irreplaceable, but at least much information remains in published or transcribed form to aid modern researchers.

With this historical background, the DAR Library launched a new series of books in the fall of 2012 designed to help with the study of Americans of the Revolutionary era in each of the original states. After many years of collecting pertinent information, and arranging and indexing it, the first book of this series is *New York in the American Revolution: A Source Guide for Genealogists and Historians*. Other state guides will follow during the next two years.

The overriding purpose of this new series is to gather into each state publication bibliographic entries for as many manuscript sources and published studies as possible, to illustrate the history and documents of the American Revolution. Researchers will then know where to find original materials or what has already

been published. All material cannot possibly be listed, but a very large percentage can, thanks to online catalogs, webpages, other electronic finding aids, footnotes in books and articles, and the holdings of the DAR Library itself.

For New York State specifically, the quantity and variety of manuscript and published material relating to the Revolutionary Era can seem staggering. Many historians and genealogists have been very busy for a very long time telling the story of the state during this period. *New York in the American Revolution* fills 707 pages and includes thousands of entries for sources and studies on innumerable topics.



Some researchers may be surprised to learn just how much is housed in the New York State Archives and the New York State Library's Manuscripts and Special Collections Department in Albany's Cultural Education Center. Together these two state agencies most closely fill the role of a central place for research on Revolutionary War ancestors. Visiting Albany or hiring a researcher are essential steps to consider. Many more research centers, libraries, archives, and historical and genealogical societies throughout New York State and beyond its borders, however, also hold major collections of Revolutionary War material. The DAR's new publication lists many of these repositories and their holdings.

Many uncataloged materials reside in file collections in local libraries and research centers, so querying or visiting such places is yet another essential step. The holdings of such other institutions — the New-York Historical Society and the New York Public Library in Manhattan, the New York State Historical Association in Cooperstown, the Cadet Library at West Point, public and academic libraries across the state, and other institutions elsewhere — reveal some amazing material. What actually exists and, sometimes, where it is located, can be surprising. Creativity in searching is essential because some library cataloging is very limited. Onsite research is a must, since the Internet often just scratches the surface of what exists.

Divided into many chapters on types of records, geographic areas, and general subjects, *New York in the American Revolution* brings thousands of bibliographic entries together in one publication. The topical sections of the book examine the geographical factors affecting research in New York State, the many types of state records that pertain to the Revolution, the use of surviving tax records to document Revolutionary War service, land and military records, spies and espionage, naval and maritime sources, prisons and prisoners of war, veterans pensions and related sources, such as grave and cemetery listings, and archaeological studies.

A major portion of the guide lists material (published and unpublished) by locality, referencing the counties, towns, and cities of New York State as they existed during the Revolution, with subsections on the modern jurisdictions. Loyalty oaths, accounts of battles and skirmishes, town records, and other local contemporary and modern materials populate this part of the guide. The book concludes with chapters on "distinctive" groups of people in the state — African Americans; Canadian and Nova Scotian refugees; Dutch, German, Irish, Jewish, and Scottish New Yorkers; Freemasons; Kings' College/Columbia College students and faculty; lawyers; Loyalists; Native Americans; Quakers/Friends; general refugees; religious groups; and women and girls — plus lineage societies relating to the American Revolution in New York State and prominent New Yorkers of the period. Twenty-two maps of New York counties for that time period precede the fifty-page subject and name index.

So much is available for research in New York State in many research centers. The DAR hopes that the new compilation will reveal this wealth of information to genealogists and historians and give them new directions for their research.

New York in the American Revolution: A Source Guide for Genealogists and Historians is available as a PDF for $25 and as a print book for $45 postpaid through the online DAR Store (*www.dar.org/omni/store/store32/*). ◆

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