

Revolutionary Cumberland: A Note on a Historical Controversy

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During the spring of 1897 Mrs. Abbie Rickard, the historian of a local Rhode Island chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, produced a paper on the town of Cumberland and the Revolutionary War. Parts of the paper were printed in Rhode Island newspapers, but it never made its way into any scholarly publication.¹ Nevertheless, Rickard's piece managed to set off a lively historical debate over the role of Cumberland in the war effort. In short, one side argued that the town played an active role in the war, while the other held that Cumberland was reluctant to join the cause of freedom. This dispute seems never to have been settled, and thus a fairly significant question on a matter of local Rhode Island history remains unanswered.

The 1897 controversy ignited over what Mrs. Rickard had to say regarding the operation of a beacon that once stood atop Tower Hill Road in Cumberland. This beacon was one of four that were erected in Rhode Island during the Revolutionary era as a signaling network. Relying heavily on family histories handed down from generation to generation, Rickard argued that the beacon was lighted during the Battle of Bunker Hill, and that upon seeing its glow against the night sky, a company of patriotic Cumberland residents "assembled and [were] on their way to Boston."²

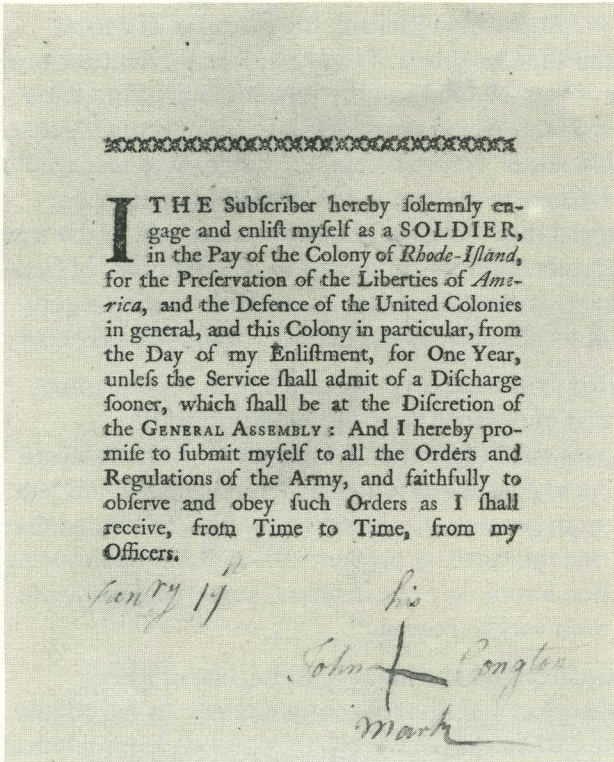
This claim was immediately disputed by Sidney S. Rider, one of Rhode Island's most outspoken historical and literary commentators. In the 10 July 1897 issue of his *Book Notes*, Rider explained that the General Assembly had designated the beacons for use "to alarm the country in case of an invasion." "Was Bunker Hill a case of invasion?" asked Rider rhetorically. "Well, hardly." Moreover, he wrote, "The battle was fought out and ended long before a light could have been seen forty miles away. No man left Rhode Island for the scene of the battle *after it was over*. Mrs. Rickard's story is tradition, and is positively worthless, recorded facts wholly overthrow it."³ Making good use of "recorded facts," Rider convincingly discredited Rickard's story of the beacon, but apparently he was not yet satisfied. In the 7 August 1897 issue of *Book Notes*, he declared that "the backwardness of the town of Cumberland in supplying men for the Revolutionary Army is a plain matter of record which no amount of tradition can overthrow."⁴

Although Rider never went so far as to label Cumberland loyalist, another writer drawn into the controversy was not so restrained. Commenting on the Revolutionary-era disposition of Cumberland in the *Woonsocket Evening Reporter* of 12 July 1897, Erastus Richardson, author of the *History of Woonsocket*, stated that "the records and traditions show a most alarming evidence of toryism hereabouts."⁵ Of what this "alarming evidence" consists, we do not know; neither in the article nor in his other published writings did Richardson support his contention. The claim of pro-British sentiment in Cumberland has been neither endorsed nor explicitly refuted by other historians, and we are therefore left with a charge of loyalism unsupported by published evidence. Can the assertion be substantiated?

Artist's rendering of the Revolutionary-era Providence Beacon. Frontispiece from Edward Field, Revolutionary Defences in Rhode Island (Providence, 1896). RIHS Collection (RHi X3 1360)

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It should be noted, first, that we must rely solely on written records in this investigation. Although Richardson claimed that both the records and the traditions of the area illustrate the prevalence pro-British sentiment, we have no good way of knowing what traditions he was referring to, nor is it likely that we could assess their reliability even if we did know. This is not the case with the written records, however, for it can be determined with reasonable certainty which records Richardson had in mind in forming his conclusions about Cumberland's Revolutionary loyalties.



A soldier's oath of enlistment, 19 January 1776. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 7023).

An examination of Richardson's *History of Woonsocket* indicates that he probably relied exclusively on local and state public records. Published in 1876 and representing the author's most thorough treatment of the history of Cumberland, the book serves as a guide to Richardson's sources of information.⁶ Although it does not address the topic of loyalism, the work does contain a section on the Revolution, and within this section public records are the only sources to which the author refers; there are no references to diaries or to other kinds of personal records. The records of the area's Quaker Society are mentioned, but only in relation to the town of Smithfield.⁷ If Richardson had access to written records other than what was available to the public, he evidently did not use them in composing his history.

The *History of Woonsocket* was published twenty-one years before Richardson's article appeared in the *Evening Reporter*, and it is possible that the author may have become aware of new historical materials during that time. The likelihood that that in fact happened, however, seems slim; someone as devoted to local history as Richardson surely would have wanted to record such documentation, but no such record exists. It thus seems reasonable to assume that if there is any evidence of Cumberland's devotion to the Crown, it would be found in the records of the town or the General Assembly.

Of the relevant public documents, the Cumberland town meeting records are the most useful for assessing the political climate in the town. With an entry for every issue voted upon, these minutes indicate what was of concern to the freemen at their town meeting and, by implication, what was not. As one might expect, the records reflect a greater interest in local affairs than in the general affairs of the colony. Like many other eighteenth-century towns, Cumberland was a parochial community.

The town meeting records of the 1760s and early 1770s show that the freemen of Cumberland were preoccupied with the issues of taxation and welfare.⁸ Meeting after meeting addressed the prospect of another "Rate or Tax" because "money [was] Wanting To Supply the Town Treasury for the Support and maintenance of the many Poor."⁹ There were other concerns as well: "Sheep Rams running at large," the laying out of highways, the selection of jurors. These matters were primarily of local importance; only occasionally does a larger issue appear in the town meeting records.

The struggle with Great Britain was such an issue. Despite its obvious significance, however, it was some time before the growing conflict gained the attention of the freemen. From the advent of the Crown's new imperial policies following the French and Indian War, ten years passed before the town

