

REVOLUTIONARY MARTYRS

The Prison Ship Martyrs' Monument in Brooklyn's Fort Greene Park honors the forgotten victims of the American Revolution—the more than 11,500 Americans held captive on British prison ships who died of disease, starvation, violence and neglect.

BY SHARON McDONNELL

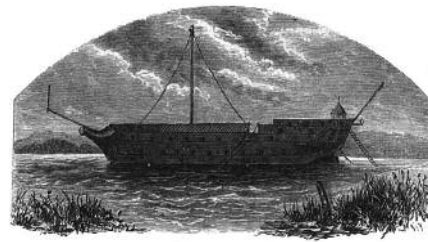
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Standing almost 150 feet tall at the summit of Fort Greene Park in Brooklyn, N.Y., and flanked by a granite staircase 100 feet wide, the Prison Ship Martyrs' Monument overlooks Wallabout Bay, the site where more than 11,500 American prisoners of war were held captive in unspeakable conditions and died on 16 British prison ships between 1776 and 1783. According to government estimates, more than twice as many Americans died on the prison ships than in all the battles of the Revolutionary War. The story of the "prison ship martyrs," as they are called, represent one of the most tragic chapters in our nation's early history—yet one of its least known.

'Turn Out Your Dead!'

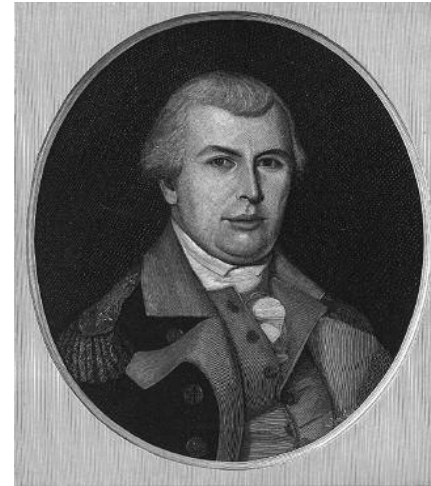
In 1776, Fort Greene Park was the site of Fort Putnam, one of the most impor-



The *Jersey* was nicknamed "Hell" by its inhabitants.

tant defenses built on high land in Brooklyn to protect New York from the British. It was one of several defenses supervised by Colonel Rufus Putnam.

"If New York was the key to the continent, then Long Island was the key to New York, and the key to the defense of Long Island was Brooklyn Heights," says David McCullough in his book *1776* (Simon & Schuster, 2005). Despite fierce battles waged during the Battle of



General Nathanael Greene

Brooklyn (also called the Battle of Long Island) under the leadership of Major General Nathanael Greene on August 27, 1776, the greatly outnumbered Continental Army lost. Shortly thereafter, the British took control of New York City and Long Island and occupied them until the war ended.

The British needed space to imprison captured seamen and soldiers, as well as civilians suspected of Revolutionary sympathies, but the churches, the old City Hall and Columbia College (then named King's College) weren't enough. A fire had destroyed many New York buildings earlier in the year, so the British turned to ships to detain their prisoners. Most prison ships were anchored in Wallabout Bay on the shore of the future Brooklyn Navy Yard, directly across the East River from Manhattan's Lower East Side. The ships held American prisoners from all over—including seamen imprisoned in Charleston, S.C., after the British occupation in 1780, St. Augustine, Fla., and Halifax, Nova Scotia. They were all eventually transferred to prison ships in New York.

Known to their once-inhabitants as floating horrors, infamous for cattle-like conditions, merciless treatment by British guards and rampant disease, death was a common occurrence on the prison ships.

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were so frequent. Bodies were buried in shallow graves along the shore.

Robert Sheffield of Stonington, Conn., one of 350 men jammed in a small compartment below deck aboard a prison ship, escaped in 1778, telling the *Connecticut Gazette*:

"Their sickly countenances and ghastly looks were truly horrible. Some swearing and blaspheming; some crying, praying, and wringing their hands, and stalking about like ghosts; others delirious, raving, and storming; some groaning and dying—all panting for breath; some dead and corrupting—air so foul at times that a

lamp could not be kept burning, by reason of which the boys were not missed till they had been dead 10 days."

Of the 16 prison ships, the *Jersey*, which was nicknamed "Hell" by its inhabitants, was the most notorious. A prisoner on the *Jersey*, who said the deaths were about 10 per day, recalled, "At the time I was on board, there were about 1,100 prisoners, no berths to lie in, or benches to sit on; many were without clothes. Dysentery, fever, pleurisy, and despair prevailed. The scantiness and bad quality of provisions, the brutality of the guards, and the sick pining for comforts they could not obtain,



A 19th-century color engraving illustrates the interior of the HMS *Jersey*, a prison ship anchored off Brooklyn during the British occupation of New York.



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altogether furnished the cruelest scene of horror ever beheld.”

Another *Jersey* prisoner, Captain Thomas Dring, a 25-year-old from Newport, R.I., survived—though surrounded by men suffering from smallpox—by inoculating himself with a pin. “On looking about me, I soon found a man in the proper stage of the disease, and desired him to favor me with some of the matter for the purpose ... The only instrument which I could procure, for the purpose of inoculation, was a common pin ...

The next morning I found that the wound had begun to fester; a sure symptom that the application had taken effect.”

A poem penned by J.M. Scott references both the *Jersey* and the *Scorpion*:

*Let the dark Scorpion's bulk narrate
The dismal tale of English hate
Her horrid scenes let Jersey tell
And mock the shadows where demons dwell.
There shrieks of pain, and the dying groan,
Unheeded fall on ears of stone.*



THE FIRST MONUMENT.

General George Washington complained about the prison ships in a January 13, 1777, letter to British

commander General William Howe. “You may call us rebels, and say that we deserve no better treatment. But, remember, my Lord, that supposing us rebels, we still have feelings as keen and sensible as Loyalists, and will, if forced to it, most assuredly retaliate upon those upon whom we look as the unjust invaders of our rights, liberties and properties.”

Prisoners could be released if they renounced the Revolutionary cause and pledged loyalty to King George III. Some bribed their way to freedom; others were exchanged for British prisoners. It's unknown how many escaped the ships this way. After the war ended in 1783, the remaining prisoners were freed, and the prison ships abandoned.

The Memorial Gains Allies

Long after the war was over, bones and skulls from ship prisoners kept washing up on the shores of Brooklyn. Some were collected and stored in a vault funded by the Tammany Society near the Navy Yard in 1806.

Support grew to honor the ship prisoners with a permanent and more meaningful monument, but it still took a century. Poet Walt Whitman, editor of *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*—the biggest daily newspaper in Brooklyn, which was then an independent city—wrote almost daily in 1846 about how Brooklyn needed a public park as a “lung” where its dense population could relax and breathe fresh air. Inspired by the Society of Old Brooklynites, he also rallied support in his pages to build a monument to the prison ship martyrs.

The grandson of a militiaman in the Revolutionary War, Whitman heard many stories about the war throughout his childhood. Patriotic heroes permeate his poems: George Washington weeps for his dead and his defeat at the Battle of Brooklyn in the *Leaves of Grass* poem, “The Sleepers,” and the prison ship martyrs appear in “Song of Myself”:

*What sobers the Brooklyn boy as he looks
down the shores of the Wallabout and remembers
the prison ships.*

Whitman and other supporters of the public park soon got their wish. The City of Brooklyn commissioned Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, fresh from their success designing Manhattan's Central Park, to design several parks in 1864, one of which was the 30-acre Washington Park, now known as Fort Greene Park. The remains of the prison ship martyrs were temporarily laid to rest in nearby Prospect Park, but were transferred to a brick crypt in Fort Greene Park in 1873.

In 1900, workers digging a cellar for the Brooklyn Navy Yard found at least a dozen skeletons of ship prisoners, a story that made front-page news in *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. The story noted the bones would be placed “with those of other Revolutionary martyrs” in the crypt.

Bending to the campaign from the Society of Old Brooklynites and the DAR—whose Fort Greene Chapter was formed in 1896 in Brooklyn to erect a “suitable memorial to the memory of martyrs, civilian, military and

naval, who perished in the noisome prison ships anchored in the Wallabout Bay during the Revolutionary War”—as well as city, state and federal officials, Congress finally approved funds to build the Prison Ships Martyrs' Memorial, and the architectural firm McKim, Mead and White won a 1905 competition to design it.

Dedicated in 1908 in a ceremony attended by newly elected President William Howard Taft, the monument was the last public work designed by Stanford White. Featuring an eight-ton bronze urn and four 300-pound bronze eagles, the monument was the world's tallest freestanding Doric column. A plaza, flanked at each corner by the crowning granite shafts and guarded by two cannons, covered the tomb beneath it. Sculptor Alexander Weinman, best known for his statue of “Civic Fame” that tops the Municipal Building in Manhattan, designed the monument's two eagles.

A Neglected Monument

In the century since it was built, the Prison Ship Martyrs' Memorial has often been as neglected as the history it commemorates. In the 1930s, the monument fell into disrepair due to lack of funding and community interest. However, the monument may finally win the attention it so sorely deserves: a restoration funded by the New York City Parks and Recreation Department is under way and expected to be completed in fall 2007, and a rededication is anticipated in 2008.

“It's the largest single crypt of Revolutionary War veterans in the United States,” says Margaret Skinner, Regent of Fort Greene Chapter, Brooklyn, N.Y. “This should be a national shrine, like Valley Forge in Pennsylvania or the Andersonville Civil War Prison Camp in Georgia.”

Renewing the Interest

Members of the Daughters of the American Revolution attending their 1939 Continental Congress passed a resolution approving the memorial and Fort Greene Park as a national shrine. “The



A vintage postcard from the collection of the Fort Greene Park Conservancy shows Fort Greene Park and the old Prison Ship Martyrs' Monument.

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A 1911 postcard from the collection of the Fort Greene Park Conservancy features a close-up shot of the old monument.

Battle of Brooklyn was our first major battle after declaring our independence. Bunker Hill gets lots of attention, and during the Bicentennial Philadelphia got most of the attention, but Brooklyn gets neglected,” Skinner says. “Someone said, ‘what they wrote in ink in Philadelphia they wrote in blood in Brooklyn.’”

However, it remains an uphill battle getting the memorial declared a National Historic Site. “Nothing was done because World War II started, and nothing since,” Skinner adds. “Someone has to fight for it. It needs a will to make it a national shrine. Money is not the issue—the work on it has been done.” Skinner wrote to the U.S. Department of the Interior to seek a national designation, but got a letter back that



“THE BATTLE OF BROOKLYN WAS OUR FIRST MAJOR BATTLE AFTER DECLARING INDEPENDENCE ... SOMEONE SAID, ‘WHAT THEY WROTE IN INK IN PHILADELPHIA, THEY WROTE IN BLOOD IN BROOKLYN.’”

noted that the prisoners didn’t die at the site itself.

During the 1960s and 1970s, it seemed that nobody cared that the Prison Ship Martyrs’ Monument

was on the verge of extinction. New York was in the throes of a fiscal crisis—the famous headline “Ford to City: Drop Dead” ran front-page in the *New York Daily News* on October 30, 1975—and crime rates soared, especially in poorer neighborhoods like Fort Greene. Vandals often attacked the monument and stole the bronze eagles, which have since been recovered and put in storage for safety. Two now grace the Parks Department headquarters on Fifth Avenue. An elevator and stairs to the top were removed in 1948, and a plaque honoring the prison martyrs—presented by the King of Spain, who attended a Bicentennial celebration—was stolen.

As New York rebounded in the late 1990s and Fort Greene and Clinton Hill, landmarked city Historic Districts filled with 19th-century brownstones that surround Fort Greene Park, became desirable places to live, the Parks Department announced a \$3.5 million renovation of the Prison Ship Martyrs’ Memorial in 2004. Today, the monument and granite staircase are being cleaned, the eagles and bronze urn are being replaced (two with replicas), and lighting and landscaping are being improved.

In May 2006, the Fort Greene Park Visitor Center opened next to the monument, where exhibits explain the history of the prison ships and the Battle of Brooklyn and list the names of the 8,000 known prison ship martyrs. The list of prisoners, copied from records in the British War Department in 1888 by the Society of Old Brooklynites, can also be found on a Web site maintained by U.S. Merchant Marine veterans (www.usmm.net/revdead.html). The site is on track to be rededicated next year, thus beginning the latest chapter in the prison ship martyrs’ history.

To learn more about the Fort Green Park Conservancy, call (718) 222-1461 or visit www.fortgreenepark.org. 📍

Sharon McDonnell profiled American astronomer Maria Mitchell for the July/August 2006 issue of American Spirit.