



NORTH GREENBUSH NOTES

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Uncovering Conspiracies in the Revolutionary War

When New Yorkers think of the American Revolution, they dwell on two sides: the American Patriots and the British Loyalists.

However, it is more complicated. How do you determine which side someone supports and what are the consequences of actions taken by British sympathizers?

To deal with this, in 1778 the New York State Legislature created a body called Commissioners for Detecting and Defeating Conspiracies. The Albany Branch was led by prominent men including Jeremiah Van Rensselaer and Isiah Fonda.

They adjudicated matters such as businessmen refusing to accept Continental currency, what to do with deserters, investigating cases of treason and espionage, authorizing arrests, deportations and incarcerations and empowering local militia to make arrests.

Several local residents were targets of the Committee's investigations.

John E. Van Alen, who was to become our first congressman in the 1790's and was a noted surveyor, ran afoul of the Committee. He was against war with the British. Van Alen was quoted as saying "If we could have peace, is that not better than that so many thousands must die?" In other words, Van Alen would not sign an oath of allegiance to the American side. Also, because he was a surveyor, the Committee felt his knowledge of the landscape of New York would be useful to the British army. This was an important factor in his incarceration.

Based on his testimony, Van Alen was jailed in March 1777. Although he was released for four days in May because he was "very sick." In November, he notified the Committee that he was ready to take the oath. After doing that, he was released but ordered to pay a fine of 200 pounds.

The other example involved several male members of the Rysdorff family and friends who lived on Mammoth Springs Road. In January 1779, they were brought before the Committee and accused of being Loyalists and attacking Militia Captain Robert Woodward and his troops who were attempting to break up a meeting. It was alleged that the Rysdorffs violently assaulted and beat the Woodward contingent. The meeting was considered to be a Loyalist gathering. They were confined for a short period of time and fined between 100-200 pounds. It is said that the common attitude of the Committee members was "that Loyalists had their heads in England, bodies in America and their necks out to be stretched."

When the War ended in 1783, the Committees were dissolved and the jurisprudence system we know today came into being.