

Journeys on Old Long Island

Compiled and edited by Natalie A. Naylor (Interlaken, NY: Empire State Books, 2002). Review by Janet Gruner

Journeys on Old Long Island is an excellent resource and teaching tool for middle and high school social studies teachers. Natalie Naylor has amassed a variety of primary source documents from the mid-eighteenth through the late nineteenth centuries which give readers insight into different aspects of life on Long Island. The book provides easy access to information that is typically difficult to obtain. The majority of the documents can only be found in specialized or university libraries. The documents are drawn from travelers' accounts of Long Island and the descriptions and reminiscences of residents. Readers learn about the topography and geography of Long Island, the origins of Long Island's economy, the social and cultural customs of the people, the impact of major events such as the Revolutionary War and the construction of railroads, and the demographic changes that occurred in the region.

One of the great strengths of this book is the variety of its sources. Authors include President George Washington, historians, foreign visitors and ordinary men and women. Each document offers a unique perspective on the history of Long Island. In addition, its maps and illustrations are wonderful resources for examining a landscape and environment that has been altered over time by population growth and technological advances. What I especially like is the way this collection provides insight into aspects of history that textbooks generally overlook. Naylor's book makes it possible for teachers to connect broad concepts and watershed events in history with the local history of Long Island. The impact of technology on history and society, in this case the construction of the Long Island Railroad, becomes clearer as students read about the journey east made by Dr. Alexander Hamilton in 1744.

The first activity, "Comparing Accounts of Sag Harbor," can be used as a springboard in a high school class for discussing economic and social characteristics unique to Long Island, the impact of geography on development, changes that occurred in the village over time as a lens through which to evaluate larger social or economic changes in the nation, or the larger issue of detecting and being aware of bias in primary sources. This activity can be completed by each student individually or can be implemented using a jigsaw method. As a concluding activity, students research Sag Harbor today and compare it with the past. The second activity examines the experience of, a teenage girl living in Kings County (Brooklyn) during the American Revolution. Middle school students can compare her wartime experiences with excerpts from *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *Zlata's Diary*.

Activity 1. Comparing Accounts of Sag Harbor

Document A: Francisco de Miranda, 1784. "At 8 o'clock in the morning, after breakfast, the Doctor and I traveled to Sag Harbor with intention to take the boat which sails to Newport (Rhode Island). It was nine o'clock when we arrived. We thought the Captain about to sail as agreed, but he was not ready, so I had to stay in dreadful place to wait an opportunity. I passed the time in observing a whale boat and talking with the crew, examining the whaling equipment . . . The crews for the main part are Indians, among whom you can find the best harpooners, and some commissioned officers, who behave with decency and circumspection - never getting drunk or misbehaving, so we observe these Indians are as capable and prudent as any other people. The implements are Harpoons and Ropes. The first are thrown to kill the whale and the rope to pull. Inside, near one of the masts they have a furnace of brick with two kettles in which they melt the fat. The first product is put in barrels and is called whale oil - the second is "Esperma-city" (spermaceti), and is placed in earthen vessels. Note the exertion and courage required in this industry. I was told that from this whole neighborhood 400 whaling ships went out during the last war . . . It was surprising to observe the simplicity and narrowness of these people's lives - their houses very small and quite lacking in ornament and comfort - and at the same time to note the high ideas they have in their heads . . . I had to be patient and spend the time reading as the place is one of the worst you can imagine" (48).

Questions

1. What are some characteristics of life in Sag Harbor at this time?
2. Who comprises the crew of the whaling boats? How are these people described?
3. What is the author's overall impression of Sag Harbor?

Document B: Timothy Dwight, 1811. "Sag Harbor is a pretty village, lying partly within the township of Southampton, and partly in that of East Hampton. It is situated on a mere mass of sand. The harbor, which is excellent and the only good one for a great distance on the eastern end of the island, allured the inhabitants to this unpleasant ground; not unpleasant from the want of prospect, but because it furnishes unpleasant streets and walks, and is unfriendly to every kind of vegetation. The village contained at this time about 120 houses, the principal part of which are on a winding street terminating at the shore; the rest, on some other streets of less consequence. Many of the houses, outhouses, and fences are new and neat; and an appearance of thrift, elsewhere unknown in this part of the island, is spread over the whole village. Several of the inhabitants have acquired considerable wealth by commerce and fishing, both of which have been regularly increasing since the Revolutionary War. When we were on the spot, there were three, and there are now six ships employed in the whale fishery on the coast of Brazil, each of which is supposed on an average to return annually with one thousand barrels of oil. The other vessels owned here may amount to fifty. Mechanical business is also done here to a considerable extent. Shipbuilding particularly is carried on with skill, spirit, and success. There is a printing office in this village, the only one on the island, except Brooklyn. The inhabitants have a small Presbyterian church, old and of design ill repaired, a much larger one being necessary to accommodate their increasing population. Sag Harbor is now and probably will continue to be the most considerable village in the eastern part of Long Island. The number of inhabitants at the date of our journey was about 850 (1804); in 1810, they amounted to 1,168" (86-87).

Questions

1. What are some characteristics of life in Sag Harbor at this time?
2. Why were settlers attracted to Sag Harbor?
3. What evidence is presented that demonstrates that Sag Harbor was a prospering village?

Document C: John Barber and Henry Howe, 1842. "Sag Harbor is the most populous, wealthy, and commercial place in the county, and may therefore not improperly be considered the emporium of Suffolk. The capital employed in trade here probably exceeds that of the whole county besides, there being nearly a million of dollars invested in the whale-fishery alone, employing a tonnage of more than six thousand, exclusive of several fine packets and other vessels engaged in the coasting business" (186).

Question: Why do Barber and Howe describe Sag Harbor as the "emporium of Suffolk"?

Document D: Daniel Tredwell, 1843. "Sag Harbor is not an accident; it is a considerable village, situated directly on the bay, with ample water for all maritime purposes. It has a population of about three thousand and five hundred souls, and considering that it is a seaport and its population consists largely of sailors, it is orderly. The village consists of one principal street (Main Street), pretty solidly built upon for several blocks, and on which its business is transacted, with many side streets of private residences . . . The arrival or departure of one ship gives Sag Harbor an excuse for going busy, but there are three here now and the business of the town essays New York activity. The financial and commercial importance of Sag Harbor is out of all proportion to its size and population. It has a population of about thirty-five hundred, many dry goods stores, grocery stores, outfitting stores for whalers, with ship chandlery stores and others. Sag Harbor has about \$1,000,000 invested in the whaling and codfishing business, and has many packets and vessels engaged in the coasting trade. The income from its investments is about \$15,000,000 annually. . . In the course of our conversations with Captain Budd during our stay he made this remark: "That calamity was imminent with the whaling business. Whales are getting scarce, profits are getting smaller and the expenses greater, and that he was shortening sail." . . . Of the inhabitants of Sag Harbor as a class little can be said . . . ,there is no marked famous or infamous class. But there are many learned and cultured people here . . . There are many wealthy and respectable citizens of Sag Harbor who commenced their career as ordinary seamen and rose to the rank of commanders, who are now retired capitalists . . ." (160).

Questions

1. What are some characteristics of life in Sag Harbor at this time?
2. Why does Tredwell believe that the "financial and commercial importance of Sag Harbor is out of proportion to its population"?
3. Why is this financial and commercial importance in jeopardy?

Summary Discussion: How do these four descriptions compare to each other in terms of content and tone? What might account for such similarities and differences? Based on the information presented in these documents, how was Sag Harbor transformed over the course of time? Compare the Sag Harbor of the 18th and 19th century to the community that exists today. What is the economic and social composition of the town? Did Captain Budd's prediction come true?

Activity 2. Civilian Experiences During the Revolutionary War

Excerpts from Femmetie Hegeman Lefferts, "Home Life During the American Revolution"

A. "The morning on which the British troops landed was one of the loveliest we had had that summer. The sky was so clear and bright that you could scarcely think of it as a day which was to bring so much sorrow. I was then just sixteen years old, and my sister was a little older . . . The whole village was in a commotion . . . The advancing army was just beyond the hills. There was an almost incessant firing in that direction. An entrenchment was thrown up in Flatbush a little to the south of us, and a small redoubt, on which a few pieces of artillery were mounted, was put up at the north of us, on a spot which is now in Prospect Park, Brooklyn and is called the Battle Pass. From these arrangements we knew that the enemy was expected in the line of our house. As my father was ill, and my sister and self were two young girls more full of life and spirit than of discretion, Mother had resolved to seek our safety in flight . . ." (20).

Questions

1. Why was Femmetie Lefferts and her family forced to flee from their home?
2. What are some emotions you might be feeling if you were in her place?

B. "When, after the Battle of Long Island, we returned home, before we reached the village we could see the tall old trees that had stretched their arms so protectingly over our roof; they were all charred and blackened by the flames. . . . Two of our neighbors' houses, as well as our own, were burned to the ground. This was done by the order of Lord Cornwallis, because they offered a defense behind which the American riflemen could reload, and from which they could discharge their firearms. . . What a scene of desolation met us on our return! There had been a most reckless destruction and waste of property. What could not be used was broken and destroyed . . . Three of our neighbors who had left the village had their houses turned into hospitals for the American officers as the sickness increased. There had been very heavy rains all through the autumn of 1776, and an epidemic had broken out, arising from the effluvia [sewage] connected with the British and Hessian encampment. Many of our neighbors and friends were taken ill with this fever, and very few of those who were seized survived. Food was scanty; even the little to be obtained by hard work we were likely to be robbed of at any moment by the lawless plunderers who had followed in the train of the army. . . The American prisoners had our warmest sympathy. They were on parole, and were not guarded strictly; they could go about where they chose . . . I took no pains to disguise my sympathy for the American prisoners and my warm interest in the cause of freedom. My sister sometimes begged me not to express my opinions so openly in the presence of the British and Mother checked me often, telling me that I was acting unwisely . . ." (24).

Questions

1. What hardships did Femmetie Lefferts and her family face once they returned?
2. How did Femmetie's experiences after the Battle of Long Island influence her outlook on the war?

Summary Questions: In your opinion, were the British justified in burning down the homes of these civilians? Is it permissible to take action against civilians in any way during wartime? Why or why not? How might Femmetie's view of the war differ from that of a British officer? How might it compare to that of a British girl her age? How did Femmetie's experience compare to the wartime experiences of others you may be familiar with?