Elias Cornelius – American Revolution Prisoner of War

Elias Cornelius (1758-1823) enlisted in the Revolutionary Army on January 1, 1777. He was assigned as a surgeon’s mate in the 2d Rhode Island regiment under the command of General Israel Angell. Elias’ regiment participated in the Battles of the Brandywine and Red Bank in New Jersey and was with General Washington’s army at Valley Forge during the winter of 1777-1778. Prior to arriving at Valley Forge, Elias was captured on Manhattan Island and briefly confined on the infamous prison-ship HMS Jersey. This was a decommissioned warship where 1,100 men were crowded together between decks. When the Revolutionary War ended in 1783 less than 1,400 survivors were found aboard the prison fleet of twelve ships in the New York harbor. An estimated 11,000 had died of disease and malnutrition and their bodies were dumped onto the mud flats of Wallabout Bay where Brooklyn Navy Yard now stands. The following are edited excerpts from his journal.

Sources: http://threerrivershms.com/americanprisonersch22.html; http://www.archive.org/stream/dreliascornelius00cornrich/dreliascornelius00cornrich_djvu.txt

A. This morning (August 23, 1777), I and my companion were conveyed to Kings Bridge (The Bronx). When we arrived I was put under the Provost Guard. We were kept, in this place some time under the Hessian Guards. I applied for the things of which I was robbed, my pocket-book & buckles were returned. I then made application for things, which belonged to other prisoners on their behalf. Some of them had part of their things returned, others nothing. The only provision we had as yet received since we arrived here was some moldy bread, a pint of rum put into a bucket of water. Once in a while the Hessian that Guarded us would bring some sour apples in his hat and throw them down among us as he would among so many pigs. The guards being relieved we were marched for New York. It being very warm weather, and the Guards changing often, we were marched so fast, that some of us were ready to faint. But we were not allowed to stop even to get a drink of water till we came to within four miles of New York, when a poor woman seeing our condition, came out and entreated our guards to stop that she might give us some water; the guard consented and the good woman ran into the house and brought us several pails of beer and three or four loaves of bread and two or three pounds of cheese. We marched till we come to the Bowery, within a mile of New York. We were led through half the streets as a show. At last we were brought before General Jones who ordered us to the Sugar House which was the Prison the private Soldiers were kept in. The Sugar House was the dirtiest and most disagreeable place that I ever saw and the water in the pump was not better than that in the Dock. The top of the House was open to the weather, so that when it rained the water ran along and through every floor and on that account it was impossible for us to keep dry.

B. In this hideous place I was kept till the twentieth of September following when the Provost Marshal came to the dungeon and took Captain Chatham and Travis and myself, and led us to the upper part of
the prison where I found my friends that were also prisoners. Ethan Allen was made prisoner near Montreal in the beginning of the war. He was put on board a man of war, and kept chained flat on his back in the hole six months. He also told me he had twice been carried on shore in England to be hung, but was reprieved. He was likewise taken on shore in Ireland and at Halifax for the same purpose. After this he was brought to New York.

C. I have frequently seen women beaten with canes and ramrods who have come to the Prison windows to speak to their Husbands, Sons or Brothers, and officers taken and put in the dungeon just for asking for cold water. Our provision was the same as in the dungeon with the exception of dried peas, we however had no fire to cook them. About this time my father came from Long Island to the prison to see me. I was called down to the grates. My heart at first was troubled within me, I burst into tears and did not speak for some minutes. I put my hand through the grates and took my fathers, and held it fast. The poor old gentleman shed many tears and seemed quite troubled to see me in so woeful a place. He asked me how I did I told him poorly but as well as could be expected in such a hideous place, I then asked after the health of Mother Brother & Sisters, he told me they were well. I was filled with joy at hearing this as it was the first time I had heard from them since I entered the service. Soon the provost Martial came and said he could not allow my father to stay longer, I therefore bade him farewell.