

Taking Sides

BY GREGORY LEFEVER

FOR BOSTON COLONISTS OPPOSING THE PATRIOT MOVEMENT, THE LOYAL AMERICAN ASSOCIATION GAVE THEM A WAY TO SUPPORT THE BESIEGED REDCOATS.

AS NEWLY FORMED PATRIOT militias called Minutemen armed themselves on the outskirts of Boston in the mid-1770s, a colorful former colonial general named Timothy Ruggles began recruiting the city's citizens for yet another militia—this one in support of the British.

The Loyal American Association, as General Ruggles's partisan militia came to be known, played a unique role in New England's perplexing clash of allegiances. Never officially part of the British Army, these Boston loyalists served as civilian auxiliaries, protecting residents devoted to the Crown and helping British Redcoats maintain order as the political teakettle came to a boil.

When the British finally evacuated Boston in early 1776—marking General George Washington's first military victory of the Revolutionary War—Ruggles's

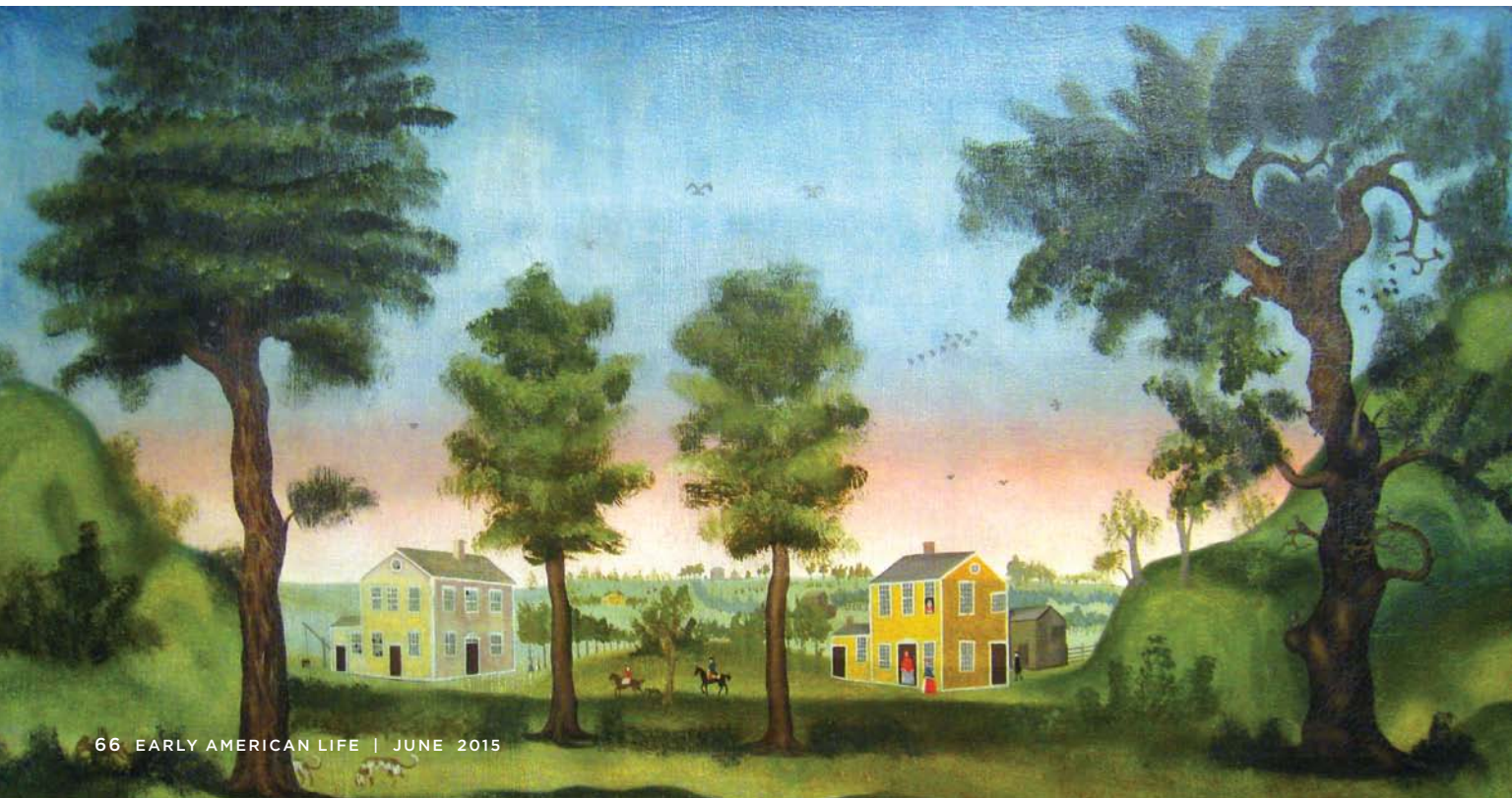
loyalist association crumbled, its members fleeing far and wide for safety.

The legacy of the short-lived Loyal American Association and a handful of similar loyalist paramilitary groups is key to what can be considered America's first civil war. These groups represented the first time since Europeans began settling the New World that brother took up arms against brother.

RIISING TENSIONS

Boston was America's most incendiary city during the early 1770s, with 16,000 residents splitting into factions for and against British rule. Aggravating the situation were unlawful gatherings of dissidents at the iconic Liberty Tree on Boston Commons and the military mishap known as the Boston Massacre in March 1770, when Redcoats gunned down nearly a dozen unarmed colonists, killing five.

This 1770 depiction of the homestead of Brigadier General Timothy Ruggles in Hardwick, Massachusetts, is the earliest documented landscape by Winthrop Chandler (1747-90), the first-known American-born painter of colonial landscapes. Ruggles, one of the colony's wealthiest landowners, antagonized his patriot neighbors with his ongoing support of the British Crown. They confined him to his farm for three months in 1775 after finding a stash of weapons there.



Taxes the Crown levied to cover its military expenses in North America further incited citizens and provoked the newly formed Sons of Liberty into staging the Boston Tea Party in 1773. Within a year, the Provincial Congress of Massachusetts had created a new type of militia—young, strong, straight-shooting Minutemen—ready to take on the Redcoats at a moment's notice.

In hopes of stifling dissent, King George in 1774 named an aristocratic British general, Thomas Gage, as royal governor of Massachusetts. Patriots saw Gage's role as more of the Crown's heavy-handedness, while some British sympathizers considered Gage too weak. "The general's great lenity and moderation serve only to make the colonists more daring and insolent," wrote Brigadier General Hugh Percy, one of Gage's top officers.

Percy appears to have been right. Patriot militias began drilling openly on village greens. Gage countered by pulling in soldiers from New York, New Jersey, Philadelphia, Halifax, and Newfoundland, creating a massive 6,000-troop garrison in Boston. Gage and Parliament both believed the troop build-up would be sufficient to keep the colonist "hoodlums," "rebels," and "banditti" in line.

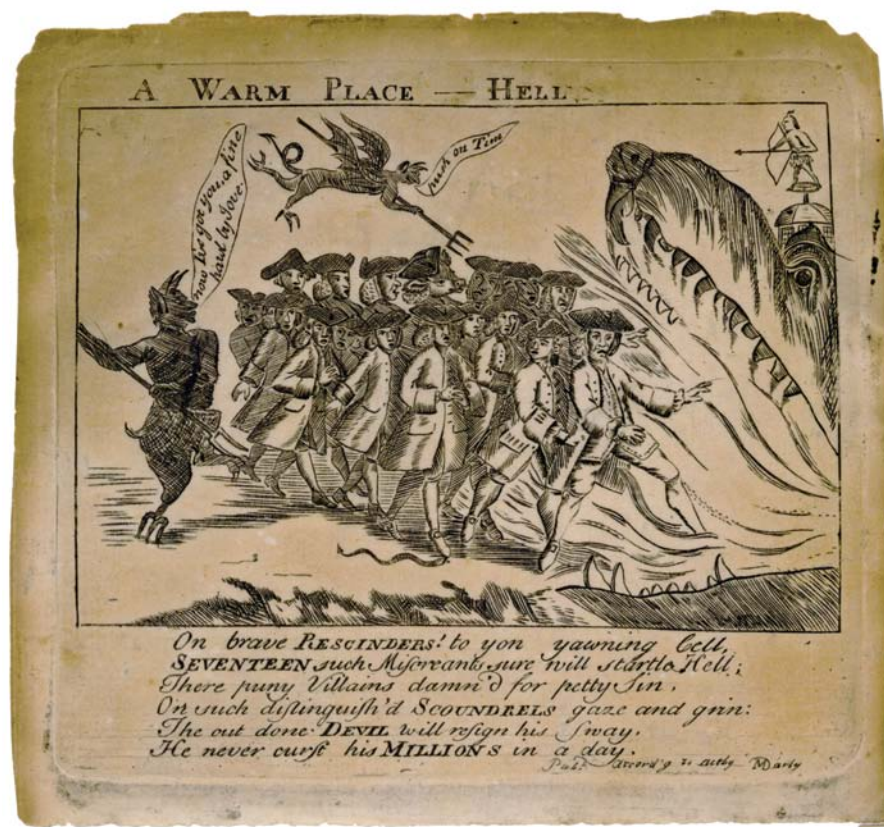
A VOLUNTEER SOLUTION

On a night in August 1774, thirty miles south of Boston, a group of rowdy patriots assaulted two well-known loyalists and unwittingly instigated the formation of loyalist militias in Massachusetts.

They first attacked Colonel Thomas Gilbert, who escaped. Then they attacked General Ruggles. Newspapers at the time reported that the mob released Ruggles but sheared off the mane and tail of his prized horse and then splashed paint on the animal.

Ruggles and Gilbert had been military officers with the British forces during the French & Indian War (1754-63) and both still preferred to be addressed by their former military ranks. Soon after patriots manhandled them that August night, each began laying the groundwork

Paul Revere's engraving titled *A Warm Place – Hell* depicts Ruggles leading the Rescinders into the maw of Hell. The 17 members of the Massachusetts Legislature dubbed "Rescinders" voted against the proposed boycott of British manufactured goods on June 30, 1768.



for the first armed loyalist "associations"—volunteer militias that could quickly protect colonists sympathetic to the Crown, rather than having them rely on bureaucratic Redcoat commanders for safety.

At the time, volunteer militias were the only option open to loyalists who wanted to fight alongside the Redcoats. There were no regiments comprising only colonial fighters, because officers in the British Army came from English gentry or nobility, a situation that had already caused discomfort with colonial fighters during the French & Indian War.

While the blue-blooded Gage refused to enlist colonial volunteers into his army, both Ruggles and Gilbert urged him to create loyalist associations. They also suggested that association leaders could advise Gage's staff on both civilian and military matters and that some association members could effectively infiltrate patriot groups as spies.

For reasons lost to history, Gage favored Colonel Gilbert and allowed

him to "collect, arm, train, and exercise" about three hundred loyalists in southeastern Massachusetts in the months to come. Gilbert turned his home into an arsenal to store muskets, bullets, and powder for his volunteer loyalist association. Despite



Timothy Ruggles, painted for the Bicentennial by Frank Bly, is shown as Chief Justice of Worcester's Court of Common Pleas, 1762-74, based on an early engraving. It hangs in the Trial Court Complex in Worcester, Massachusetts.



General Thomas Gage, oil on canvas, by John Singleton Copley, bears this inscription in the lower right: “GENERAL THE HONBLE THOS GAGE / OBI 1788.” As commander of all British forces in North America from 1763 to 1775, Gage favored the concept of civilian militias supporting the Redcoats but would not authorize the formation of Ruggles’s Loyal American Association.

that, his association was inactive for much of its brief existence.

Why didn’t Gage give Ruggles the same permission? Speculation at the time was that Ruggles’s tendency to publicly question the intelligence of Redcoat officers did not sit well with Gage.

BROTHERS AT THE BRIDGE

Whether or not people liked Ruggles—and he seems over the years to have attracted as many foes as friends—everyone agreed the man was bright, colorful, stubborn, and divisive. He also was something of a rarity for the times, a vegetarian and teetotaler.

Born in 1711 in Rochester,

Massachusetts, Ruggles was a Harvard-graduated lawyer, a prominent provincial jurist, and had served two years as speaker of the Massachusetts House of Representatives. In 1765 he was elected chairman of the First Congress of the American Colonies, a body of delegates who convened in New York to draw up protests against British taxation policies. After nearly a month of discussion, the delegates adopted a declaration of grievances.

But Ruggles refused to sign the declaration and asked that the paper describing his reasons be printed in the *Journal of the House*. When his request was denied, Ruggles

published the paper himself in the *Boston Post Boy and Advertiser* on May 5, 1766, arguing in part:

“The petition agreed upon by the congress to be presented to his majesty not being conceived in terms clearly enough expressive of that duty and loyalty which are due to the best of sovereigns, and consequently not agreeable to my above instructions from this house, left as a mere matter of judgment and discretion, if I had signed it I must have acted in direct opposition to those instructions, and thereby have exposed myself not only to the censures of this house, but to the reproaches of my own conscience, a tribunal more awful to me than this (however great) by which I have been condemned.”

He further claimed that because not all of the colonies sent delegates, the position did not reflect the majority opinion. Ruggles’s firsthand experience during the French & Indian War also engendered an aversion to taking up arms.

His decision inflamed the Stamp Act’s many foes, earned him a public censure by the General Court of Massachusetts, and provoked one shirttail relative, the venerable patriot leader John Adams, to condemn him. “His behavior was very dishonorable,” Adams charged, adding that Ruggles was now “held in utter contempt and derision by the whole continent.”

Ruggles’s Tory sentiments again surfaced in August 1774 when Britain’s Parliament abolished the Charter of Massachusetts. Gage decided to appoint thirty-six “Mandamus Councilors” to help govern the colony. Patriot outcry against these councilors was so fierce that twenty of them resigned before even taking office.

One who didn’t resign was Ruggles. Town histories of Hardwick, Massachusetts, his primary residence and location of one of five farms he owned, relate what happened when he left on horseback to travel the 70 miles to Boston to be sworn in.

As Ruggles approached a bridge on the edge of town, his younger brother Benjamin stood at the opposite end with a detachment of local militia and told Timothy that he would never be allowed back into Hardwick if

he proceeded to cross the bridge.

“Brother Benjamin, I shall come back—at the head of five-hundred soldiers, if necessary.”

“Brother Timothy,” Benjamin replied, “if you cross the bridge this morning, you will certainly never cross it again—alive.”

According to a descendant’s recollection of the incident, Timothy Ruggles, dressed in his brigadier general’s

uniform and astride his black war horse, “took off his cap with a military gesture to the people, and they, overawed by his appearance, immediately gave way and uncovered their heads to him as he passed unmolested through the ranks.”

FEW TAKERS

Soon after that incident, Ruggles launched a personal campaign to drum up loyalist associations across

Massachusetts. He created the “Ruggles Covenant” stating: “We will, upon all occasions, with our lives and fortunes, stand by and assist each other in the defense of life, liberty, and property, whenever the same shall be attacked or endangered by any bodies of men, riotously assembled upon any pretense, or under any authority not warranted by the laws of the land.”

PAYING FOR THE SINS OF THE (LOYALIST) FATHER

Timothy Ruggles incited considerable dislike among patriots during the Revolutionary era for his brazen support of the British, a factor that likely led to his daughter being the first woman executed by Americans in the new United States.

Bathsheba Ruggles Spooner was hanged at age thirty-three on July 2, 1778, in Worcester, Massachusetts, before a crowd of five thousand onlookers. With her on the gallows were three men—her lover and two British soldiers—charged with killing her husband, an act Bathsheba was found guilty of masterminding.

Ruggles himself likely arranged his daughter’s marriage in 1766 to Joshua Spooner, an affluent farmer in Brookfield, Massachusetts. The couple had four children in quick succession. Soon into her marriage, Bathseba developed “an utter aversion” to her husband, who is said to have been a heavy drinker and perhaps a womanizer.

Bathsheba fell in love with Ezra Ross, a sixteen-year-old soldier in the Continental Army, whom she met in 1777 when he became ill and convalesced at the Spooner home. Within a year, she became pregnant and wanted her husband dead before her adultery—for which she would be publically whipped—became apparent. She enlisted the help of two British deserters, Sergeant James Buchanan and Private William Brooks. On the night of March 1, 1778, Brooks beat Spooner to death. The Redcoats and Ross then dumped his body into a well.

Bathsheba, her lover, and the Redcoats were arrested the

next day, after the soldiers got drunk at a tavern and flaunted the dead man’s silver shoe buckles. The ensuing trial lasted only a day. It was the first capital case (one involving the death penalty) to occur in the newly formed United States. Prior to the nation’s independence, such trials were conducted in British courts throughout the colonies.

All four were found guilty. Bathsheba asked that her execution be postponed because she was pregnant—common law at the time protected the life of a fetus if the mother had felt movement. A panel of twelve women and two male midwives examined her and claimed she was not. Days later, another six people examined her and confirmed the pregnancy.

The court discounted the second examination and ordered Bathsheba hanged alongside her co-conspirators. Newspapers described the case as “the most extraordinary crime ever perpetuated in New England.”

A post-mortem examination confirmed that Bathsheba was five months pregnant with a son. Timing points to the lover, Ross, as the father.

With widespread patriot hostility for Bathsheba’s father, historians have noted that the Massachusetts Executive Council that processed her death warrant included prominent patriots, and that members of the initial panel who examined her for pregnancy also likely consisted of those with strong patriot leanings who despised Ruggles.



LEFT At the end of the 20th Century, a historian examining the Bigelow Tavern in West Boylston, Massachusetts, discovered several large chalk drawings on the attic walls, including this one showing a woman and man in detail.



RIGHT A smaller chalk drawing shows a rare public hanging in Worcester—and the only one involving a woman. Apparently the historian examining the walls had found a contemporary depiction of the hanging of the most notorious criminal of the time.



British General William Howe proved a more aggressive military leader than his predecessor. During the siege of Boston in 1775-76, Howe authorized Ruggles to form his Loyal American Association in Boston to help maintain order among the city's residents. This color mezzotint of Howe dates from 1777.

Few towns endorsed the covenant. In December 1774, the Associated Loyalists of Marshfield was formed, with about two hundred townsmen vowing to oppose patriots from nearby towns, especially Plymouth and Duxbury. A month later, in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, sixty local Tories adopted a version of Ruggles's plan and formed an association to "defend and protect each other from mob, riots, or any unlawful attack whatever."

Ruggles remained convinced he could raise a substantial number

of volunteer loyalist associations in New York, New Hampshire, New Jersey, and colonies farther south. He believed—along with many other upper-crust Tories in New England—that British sympathizers were far more numerous than the facts would bear out. As hostilities erupted, the number of loyalists in the colonies dwindled dramatically. Within a year or two into the Revolution, they numbered about a half-million, or less than 20 percent of the colonial population, historians estimate.

As 1774 ended, Ruggles was

still on the attack. He used Boston's newspapers in December to publicly accuse patriots of "frequently committing the most enormous outrages upon the persons and properties of such of his Majesty's peaceable subjects, who, for want of knowing who to call upon (in these distracted times) for assistance, fall into the hands of a banditti, whose cruelties surpass those of savages."

PROBLEMS OF WAR

At sunrise on April 15, 1775, Loyalists and patriots found themselves actually at war. The skirmishes outside of Boston at Lexington and Concord shocked patriots and loyalists alike and put an end to the question of whether colonists were actually willing to do battle with the British.

Within days, more than 15,000 patriot militiamen from across New England had placed Boston under a siege that would last nearly a year, strangle commerce in the city, and cut its supplies of food and fuel. Thousands of patriot residents fled their homes, while loyalist refugees from Massachusetts and New Hampshire towns poured into Boston to seek the safety of the British Army.

The clash and Ruggles's aversion to warfare cemented his support for Great Britain. From Boston in April 1775 he vowed "to contribute everything in my power to convince these rebellious wretches of their folly and wickedness in despising the best Government both in Theory and administration that ever yet bled the earth we inhabit and if it causes me as many wearisome days and sleepless nights, as five campaigns did in the last War, I pray God my constitution may endure it; and my Country will be happy if success extends his Majesty's arms; if not many of us will lose our lives and be put out of our present miserable situation."

For Gage, things would only get worse. Just two months after the British humiliation at Lexington and Concord, the Redcoats encountered a much more intense battle on the hillsides north of Boston. On June 17, 1775, in three fierce, uphill charges, the Redcoats drove the patriots from

Bunker Hill and Breed's Hill. For the British, it was a pyrrhic victory—not worth the cost because British casualties included a disproportionate number of valuable officers.

Gage himself was a casualty of another sort. When news of British losses at Bunker Hill reached Parliament, Gage was ordered back to London and British Major General William Howe, a much stronger military leader, replaced him as commander.

Meanwhile, Ruggles was having his own troubles. He'd returned to his farm in Hardwick in April, when local militiamen found a stash of weapons there. Town selectmen voted on April 24 "to see that the arms and ammunition now at Brigadier Ruggles's house are delivered up, and that he is confined to his farm, and not to go out of it, excepting on Sabbath-days, fast days, or some other public days; and that he pays the guard for their trouble in taking care of him."

RUGGLES PREVAILS

Released from his confinement in Hardwick after about three months, Ruggles arrived in Boston in time for the transition from Gage to Howe. The new commander agreed almost immediately to establish the Loyal American Association for Ruggles.

"We consider it as our strongest duty to contribute our aid in promoting the peace, order, and security of the town, and are willing to be employed to these good purposes, in the ways and means suited to our capacities," stated an October 28, 1775, proclamation that Ruggles and Howe authored. "To that end, we cheerfully accept the offers of His Excellency . . . and will, to the utmost of our power, faithfully perform those services, and punctually discharge the trust reposed in us."

Ruggles was named association commander of three companies. Abijah Willard headed the first, James Putnam the second, and Francis Green was captain of the third. The British garrison armory would provide "as many arms as may be necessary for carrying on the service," and the army's commissary would provide "rations of

provisions to those companies."

The strength of the Loyal American Association varied over the months of its existence, but likely ranged between two and three hundred volunteers.

No uniforms were issued to the Loyal American Association or other loyalist volunteer militia groups. Each member wore civilian clothing. Ruggles's association wore white armbands for identification. Formed later, a group of Irish merchants called the Loyal Irish Volunteers wore white, knotted ribbons on their hats, while another group called the Royal North British Volunteers wore blue hats with blue-and-white St. Andrew's crosses sewn on them.

FIREWOOD AS AN EXCUSE

Duties assigned to the Loyal American Association in 1775 expanded as the siege worsened. Early on, the association performed routine patrols through Boston's streets, especially the warehouse districts. Later, association members helped secure food and firewood—two items critical to a city with severed supply lines.

In a late November communiqué,

Ruggles ordered Green's company to "take charge of the district about the Liberty Tree and the lanes, alleys, and wharves adjacent." Green's men were to patrol the streets from sunset to sunrise and "prevent all disorders within the district by either signals, fires, thieves, robbers, house breakers, or rioters."

But a member of the Loyal American Association patrolling near the Liberty Tree took issue with the giant elm's symbolic value for patriots. Job Williams led an attack on the venerable tree—where patriots had hanged many Tory effigies over the years—using the firewood order as an excuse to chop it down. The act enraged patriots across New England, who then adopted a Liberty Tree symbol on their battle flags for years to come. Williams went on to become a captain of a British Army regiment.

By January, fuel was scarce throughout Boston, and Howe ordered Ruggles to have his loyalists rip down vacated homes for firewood. Ruggles wrote out the order on January 13, 1776, to his captains: "The General being at all times solicitous



The giant elm near Boston Commons, called the "Liberty Tree," was a potent symbol for patriots and despised by the town's British sympathizers. One night in November 1775, as the Loyal American Association was patrolling the neighborhood during the Siege of Boston, loyalist Job Williams led a group who chopped down the tree, enraging patriots across New England.

for relieving the loyal inhabitants in this garrison from all their misfortunes, and at this time of scarcity for fuel (occasioned by the Rebels preventing the usual supply being brought to this market) has for their relief as well as for the greater safety of

the town against fires, been pleased to order some wooden buildings that are interspersed among those of brick to be taken down and used as fuel.”

Records indicate that the Loyal American Association dismantled more than a hundred vacant homes

to supply the garrison with firewood. These were the homes of patriot families who had departed as Boston became a sanctuary for Tories.

BECOMING REDCOATS

The massive 120-ship British evacuation of Boston on March 17, 1776, marked the end of the Loyal American Association. History is quiet on where all of the association’s members went, but like other Boston loyalists, some certainly departed on those ships to Nova Scotia, some continued on to England, some fled to friends and relatives in other New England loyalist strongholds, some risked remaining in Boston, and some joined the British Army.

After the Redcoats vacated Boston, several British Army leaders agreed that loyalist regiments should be attached to the army so they could fight alongside Redcoats. Their belief was that creating a civil war among colonists would prove victorious for the Crown.

Thousands of loyalists formed regiments and battalions when the British Army was stationed in New York, more in Philadelphia, and still more as the Redcoats moved south. Estimates are that perhaps 50,000 loyalists served as part of the British Army and Navy during the course of the Revolutionary War.

As for Ruggles, the loyalist leader left Boston during the evacuation on a British warship bound for Halifax, Nova Scotia. From there, he sailed with Howe back to New York, where he actively recruited loyalist militiamen to build camps, cut firewood, and forage for hay and food for the Redcoats.

In 1779, Ruggles was officially banished from Massachusetts as a “notorious conspirator” and his property was confiscated, although the British government later reimbursed him with a tract in Wilmot, Nova Scotia. He retired there in 1783 and died there in 1795 at the age of eighty-four. In his death notice, the *Royal Gazette* in Halifax praised him as one of the finest soldiers in the American colonies. ★

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The Second or Regimental Guidon of the King’s American Dragoons, 1782, represented the regiment of light dragoons Timothy Ruggles proposed to raise in 1780 after resettling on Long Island. The King’s or First Guidon of each regiment was to be crimson while the regimental standard was to be the color of the regimental facings—blue for the KAR. The first Royal Provincial formation of any size to go to the mouth of the St. John River, the Dragoons left on the spring fleet in late April 1783, arriving in mid-May. The regiment, which Ruggles intended to command, was to comprise six troops made “entirely of Gentlemen of the first Families of Connections in America, who have served as Volunteers under the Command of the Subscriber since the year 1777.” The King approved the raising of the cavalry unit, but the command went to Benjamin Thompson—Ruggles was deemed too old.

Although Massachusetts officials confiscated Ruggles’s property, the British government reimbursed him with a tract in Wilmot, Nova Scotia, where he lived the rest of his life. He is buried in the graveyard at Old Holy Trinity Church in Middleton, Nova Scotia. Although his grave is unmarked, this headstone erected later notes his prominence.

