

COLLEGE TUTOR AND REVOLUTIONARY COLONEL

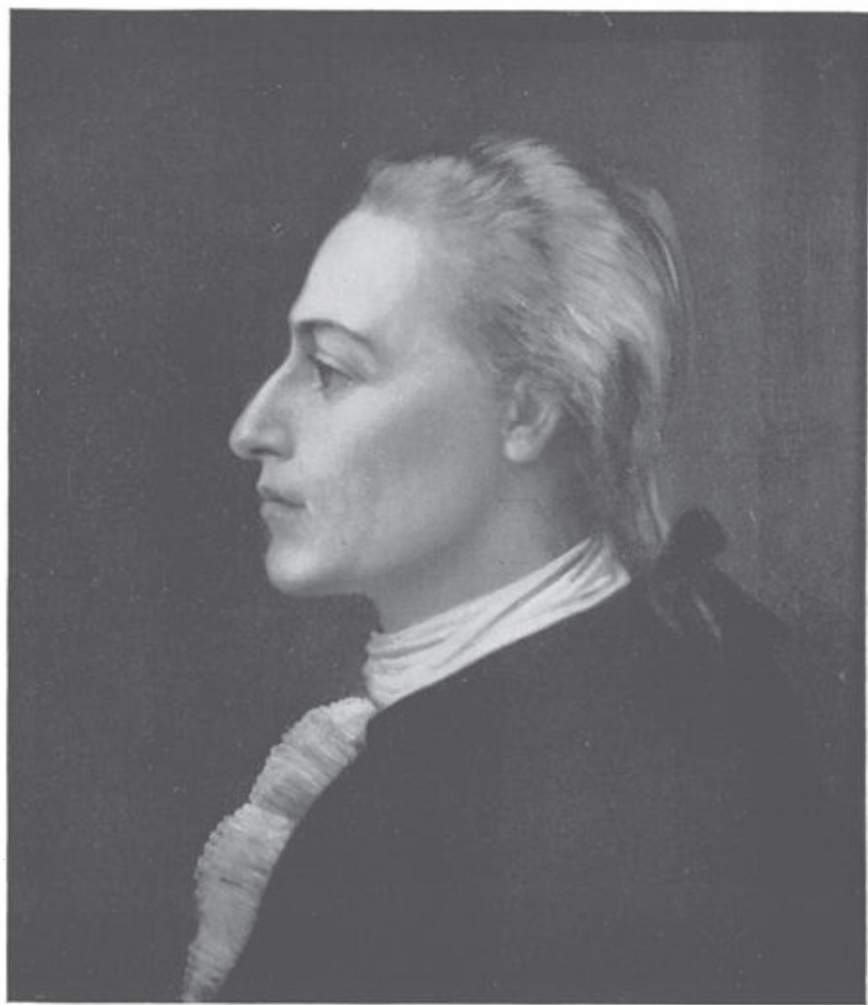
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JOHN TAYLOR, tutor of Queen's College during the American Revolution, shifted from civilian to military life with a frequency which characterized the record of many colonial soldiers. Whenever the security of New Jersey was threatened by British invasion, Taylor deserted his students. But as soon as the immediate danger was at an end, he would return to his college duties until a new occasion for military action arose. The story of Taylor's war-time activities revealed by documents in the Rutgers University Library, therefore, not only provides an interesting account of the services of an individual soldier but also contributes considerable incidental information regarding the history of Queen's College in Revolutionary days.¹

Having served as tutor at Queen's since graduating from the College of New Jersey in 1768 at the age of seventeen, Taylor began his military training early in 1776. All the colonies had been slow to appreciate the significance of the struggle of the previous April between the mother country and the Massachusetts patriots. The growing possibility that the contest might spread to other areas, however, gradually aroused the most far-sighted colonists to the need of preparation for defense. New Brunswick residents met the danger before

¹ The best accounts of John Taylor's life are an entry of November 20, 1815, in the family Bible of Augustus R. Taylor now in possession of the Rutgers University Library and the material presented in John Neilson Taylor, *Address . . . on . . . the late Col. John Taylor*, Pittsburgh, 1888 (photostat in John Taylor file, RUL).



most of their fellow colonists, when a company of volunteers under the command of Colonel John Neilson was formed in January, 1776. As captain of this group, John Taylor commenced labors which soon led to active service in the colonial cause.²

The fear of British attack, which drove Taylor and his fellow soldiers to organize, quickly proved well-founded. Forced to evacuate Boston in March because of the determined resistance of Washington's troops, General Howe attacked New York City following a short stay at Halifax to rally his forces. His arrival off Sandy Hook late in June presented a crisis which not only caused Taylor to abandon his classes but also drew into action every student who could bear arms. As satisfactory instruction was impossible under the circumstances, college activities were suspended until October 21.³

The resumption of college life in October, 1776, was doomed to be brief. Taylor was present, although he had assumed new responsibilities in August as major of the Middlesex County militia.⁴ At a mid-November meeting of the Athenian Society, a college literary group which he had founded in 1773, Major Taylor offered a "letter to a Tory."⁵ No more drastic action than such literary exercises would be necessary, he hoped, until the following spring. But all possibility that the approach of winter would force an end of campaigning and permit instruction to proceed without interruption was shattered when British troops approached New Brunswick on December 1. Although the secretary of the Athenian Society reported that its members "still inspired by Patriotism, and zealous to promote the interests of America" left "their peacable abodes . . . to repel an Enemy endeavouring to establish a System of Tyranny and Oppres-

² W. Woodford Clayton, ed., *History of Union and Middlesex Counties*, Philadelphia, 1882, p. 463; and New Jersey Adjutant General's Office, *Official Register of the Officers and Men of New Jersey in the Revolutionary War*, Trenton, 1872, p. 356. Only the first and last appointments listed on this page under John Taylor represent service by the John Taylor of Queen's College (Henry Race, "The Two Colonels John Taylor," in *The Jerseyman*, March, 1892, pp. 33-35). Taylor's militia positions in the interim are correctly listed in the adjutant general's records on page 361 and upon analysis are clearly inconsistent with those described in the first list.

³ These facts were recorded by the secretary of the college literary society in *Transactions of the Athenian Society for the years 1776 to 1786*, undated entry following June 29, 1776 (MS. in RUL).

⁴ New Jersey Adjutant General's Office, *op. cit.*, p. 361.

⁵ *Transactions of the Athenian Society*, November 13, 1776.

sion,"⁶ the effort failed and New Brunswick was occupied by British troops from December 2, 1776, to June 22, 1777. Once more, therefore, the college was forced to discontinue its sessions; and once more Taylor, freed from all educational obligations, could devote his entire attention to performing his part in the struggle against the British.

Major Taylor's share in the military activities of 1777 was extremely prominent for a youth of twenty-six. Specifically mentioned by General Washington as one of a small number entrusted with the duty of summoning the militia in accordance with the call to arms of December 31, 1776,⁷ Taylor was particularly concerned with apprehension of enemies of the colonial cause. Thus he reported on May 7 the arrest of three Middlesex farmers who sold potatoes to the British;⁸ and eight days later he wrote Governor Livingston of the seizure of two suspicious travellers. "These kind of men are certainly very dangerous to the state," he remarked, "yet it is very difficult to obtain any evidence against them, further than what we ourselves do observe."⁹ Yet Taylor's observations of the activities of contemporary "fifth columnists" were sufficiently fruitful in spite of all difficulties to cause his advancement to the rank of lieutenant colonel on June 6.¹⁰ He continued to serve in this capacity until college sessions were renewed in the late spring of 1778.

The movements of British troops in New Jersey during 1777 and 1778 caused considerable anxiety among distant students of the college concerning the activities of their tutor and the possibility of a revival of classes. On October 1, 1777, Simeon Van Artsdalen of Northampton, Pennsylvania, stated in a letter to John Bogart, a fellow student:

As the Jersey Militia seem to be in general on the march it is a matter of uncertainty with me whether Mr. Taylor is with you or with his Battalion. I should therefore be glad if you would favour me with a few lines that I might be certain of the same since I expect if the times permit to be with you . . .¹¹

⁶ *Transactions of the Athenian Society*, note following November 20, 1776.

⁷ *Archives of the State of New Jersey*, Second Series, II, p. 568n.

⁸ John Taylor to William Livingston, May 7, 1777 (*Selections from the Correspondence of the Executive of New Jersey from 1776 to 1786*, Newark, 1848, p. 59).

⁹ John Taylor to William Livingston, May 15, 1777 (*ibid.*, p. 60).

¹⁰ New Jersey Adjutant General's Office, *op. cit.*, p. 361. This appointment had been pending since March (John Neilson to Charles Pettit, March 21, 1777; and Pettit to Neilson, March 22, 1777—MSS. in RUL).

¹¹ Simeon Van Artsdalen to John Bogart, Oct. 1, 1778 (*The John Bogart Letters, 1776-*

Van Artsdalen's fear that a trip to New Brunswick might prove worthless was justified, for the confusion resulting from the proximity of British troops had again forced the college to close its doors. Worried the following February by absence of any word regarding college activities, a friend of Bogart from Rochester, N.Y., wrote, "I know not . . . in what sphere Mr Taylor is acting. . . . Since I left you I never heard you had any such Creatures as Examinations among you. Pray What is become of Queens-College?"¹² To such a query no answer was possible at the moment. Only late that spring did college authorities decide to resume sessions at North Branch on the Raritan which, located fifteen miles further up the river, was considered much less exposed to attack than New Brunswick.¹³

The reopening of Queen's College was announced on May 13, 1778, when the *New Jersey Gazette* stated that gentlemen desiring to send their sons for instruction should apply to "John Taylor, A.M."¹⁴ Colonel Taylor presided on June 10 at the first meeting of the Athenian Society since 1776 and a week later "read a Peice on the Ocean" and "spoke from Brutus."¹⁵ But college activities were soon interrupted when British troops in the process of shifting headquarters from Philadelphia to New York again marched across New Jersey. As many members of the Athenian Society joined Taylor in efforts to check the enemy's movements, the meetings of June 24 and July 1 were cancelled.¹⁶ How much more serious matters occupied Taylor's attention during these days, he himself indicated on June 29 when, in a report to Colonel Neilson regarding a conflict with the enemy at Monmouth, he wrote:

Gen^l. Lee's Division had a severe engagement with the Enemy yesterday in which he lost a number of men, but maintained his ground with a much greater loss on the side of the Enemy. In the afternoon his Excellency [Washington] commanded in person with a Division of fresh troops, in which battle he drove the Enemy near

1782, p. 13). The original manuscripts of these letters are in the possession of the Rutgers University Library.

¹² Simeon DeWitt to John Bogart, Feb. 24, 1778 (*ibid.*, p. 15).

¹³ *Transactions of the Athenian Society*, note preceding 1778 minutes.

¹⁴ William H. S. Demarest, *A History of Rutgers College*, New Brunswick, 1927, p. 119. Taylor had received his master's degree from the College of New Jersey, now Princeton, in 1773 (*Archives*, First Series, XXIX, p. 54).

¹⁵ *Transactions of the Athenian Society*, June 10 and 17, 1778.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, June 24 and July 1, 1778.

too miles, took a number of Prisoners, and their dead and wounded . . . The militia had a skirmish with the Enemy in the morning in which we at first got drove. We afterwards rallied, and drove the Enemy with some loss. We had two men wounded. We are again upon the march to the lines of the Enemy. What they are about this morning we have not yet been able to learn.¹⁷

Information regarding British movements soon made clear that failure to halt the enemy at Monmouth had made further attempts to prevent occupation of New York useless. Little over a week later, therefore, Taylor was to be found opening the Athenian meeting of July 8 "by speaking from Shakespears Brutus."¹⁸ During the rest of 1778, he was able to teach without interruption; and, as college clerk, to urge the advantages of studying at North Branch by declaring in the *New Jersey Gazette* of January 27, 1779:

This neighborhood is so far distant from Headquarters that not any of the troops are stationed here, neither does the army in the least interfere with the business of the college. The Faculty also take the liberty to remind the Publick, that the Representatives of this state have enacted a law by which Students of Colleges are exempted from military duty.¹⁹

When Taylor resumed his work at North Branch following his return from Monmouth in the summer of 1778, he sincerely hoped to pursue his teaching career without further summons to military duty. The college trustees were increasingly insistent that the needs of the students should receive constant attention, and Taylor himself realized the impossibility of retaining his post if he were forced to be absent during long periods of army service. It was with great reluctance, therefore, that he agreed to assume command of the New Jersey militia in July 1779 at the request of Governor Livingston. In a letter asking John Bogart to take charge of the students during his absence, Taylor outlined the work of individual students in detail, urged the college to "parade," and declared that he would return by fall.²⁰ At Elizabethtown, in the meantime, Taylor devoted his atten-

¹⁷ John Taylor to Colonel John Neilson in behalf of General Dickinson, June 29, 1778 (MS. in RUL). The engagement was not the sole topic of the report. Taylor, for example, innocently provided a possible explanation of why his men were "in high spirits" in spite of their experience of the previous day by writing, "We last night got some whiskey a part of which you can have by sending for. If you can send a cagg I will endeavour to get two gallons of rum for your own use."

¹⁸ *Transactions of the Athenian Society*, July 8, 1778.

¹⁹ Demarest, *op. cit.*, pp. 119-120.

²⁰ John Taylor to John Bogart, July 2, 1779 (*The Bogart Letters*, pp. 18-19).

tion to watching the activities of General Clinton in New York, distributing troops to protect New Jersey counties against raiders, and quieting the dissatisfaction of soldiers who were inadequately paid. His name appeared in newspapers of the day signed to such items as an advertisement for a major's lost horse, a report to college friends regarding events at camp and an offer to pay \$100 and reasonable charges for each deserter submitted to his custody.²¹ With a "prudence and impartiality" which impressed Livingston, Colonel Taylor labored to maintain the spirit of his men and render them of maximum service to the State.²² But as the time for the opening of college approached, relief from duty became essential if academic work were not to be entirely abandoned.

Taylor's request for a discharge, dispatched to Governor Livingston from North Branch on September 25, was a document of general interest. A report of the deficiencies of each county in providing officers was omitted because of the necessity of Taylor's attendance at Queen's College examinations, but a large number of additional complaints revealed that his men had much reason for dissatisfaction with their condition. Accounts for lodging and medical supplies were unpaid; but ten horsemen and a single piece of artillery were available; counties were supplying men insufficiently armed or unfit for service; one-third of the men were sick from lodging in filthy houses; inadequate hospital facilities and the refusal of local physicians to supply medicines without pay had forced the granting of leaves of absence to all who were ailing. Such difficulties alone would have made retirement desirable. With the trustees of Queen's College demanding that his engagement to them be fulfilled, Taylor did not hesitate to ask the Governor for his release.²³ When the college reopened on November 4, therefore, Taylor was present,²⁴ and from December 29 to April 12, when college was dismissed to open at Hillsborough (now Milltown) in May, he regularly attended the Athenian meetings.²⁵

²¹ *Archives*, Second Series, III, pp. 562, 587, 638.

²² Governor Livingston to the House of Assembly, Sept. 23, 1779 (*Selections*, pp. 176-177).

²³ Colonel Taylor to Governor Livingston, Sept. 25, 1779 (*ibid.*, pp. 177-181).

²⁴ *Archives*, Second Series, IV, pp. 16-17.

²⁵ *Transactions of the Athenian Society*, December 29, 1779 to April 12, 1780.

Life in the last years of the war was much less disturbing for Taylor and his students; but they were not without frequent reminders of the contest being waged. While college announcements were invariably signed by Taylor, a friend of Bogart wrote in the summer of 1780, "I had the Pleasure of seeing Johnny Taylor about Springfield some time ago. . . . The Jersey militia have Distinguished themselves in a singular Manner upon the Occasion And every One gives them the praises they have Justly merited."²⁶ The tutor was occasionally absent from Athenian meetings early in 1781 on what were undoubtedly brief military missions against British raiders;²⁷ and the students themselves came into direct contact with the conflict at Hillsborough on January 3 when "in consequence of a mutiny in the Pennsylvania Line and their marching through this Place, the Athenian Society did not meet."²⁸ The State was quiet enough by late spring, however, to justify a return to New Brunswick where the first meeting of the Athenian Society to be held in that city since 1776 assembled on May 30.²⁹

The changing atmosphere which an end of war worries produced in the life of both tutor and college was evident in the wide interest aroused among the students by Taylor's successful courtship of Jennet Fitz Randolph. Before leaving Hillsborough, the suitor had entertained the Athenian Society with a paper on "Matrimony"; and following the return to New Brunswick, he read on "love" and composed "a Letter to a young Lady."³⁰ Taylor's marriage did not cool the Society's interest in the romance; for the group chose "Is matrimony advantageous to men of learning" as the first question for periodical debates initiated in March 1782, and with due concern to have the proposition well argued selected the young husband to uphold the affirmative.³¹ But even though the times were less exciting following Yorktown, Taylor's military experiences had not ended. In mid-January, 1782, editor Collins of the *New Jersey Gazette*

²⁶ Simeon DeWitt to John Bogart, June 26, 1780 (*The Bogart Letters*, p. 26).

²⁷ *Transactions of the Athenian Society*, January 10, 24, February 14 and March 21, 1781.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, January 3, 1781. See also John O. Raum, *The History of New Jersey*, II, pp. 93-94, Philadelphia, 1877.

²⁹ *Transactions of the Athenian Society*, May 30, 1781.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, March 7, June 13 and June 27, 1781.

³¹ *Ibid.*, February 13 and March 6, 1782.

received the following report from John Taylor, commander of the second battalion of Middlesex militia:

About four o'clock last Wednesday morning, near three hundred of the enemy from New-York, consisting of British and refugee troops, landed at the lower end of the town; our guards discovered their approaches on the river, by which means the inhabitants were alarmed about fifteen minutes before they landed. They were attacked by a small party whilst landing, in which they lost two men. Reinforcements were thrown in to support this party, but being overpowered by numbers, and the enemy having gained the heights, they were obliged to retire. They then took possession of the town with very little difficulty, for the darkness of the morning and the enemy landing at different places, prevented us from assembling in force. They had possession of the town more than an hour, during which time very little opposition was made. When the blessed light of morning began to appear, they retired to their boats, and a smart skirmishing commenced, which would have been much more severe had not many of our muskets been rendered useless by the falling of snow and rain; during which action no marks of fear were seen on either side. We had none killed and only five wounded. . . . We cannot ascertain the loss of the enemy, they left two dead in the town, two more were killed upon their first landing, and they were seen to carry off several. . . . The taking of the whale-boats appeared to be their principal object, which they accomplished. Credit is due to them for their humane treatment of the defenceless part of the community. No burning or insults were committed, and only two families were pillaged.³²

As no further disturbances occurred after this, John Taylor was able to devote the nineteen years of his life which remained to instructing at Queen's College, Elizabeth Academy and Union College without the constant fear of interruption which had plagued his early efforts.

³² *Archives*, Second Series, V, p. 358. John Neilson Taylor states that the British had not been so considerate of Taylor's property during their earlier occupation of New Brunswick, Taylor's home, library, and personal effects having been ravaged and Taylor himself having been taken temporarily a captive (*op. cit.*, pp. 6-7).