

Major Jesse Brush (1752-1800)

Patriot of the American Revolution

One of Huntington's most active military participants in the American Revolution was Major Jesse Brush. After participating in the 1776 Battle of Long Island, Brush was active in numerous raids and military intelligence missions on Long Island.

Brush has been described as a "small well-built man with red hair, sandy complexion, and a bright eye, strong as Hercules and bold as a lion." Born on October 2, 1752 in Huntington, he was baptized October 25th by the Rev. Ebenezer Prime of the Old First Church. Later in life he married Dorothy, daughter of Zephaniah Platt, on January 6, 1774 at the Smithtown Church.

In 1775 Brush was appointed to an 11-member committee to raise a Huntington militia. On September 5, 1775 at a Smithtown gathering of identical groups from other Suffolk County towns, these delegations organized a Regiment of Minute-Men in Western Suffolk County and nominated field officers. Elected as Lieutenant Colonel was Dr. Gilbert Potter, a Huntington physician who had previous military experience in the French and Indian Wars. After returning home, the Huntington Committee on September 11, 1775 formed three companies amounting to some 80 men each; Jesse Brush emerged as Captain of the 2nd Company.

With the formation of the First Long Island Regiment at Smithtown on October 24, 1775, Brush was promoted to the rank of Second Major, a position of distinction in the County. In December 1775, Major Brush was sent to New York City to address the New York Provincial Convention about the status of military preparedness in Suffolk County. On January 29, 1776 Brush was among 18 freeholders appointed to Huntington's "War Committee" to oversee the supply and coordination of its companies of militia. On July 22, 1776, Major Brush assisted Lieutenant Colonel Potter, who together acted as Regimental Reviewing Officers for the five companies of Suffolk County Militia that engaged in maneuvers celebrating the announcement of the Declaration of Independence.

On the 30th of June, 1776, a British fleet of 130 ships landed an army of 10,000 on Staten Island, commanding New York harbor. By August 1st, the army had grown to 31,000 seasoned troops. The American army of only 28,000, both poorly trained and inadequately equipped, had prepared defensive positions in Brooklyn, Manhattan, and the nearby Jersey shore. In early August the Suffolk County Militia, led by Lieutenant Colonel Potter and Major Brush and carrying the Huntington Liberty Flag, mustered on the Village Green, drew an issue of gunpowder from the Arsenal (Job Sammis House) at its southern end, and marched to Brooklyn to augment the Continental Army. Upon their arrival their ranks were divided. About 100 men, under Potter and Brush, were assigned to General Nathaniel Woodhull (of Mastic) and the remainder, under Colonel Josiah Smith of East Moriches were placed in the defensive lines. Woodhull, who had served as President of the Provincial Convention, was given the rather strange assignment of driving beef cattle eastward to prevent their falling into the hands of the British if and when they attacked.

Early on the morning of August 22nd, 15,000 British and Hessian soldiers and 40 pieces of artillery were landed on Long Island. The Battle of Long Island was fought from the 22nd to the 29th of August, 1776, resulting in a defeat for the Americans who effected a miraculous escape across the East River to Manhattan. On August 27th General Woodhull ordered Major Brush and the 100 Militiamen to proceed eastward from Jamaica driving the cattle before them. However, upon learning of the disastrous results of the battle, and after consultation with higher authorities, Brush dispersed the men under his command advising them to return home.

Brush himself quickly left Long Island, presumably in a boat across the Sound to the Westchester shore, where he joined the 2nd Regiment of Westchester County Militia, commanded by Colonel Thomas Thomas. Brush proceeded to make numerous excursions across to Long Island for the duration of the war. Correspondence and newspaper accounts testify to Major Brush's leadership of raiding parties in November 1778, March 1779, and June 1779, although he was undoubtedly active on other occasions.

As a consequence of leaving Huntington and taking up arms with the Rebel Army, Major Brush's farm at West Neck was seized and assigned to a Loyalist (Tory) family. Brush wrote a note to the intruders as follows:

August 25, 1780

I have repeatedly ordered you, especially April 15th, to leave my farm. This is my last invitation. If you do not, your next landfall will be in a warmer climate than any you have ever lived in yet. Twenty days you have to make your escape.

Jesse Brush

During the latter half of September, 1780, Major Brush was dispatched on a secret mission by Governor George Clinton to raise loans of money from patriots living in Huntington and western Suffolk County. Commanding a group of seven other soldiers, Brush successfully crossed Long Island Sound and spent three weeks passing from town to town calling upon known patriots. Although active mostly at nighttime, they also ventured out in broad daylight, using assumed names, various disguises and pretended business transactions. Unfortunately, just at the conclusion of their mission as they sought to escape back across the Sound, their whaleboat was driven ashore by a violent storm. This landing having been observed, they were attacked by a group of armed loyalists who immediately killed Lieutenant Alexander Ketcham of Brush's command in a volley of musket-fire. Brush ordered two of his troop to take the funds raised and escape while the remainder held off the attack. Brush and his party were all captured, but were successful in covering the escape of Lieutenants Williams and Legget who returned to the American lines with the valuable currency. Brush and his companions were held in the Provost prison in New York City. Although no record has been found concerning the date and circumstances of his release, it is known that by June 1781 Brush had returned to his duties in the Westchester County Militia.

Little is known of Major Brush from the close of the Revolutionary War until his death on July 12, 1800. He is buried in the Old Burying Ground in Huntington.

*Excerpted from an essay by Reginald Metcalf, Sr.
For more information contact the
Huntington Historical Society
209 Main Street, Huntington, NY 11743
631-427-7045; FAX: 631-427-7056*