

# BROADSIDE

The Newsletter of the  
American Revolution Round Table  
<http://www.arrrt-ny.org>

June 2023

## APRIL SPEAKER:

### WHO BURNED NEW YORK?

Dr. Benjamin Carp, who teaches at Brooklyn College, addressed the Round Table by Zoom on April 4. He discussed his latest book, *THE GREAT NEW YORK FIRE OF 1776: A LOST STORY OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION*. Dr. Carp was our speaker in October 2010, when he had just published *DEFIANCE OF THE PATRIOTS: THE BOSTON TEA PARTY AND THE MAKING OF AMERICA*. His PhD. is from the University of Virginia.

The burning questions here are: Was the fire set on purpose, and by whom? Dr. Carp has been studying this incident for years, and he finds it



*almost* certain that the fire was no accident, and that it was set by the rebels.

Several witnesses, watching the fire from different distances and angles, report seeing fires break out in three or even ten or more different places within minutes of each other, for starters. The next question is: Were the incendiaries acting on their own, for reasons of their own, or were they ordered to set fires by their own

officers, or by General Washington himself, or by the Continental Congress?

Dr. Carp spoke of the “perennial problem” of New York City’s under-representation as a site for Revolutionary history. If Americans knew more about this fire, and if it were presented to them as a deliberate American scorched-earth tactic, the incident would be more interesting.

(One might conclude, from Dr. Carp’s point, that more advertising needs to be done, if we want to make New York City more of a Rev-specific tourist destination. But it is not easy, since there are so many other NYC attractions competing with the Rev attractions.)

Here are some other salient points from Dr. Carp’s talk.

Prior to the New York fire, US troops had burned Norfolk, Virginia, the nation’s sixth largest city, once the Redcoats had captured it, but before that, when the US held it, British warships fired on the city, destroying nineteen buildings that they believed harbored rebels. Then the rebels, retreating from the city, burned eight hundred buildings. So the New York fire was nothing new.

St. Paul’s Chapel had a flat roof, making it easy for firefighters to put out any embers landing on it from other burning roofs. Trinity Church

burned because its roof was steep, and hard to climb.

Dr. Carp has a podcast.

The NYC Fire Museum has a reconstructed “engine,” as they used to pronounce it – a hand-pumped pump from the revolutionary era.



A “hook and ladder” company used hooks to pull down buildings that could not be saved.

Dr. Carp could not get into some municipal records of the era because of the Covid shutdown.

Dr. Carp is working on an app for a walking tour of revolutionary New York.

## BOOKS BOOKS BOOKS

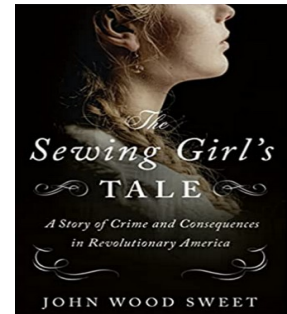
Member Stephen Weiner once again read a well-written book review for us at the April Zoom. He reviewed *THE SEWING GIRL’S TALE: A STORY OF CRIME AND CONSEQUENCES IN REVOLUTIONARY AMERICA*, by John Wood Sweet. The non-fiction book was published in 2022 by Macmillan. The book is 278 pages long and has 61 pages of notes.

The book is about a famous rape trial in New York City in 1793. Lanah Sawyer was a 17-year-old living with her step-father, a respected pilot. She accused Henry Bedlow, a 26-year-old from a wealthy family, of date rape. Her step-father asked Mayor Richard Varick to arrest Bedlow. He was tried and acquitted. Rape carried the death penalty.

Stephen says “As a lawyer, I was struck by how one-sided the trial was. The defense attorneys argued both the facts and the law, while the prosecutors limited themselves to arguing the facts. The prosecution did not rebut the statement by the defense attorney that the death penalty was only for “the brutal violator of female innocence” rather than for a mere “seducer” like Bedlow. The jury acquitted the defendant in fifteen minutes. The author finds this a case of “the privileges of whiteness, patriarchy and property.”

The trial was followed by a riot of 600 working men who tore down the brothels in the neighborhood. The author takes the side of the prostitutes, describing the rioters as “asserting their patriarchal authority to blame the women.” The rioters were blaming the victims – the victims of misogyny.

Stephen finds the author to be following the conventions of traditional scholarship with a few nods to readability.

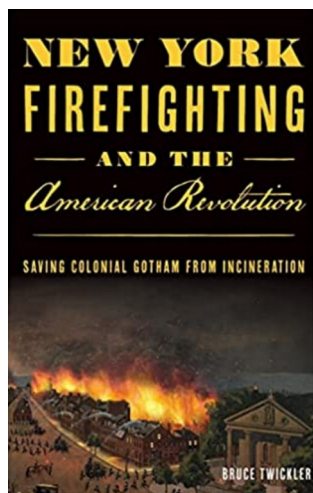


“If one finds a focus on “patriarchy” helpful in understanding what happened in this case, then this book is for you. If you consider it of limited use, or misleading, it is not.”

Your editor has just finished reading Dr. Carp’s book, *THE GREAT NEW YORK FIRE OF 1776: A LOST STORY OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION*. It was published this very year by Yale U. Press. I immediately followed that by reading *NEW YORK FIREFIGHTING AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION: SAVING COLONIAL GOTHAM FROM INCINERATION*, by Bruce Twickler, published in 2022 by the History Press. Even though Twickler’s book was published before Carp’s,

Mr. T gives credit to Mr. C for his research on the fire, which goes back years. Carp's book has no bibliography, but his references are all over his text and his notes. Twickler does have a biblio, and in it you will find Dr. Carp's article on the fire in *Early American Studies* in 2006.

Dr. Carp is a history professor, and Mr. Twickler is a documentary filmmaker. It is always interesting to see writers with different backgrounds approach the same subject in different ways. Reading Twickler's bio, I was



surprised to not see "fireman" among his professions, since he writes like someone who has worked in the field he is writing about. He seems to write from a firefighter's point of view.

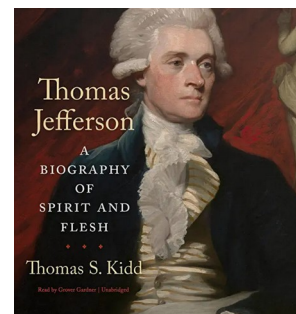
While Carp leads us up to the fire through the political and military developments of the months leading up to the night of September 20, 1776, Twickler tells of the whole development of what became the New York City Fire Department, right from the Dutch founding. And he surveys the next few years of the department's development after 1776. That fire was the worst one in New York City's history, up to 9-11.

Both books have maps and illustrations, but Twickler's are better. He shows maps of the fire's progress at three different stages of its spread.

Both books treat of the question of how the fire started, and both come to the same conclusion, namely that American incendiaries set the fire deliberately. That much is clear. But since there were several fires in different parts of the city

starting within a few minutes of each other, it is not impossible that one or more was accidental. The next question is whether General Washington himself ordered the fires started. There is no evidence that he did. He and his staff discussed doing so for months, but if the General deliberately sent someone into British-held New York with orders to burn the town, no one has ever found any proof of it. It is standard operating procedure to burn a city when the enemy takes it, so as to deny him its use for housing in the coming winter, but what if you hope to retake the city soon? In the chaos of New York's evacuation by Patriots, British capture, and Loyalists flooding in, things happened that we will probably never get to the bottom of.

Lynne Saginaw has received two 2022 books from Yale U. Press. THOMAS JEFFERSON: A BIOGRAPHY OF SPIRIT AND FLESH, by Thomas S. Kidd, concentrates on the private man. CORNWALLIS: SOLDIER AND STATESMAN, by Richard Middleton, is the first biography of Yorktown's loser in forty years. Please contact Lynne –



– [lynesaginaw@gmail.com](mailto:lynesaginaw@gmail.com) – and tell her you would just love to read either of these books and deliver an oral report at the June Zoom, if you are a very fast reader, or at the October dinner. And you get to keep the book!

Stacy Schiff's book, THE REVOLUTIONARY: SAMUEL ADAMS is still available for some member to review for us.

## IN THE NEWS

The Congress of American Revolution Round Tables will be held November 17 to 19 in Princeton. Contact William Welsch for details at [www.wmwelsch@comcast.net](mailto:www.wmwelsch@comcast.net). Since New York's is the oldest ARRT, it would be a shame if someone did not carry our banner at the Congress.

Book Review Editrix Lynne Saginaw found an article about Colonial Williamsburg in the New York Times of Tuesday, May 9. The foundation has been losing visitors and revenue, and is trying to make its message more relevant by emphasizing the role of enslaved people and native people.

Dr. Carp also spoke on the Great Fire at the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen on May 23. The General Society was founded in 1785, and is New York City's oldest labor organization.

New York City tour guides report on Facebook the offering of a new self-guided audio walking tour of revolutionary New York. The tour starts at the Battery, takes you up to the city Commons – today's City Hall Park – and back down to Federal Hall National Memorial in 90 minutes. [www.nycrevolutionarytrail.org](http://www.nycrevolutionarytrail.org). Sponsored by the Gotham Center for NYC History.

Pennsylvania Revwar re-enactor Rick Wolff has spread the word to the Facebook community that an astounding fact was announced at a recent Keystone State re-enactment: "Among the weekend's takeaways: The Revolutionary War bayonet makes a good bottle opener." As all old bottle-scarred veterans know.

## ARRT FACEBOOK PAGE

Maria Dering, our Facebook Co-ordinatrix, reports that our Facebook page now has 1,290 followers, many because of member Richard

Melnick's book on Queens in the Revolution. (Richard will be one of our speakers next year.) Sixty-three percent of those followers are men 35 to 65 years old. Maybe we need to find some authors to speak on Abigail "Don't forget the Ladies" Adams.

## JUNE SPEAKER

At the June Zoom meeting, we will meet Dr. Christopher F. Minty, author of UNFRIENDLY TO LIBERTY: LOYALIST NETWORKS AND THE COMING OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION IN NEW YORK CITY. The book covers the period from 1768 to 1776. Dr. Minty argues that the Delancey faction and other groups formed more because of certain effects of the French and Indian War than because of rising republican ideas in New York City.



Dr. Minty is an editor at the Center for Digital Editing at the University of Virginia. His Ph.D. is from the University of Stirling. He has Fellowships from the British Library and other institutions. He lives in Astoria, Queens.

## DEADLINE

We always need and appreciate articles for the Broadside. Please send your editor – [fcookinham@juno.com](mailto:fcookinham@juno.com) – any information that might interest fans of the American Revolution. If you have something about the French and Indian War or the War of 1812, or any American history around those events, send it in! We won't quibble. The deadline for inclusion in the

October Broadside will be midnight, Tuesday, September 12 – two weeks before you should look in your inbox for the Broadside, and three weeks before the October meeting. Perhaps you will be traveling over the summer. Tell us about your trip to Valley Forge or Fort Ticonderoga or Monticello.

## AN IMPORTANT MESSAGE FROM OUR CHAIRMAN

Once more unto the Zoom, dear friends, once more! We will Zoom in June, and try for an actual dinner in October. But we have to find a restaurant first. So, ALL HANDS! ASK AROUND! DOES ANYONE KNOW OF A RESTAURANT, PREFERABLY NEAR GRAND CENTRAL OR PENN STATION, BUT NOT TIMES SQUARE, NOT TOO EXPENSIVE, AND ABLE TO ACCOMMODATE THIRTY PEOPLE AND SHOW SLIDES? Please report any leads to me, at [djacobs01@snet.net](mailto:djacobs01@snet.net). Thanks!

The June Round Table will meet by Zoom at 7:30 on Tuesday, June 6. D-Day! The Zoom link is in the email you got from Jon Carriel that also contains the link to this Broadside.

Speaking of Jon, our trusty Treasurer will be retiring from that position as soon as we can find a replacement. We are asking for two volunteers: a Treasurer and an Assistant Treasurer. Duties will be very light, especially when shared by two. Prospective Treasurers and Assistants should reply to your Broadside editor, Fred Cookinham, at [fcookinham@juno.com](mailto:fcookinham@juno.com).

The Round Table will not be giving out its annual book award this year due to a dearth of nominations for books published in 2022. Our April speaker's book on New York's Great Fire is an early favorite for the 2023 award, but the year is yet young.

The  
ARRT-NY  
Board of  
Governors  
held its  
annual  
meeting



on April 24<sup>th</sup>, via Zoom. The officers were all re-elected.

Yr most obdt svt.  
Dr. David W. Jacobs