***JOHN NEILSON AND NEW BRUNSWICK DURING THE REVOLUTION***

1. **INTRODUCTION**

Have you ever wondered about old street names in New Brunswick? We often take certain names for granted, because we see them so often. New Brunswick, Trenton, Elizabeth, Somerville, and Flemington all have streets named for Hamilton. Washington’s name scrawls across signs in Hoboken, Perth Amboy, Sayreville, and South Amboy to name a few. Johnson and Johnson’s Albany Street headquarters lie atop old Washington Street in New Brunswick. The Marquis de Lafayette’s name, if not memory of his bravery, lives on in New York, Edison, Metuchen, and right next to Buccleuch Park. However, there is one street found only in New Brunswick, named for one of its native sons.

Neilson Street runs south from Albany Street until meeting Commercial Avenue just shy of Douglass College. This street has some of New Brunswick’s oldest buildings – British soldiers ripped the pews out of the First Reformed Church in the winter of 1776-77 to make room for their hospital. The neighborhood also has modern buildings designed by I.M. Pei and his associates, the Johnson and Johnson headquarters and the Hyatt Hotel. Across Neilson street from the other, where the Italian restaurant Due Mari stands there used to be an inn that George Washington used as his headquarters. There, on July 9th, 1776, Colonel John Neilson stood atop a table before a crowd of Brunswickers and read the Declaration of Independence. New Brunswick was the third city to hear this great document. This is but the most well-known of tale of New Brunswick’s rich Revolutionary history. Unfortunately, only a handful of buildings from that period remain and if it were not for a few plaques dedicated to the site, one would pass along Albany Street without the slightest knowledge of the interesting and important events that unfolded in this neighborhood. Around the corner stayed Lord William Howe, the commander of the British armed forces, and his leading general, Charles Cornwallis. On the hill next to Kirkpatrick chapel, George Washington saw the 21-year-old Alexander Hamilton shelling the British Army across Raritan; it was the first time the two had met. New Brunswick was host to more major players of the Revolution than most other cities in America.

How is it that this history no longer seems commonly appreciated? In some parts of the state, people wear their Revolutionary heritage – Reenactors row boats across the Delaware in a beautiful recreation of Washington’s crossing every Christmas at Titusville, NJ. Some cities honor their past with statues, as Paterson does with its Alexander Hamilton – looking intently at the churning falls of the Passaic. Even poor Trenton has an air of history with its old barracks.. A city with such a distinguished role in the Revolution should not allow its past to go uncelebrated, to do so erodes our delicate historical capital. If New Brunswick is ever to truly thrive again, it must establish a distinction from other places, and it can do so by relying on its history. In the form of statues, buildings, and celebrations, a great city does not shrink from its past but rather makes its past known; it is one of the best ways to convey a sense of refinement to a city. The Arc de Triomphe in Paris reminds you of Napoleon’s awesome power and the exalted role of Paris in history. In the spirit of revitalizing our knowledge of the city’s role in history, the new non-profit group New Brunswick Public Sculpture proposes a monument to John Neilson, close to the site of his reading of the Declaration of Independence.

1. **COLONEL JOHN NEILSON’S FAMILY AND YOUTH**

John Neilson was born on March 11th, 1745 to Dr. John Neilson and Joanna Cojeman Neilson in Raritan Landing. This settlement existed on either side of Landing Lane, along River Road below the Cornelius Low House and the Rutgers Stadium, and archaeologists have found remains along the bike path that connects Busch Campus with New Brunswick. The town failed because sea-worthy ships could reach it only during high tide; Brunswick was always accessible by sea. Doctor John died of an accident only a few days after his son’s birth. Fortunately, John had come to Perth Amboy in 1716 from Belfast with his brother, James. The baby boy went to live with his uncle, who had become a leading citizen of the fledgling Brunswick before 1730, when we find James Neilson on the City Charter from King George II. He had established himself in the shipping trade and was one of the first Trustees of the College of New Jersey, now Princeton University. James raised his nephew in the large house on Burnet Street that Howe and Cornwallis later occupied, and brought the young John into business with him.

When John Neilson was twenty-nine, news of the Boston Tea Party and the subsequent British closure of the port of Boston reached New Brunswick. Its citizens responded by writing to Governor William Franklin, the estranged son of Ben Franklin, in the capital Perth Amboy. They wanted Franklin to call the Colonial Assembly, which Franklin refused to do since he saw no point in debating the closure of Boston’s port – he thought it was just punishment for colonial defiance. Young John Neilson saw no point in mincing words and he made a speech in New Brunswick in which he “bitterly resented the attempt of a venal Parliament fought by an oppressive ministry to tax his country, stating that the only alternative was victory or slavery.” His uncle’s house must have been a haven for revolutionary activity. It received the mail for Somerset County (the colonial post-office was in Amboy), and on 2 am on April 24th, James Neilson received news that war had begun in Lexington and Concord five days earlier.

A Provincial Congress, sweltering in the August heat of Trenton, finally broke all ties with King George III of Britain and charged each county with raising soldiers to aid General Washington besieging the British in Boston. Middlesex County raised two regiments of militia. Neilson was asked early in 1776 to take a seat in the Continental Congress of that year, but declined out of a desire to see his city through the difficult period. It was probably because of this connection with the Congress that it was John Neilson that read the Declaration of Independence on late on July 9th. It had been read for the first time publicly in Philadelphia on July 8th, in Trenton the same day, and at Nassau Hall in Princeton on the evening of the 9th. In truth, the sources relating to these events are difficult to corroborate, one historian doubted that the reading in New Brunswick happened before July 20th, as that was when the volunteer regiments were allowed back home[[1]](#footnote-1).

1. **WAR COMES TO NEW BRUNSWICK – AUTUMN AND WINTER, 1776**

John Neilson was commanding one of the Middlesex regiments in Bergen and Essex counties in September and October of 1776. To the south, Lord William Howe thrashed the American army on Long Island and Manhattan and took control of New York in September. Washington fled New York with serious losses of men and materiel. Neilson abandoned his northern positions and joined Washington on his retreat towards New Brunswick, where Washington hoped to hold the advancing British at the Raritan, who reached Newark on November 28th. Washington’s army was weakened by the expiration of many of his soldiers' terms of service[[2]](#footnote-2). He complained of the poor morale of the New Jersey militia, and was exasperated that so many soldiers left him in a critical period[[3]](#footnote-3).

Washington made his headquarters in a tavern where Due Mari Italian Restaurant is now. This building was built by Peter Cochrane in 1742. It seems that New Brunswick’s real estate has always been fluid and this inn was known as no less than eight names in its history: **Cochrane’s, Le Grange’s Stone House, Mariner’s, Jaque’s, Sutton’s, Sign of ’17 Washington 76, Carlile’s, and Ayer’s Tavern.** John Adams probably stayed here on his way to the Continental Congress from his home in Massachusetts, and Benjamin Franklin on his way to meet Lord Howe for peace negotiations as the British fleet lay at anchor outside New York. People at the Bloustein School may say their city-building profession is prefigured by another of the inn’s tenants – British General John Graves Simcoe. New Brunswickers shot Simcoe’s horse from under him whilst the daring cavalry commander was raising hell on a raid from Woodbridge to the Amwell Road. The Americans imprisoned Simcoe in Cochrane’s inn; he later founded the city of Toronto. The inn was razed in 1876, a century after John Neilson read the Declaration of Independence there.

By the first of December, 1776, the British had appeared on the east bank of the Raritan, where Route 27 comes through Highland Park. That day, William Alexander, the Lord of Stirling, came marching to Brunswick fresh from British captivity, offering needed reinforcements[[4]](#footnote-4). Alexander Hamilton, just out of King’s College, now Columbia University in New York, set up an artillery regiment on the heights near Old Queens and shelled the British across the Raritan. Washington and Hamilton met for the first time in New Brunswick, as the General commended the young commander for his talented gunnery. Washington deemed the city indefensible in light of his scattering army and the easily passable river. Hamilton’s barrage delayed the British just long enough for Washington to head south. With Stirling and Adam Stephen covering the retreat, the Americans abandoned New Brunswick and fled to Trenton.

The British under Sir William Howe and Charles Cornwallis occupied Brunswick on the evening of the First, settingup their headquarters in the Neilson house on Burnet Street, doubtless happy to occupy such a seat of disloyalty. The Hessian commander DeHeister made his headquarters on Neilson Street in the Van Nuis house. The British transformed New Brunswick into their base of operations for the winter, building various redoubts and outposts around the city. Daily life was greatly disrupted: worship was canceled in churches sympathizing with the revolution – the British burned the city’s Presbyterian Church that John Neilson belonged to. Redcoats ripped the pews from the First Reformed Church and made it into a hospital; the loyalist minister of Christ Church kept his pulpit. They also occupied Run, Middlebush, Piscataway, Bonhamtown and Woodbridge, spreading great misery over the land. They plundered the property of one in every three householders in Middlesex County, burned numerous structures, and used scavenged lumber to build a temporary bridge over the Raritan, Washington having damaged a previous span in his retreat[[5]](#footnote-5). Still, the city did not pass into British hands entirely without argument; on December 3rd a patriot sniper hidden in the Raritan docks of New Brunswick shot dead Captain Weiterhausen of the Hessians as he walked across the Albany Street bridge[[6]](#footnote-6).

1. **THE RETREAT FROM BRUNSWICK, THE BATTLE OF TRENTON – DECEMBER 26TH, 1776**

Neilson marched with the main army south. Washington crossed the Delaware and made his camp around Newtown, Pennsylvania. American fortunes were a low ebb – the British and their Hessian mercenaries had advanced all the way to Trenton by December 8th. Despite his ability to press on to Philadelphia, which was in panic, Lord Howe returned to New York and ordered his brigades to bunk down for the winter in a line that stretched from Bordentown on the Delaware to Newark on the Passaic. It was vital that Washington remove the forward Hessian garrison at Trenton, or Philadelphia and the Revolution would surely fall in the spring. Fortunately, Howe had overspread his soldiers, leaving Trenton garrisoned by only 1,400 Hessians under Johann Rall, apparently an unpopular commander with his soldier and his superiors.

In the week before Christmas, Washington sent Neilson and other New Jerseyans to round up support from the populace north of Trenton[[7]](#footnote-7). Reinforcements under John Sullivan and Horatio Gates brought Washington’s strength around 5,000 and he launched a guerilla campaign to cut the Hessians off in Trenton[[8]](#footnote-8). Rall did not heed his officer’s advice to fortify Trenton, although his correspondence indicates that he was nervous of attack – he requested the British General James Grant in Princeton establish a post in Lawrenceville, which would have protected Rall’s lines of communication. His request was denied. Rall wrote to his superior, Carl von Donop in Bordentown, that he expected attack at any moment. Von Donop disliked Rall so greatly that he not only declined to sent reinforcements to Trenton, but marched south to deal with rebels in Mount Holly on December 22nd.

With Trenton exposed, Washington crossed the Delaware on the Christmas night with 2,400 soldiers and was upon the town by 9 am. Washington rode ahead of his troops and surprised the German sentries to cries of ‘*Der Feind!”* (The Enemy). The Hessians never held the momentum of the battle, and once the Americans brought their cannon to the intersection of Trenton’s main boulevards, they scattered the enemy. By noon, the Americans had killed 22 Hessians, wounded 83, and captured 896 others. The rest fled to other British outposts, or into the wilds of southern New Jersey, where some claim they became the inhabitants of the Pine Barrens[[9]](#footnote-9). Miraculously the Americans suffered two fatalities and five injuries, however men did die and suffer from the savage winter during this campaign [[10]](#footnote-10).

1. **THE BATTLE OF PRINCETON, WASHINGTON ADVANCES NORTH, THE BRITISH HOLD BRUNSWICK**

Thinking that the Americans were beaten for the year, Lord Howe and Cornwallis had already returned to New York to celebrate Christmas. Upon hearing that Trenton had fallen, Cornwallis rode post-haste to Princeton and in the last days of 1776, marched with 8,000 men towards the Delaware. Washington’s army by that time had swelled to 6,000, but pitched battle against a larger British force was not yet advisable. Should Washington’s main army be destroyed, Cornwallis would certainly make up for his previous errors and move on Philadelphia. His army reached Trenton at dusk on January 2nd, and made three attempts to cross the Assunpink Creek that protected the American camp. He was unsuccessful and camped in Trenton for the night. Washington broke camp, leaving a skeleton garrison tending the campfires and keeping the semblance of activity, and marched north towards Princeton along country roads. The whole army was in motion by 2 am.

Lieutenant Colonel Charles Mawhood left Princeton on the morning of January 3rd under orders to join Cornwallis in Trenton. Just to the south of Princeton he spotted the main American army filtering through the woods, but was unable to tell its true size. He withdrew to Princeton, but the American Hugh Mercer had already gotten between the British and the town, attempting to destroy the bridge that crosses the Stony Brook. Loathe to be cut off from his garrison, Mawhood attacked and scattered Mercer’s detachment. Mercer lost his life, but his name lives on as the name of county in which he died. As the Redcoats scattered their foes, it caused panic in the other groups of the Continental soldiers arriving from the south. Washington rallied his soldiers and rode in front of their positions, hat in hand, sawing “Parade with us my brave fellows! There is but a handful of the enemy and we shall have them directly!”

The Americans reformed and fresh troops forced Mawhood to withdraw and the small British garrison holed up in Nassau Hall. Alexander Hamilton, with his penchant for creatively uniting academia and artillery, shelled the building until the British flew a white flag from its windows. Princeton was a stirring victory, but the Americans could not stay to celebrate it; Cornwallis was already on his way to the town. Washington wanted to move north, where a British pay chest of 70,000 pounds awaited them. However, Nathanael Green and Henry Knox talked Washington out of an assault on the city, and counseled that he take refuge behind the Watchung Hills. The American army marched north, but crossed the Raritan to the west of New Brunswick and arrived in Morristown on January 6th, 1777. Cornwallis, coming upon the wreckage of battle in Princeton, decided to withdraw his soldiers to New Brunswick. Washington had soldiers posted on the Watchung ridge, ever watchful of Brunswick.

1. **THE GUERILLA WAR IN MIDDLESEX COUNTY, NEILSON’S RAID – WINTER 1777**

We must assume that John Neilson was with the American army during the battles of Trenton and Princeton, although we don’t know what role he had in those conflicts. Was he one of the New Jerseyans that guided Washington through central New Jersey? He may have been one of the voices advocating an immediate attack on New Brunswick. He had probably heard reports of the strain that the British occupation caused in the city. Moreover, his elderly uncle James may still have been in the city, since this author has found no evidence that he left with Washington’s army.

However, attack on the city itself was unwise. The Americans had won at Trenton and Princeton, but these were accomplished against a British land army. The terror of the seas, the British Navy, commanded New York Harbor and Raritan bay and could sail to New Brunswick in mere hours. The British garrison was more than 10,000 soldiers, almost twice the size of Washington’s field army and nearly the population of all Middlesex County. Unlike Trenton and Princeton, the British dug earthworks around New Brunswick, and had a plan of defense. The situation settled into a stale mate, with the Americans drawing a loose siege around Brunswick and Amboy, eager to choke off the British supply route – the river.

The British occupation weighed heavily on New Brunswick, almost every house quartered British soldiers. Some prominent homes were occupied by officers, such as Neilson’s, or destroyed as in the case of John Cochran’s[[11]](#footnote-11). It seems Cornwallis was in the city from the time until his retreat from Princeton until the British left New Brunswick in June. However, Lord Howe stayed in New York until some point in the spring. New Brunswick became a den of loyalist activity, with some men pressing citizens into service. Life was difficult for those who resisted British rule; Abraham Patton, a spy for Washington in Brunswick, was executed in the city for paying a British soldier to deliver messages to General Washington in Bound Brook and General Putnam in Princeton. Patton had devised a scheme to set fire to various buildings in New Brunswick, including the British magazine, and use a rocket to invite rebel attack.

The British had reason to be wary of such assaults. The Americans raided the outposts of New Brunswick repeatedly. From early January to late March, New Brunswick was completely cut off from Perth Amboy. Colonials fired on any Redcoats trying to reinforce New Brunswick from Perth Amboy, and cannons set up along the Raritan repulsed the British navy’s attempts to provision the city. Cornwallis and his garrison grimly held on, defending itself against raids and launching foraging parties to feed the ravenous appetite of the garrison. John Neilson distinguished himself in one daring raid on February 18th, at a place called Bennett’s Island, which was probably in the Lawrence Brook close to today’s Rutgers Gardens. He and a small group of soldiers from Princeton surprised a British fortification. Neilson was the first man to leap the palisade, but almost met death at the hands of the British sentinel. Another American, Captain Farmer, shot this soldier dead and Neilson led the capture of Major Stockton of the British, one of his captains, several subordinate officers, and fifty-one privates of a loyalist battalion. Neilson accomplished this without a single casualty among his men, and was already back in Princeton before the main British garrison in New Brunswick had any idea it had occurred. Washington congratulated Neilson for the brave assault.

The winter was characterized by this kind of hit-and-run warfare. With the weather warming a bit, the British felt more bold. Lord Howe returned to New Brunswick in June, 1777, with reinforcements. Washington countered by moving his main army from Morristown to the Watchung Ridge. He got an excellent view as Howe marched out of New Brunswick with 17,000 soldiers in an attempt to lure Washington from the heights. The rebels stayed put, and Howe milled about for a while south of Bound Brook. Perhaps, feeling overstretched, he returned to New Brunswick and Americans filtered out of the hills and woods to harass him all the way back to the city. Howe’s strategic position was not compromised, but it seems he was frustrated with his inability to make progress in New Jersey. By mid May, he had already conceded, “we must probably abandon the Jersies.” He planned to attack Philadelphia by sea, and withdrew his soldiers from New Brunswick. General Washington reported to the Continental Congress on June 22, 1777:

“I have the honor and pleasure to inform you that the enemy evacuated Brunswick this morning, and retired to Amboy, burning many houses as they went along. Some of them, from the appearance of the flames, were considerable buildings.

1. **NEILSON AFTER THE REVOLUTION**

1. This narrative of readings comes from Charles Benedict’s *New Brunswick in History*. He mention’s ‘Force’s “Archives”’ as his source. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Wall and Pickersgill, *History of Middlesex County Volume 1*. P. 98. I have not found a description of Neilson’s march to New Brunswick, or what his activities were when Washington was in the city. Neilson probably started marching south in November 1776; he could have evaded New Brunswick entirely and met Washington in Trenton before the General’s crossing into Pennsylvania on December 7th, 1776. I find it more likely that Neilson met Washington in Brunswick and that both marched south together. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Wall, *Chronicles of New Brunswick*, p.210: Washington to Congress: ““We have had another proof of the folly of short enlistments. This time for the five months men expired at this critical period. Two brigades left us at Brunswick, notwithstanding the enemy were within two hours’ march and coming on. The loss of these troops at this time reduced his excellency to the necessity to order another retreat. Here we are endeavoring to draw our forces together. The Philadelphia and Pennsylvania militia turn out with great spirit, but the Jersey militia behaves scurvily, and I fear are not deserving of the freedom we are contending for.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Wikipedia Distilled: William Alexander (1726-1783) has a school named after him on George Street in New Brunswick. He was not British, but was instead born in New York. His father, James Alexander, was a lawyer and one of the founders of King’s College. James Alexander employed as a law clerk the young William Livingston (1723-1790), who would be the first independent governor of New Jersey and was a signer of the Constitution. Perhaps as a result of his father’s suggestion, William Alexander married Livingston’s sister Sarah in 1747. He enlisted in the British Army and was involved in the French and Indian War.

   He went to England in 1756 to defend his commander, William Shirley, from charges of treason. Whilst in England, he claimed the empty title of Earl of Stirling, based on an ancestral link that he never proved to the House of Lords; the British never recognized his title, but he consistently referred to himself Lord Stirling. Had the British agreed with his claim, it would have entitled him to much of the New England coast, parts of Nova Scotia, and the St. Lawrence Valley. He became the surveyor general of New Jersey and lived lavishly as befitted a Scottish Lord.

   He fought with distinction at the Battle of Long Island, where his 1st Maryland Regiment covered the American retreat, fighting the British until the regiment was decimated and Stirling himself was captured by the Hessians. The unit was regenerated with new Maryland volunteers and fought in almost all the decisive engagements in the Revolution, until the Siege of Yorktown in 1781. Stirling fought with Washington at Bradywine, Germantown and Monmouth, but died before the war ended in 1783. Always a heavy drinker, he died stationed with the northern army in Albany. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Wall, *Chronicles*, pp. 207-209 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Wall, Chronicles, p. 224 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Wall and Pickersgill. *History of Middlesex County, New Jersey, Vol. I*, p. 98 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Wall, *Chronicles*, p. 210 General Green writes a comrade in Trenton: “When we left Brunswick we had not three thousand men – a very pitiful army to trust the liberties of America upon. We are endeavoring to collect a sufficient force to give battle, or at least to stop their progress.” Sullivan brought 2000 men, Horatio Gates brought 800 from Ticonderoga. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In his book, *The Pine Barrens* (1968), John McPhee recounts the popular understanding among Pineys that many of the German last names of that area come from refugee Hessians. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For general information on the Battle of Trenton, I have used Wikipedia. I will corroborate my research with more scholarly resources such as *The Crossing*, by David Hackett Fisher. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Wall, *The Chronicles of New Brunswick*, p. 231. Cochran was the “Dear Dr. Bones” of Washington’s letters, the General of Hospitals of the army after 1781. He was the most talented holder of that position. He moved from Pennsylvania to Brunswick in 1764, and a was a founder of the New Jersey Medical Society in 1766, the same year Queens College was established. New Brunswick’s focus on academia and healthcare has been with it since the beginning. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)