

# BRIEF SKETCHES OF LIFE IN THE NEUTRAL GROUND

**(These two sketches of life in the Neutral Ground may be too harsh for younger readers.)**

During the Revolutionary War, Mamaroneck and Westchester County was considered Neutral Ground, belonging to neither the British Forces in New York City, nor the American Forces in Connecticut. This designation meant that there was no civil government or law to protect the inhabitants who were prey to the depredations of roaming bands of marauders.

## ***The Observations of a Dr. Thacher:***

The county which we lately traversed, about fifty miles in extent, is called "Neutral Gound;" but the miserable inhabitants who remain are... continually exposed to the ravages and insults of infamous banditti...

These shameless marauders have received the names of Cowboys and Skinners. By their atrocious deeds, they have become a scourge and terror to the people. Numerous instances have been related of these miscreants subjecting defenceless persons to cruel tortures, to compel them to deliver up their money, or to disclose the places where it has been secreted. It is not uncommon for them to hang a man by his neck till apparently dead, then restore him, and repeat the experiment, and leave him for dead...

A peaceable, unresisting Quaker, of considerable respectability, by the name of Quincy, was visited by several of these vile ruffians; they first demanded his money, and after it was delivered they suspected he had more concealed, and inflicted on him the most savage cruelties in order to extort it from him. They began with what they call scorching, covering his naked body with hot ashes, and repeating the application till the skin was covered with blisters; after this they resorted to the halter, and hung the poor man on a tree by his neck, then took him down, and repeated it a second, and even a third time, and finally left him almost lifeless.

(Thacher's Military Journal, 232)

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## ***The Observations of a Dr. Timothy Dwight:***

In the autumn of 1777, I resided for some time in this County. The lines of the British were then in the neighborhood of King's Bridge, and those of the Americans at Byram River. The unhappy inhabitants were, therefore exposed to the depredations of both...

Their houses.. were in a great measure scenes of desolation. Their furniture was extensively plundered, or broken to pieces. The walls, floors, and windows were injured both by violence and decay; and were not repaired, because they had not the means to repair them, and because they were exposed to the repetition of the same injuries. Their cattle were gone. Their enclosures were burnt, where they were capable of becoming fuel; and in many cases thrown down where they were not. Their fields were covered with a rank growth of weeds and wild grass...

...They feared every body whom they saw, and loved nobody. It was a curious fact to a philosopher, and a melancholy one to hear their conversation. To every question they gave such an answer as would please the inquirer; or, if they despaired of pleasing, such a one as would not provoke him.

Fear was, apparently, the only passion by which they were animated. The power of volition seemed to have deserted them. They were not civil, but obsequious; not obliging, but subservient. They yielded with a kind of apathy, and very quietly, what you asked, and what they supposed it impossible for them to retain. If you treated them kindly, they received it coldly; not as a kindness, but as a compensation for injuries done them by others. When you spoke to them, they answered you without either good or ill nature, and without any appearance of reluctance or hesitation; but they subjoined neither questions nor remarks of their own; proving to your full conviction, that they felt no interest either in the conversation or yourself.

Both their countenances and the motions had lost every trace of animation and of feeling. The features were smoothed, not into serenity, but apathy; and, instead of being settled in the attitude of quiet thinking, strongly indicated that all thought beyond what was merely instinctive, had fled their minds for ever.

(Dr. Timothy Dwight's Travels, 3d vol.)

(Researcher: Peter M. Fellows. This material is from "A history of the county of Westchester, from its first settlement to the present time, Volume 1, Robert Bolton, beginning p. xvi. The section in the second account beginning "Their houses..." actually follows the last paragraph. I altered its position for editorial purposes. September 2011)







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