

***Quarters: The Accommodation of the British Army and the Coming of the American Revolution***

**John Gilbert McCurdy**

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This book takes an expansive look at the ways in which the British army was housed in its Atlantic colonies in the eighteenth century. This is “spatial history,” a discussion of how space, especially in homes, was used and how this changed over time. While doing so, the author makes several specific arguments. The first is that the Quartering, or Mutiny Acts, contrary to the findings of most previous scholars, did not require or force settlers to accept soldiers into their homes. Instead, political and military leaders expected them to be housed in barracks, public spaces (including taverns), or empty buildings. This act “prohibited British soldiers from entering private houses.” The second is that what happened when the laws took effect varied greatly. Much depended on location, the needs of the area (in the West as protection from hostile native tribes, or in the South from restless slaves), imperial and colonial economic problems, and a developing notion of the home as a sacred place. To show these variations, the discussion is divided into sections on the “old colonies,” the backcountry, and the “new colonies” (in Canada, Florida, and the Caribbean islands). Also important, conflicts that arose over “accommodations” and were a contributing cause of the American Revolution are assessed. Here McCurdy includes British colonies that did not revolt, to show how their reactions to the Quartering Acts differed and influenced their continued adherence to the British Empire. Finally, he argues that the idea that civilians and soldiers should not share housing led to the Third Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, and their being separated in the United States ever since—except in wartime. His

conclusion is that “Not only did quartering lead to independence; it definitely answered the question of where soldiers belonged” (240).

Several recent books look at issues relating to British troops in the North American colonies. These include Serena Zabin’s *The Boston Massacre: A Family History* (2020), which discusses marriages between soldiers and local women and the impact that developing hostility had on them. Donald F. Johnson, *Occupied America: British Military Rule and the Experience of the Revolution* (2017), examines the administration of occupied major cities, including the housing of troops during the Revolutionary War; and Aaron Sullivan, *The Disaffected: Britain’s Occupation of Philadelphia During the American Revolution* (2019), portrays that city while it was occupied between 1777 and 1778. There are others as well, and the list is growing. This book differs in its scope both in terms of time and place, as well as in its focus on quartering, and as such, it makes a contribution to what we know about the American Revolution.

The breadth of the geographic area covered enables McCurdy to show how complicated finding housing for soldiers became while also adhering to the British law, and why a policy designed in England to protect both soldiers and civilians failed in the period leading up to the revolution. In sparsely settled rural areas, housing options were limited or nonexistent. In densely settled urban areas, homes were often small and crowded and rooms served multiple purposes, so adding more occupants raised issues of privacy and expense. The British government found billeting costly and providing supplies difficult. Colonists, expected to provide some food, firewood, alcohol, and bedding also found this expensive. Besides expenses, accommodating troops once the French and Indian War ended became a major issue, because British troops were relocated from the backcountry and border regions to coastal cities. This left settlers in the backcountry to provide for their own defense, a process that left them feeling abandoned and

alienated. While in the East, British troops were now viewed as an unconstitutional standing army during peacetime, meant to impose British laws on the local populations. In addition, making the colonists pay such expenses came to be seen as another form of “taxation without representation.”

The author’s research is wide-ranging and includes New Jersey. Information about the state is scattered throughout the book, helping to provide a larger perspective. In the eighteenth century, New Jersey was overwhelmingly rural, its towns small, with no equivalent to Boston, Philadelphia, or New York. The colony’s response to the need to house soldiers during the French and Indian War (1754–1763) led the legislature to approve the construction of barracks in five towns (Burlington, Elizabethtown, New Brunswick, Perth Amboy, and Trenton), none of them very large. As in other towns that built barracks, this was done to keep soldiers out of private homes where, out of necessity, they had previously been housed. McCurdy provides a vivid description of troops quartered in Trenton in 1756, and from 1757 to 1758, before barracks were built. The town had 100 to 130 buildings as 450 soldiers came and went. Homeowners provided “beds and blankets.” Soldiers ate with families. “Men crowded into nearly every house, so that 121 of the town’s families hosted at least one soldier at some point.” As the average household held six persons, adding “two to four soldiers” was a substantial imposition. Barracks kept soldiers and civilians separate, while helping the local economy. As disagreements with Britain heated up, and soldiers clashed with locals (as happened most drastically in Boston but also at one point in Elizabethtown), this increasingly became an issue throughout the 13 North American colonies that had declared independence. New Jersey’s legislature did in time object to providing supplies because of “poverty,” while really opposed on the grounds that this was an unauthorized tax imposed by Parliament. As such, it was no different from the Stamp Act, Townshend Acts, and

other laws. The legislature's refusals were not appreciated by British authorities, who vetoed several New Jersey laws that they considered insufficient, including those that provided for troops.

The author also provides details on how much the barracks cost, what materials were used to construct them, and where they were placed. In New Jersey, the building material was fieldstone. Each building was limited to a plot of one acre and designed to hold 300 soldiers. McCurdy includes a map that details all five barracks built in the colony, but he discusses only three: New Brunswick, Perth Amboy, and Elizabethtown (noting that the British destroyed its barracks during the revolution). Trenton is mentioned briefly as the only place that barracks have survived into the present. McCurdy does not note that troops involved in the Boston Massacre were transferred to New Jersey with little initial opposition. Nor that during the war, the Trenton barracks were used to house soldiers by the British, Hessians, and Patriots, and also served as a hospital. His main interest is the period leading up to independence, and not what followed.

Again this is a "spatial" history, a social history of how space was used in homes and in areas housing troops; it is also about newly developing concepts of privacy. The author is less interested in ideology and politics and consequentially misses the importance of political divisions in New Jersey, and the significance of its large Quaker population. Part of the opposition to providing money for the military, including housing soldiers, especially during peacetime, came from west and south Jersey, areas with significant Quaker populations.

McCurdy emphasizes the issue of quartering for the coming of the revolution and does include information about New Jersey, while also providing a wider picture of where and what this involved. Larry R. Gerlach noted how important the quartering of troops was for New Jersey nearly 50 years ago, when he wrote: "The British soldier was a tangible reality to Jerseymen,

whose province supported proportionally (and sometimes actually) a larger contingent of royal troops than any other North American colony during the pre-Revolutionary era.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Larry R. Gerlach, *Prologue to Revolution: New Jersey in the Coming of the Revolution* (1976), 62.