

NJS Presents***Museums, Archives, Artifacts, and Documents*****In This Issue:*****The Story Behind the Story:******Telling the History of Colonel Tye at Sandy Hook*****By Brett Palfreyman****DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v9i2.336>**

The National Park Service and the Sandy Hook Foundation are in the midst of creating an educational experience to tell the story of Colonel Tye, the runaway slave who joined British forces at Sandy Hook and became one of the most feared fighters of the American Revolution in New Jersey. This article summarizes their efforts to create a rich, immersive narrative for public audiences, despite the challenge that surviving documents about him, mostly written by those who enslaved him and fought against him, are scarce and often scant on details.

The pages of the “Documents and Artifacts” section of *New Jersey Studies* are bursting with compelling examples of historians, archaeologists, and preservationists delving into rich troves of surviving records and objects to reconstruct detailed accounts of the past. But how do storytellers create immersive narratives when there are relatively few documents and artifacts with which to work? The National Park Service and the Sandy Hook Foundation are currently confronting this very problem as they attempt to develop a new public-facing storytelling project about Colonel Tye, the runaway slave who joined British forces based at Sandy Hook and became one of the most fearsome fighters of the American Revolution in New Jersey. Against all odds for his time, Tye managed to leave a modest ripple in the paper trail largely created by those who enslaved and fought against him—a handful of references in property inventories, newspapers,

and military reports. Perhaps the fact that we know Tye's name at all should be considered a testament to his accomplishments, given the fact that the surviving historical record systematically undercounts the experiences and perspectives of the many thousands of enslaved people who lived and toiled in New Jersey from the 17th to 19th centuries. This short essay will describe the early-stage efforts of the Sandy Hook team to take the fullest possible advantage of those scarce documents and artifacts to build out a narrative as vivid and memorable as Colonel Tye himself.

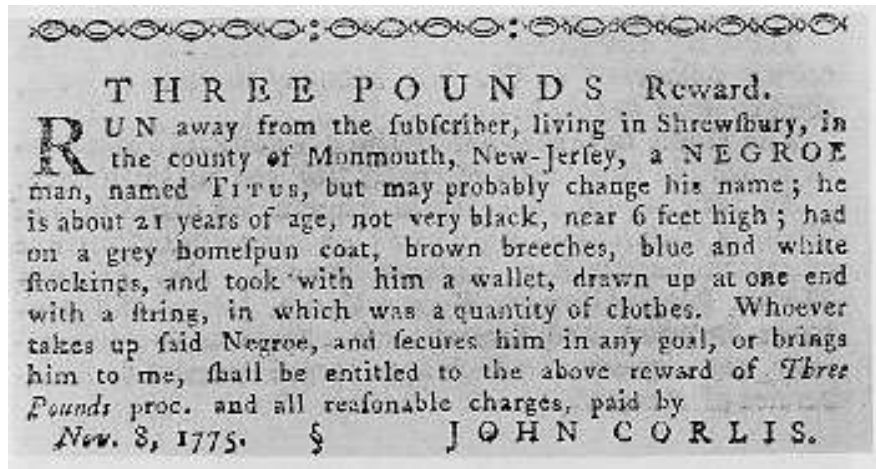
As the 250th Anniversary of the American Revolution rapidly approaches, historical organizations and sites across the United States are racing to recount well-worn stories about the Founding Era and to gather evidence to tell new ones. Here in New Jersey, the State Historical Commission is planning a spree of observances, commemorations, and educational opportunities from the site where General Washington crossed the Delaware River to win a surprise victory at Trenton to the famous battlefield near the courthouse in Monmouth County.¹ Sandy Hook, a thin peninsula stretching upward from the northeast corner of New Jersey into New York's Lower Bay, is already known for its miles of white sand beaches and well-preserved 18th-century lighthouse. The site's stewards, the National Park Service and their non-profit partners at the Sandy Hook Foundation, are hoping to capitalize on the millions of beachgoers, dog walkers, and bikers who visit the park every year as a potential audience for a new educational experience telling the story of Colonel Tye, a pivotal but lesser known figure in New Jersey's Revolutionary history. The project is currently in the interpretative planning stage with an expectation that a request for proposals for final development will go out in 2024.

¹ "Crossroads of the American Revolution Selected as Not-For-Profit Partner for New Jersey's 250th Anniversary of the United States Commemoration Efforts," New Jersey Department of State, accessed June 22, 2023, <https://www.nj.gov/state/press-2018-1025.shtml>.

The Sandy Hook team is still in the process of deciding exactly what form this project will take—a virtual reality presentation? An audio walking guide? An interactive workshop series? Some combination of the above, or something else entirely? They do know that they want the experience to be immersive, engaging, and rich in human drama, something that truly captures the excitement and tension of Colonel Tye’s short, tumultuous career. Thus the challenge: we know Tye’s story is compelling history and a crucial addition to the broader narrative emerging around the 250th Anniversary of the American Revolution in New Jersey, but the toolkit of primary sources we have to communicate it is far more sparse, uncertain, and scant on details than we would hope. Enslaved people in New Jersey were almost always prohibited from learning to read and write; even if an extraordinary figure like Colonel Tye somehow managed to compose a few letters, no one bothered to preserve them in archives to be read today. We have some brief reports written by others about what he did, but we’ll never fully know his reasons or what he was thinking or feeling as he made the choices that defined his life.

Before diving into the question of how to tell the story, first a bit on the actual documentary record regarding Colonel Tye. It’s impossible to know for sure, but the feared “Colonel Tye” who featured in breathless newspaper reports from the frontlines of the Revolutionary War probably started life as “Titus,” an enslaved boy who shows up in the historical record just a few times. By far the most meaningful and detailed document describing Titus’s early years is a runaway advertisement posted by his master John Corlis, a Quaker who owned a handful of enslaved people working a farm somewhere near Colts Neck in Monmouth County as the Revolution approached. On November 8, 1775, Corlis offered a reward of three pounds for the return of Titus, who he

described as “about 21 years of age, not very black,” and likely to “change his name” in order to avoid detection and capture.²



The Pennsylvania Gazette, November 22, 1775

Knowing that Titus was owned by Corlis and about 21 years old at the time he ran away in 1775, we can guess that he must have been born in 1753 or 1754. Working backwards from the runaway ad, it seems likely that Titus appears in at least two more records of the typical kind associated with slavery: financial documents kept by slave owners in order to track what was often their most valuable form of property. The first is a 1760 will in which John Corlis’s father, also named John, bequeathed “six negroes “ worth some 220 pounds to his wife and son, probably including Titus, who would have been six or seven years old at the time.³ The second is a 1771 inventory of enslaved people living near Shrewsbury, New Jersey, where a now seventeen or

² *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, November 22, 1775.

³ Will of John Corlis, February 12, 1760, A. Van Doren Honeyman, ed., *Documents Relating to the Colonial History of the State of New Jersey, First Series, Volume XXXII* (Somerville, NJ: The Unionist-Gazette Printers, 1924), 71.

eighteen year old Titus was likely one of the four people listed as belonging to John Corlis.⁴

July 23 1771 an Account of All the Negro Slaves & Melatos both Men & Woman as near as I Can find for Shrewsbury	
V. Parson Ashfield - - - - 2	Joseph Glesman - - - - 1
Relakah West - - - - 2	Ritchard Tole - - - - 3
Nicklaus Vanbrout - - - - 1	Mary Marton - - - - 1
Nicklaus Vanbrout Juner - 1	James Corlis - - - - 1
Ritchard Larance - - - - 1	William Parker son of Joseph - 1
Stephen Tallman Juner - 2	Samuel Breef - - - - 3
John Wardill - - - - 3	John Corlis - - - - 4

**“An Account of All the Negro Slaves & Melatos both Men & Women as near as I Can find for Shrewsbury,”
July 23, 1771, Monmouth County Archives**

These early records reveal little about Titus’s day to day existence during his first decades of life in slavery. We can only say for sure that at least according to his owners, the keepers of the documents, his primary identity was as a valuable piece of property and that by 1775, he was ready to grasp his fate in his own hands and take the bold but dangerous step of running away.

What became of Titus in the four years between the runaway advertisement in 1775 and his first appearance as “Colonel Tye” at the height of the Revolutionary War in New Jersey in 1779 is a documentary black hole. He may have traveled south to Virginia, drawn by news of the Dunmore Proclamation, which promised permanent freedom to enslaved people belonging to Patriots who served with the British military. Had Titus taken this route, he might have trained with the famous Ethiopian Regiment or supported the war effort with the Black Pioneers, who the

⁴ “An Account of All the Negro Slaves & Melatos both Men & Women as near as I Can find for Shrewsbury,” July 23, 1771, Monmouth County Archives.

British set to digging trenches, building fortifications, and other behind the front tasks.⁵ Alternatively, Titus could also have drifted north towards New York City or south to Philadelphia, hoping to blend into the anonymity of the crowded streets and docks of the larger cities. He might have also laid low in Northern New Jersey for a time, simply hoping that the chaos surrounding a budding Revolution would provide ample distraction to local whites who might otherwise devote more of their energy towards slave catching.

Whatever his path, by 1779, Titus had made good on his master's fear that he might "change his name" and reappears in the historical record as Colonel Tye, with the title of "Colonel" likely bestowed by Black and white Loyalist peers who had obviously grown to respect his leadership. By this time, the north Jersey countryside was embroiled in a full blown civil war, with most Loyalists hewing closer to the British strongholds along the coastline and towards Staten Island and New York City to the north, while Patriots largely controlled the interior mainland. The thin strip of land at Sandy Hook, then an island and much smaller than it is today, proved to be both a safe haven and a crucial base of operations for Black and white Loyalists, collectively called "Refugees" since both had left their original homes (albeit under different circumstances). It is unclear exactly when Colonel Tye arrived at Sandy Hook or how he rose so quickly through the ranks, but by June of 1779 he was elevated to commander of the Black Brigade, an entire unit consisting mostly of runaway slaves committed to wreaking havoc on their former masters amongst the Patriots.⁶

Between 1779 and 1780, Colonel Tye led the Black Brigade and various other squads of Loyalists from their camps on the shores of Sandy Hook on more than a dozen daring raids deep

⁵ For more on the various ways African Americans became involved in the Revolutionary War, see Douglas Egerton, *Death or Liberty: African Americans and Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 65-92.

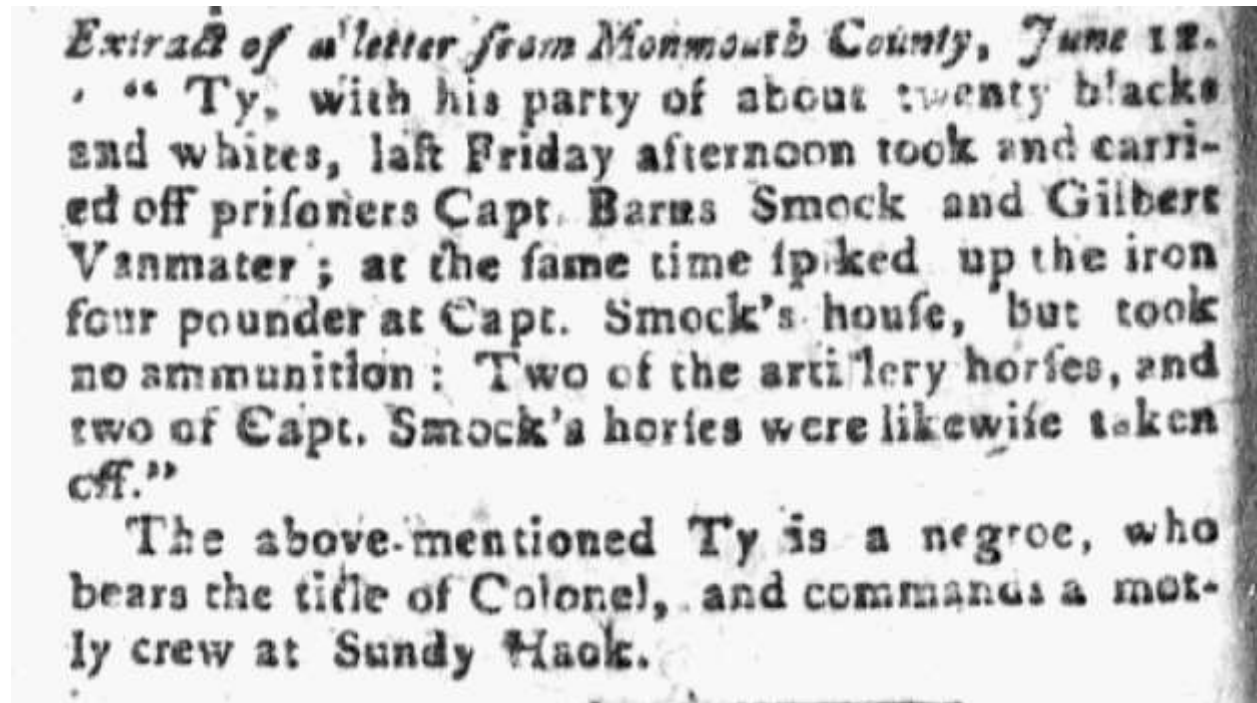
⁶ See especially Michael Adelberg, *The American Revolution in Monmouth County: Theatre of Spoil and Destruction* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2010), Chapter 4.

into Patriot territory across Monmouth County.⁷ With at least the tacit consent of British leadership, Loyalist marauders engaged in a guerilla campaign to harass known Patriots and disrupt the Patriot war effort. On a typical raid, Tye and several dozen fighters might row across from Sandy Hook, quietly sneak ten or twenty miles inland, surprise leading Patriots in their homes, and carry off cattle, weapons, valuables, and even hostages. With booty in hand and an intimate knowledge of the geography of the area from their time in slavery, Tye and his men would then melt into the swamps and deep woods, often stopping to exchange fire with pursuing rebel militias. If all went well, the Black Brigade would ultimately return to the safety of Sandy Hook with goods to sell and captives to ransom.

Documentation for these raids, though never as detailed as we might hope, can reveal some measure of the drama involved in a daring foray into enemy territory. One representative case from June 9, 1780 involved Tye leading a mixed party of about twenty Black and white Loyalists in a surprise attack on the home of Captain Barnes Smock, where several Patriot militia men had gathered. After taking several high value prisoners, including Smock himself, Tye personally “spiked up,” or destroyed, the rebels’ four pound cannon and made away with four horses.⁸

⁷ Rick Geffken, *Stories of Slavery in New Jersey* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2021), 63-37.

⁸ *The Norwich Packet*, June 22, 1780.



The Norwich Packet, June 22, 1780

Tye and his “motley crew” had gained enough notoriety by this point that Patriot higher-ups were starting to take notice. Speaking of the Smock raid in a letter to New Jersey Governor William Livingston, local Patriot commander David Forman lamented that the attack had occurred with the “sun one hour high” and “12 miles from the landings.”⁹ If onetime slaves had grown brazen enough to attack their former masters in the light of day, a full twelve miles away from safety of the boats back to Sandy Hook, then it must certainly be time for Patriot leadership to take them as a serious threat. These kinds of hurried newspaper reports and dashed military communications paint a partial picture of the brutal, back-and-forth nature of the civil war between Loyalists and Patriots in Monmouth County, but still leave us much to wonder about Colonel Tye’s specific choices and motivations.

⁹ David Forman to William Livingston, June 9, 1780, Monmouth County Historical Association, Coll. 60, Box 1, Folder 5.

Monmouth Court House 9th June 80
10 o'clock at Night

Sir

I am desired to Inform your Excellency that we have this morn-
 ing Express that a Party of Negroes about 80 in Number did
 this afternoon attack and take Capt. Davis Smock and
 a small party that were collected at his House for their
 mutual Defence - this was done soon after Hour High
 12 Miles from one of the Landings of 15 Miles from the other

The Day before yesterday Joseph Murray was
 Murdered by a party of these Refugees while he was at
 his Harrow in his Corn Field - this we doubt not will
 be taken in to the acct. of our other numerous detentions
 will induce your Excellency to send your self in establish-
 ing such a guard and will tend to extend in some
 measure the Security of this County - I am in
 behalf of the Inhabitants of the Town

Yours Excellency's Obedt^h Servant
David Forman

N^o 13
 We are this Minute to
 March from this Village of
 shall not leave a single man
 for its defence

David Forman to William Livingston, June 9, 1780, Monmouth County Historical Association, Coll. 60, Box 1, Folder 5

Tye's brief but deeply effective career as a Loyalist raider came to an abrupt end just a few months later. In his most daring incursion yet, Tye and a party of about thirty penetrated fifteen miles inland to Colts Neck, not far from where he had spent his first years on John Corlis's farm. The invaders surrounded a tavern belonging to Patriot Captain Joshua Huddy, who was notorious among Loyalists for his role in the execution of a Loyalist leader several years before. Huddy and his mistress Lucretia Emmons reportedly held off the raiders for a time, but eventually

agreed to be taken prisoner when Tye set fire to the building. As the Black Brigade retreated across the countryside with Huddy in tow, Patriot pursuers caught up just as the invaders were boarding their boats to cross back to Sandy Hook. Local Whig leader Nathaniel Scudder described what happened next in a letter to his son: the rebel “militia waylaid the Enemy on their retreat, and fired on them in their boats with such effect that a considerable number... were killed, and one of their boats upset, in which Captain Huddy happened to be, by which means he made his escape and swam to shore.”¹⁰ Tye took a ball through the wrist in the crossfire and as was so often the case in 18th-century warfare, the initial wound led to a deadly infection. He died of tetanus several weeks later at the age of 26 or 27.

Despite his short years, Colonel Tye managed to cut a relatively wide swath through the documentary record created and preserved by the Patriot society that held him in bondage and that he later terrorized, at least for someone who started life as a slave. We can pinpoint a few specific details about his early years, assuming that Titus the runaway was indeed the same person as Colonel Tye the Black Brigade Commander. We can observe the respect he commanded from his comrades in the title of Colonel and the fear he engendered in his enemies, who unabashedly called him the “brave Negro Tye.”¹¹ All things considered, we may know more about him than virtually any other Black person in Revolutionary era New Jersey, enslaved or free. Yet even this collection of specific records leaves us with an unsettling number of tantalizing, probably unanswerable questions about Tye’s life and experience. What pushed him to take the considerable risk of running away at the age of 21? What did he think of Patriots’ use of the language of liberty and slavery to justify their political quarrel with the British Empire, especially as the human property of one of those Patriots? Why did he choose to align himself with the British Military at Sandy

¹⁰ Nathaniel Scudder to John Scudder, September 11, 1780, New Jersey Historical Society, Nathaniel Scudder Letters.

¹¹ *The Pennsylvania Packet*, October 10, 1780.

Hook? Why did he risk life and limb to aid the British war effort? For revenge against his former masters? For fame and fortune as a successful marauder? For the principle of freedom? Since we cannot and will never hear his own voice, these questions can only be answered with circumstantial evidence, speculation, and much uncertainty.

Back to the initial dilemma of this essay: How then, given the reality of the documentary record, can modern interpreters create a rich, immersive, and historically accurate narrative to capture the attention of today's audiences? The team at Sandy Hook is currently experimenting with two strategies.

The first involves keeping the figure of Colonel Tye at the center of the narrative, but employing the intense human interest inherent in his personal biography as a point of entry into broader stories about the Revolutionary Era in New Jersey. For example, while we know few specific details about Tye's first twenty years on the Corlis farm, we do have a better sense of the general outlines of slavery in New Jersey. We know that most enslaved people were used for agricultural labor and that their freedoms were deeply restricted by slave codes on the books in New Jersey since 1704 and strengthened in the lead-up to the Revolution, especially in slavery reliant Monmouth County.¹² We know that despite the cruelty and inhumanity of the institution, enslaved people still managed to preserve their individual personalities, family ties, cultural traditions, and even resist bondage in a variety of ways whenever possible. In cases where there are few details to fill in the gaps in Tye's personal biography, it might be possible to highlight the Tye-specific documents that do exist as windows into larger conversations about slavery and enslaved people in New Jersey.

¹² Geffken, *Stories of Slavery in New Jersey*, 155; Adelberg, *American Revolution in Monmouth County*, 106-112.

In this way, those precious early documents about young Titus can serve as initial clues to launch future audiences on wide-ranging journeys of discovery. The 1760 will, mentioned above, where the elder John Corlis passes down a six-year Titus and five others to his wife and son might seem somewhat dry and lifeless on its own. But if we use this scrap of paper as a symbol to represent a system where one human could bequeath ownership of other humans, including a six year old child, to his own young children, audiences can begin to appreciate the uncompromising economic exploitation at the heart of slavery. Then perhaps it's possible to bring in other kinds of evidence that demonstrate the same point: bills of sale from slave auctions showing families torn apart, the grisly diagrams demonstrating how to most efficiently pack the suffocating holds of slave ships for the horror of the Middle Passage, signs of malnutrition and overwork written into the bones of remains found in Black burial grounds, to name just a few. We don't know if Titus had a mother, brother, or sister sold away from him during his early life on the Corlis farm, but we can point to plenty of cases where slave masters earned a few more dollars by breaking a family apart.

If the Corlis will and other kinds of ownership documents represent the barbaric and exploitative nature of slavery, the 1775 runaway advertisement might stand in for the myriad ways in which enslaved people maintained their humanity and worked to resist the institution. Titus's single act of defiance can open the door to other stories and evidence about enslaved people who subverted the designs of their masters and the system. Curators at Marlpit Hall in Middletown recently discovered a curious collection of deliberately placed clam shells, corn cobs, and other objects secreted beneath the floorboards of the 18th century house. They suspect these items might represent a "spirit cache," or the remains of West African spiritual traditions that the enslaved residents of Marlpit might have practiced out of the sight of and without permission from their

owners.¹³ Similarly, the monumental archaeological discoveries at the African Burial Ground in nearby Manhattan demonstrate that enslaved people engaged in a wide array of elaborate and spiritually significant rituals when burying their dead.¹⁴ Though neither the will or the runaway ad tell us as much as we'd like to know about Titus, taken together they do encapsulate two of the most fundamental stories of slavery: economic exploitation and resistance. For local audiences used to thinking of slavery as something that happened a long time ago in faraway Mississippi or Alabama, the idea that young people like Titus labored right here in New Jersey as late as 1865 might come as a perspective shifter.

There are several moments in Tye's life, perhaps chapters in an ultimate narrative, where interpreters might follow a similar template, using a single document about Tye as a clue to begin investigations into larger truths about Revolutionary New Jersey. Hurried newspaper accounts of Tye's daring incursions into Monmouth County provide a window into the depths of chaos and turmoil that emerged as Patriots and Loyalists devolved into total war during the worst years of the fighting. Written accountings of items that the Black Brigade carried off in their raids, which sometimes included enslaved people still living on Patriot farms, allow us to speculate about how Tye and others like him might have used their brief position of power to grapple with the institution of slavery itself. While Tye himself remains somewhat mysterious, his story does allow us to ask big questions about the Revolution, even ones that disturb some of our most settled notions. What does it mean to fight for freedom? For Tye, it actually meant fighting against the very Patriots that we usually today celebrate as defenders of liberty. Who held the higher moral ground in the

¹³ Recent discoveries at Marlpit Hall have been featured in the exhibition "Beneath the Floorboards: Whispers of the Enslaved at Marlpit Hall" at the Monmouth County Historical Association.

¹⁴ See for example Joyce Hansen and Gary McGown, *Breaking Ground, Breaking Silence: The Story of New York's African Burial Ground* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998).

Revolution? It seems both sides engaged in the dirty business of civil war. Even through the lens of scarce documents, Tye's remarkable life raises some fundamental questions.

The second strategy under consideration by the Sandy Hook team is simply to embrace the mystery surrounding key moments and decisions in Tye's life. Rather than trying to prescribe what Tye "probably" thought or "most likely" felt, we can invite audiences behind the curtain of the historical process and ask them to evaluate the various possibilities themselves. There is no way to know why Tye went over to the British and then dedicated himself to fighting alongside them, even at the greatest personal risk. We can, however, offer some potential scenarios. Raiding for the British offered at least the promise of freedom, upward mobility, notoriety, revenge, money, as well as other motivations we might not have even thought of yet. Once a viewer puts themselves into Tye's shoes and mulls over what they might do, given the same set of circumstances, the uncertainty inherent in the story almost seems more like a feature than a bug. As much as any good historian loves smoking-gun type evidence to answer the most difficult questions, there's also a kind of intellectual excitement in grappling with ambiguity and contingency of history. Perhaps offering audiences more questions and fewer answers—asking them to confront the incomplete evidence on their own terms—will allow for an even deeper appreciation of Tye. When a viewer puts themselves in Tye's position, they are forced to consider the dangers and obstacles he faced and thus acknowledge the magnitude of his accomplishments.

Though still early in the process, the Sandy Hook team hopes that these interpretive strategies will eventually support a public-facing experience that will do justice to the story of Colonel Tye. Though few in number and often scant in detail, the documents left over from Tye's short life as a slave, a runaway, a guerilla warrior, and a freedom fighter make for compelling

narrative and essential history. Readers of *New Jersey Studies* are invited to Sandy Hook in the next few years to see how and to what extent the history comes to life.

Brett Palfreyman is an Associate Professor of History at Wagner College. He is currently working on a book project about the fate of Loyalists who chose to remain in the independent states after the American Revolution. He is also part of the team preparing an interpretative plan for a public-facing storytelling project about Colonel Tye at Sandy Hook, New Jersey.