

Damaged by the War: An Examination of a Loyalist Woman Living in Patriarchal and Revolutionary America

Charles Sorge

Introduction

Until the middle of the 19th century, loyalist scholarship was nonexistent because of a “persistent unwillingness to recognize a painful aspect of our early national development.”¹ Early revolutionary scholarship paid little attention to loyalists because they were considered traitors and a national enemy. Once historians began to look at the group, their works “downplayed the diversity and potential of loyalists.”² In more recent decades, however, historians have begun to look more into the loyalists and the role they played throughout the conflict, as well as their impact following it. Historians have analyzed loyalist thought and action both on an individual and group level, and the amount of literature available on loyalists has increased significantly in recent years. Historians, however have largely neglected the wives, sisters, and mothers of loyalists.

This paper serves as a microhistory to tell the story of Sarah Dering Thomas, a conventional loyalist woman from a small town thirty miles south of Boston. Sarah was the sister of Thomas Dering, a New York congressman and ardent patriot. He had two sons, Henry and Sylvester, who both served in patriot militias and the Continental Army. Sarah, however, was married to Nathaniel Ray Thomas, a prominent loyalist who lived in Marshfield, Massachusetts. Nathaniel was a Harvard graduate, farmer, and politician. The Thomas family owned a large estate in Marshfield and played a prominent role in colonial Massachusetts’ social and political society. Prior to the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, King George appointed Nathaniel to the Council Board of the Province,

¹Robert A. East, *The Loyalist Americans: a Focus On Greater New York*. (Tarrytown, NY: Sleepy Hollow Restorations, 1975), xi.

²Ruma Chopra, *Choosing Sides: Loyalists in Revolutionary America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, Publishers Inc., 2013), 2.

otherwise and more famously known as the “Mandamus Council.” The council was given the insurmountable responsibility of maintaining royal control over New England following the Boston Tea Party and institution of the Intolerable Acts.³ Thus, distinct ideological differences were present between Sarah’s biological family and the Thomas family she married into. Further, as the wife of a prominent loyalist, Sarah was a target within the war-torn colony of Massachusetts, and her status as a woman provided her with little to no legal power.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the wartime and postwar experiences of Sarah in order to determine her place within the historical arguments concerning the characteristics of loyalist women. To accomplish this, her letters from before, during, and after the war will be examined and compared to other loyalist women.⁴ Although Sarah is only one woman, no other scholarly works have looked solely at the personal materials of one loyalist woman and explored their experiences within the larger topic of the American Revolution. Rather, historians have made broad interpretations about the population of loyalist women based on many small samples. This paper will do the opposite by looking at the writings of one woman in detail. Scholars have not previously studied the letters of Sarah Dering Thomas, and so this paper serves to bring her experiences to light and show how the Revolutionary War impacted her life in ways that persisted until her death.

Pre-revolutionary American society, and the world Sarah Dering Thomas lived in, was defined by a strict patriarchy that determined the roles of both patriot and loyalist women.⁵ The doctrine of coverture prevented women from owning property, and women had few legal rights.⁶ Women were not eligible to vote because of the notion that they were “incapable of making reasoned and unbiased political judgments.”⁷ Therefore, women were expected to remain in their homes and perform domestic and familial duties, and “dependence and passivity [was] associated with femininity.”⁸ Up until and throughout the Revolutionary War, both patriot and loyalist women lived in this society, but loyalist women faced an additional challenge—the constant threat of patriot hostility. Loyalist women were

³ Massachusetts Historical Society, *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*. Vol. X (Boston: The Society, 1887), 165.

⁴ Sarah Dering Thomas’s letters are held in the Dering Family Papers collection in the William Clements Library in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The collection holds letters from various family members throughout the roughly one hundred-year timeframe from 1750 to 1850. For the purposes of this paper, however, only Sarah’s letters will be examined.

⁵ Janice Potter-MacKinnon, *While the Women Only Wept: Loyalist Refugee Women* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1993), 8.

⁶ Potter-MacKinnon, *While the Women Only Wept*, 7.

⁷ Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect And Ideology In Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 36.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

threatened by patriot aggressions such as tar and feathering, confiscation of property, and even murder, similarly to their male counterparts.⁹

Historiography

Previous historians have identified and examined loyalist women in their works, although briefly and usually within a larger work examining other topics about the loyalist community. For example, the two most recent loyalist studies are from scholars Ruma Chopra and Maya Jasanoff, who each provide some insight into the experiences of loyalist women. Chopra's work is centered on primary documents chronicling the stories of different populations of loyalists during and after the Revolutionary War.¹⁰ One of her chapters is dedicated to the letters and other primary materials of loyalist women in an attempt to portray how the war and their loyalist beliefs affected their ways of life. Jasanoff's purpose is to explore how the mass loyalist exile affected the policy, culture, and other facets of the places—namely, Canada and the Caribbean—that they fled to.¹¹

Other works have also addressed the female loyalist experience on a broad scale. Kierner focuses on the claims petitions submitted by southern loyalist women asking to receive permission to return to their homes.¹² Potter-MacKinnon's work follows loyalist women and families into Canada and depicts how they struggled with keeping their families together during this time.¹³ This text focuses on general trends within the female loyalist community, and pays particular attention to loyalists from the frontiers of the colonies and barely mentions loyalists within urban areas. Norling and Chambers' essay compares the stories of two women, one in Massachusetts and one in Venezuela, and argues that their experiences act as evidence that loyalist women actively rejected the influence of growing republicanism and remained loyal to their colonial roots.¹⁴ Judith Van Buskirk's article explores the experiences of Quaker loyalist women in Philadelphia during the Revolutionary War and examines two women specifically: Sarah Logan Fisher and Elizabeth Drinker. Van Buskirk explores their diaries and correspondence in order to determine how they were affected by the war and whether their Quaker beliefs played any role in

⁹ William S. Wallace, *The United Empire Loyalists: A Chronicle of the Great Migration*. (Boston: Gregg Press, 1972), 26.

¹⁰ Chopra, *Choosing Sides*.

¹¹ Maya Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles: American Loyalists In the Revolutionary World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011).

¹² Cynthia A Kierner, *Southern Women in Revolution, 1776-1800: Personal and Political Narratives* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1998).

¹³ Potter-MacKinnon, *While the Women Only Wept*.

¹⁴ Sarah C. Chambers and Lisa Norling, "Choosing to Be a Subject: Loyalist Women in the Revolutionary Atlantic World," *Journal of Women's History* 20, no. 1 (2008): 39-62.

how their lives transpired.¹⁵

Among the highest regarded and well-known works on loyalist women is Mary Beth Norton's 1976 article, "Eighteenth Century American in Peace and War: The Case of the Loyalists."¹⁶ Norton's article examines the 468 loyalist claims petitions that were submitted by women following the Revolutionary War. These petitions filed with the British government were meant to document the property, assets, and other things loyalists lost as a result of the war in order to receive some sort of compensation or replacement. Norton researched the claims in order to learn about the loyalist "female experience" throughout this period.¹⁷ Although Norton's article was published in 1976, it remains one of the few studies that focus solely on loyalist women. Following her close study of the claims and interpretation of the lives and qualities of the women who filed those claims independently, she concludes that loyalist women "were incapable of helping themselves" and that the population of loyalist women was "almost wholly domestic."¹⁸ She cites the frequent times the women appeared unaware of their estate or home's value or their husband's occupation. Also, she cites their consistent references to themselves as "helpless" or other such terms, something Norton argues creates a sense of perceived inferiority and timidity.¹⁹ The women that Norton studied, along with her arguments and those of other historians, will be used as a tool for comparison to Sarah Dering Thomas in order to see if Sarah sways from or is in line with these ideas. These other works show that while historians have not outrightly ignored loyalist women, there are significant gaps in the historiography. The letters of Sarah Dering Thomas represent an opportunity to look closely at one woman's experiences and to learn what daily life was like for a loyalist woman living alone in a country that considered her a traitor.

Before the Rebellion

Sarah wrote her first letter in 1755, twenty years prior to the Revolution, during the French and Indian War. During this time, she sent most of her letters to her brother Thomas Dering. The letters written by Sarah prior to the war exemplify the role of women and the patriarchal nature of colonial society by showing a narrow focus on areas commonly

¹⁵ Judith Van Buskirk, "They Didn't Join the Band: Disaffected Women in Revolutionary Philadelphia," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 62, no. 3, (Summer 1995): 306-329.

¹⁶ Mary Beth Norton, "Eighteenth-Century American Women in Peace and War: The Case of the Loyalists," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (July 1976): 386-409.

¹⁷ Norton, "Eighteenth-Century American Women," 387, 389.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 408, 409.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 408.

associated with women.

In a letter to her brother dated November 27, 1755, Sarah conveyed how important religion and the health of her family were in her life. Sarah discussed an earthquake that had occurred on November 18, which is considered to be the most significant in the region's history, causing a great deal of damage from Nova Scotia to the Chesapeake Bay.²⁰ Sarah praised "the almighty God for his great goods to us in protecting us in such an awful time of danger."²¹ She concluded her letter by wishing to see her brother soon, but she left the possibility open that she would never see him again.²² Perhaps this was due to the distance between them or one of them having poor health, making a visit difficult. Nevertheless, this early letter serves as an example of a typical correspondence from Sarah. She placed a priority on discussing family matters and did not raise issues such as politics or events outside of her immediate family, illustrating the idea that Sarah, similar to other colonial women, lacked a voice in non-womanly matters.

Tensions began to rise between the siblings in a later letter from Sarah to Thomas. Sarah appears to be responding to a letter in which her brother accused her and Nathaniel, her husband, of a wrongdoing relating to the wealth accumulated from their late father's estate. Most likely, Thomas Dering accused Sarah and Nathaniel of taking more than their share. However, Sarah stressed "no other thing upon the earth has passed between Mr. Thomas, me, with you, that you could have probably taken offence at."²³ Throughout the letter Sarah defended her husband and accused Thomas of unjust blame for the issue at hand.²⁴ Sarah's priority though, remained the wellbeing of her relationship with her brother and family, which is expressed through quotes such as:

I have often said it and do now that I [sinsearly] wish from my very soul that I had never had the least prospect of receiving one [penney] from my father's [estate], and then would hope there had bin nothing [elce] to have [maide] this unhappy jar between two friends so nearly [allyed], to me as

²⁰ Jeremy Miller, "Boston's Earthquake Problem," *Boston Globe*, May 28, 2006, accessed March 31, 2015, http://www.boston.com/news/globe/magazine/articles/2006/05/28/bostons_earthquake_problem/?page=full.

²¹ Sarah Dering Thomas to Thomas Dering, Marshfield, November 27, 1755. *The Dering Family Papers*. (William L. Clements Library, University Of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan), Box 1, Folder 4 (Hereafter SD1).

²² Ibid.

²³ SD1 to Thomas Dering, Marshfield, July 17, 1757. *The Dering Family Papers*, Box 1, Folder 4.

²⁴ SD1 to Thomas Dering, Marshfield, July 27, 1763. *The Dering Family Papers*, Box 1, Folder 6.

you and Mr. Thomas are.^{25,26}

Despite the issues in her relationship with her brother, Sarah maintained her desire to remain close with him, which demonstrates her dedication to her family. Colonial women were known to prioritize a close support system of family and friends, and this letter shows that Sarah was no exception.²⁷ This is also evident in other prewar letters from Sarah.

Sarah began a 1763 letter to Thomas by recalling that she had not heard from her brother in a while and explaining that she had contracted a disease in her liver and was unsure if she would live much longer.²⁸ Sarah spent the remaining duration of the letter providing her brother with recent news within the family and an outlook of the year's harvest. Her tone communicated a sense of despair that she had not heard from her brother. Sarah ended the letter by saying, "I would conclude with the assurance of remaining your affectionate sister," signaling a potential rift in their relationship.²⁹ Perhaps the increasing tensions within the colonies, the families' ideological differences, or Thomas and Sarah's altercation from the previous letter were contributing factors to this.

Within her letters, Sarah also showed that she was unaware of many facets of Nathaniel's life and business dealings. This is primarily conveyed in a 1756 letter to Thomas, in which she said, "Mr. Thomas is gone into the woods and our Irish men have at this moment told me they are going aboard."³⁰ Ambiguity protrudes from Sarah's statements. She provided no clarity regarding who the Irish men were or what going "aboard" meant, but perhaps Sarah did not know either and instead was repeating what the Irish men told her. The men she referred to were most likely indentured servants. The Thomas family was very wealthy and lived on a large estate, and such servants were common in New England.³¹ In another letter from the same year, Sarah wrote to Thomas informing him that "Mr. (Nathaniel Ray) Thomas thinks his business will not admit of his leaving home till April," but she provided no information as to what his business was or why specifically he could not visit.³² Sarah, perhaps, also did not know why his business prevented a visit, and was instead simply relaying information.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Bracketed words indicate misspelled words from the original text.

²⁷ T Potter-MacKinnon, 6; Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, 72.

²⁸ SDT to Thomas Dering, Marshfield, July 27, 1763.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ SDT to Thomas Dering, Marshfield, January 16, 1756. *The Dering Letters*, eds. Edward Shillingburg and Patricia Shillingburg, (Shelter Island Heights, NY: Cedar Grove Press, 2015).

³¹ Mary Beth Norton and Jane Kamensky, *A People and Nation: A History of the United States, Volume I to 1877*, 10th Ed. (Boston: Wadsworth Publishing, 2014), 45.

³² Sarah Dering Thomas to Thomas Dering, Marshfield, January 20, 1756. *The Dering Letters*.

An important distinction to make regarding Sarah's prewar letters is the lack of mention of politics or colonial conflict. For a woman whose husband and brother were both involved in politics, this is even more striking. Instead, she focused on her family; maintaining a healthy relationship with them remained paramount as did the importance of God and religion. Sarah's letters convey the idea that she was displaced from the realm of politics or other matters that men were typically associated with in society.³³ In many ways, Sarah's prewar letters run parallel to what traditional scholarship has attributed to women in colonial society, and therefore establishes the prevalence of patriarchy and dependence on others in Sarah's life. Particularly, Sarah displayed the qualities consistent with Norton's attribution of loyalist women. This idea will be even clearer after examining Sarah's wartime letters.

Amidst the Revolution

Progressing into the years just before and during the Revolutionary War, the letters Sarah wrote changed in mood and purpose. Overall, they displayed a more desperate attitude and revealed the difficulties Sarah faced and how she dealt with them. Further, they also portrayed Sarah's expanded role within her family and the new responsibilities she was forced to take up. Most of the letters during this time were to her nephew Sylvester Dering, a Boston merchant and member of the state militia. It is important to note that in 1775, Sarah's husband Nathaniel fled from their Marshfield, Massachusetts home to London.³⁴

Nathaniel's departure was in part due to a patriot mob, said to number two thousand, that marched to Marshfield holding an empty coffin to coerce him to abandon his post on the Mandamus Council. Neighbors tipped off Nathaniel, and he fled Marshfield for Boston by horseback. Nathaniel's appointment to the council made him a target for the patriots, and threatened not only his life but also that of his family. Whether the mob intended to torture or kill him is not known, but the event shows how the patriots viewed Nathaniel as an enemy towards their cause, as well as the effects Nathaniel's loyalism had on Sarah's life.

Therefore, during the time of her wartime letters, Sarah and her children were living on their Marshfield estate without Nathaniel. Why, however, did Sarah and the rest of their family not follow him? One possible explanation is that if the entire family had left, then patriots and other colonists would have confiscated their land and possessions, which

³³ Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 35.

³⁴ Massachusetts Historical Society, *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 165.

occurred at a high frequency throughout the colonies.³⁵ Therefore, Sarah was forced to remain in Marshfield.

Despite her husband's absence, Sarah was not safe from patriot aggression. While women were traditionally not allowed to express their own political views, they were commonly associated with the views of their husband.³⁶ Thus, patriots often threatened loyalist women even if their husbands were away from the home.³⁷ Sarah was most likely in the same situation as other loyalist women, and may have faced more pressure due to Nathaniel's reputation. However, Sarah did not mention this or other political matters in her letters. Instead, she remained focused on her family and what they needed to survive.

Many of Sarah's wartime letters revealed unique challenges she faced due to her loyalist ties. In a letter from September of 1777 to her nephew Sylvester, she asked something that was "greatly against her inclination" and that she had "resolved never to do."³⁸ Her request was for her nephew to send her "two pair of white hid [sic] mittens and one pair of gloves."³⁹ The difficulty for Sarah to make such a request is interesting because it seems so minimal in today's standard. When considering that the Thomas family was among the wealthiest in their town and in Massachusetts, it strengthens the notion that Sarah was unable to receive or purchase certain goods due to her family's loyalist ideology.⁴⁰ This idea is enhanced in a 1782 letter to her brother Thomas, in which Sarah mentioned that she had items that had been seized and she did not believe they would ever be made available to her again.⁴¹ Also, Sarah's communication with her family appears to have been restricted during the war. In her 1777 letter, Sarah asked her nephew if he would be willing to forward a letter to her father that she had written for him, which implies that the patriots blocked her ability to send letters or that Sarah was fearful of patriot inspection.⁴²

The difficulties Sarah described may have been common among loyalist women, or perhaps Nathaniel's reputation among the patriots made life uniquely more difficult for Sarah. Nathaniel was one of the top targets of the patriots due to his position on the Mandamus Council. Following his exile, it is possible that the patriots specifically targeted Sarah in the ways that she described: confiscating goods meant for her, restricting her

³⁵ David E. Maas, "The Massachusetts Loyalists and the Problem of Amnesty, 1775-1790" in Robert M. Calhoun, *Loyalists And Community In North America*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 71.

³⁶ Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 9.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ SDT to Sylvester Dering, Marshfield, September 20, 1777. *The Dering Family Papers*, Box 1, Folder 7.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Massachusetts Historical Society, *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 165.

⁴¹ SDT to Thomas Dering, Marshfield, November, 12, 1782. *The Dering Letters*.

⁴² SDT to Sylvester Dering, Marshfield, September 20, 1777. *The Dering Letters*.

purchase of goods, and intercepting her correspondence. Nevertheless, these challenges must have made Sarah's time living alone much more difficult.

Whether or not the patriots specifically targeted Sarah, history shows that thousands of loyalists were negatively affected by the war and the actions of the patriots. Following the passing of the Declaration of Independence the Continental Congress passed the test laws, which "compelled every one to abjure allegiance to the British crown, and swear allegiance to the state in which he resided."⁴³ Loyalists who did not abide by the law "became liable to imprisonment, confiscation of property, banishment, and even death."⁴⁴ Additionally, Massachusetts was a heavily patriot colony where many historic events occurred, such as the Boston Tea Party and Battle of Bunker Hill.⁴⁵ Further, Massachusetts was one of the first colonies the patriots controlled during the war following the British evacuation of Boston in March of 1776.⁴⁶ Therefore, known loyalists in the state were often taxed double or triple the amount non-loyalists were taxed.⁴⁷ Considering that Sarah was living in Massachusetts without her husband, it makes sense that she may have struggled to afford the items she requested from her nephew because of a possible loss in income and increased taxes. She could have also been barred from purchasing any goods through local laws or even unofficially due to patriot threats.

Sarah's other letters to Sylvester showed that she still prioritized her network of family members and her communication with them. In each of the letters, she asked for further information regarding her family and asked her nephew if he could forward messages to other family members. In a letter from 1780, Sarah admitted that she longed for "the private satisfaction of a letter from New York" and wrote, "it seems as though my friends were all dead."⁴⁸ Evidence such as this further suggests that Sarah and her family were cut off from further communication and signifies Sarah's intense desire to communicate with others. Sarah concluded the letter by expressing her happiness that her family was in good health, and that the end of winter was reason to celebrate and thank the Lord for his protection.⁴⁹

Religion was another important part of Sarah's life. Throughout her letters she showed her faith in God's will. For instance, in her October 14, 1775 letter to Thomas she wrote, "I have reson [sic] to bless a kinde

⁴³ Wallace, *United Empire Loyalists*, 26.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Potter, *The Liberty We Seek*, 64.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Wallace, *United Empire Loyalists*, 29.

⁴⁸ SDT to Sylvester Dering, Marshfield, February 20, 1780. *The Dering Family Papers*, Box 1, Folder 8.

⁴⁹ SDT to Sylvester Dering, Marshfield, February 20, 1780. *The Dering Family Papers*, Box 1, Folder 8.

[sic] Providence who has protected and provided for me.”⁵⁰ Sarah expressed her belief and faith in God, showing she was confident that God determined her path and future. Sarah's belief in God's will continued in an April 23, 1782, letter where she wrote, “I hope I have a just sense of God's goodness in sparing your threatened life and raising you to such a measure of health as to be able to let me hear it from your own pen.”⁵¹ Sarah's faith in God's will and his determination of one's fate also possibly contributed to her passivity.

Sarah's letters depicted the challenges that both loyalist and patriot women faced during the war. Sarah responded to these challenges by assuming the role as head of the family and assuring her family had the proper provisions to remain safe and healthy. Nevertheless, Sarah seemed to hold onto traditional feminine views of herself and her role in society. She did not ask about events regarding the war and did not mention the effects her loyalist beliefs had on her lifestyle. Her dependence on communication with her family in the prewar period continued throughout the war as well. Religion showed itself to be a larger presence in her life during the war, or perhaps Sarah had more reason to discuss religion considering the violence occurring around her and the challenges the war brought. Despite this, Sarah appeared comfortable in Marshfield, especially when compared to how she struggled to adjust to life in Canada after the war was over.

Despair in Nova Scotia

Following the war, loyalists across the colonies faced many challenges. In her letters, however, Sarah placed more emphasis on her personal issues and struggles, which were a consequence of the dependencies she held in life. Sarah's postwar letters ranged from 1784 to 1791 and were sent from Nova Scotia, where Sarah and Nathaniel moved from Marshfield and London, respectively. In 1787, however, Nathaniel died, and Sarah was therefore alone in her new home during the time when many of these letters were written.⁵²

Settling in Nova Scotia was extremely challenging for the loyalists who fled there. At first, many loyalists saw Nova Scotia as a chance to create a new society, much like the Puritans and other early settlers saw the British colonies in the seventeenth century.⁵³ The loyalists' experiences in Nova Scotia, however, were not as positive as they had expected. Firstly, there was a strong sense of distrust among the loyalists. Coming from a place where loyalists had been villainized by their neighbors and perhaps former friends,

⁵⁰ SDT to Thomas Dering, Marshfield, October 14, 1775. *The Dering Family Papers*, Box 1, Folder 7.

⁵¹ SDT to Thomas Dering, Marshfield, April 23, 1782. *The Dering Letters*.

⁵² Massachusetts Historical Society, *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 166.

⁵³ Potter-MacKinnon, *While the Women Only Wept*, 201.

“what the loyalist feared and distrusted most was another loyalist.”⁵⁴ The lack of trust loyalists held towards each other resulted in conflict regarding property claims and other civil matters, and local governance was often contested due to small groups vying for power.⁵⁵ Other factors hurt loyalists as well. Within the first year of settlement, it became apparent that the area was not suitable for the twenty thousand individuals who settled there, and the land was not conducive to farming.⁵⁶ Women also experienced extensive difficulties in their new homes. Due to their lack of power, women were dependent on their husbands for survival.⁵⁷ For Sarah and other widowed women who lost their husbands in the war, however, poverty, starvation, and breakdown were common.⁵⁸ Without their husbands, these women were dependent on the government to provide them support, but few if any received it.

In her letters, Sarah did not focus on the common challenges loyalists faced in Nova Scotia, though, and instead emphasized her emotional struggles while living in exile. Her struggles and hesitancy were even apparent prior to her departure from Marshfield. In her final letter before leaving, Sarah told Thomas, “I have been to take my leave of Boston this fall for I find the disposition of the people is such that Mr. T can never return here.”⁵⁹ She went on to say that she had to submit to “the will of Providence ... and prepare to meet him.”⁶⁰ Sarah’s letter did not evoke positive feelings about the move but instead portrayed her nervousness. In writing “I have been to take my leave” Sarah showed that she was forced to move and that she had little choice in the matter. It’s likely that Sarah felt anxious about leaving Marshfield for the first time in perhaps thirty years. This letter also showed that the family’s move to Nova Scotia was due to Nathaniel’s reputation among the patriots. Sarah acknowledged that if he had attempted to return home, they would have been vulnerable to patriot violence.

A 1784 letter from Sarah to her sister Mary brought up important topics that bear resemblance to similar issues and topics Sarah’s prewar letters focused on. Sarah expressed her sadness regarding leaving Marshfield and the friends she had there. Later in the letter she referred to America as a “naïve” place and acknowledged that she was “condemned” there.⁶¹ Further, while there were intense political and societal issues surrounding Sarah in Nova Scotia, the biggest issue according to her was the lack

⁵⁴ Ibid., 202.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 203.

⁵⁶ Potter-MacKinnon, *While the Women Only Wept*, 209.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 107.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 107.

⁵⁹ SDT to Thomas Dering, Marshfield, December 2, 1783. *The Dering Letters*.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ SDT to Thomas Dering, Marshfield, December 2, 1783. *The Dering Letters*.

of a religious foundation near her home.⁶² There was only one church in Nova Scotia, which was disappointing for Sarah. She expressed this disappointment in her letter, writing, “Dissenting Ministers take their turn to preach every other Sabbath. But I am sorry to say, I hear [they] are neither of them the best moral [character]. And when our Teacher do not live up to what [they] profess, [they] soon useless.”^{63,64} This passage revealed Sarah’s chief concerns and thus her main priorities while living in her new home. Sarah later expressed her regret that she would most likely not see her sister again, but she hoped that they would “at least meet in heaven.”⁶⁵ This 1784 letter alludes to Sarah’s deepening depression as time passed in Nova Scotia.

In a later letter to her sister, Sarah continued to lament her situation. The tone of this letter, however, was much darker. The letter began by Sarah remembering her friends from Boston and how she had to bury them years ago.⁶⁶ Sarah continued to discuss how much she missed her sister and that she felt “alone in this world... without a partner to comfort me in all my afflictions.”⁶⁷ A sense of dependence on others was portrayed in quotes such as this, which was common among other loyalist women living in exile.⁶⁸ Loyalist women, and particularly those who were widowed, were dependent on others in Nova Scotia because many of them did not know how to support themselves.⁶⁹ Sarah concluded the letter by telling her sister that the only consolation for her pain was that she was ready and willing to meet God in heaven.⁷⁰ This letter revealed Sarah in intense emotional pain. During and after the war Sarah was without her husband, but while living in Canada she was also without her support system of friends and family. In addition to the emotional pain Sarah underwent while mourning the many losses in her life, the isolation she experienced negatively impacted her psychological wellbeing as well. Sarah’s loneliness seemingly overwhelmed her in her later years and made it difficult for her to find a purpose in life.

Conclusion

Sarah Thomas’ letters provide an important glimpse into the life of loyalist women. Her letters also revealed that she mostly fit in line with

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Bracketed words indicate misspelled words from the original text.

⁶⁵ SDT to Mary Dering, Marshfield, July 30, 1784. *The Dering Family Papers*, Box 1, Folder 9.

⁶⁶ SDT to Mary Dering, Nova Scotia, August 29, 1790. *The Dering Family Papers*, Box 1, Folder 9.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Potter-MacKinnon, *While the Women Only Wept*, 107.

⁶⁹ Potter-MacKinnon, *While the Women Only Wept*, 107.

⁷⁰ SDT to Mary Dering, Nova Scotia, August 39, 1790.

what historians have argued regarding the personal characteristics of loyalist women. It can be inferred that prior to and during the Revolutionary War, Sarah shared many similarities with other colonial women. For instance, she represented a motherly figure in her prewar letters who did not discuss political or societal topics that her husband and brother most likely discussed frequently. Further, she cherished communicating with her family and did not show any desire for an enhanced role or voice in her life. During the war, Sarah appeared to have taken up additional responsibility in her home out of necessity, but she also displayed the same dependencies that were common prior to the war. The challenges associated with loyalism are clear throughout her wartime letters, such as the confiscation of her goods and inspection of her letters. Sarah's postwar letters displayed the war's effects on her family and herself, and portrayed her falling into despair regarding her situation. Sarah was mentally and emotionally wounded by her forced exile and loss of correspondence with her family.

Sarah's unhappiness and despair raises the question, why did she not return to Marshfield following Nathaniel's passing when she evidently was not happy in Nova Scotia? Hundreds of Massachusetts's loyalists returned to their homes following the war, and therefore the possibility existed for Sarah following Nathaniel's passing.⁷¹ Sarah showed signs of passivity and dependence throughout her letters, and therefore perhaps she may have been unwilling to undertake such responsibilities alone. Another possibility is that she knew Nathaniel's reputation and legacy in America would have made establishing herself peacefully in the newly created United States difficult. Nathaniel was a clear target for the patriots during the war, and since political ideologies usually spread to men's wives in the colonial era, the Americans may have associated Sarah with Nathaniel for the rest of her life.

The patriarchal nature of American colonial society is well known and has been extensively studied by historians. Husbands largely controlled households and dictated many facets of their wives' lives. This paper has also shown, at least in the case of Sarah Dering Thomas, that even in their absence during the Revolutionary Era, men still had a significant effect on their wives' lives. Sarah lived independent of Nathaniel for many of her adult years, but his loyalist ties and actions continued to affect her life. While in Marshfield, Sarah was unable to send letters to her family members or purchase necessary items without the aid of her patriot nephew. Throughout her letters, Sarah emphasized how much visits from friends and family meant to her, but during the war she refused a visit from her son due to the dangers associated with her known loyalist ties. Sarah's move to Nova Scotia, though necessary due to Nathaniel's ideology, did not excite her and later caused her a great deal of psychological and physical damage.

⁷¹ Stephanie Kermes, "I Wish for Nothing More Ardentlly Upon Earth, Than to See my Friends and Country Again": The Return of Massachusetts Loyalists," *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* 30, no.1 (Winter 2002): 30-49, 36.

All of these consequences resulted from Nathaniel's loyalist ties – not once did Sarah reference her own political beliefs. Had Sarah married a patriot, her life would have most likely been very different. Nevertheless, Sarah's marriage to Nathaniel Ray Thomas determined her fate.

The case of Sarah Dering Thomas most likely falls in line with many, perhaps most, loyalist women. Sarah displayed a passive and dependent nature similar to Mary Beth Norton's arguments on loyalist women, and the challenges Sarah faced fall in line with what loyalist historians have discovered about loyalists living in America and in exile during the Revolutionary Era. What this microhistory illustrates, however are the personal consequences and reactions of a loyalist woman during this time. Sarah's letters indicated the many ways in which her life was permanently altered by the American Revolution and her loyalist ties, both of which were out of her control. Her experiences were common among other loyalist women, who were expected to follow the leads of their husbands without question.

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