

BEN FRANKLIN'S WORLD

Episode 455: Sarah Henry and Blake McGready, "The Occupied City: New York and the American Revolution"

[00:01:00] Liz Covart: *Ben Franklin's World* is a production of Clio Digital Media.

[00:01:05] Sarah Henry: As the ships begin to amass in New York Harbor, and it starts in late June, early July of 1776, there are hundreds of ships and boats amassed in the waters. And you could see them from the shores of lower Manhattan or from the village of Brooklyn.

And famously, one observer said "it looked as if all of London were afloat." It was considered to be a sea of masts. It was the largest amphibious invasion in human history up till, I think, World War I or even to World War II.

So it's like nothing anybody had ever seen. And that is part of what we're trying to get people when they first enter the exhibition to imagine themselves. Because whether you had taken sides in this dispute or not, you were in the sights of this vast military force.

[00:02:06] Liz Covart: Hello, and welcome to episode 455 of *Ben Franklin's World*, the podcast dedicated to helping you learn more about how the people and events of our early American past have shaped the present-day world we live in. And I'm your host, Liz Covart.

In late August 1776, Hugh Hughes, a quartermaster in the Continental Army faced an urgent task. He needed to gather enough boats to carry George Washington and his army across the East River from Brooklyn to Manhattan. The British Army had just defeated the Continental Army at the Battle of Brooklyn, also known as the Battle of Long Island, and Washington's soldiers were completely surrounded.

With the help of Hughes and mariners like Manuel Soto and John Glover of Marblehead, Massachusetts, Washington's army made an improbable escape. But their escape did not save New York City from falling into British hands.

We often tell the New York campaign of 1776 as a military story, a string of Continental Army defeats that ran from Brooklyn in late August, to the fall of Fort Washington on the northern tip of Manhattan in November. But for many New Yorkers, the pressing question was not which army would win their city, it was how they would survive an occupation that began many months before the British arrived.



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In our last episode, we explored the 250th anniversary of the Battle of White Plains and the neutral ground, or no man's land, that formed in Westchester County during the War for American Independence. Today, we're going to explore the 1776 New York campaign and the seven years of British occupation that followed it through a new exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York.

It helps to know that New York City looked very different in 1776 than it does today. What revolutionaries called “the town” sat entirely below present-day City Hall Park on the southern tip of Manhattan. About twenty-five thousand people lived there, which made New York one of the largest cities in British North America.

Now, the British Army had a strong presence in New York City long before the war, with barracks at the town's northern edge and Fort George at its southern tip, near what is today Battery Park. Sarah Henry, the chief curator emerita of the Museum of the City of New York, and Blake McGready, a recent PhD graduate at the Graduate Center at the City University of New York, joins us to discuss this history through the Museum of the City of New York's new exhibition, *The Occupied City: New York and the American Revolution*.

Now during our exploration of the occupied city Sarah and Blake reveal how the occupation of New York City began not with British warships, but with the arrival of the Continental Army in the spring of 1776; how the British struggled to keep and win the loyalty of the people in New York City, the people they protected as they enacted martial law; and how roughly ten thousand people sought freedom from behind British lines in New York City by self-emancipating or running away from their enslavers, and how and why their fate became a sticking point between George Washington and Sir Guy Carleton in 1783.

But first, I need your help. I'm planning what *Ben Franklin's World* and its nonprofit parent organization, Clio Digital Media, will offer in 2027. And I really want to build our 2027 offerings around what you care about most. So I put together a short listener survey. It takes just three to four minutes to complete, and most of the questions can be answered with just a click.

Now, your answers will help me decide which events, programs, and episodes to create and which sponsors to invite to support our show. More than 150 of you have already shared your thoughts, and I read every response. So please join them. Take our survey at

benfranklinsworld.com/survey. That's benfranklinsworld.com/survey. All right. Are you ready to investigate the 1776 campaign for New York? Let's go meet our guest historians.

Today, we welcome two guests. Sarah Henry is the Chief Curator Emerita at the Museum of the City of New York. She spent twenty-five years at the museum, where she served as Deputy Director and Chief Curator, Interim Director, Senior Scholar, and now Chief Curator Emerita. Among the many projects she curated for the Museum of the City of New York is its *The Occupied City: New York and the American Revolution* exhibition.

Blake McGready is a recent PhD graduate from the Graduate Center at the City University of New York. His dissertation is titled *Making Nature's Nation: The Revolutionary War and Environmental Interdependence in New York, 1775 to 1783*. Blake's received numerous fellowships for his research, including fellowships from the Massachusetts Historical Society, the Society of the Cincinnati, and the William L. Clements Library at the University of Michigan. Alongside Sarah, Blake served as the associate curator for the exhibition, *The Occupied City: New York and the American Revolution*, which is on view at the Museum of the City of New York through March 19, 2027.

Welcome to *Ben Franklin's World*, Sarah Henry and Blake McGready.

[00:07:20] Sarah Henry: Thank you so much. I'm thrilled to be here. It's good to see you, Blake. We worked for a long time, a couple of years on this show, along with Peter-Christian Aigner, who's the director of the Gotham Center for New York City History at CUNY Graduate Center and was the co-director and co-curator of this.

[00:07:36] Blake McGready: Yeah, thanks for having us, Liz. I'm looking forward to the discussion.

[00:07:40] Liz Covart: Now, before we dive into *The Occupied City exhibition*, let's talk a bit about the British occupation of New York. So after the British evacuated Boston on March 17, 1776, they continued planning their 1776 campaign season. And it seemed that British General William Howe and his superiors in London were really focused on what the British Army could do in New York City, Westchester County, and Long Island.

Sarah and Blake, would you tell us why the British were so keen to bring Long Island, New York City, and Westchester County under their control in 1776?

[00:08:15] Sarah Henry: New York was strategically really important. When you think about the colonies that were rebelling and what was going on in Massachusetts, and then what was going down the eastern seaboard, if you could get New York, you could sever Massachusetts from the folks in Virginia and Pennsylvania and the rest. And you got control of a really important strategic waterway, the Hudson River.

And actually, when folks come to the Museum of the City of New York and enter the exhibition, we decided to start at the exact place you started your first question, which is in July of 1776, when the invasion arrives. When you get off the elevator and arrive in the exhibition, you're confronted with cannons aimed at you from the side of British ships. So you are placed in that moment of asking, why us? Why here? Why now? Why did the British arrive?

[00:09:07] Blake McGready: Yeah, I'd like to add a couple of things to Sarah's answer there, which is to say, in addition to severing the mid-Atlantic colonies and southern colonies from New England, the British also really expected they would have robust loyalist support in and around New York, especially in those rural areas that you alluded to, Liz, Westchester, Long Island.

And part of their aim at this moment in the war is not just to take back territory from the patriots, but also to convince many American colonists to come back to their side in a campaign for hearts and minds. It's also probably worth noting that during the last large continental war, the Seven Years' War, New York had served as the headquarters of the British Empire. So there's already the military infrastructure in place in this city.

So all of these things bring the British into the harbor in 1776. And as Sarah mentioned right there, yeah, that's where we start the show, to hopefully encourage our visitors to think about the choices that people were making at that moment and the decisions that had led to this moment.

[00:10:11] Sarah Henry: And the hearts and minds piece I found really fascinating. It's not something that I had fully understood until we started to look at this period and the degree to which the British occupiers are working to retain the loyalty of the folks on the ground. And the degree to which the ultimate loss, for the British, is partly an ideological and spiritual, emotional loss, because even here in New York, they couldn't keep hold of that sense of loyalty.

So it added an extra dimension to me on top of the military and economic and political story to really think about this revolutionary moment as this engagement with the broad population.

[00:10:57] Liz Covart: Sarah, I love the way that you set up the opening of *The Occupied City* exhibition, you walk in and the British ships entering New York Harbor have their cannons trained on you.

As we get a better sense of what it was like when the British occupation began, could you tell us what the city and southern New York region looked like when the British arrived in New York Harbor in August 1776?

[00:11:22] Blake McGready: Yeah, I think it's first important to remember that the city of New York at this time, what the revolutionary generation referred to as the town, is entirely below City Hall Park today.

So at the very southern edge of Manhattan is the buildings, markets, the docks, the port that we refer to as "the town" or New York City. So it's much smaller space than the sprawling five boroughs that we're all familiar with today.

The city numbered about twenty-five thousand people at the start of the War for Independence, making it one of the largest cities in British North America. Perhaps as many as 20% of the region's population were of African descent. About two-thirds of them were enslaved. In fact, this region, New York, New Jersey, parts of Long Island had some of the highest concentrations of slavery anywhere in British North America.

The city itself featured many artisans, merchants, the types of professions you would expect to find in a port city. But the wider region was largely a mixed farming economy that was dependent on exports. So New York grain, for instance, is traveling around the empire. Much of it's going, for example, to Caribbean colonies to feed plantation economies.

And the other thing, I guess it's worth mentioning here, is something I already alluded to is that that military infrastructure is already in place. So the city, in a sense, is surrounded on its northern end, its northern limits, were the barracks where soldiers, crown regulars, would have been stationed. At the southern end was Fort George, today more or less around where Battery Park is in lower Manhattan.

So at the northern end and the southern end, New Yorkers are surrounded by British troops, and that's going to have a major effect on the way resistance unfolds in the 1760s.

[00:13:17] Sarah Henry: And I'll add that in the exhibition, after you're confronted with the cannons, you're invited to take a turn to the right, to the north in the museum, to roll back time to see how we got to this moment of the British invasion. You're welcomed into a large gallery that looks at the period between the end of the Seven Years' War and the real beginning of the military conflict, so basically goes to 1775.

One of the things we want people to understand is that ten-year period is also characterized by tremendous economic hardship. So the Seven Years' War was boom time for New York, and the city profited tremendously by being the depot and headquarters for the British Army during the Seven Years' War. And when that war ended, the economy fell off a cliff.

So there was ten years of release of economic depression that strained the bands of society. Throughout the exhibition, we focus in on a small number of individuals whose story kind of captures some of the range of experiences. They're actually represented by silhouettes that you can hear audio stories. And we did silhouettes on purpose because many of these people, there are no portraits that survive of them, but they're all real people.

And the three folks that we highlight in that revolutionary crisis gallery kind of run the gamut of people who lived by the port, people who were in the rural areas, people who were involved in the revolutionary conflict, people who tried to avoid it. And I think it's that diversity of the landscape and the political economy of the city that we're trying to get at in that.

[00:14:57] Liz Covart: Now let's talk about the revolutionary politics of New York and how you represent them in *The Occupied City* exhibition. Because unlike New England, where the politics were rather homogenous, New York's politics were rather complex, because there were so many different opinions and so many different types of people living within what is now New York state.

So would you give us an overview of the politics? You mentioned that the British Army expected a lot of loyalist support, but it also seems like there were plenty of revolutionaries in New York's southern regions. So what did New York City and that surrounding area's politics look like in 1776?

[00:15:37] Blake McGready: You could look at it from a dozen different ways, and the political landscape will look different every single time. This is such a complicated story, and

this is a really rich question. There are obvious differences between urban and rural areas, as you were sort of alluding to.

Generally speaking, the counties that were located along the Hudson River up towards Albany tended to support the revolution a bit more, yeomen and tenant laborers in this area. Whereas the counties in the southern area of New York, that we're discussing today, tended to have a bit more support for the crown.

But it doesn't really look that way in 1765. And I think one of the things that characterizes New York is that sometimes it seems New York City is leading the resistance, and other times it appears like it's at the very back of the pack and holding the resistance to parliamentary reform back in crucial ways.

There's also real factional politics in New York throughout much of the eighteenth century leading up to the revolution. And by that, I'm talking about these very powerful families in New York, the Livingstons and the De Lanceys that really controlled the General Assembly and were fighting against each other for different interests.

One of the things that changes, though, after especially the Stamp Act Crisis in 1765, there's a new player in town, that's the Sons of Liberty. And the Sons of Liberty are not beholden to these patrician aristocratic families in New York. They profess to speak for the people. And they've got a different constituency. And they sort of trouble these waters. And suddenly, you have these different factions that are playing to the loyalties of the people who are supporting the Sons of Liberty. So that's another way in which it gets quite complicated.

As I mentioned, New York seems to be leading the pack and perhaps no more than the Stamp Act Riot. One of the largest in the colonies, probably the largest, thousands of people in the streets of New York coming out to voice criticism of the Stamp Act; leads to widespread destruction, including the royal governor of New York, Cadwallader Colden, hung in effigy, the destruction of his carriage that was burned on the Bowling Green in lower Manhattan, and widespread social upheaval that scared many New Yorkers.

So in fact, by the time the Revolutionary War is about to break out in 1775, many New Yorkers have been scared by the activities of groups like the Sons of Liberty, by events like the Stamp Act Riot, and have taken a more conservative stance.

The final thing I'll say is, unlike Boston or Philadelphia, New York has a very significant British military presence. There are warships in the harbor, there are soldiers at the fort, at Fort George, downtown, and there are soldiers at the barracks.

So in many ways, they're surrounded. And I think that does make New Yorkers a bit more cautious in what means they're going to choose to voice their opposition to parliamentary reform. It's not that they were all on board with the reforms of parliament in this time period. It's that in many ways, they're staring down the barrel of cannons. That seems different from some of these other cities. And I think that plays a large part in how New York engages in this period of resistance in the 1760s and 1770s.

[00:18:42] Sarah Henry: New York is a poster child for the idea that this is America's first civil war. And one of the things you see throughout the revolutionary crisis and then throughout the occupation itself and into the postwar period is the degree to which this crisis profoundly split New Yorkers from one another. And it didn't map neatly onto identities or economic interests or social status.

Often these fault lines ran directly through families with people picking different sides. So there was a sense of a fratricidal sort of war that was going on, even before the war began, as families split. And that's one of the things that we try to get people to understand in the exhibition is that the calculus that people were going through was inflected by a lot of things, fear for their own families and physical safety among them, as Blake alluded to.

So it's not merely which side they thought was right or what outcome they hoped for, but the calculus of what it meant to be entering into what was increasingly seen to be, with good reason, a period of extreme violence coming on top of a period of extreme economic hardship.

So one of the things we do in the exhibition is we have a kind of tavern environment where visitors can come in and gather around a table and in a very simplified way, read about the issues that people were evaluating and kind of do a little test for themselves, which side would they have stood on? You actually do this exercise by having a piece of paper and there is an embosser and you can choose your position on a variety of issues.

And at the end, you kind of sum it up to find out might you have been a loyalist? Might you have been a revolutionary? Might you have been on the fence, which accounts for a lot of

people, right? We shouldn't forget people who are either neutral or flip-flopped on sides, depending upon circumstances around them.

I think a lot of our visitors are surprised that they are not automatically like patriots who would have been rushing to fight for American independence. They might have themselves made a different kind of calculation.

[00:20:56] Liz Covart: Blake, I'm really glad you brought up the military presence that already existed in New York City, because we've spoken with other scholars who told us that the British Empire meant for New York City to be its North American imperial headquarters. And as such, it had built infrastructure there.

So as we consider the British next move out of Boston, New York makes a lot of sense since they had barracks where they could camp and station troops. They also had military depots where they had stored supplies. And New York also gave the British a ready harbor with a decent Navy presence. So really, thank you for reminding us of those facts.

Now, it was no secret that General Howe and the British Army were going to New York City. Even General George Washington was convinced that New York had to be Howe's next move. So if you were a New Yorker and you knew the British Army was coming, what did you do to prepare from March until the Army showed up in late July in August?

[00:21:55] Blake McGready: One of the things I'm really proud about in the exhibition is that we kind of put a spotlight on this period; a dedicated time in which we show that the occupation of New York, in many significant ways, did not begin when the British take the city. But it began in the spring of 1776, the winter and spring of 1776, as Continental troops start to arrive.

They start barricading the streets, building fortifications. They arrive in such large numbers. They're stationed in lower Manhattan. They're at Governor's Island. They're across the East River in Brooklyn. So they're a regular presence. So I think to ordinary New Yorkers, the occupation begins not once they start seeing British warships in the harbor, but it begins when these patriot soldiers first show up in their presence.

And for those who had loyalist leanings, loyalist sympathies who are about loyalists themselves. This was a really dangerous time. The Sons of Liberty feel empowered by the arrival of the Continental Army. So they try to silence dissent. They target loyalists in and

around the city. So in many ways, this period of the first occupation is a time of intense loyalist persecution. So that's one of the things we really try to highlight in the exhibition.

[00:23:15] Sarah Henry: Yeah, we have a section that talks about the sort of first diaspora from the revolutionary crisis, which is the flight of many loyalists just to leave the city. They see it as a dangerous and hostile place. And with good reason.

The city government, to put it charitably, looks the other way as mob violence targets loyalists. And it's quite brutal. We have the story of one New Yorker, Theophilus Hardenbrook, who ends up perishing as he flees to try to reach a British ship in the harbor.

But before that, he had been stripped naked and rode on the rails through the streets and really brutalized by mobs; ended up fleeing to the northern part of the island and living in the woods, trying to seek shelter. So it all gives additional flavor and texture to the point that you made, Blake.

[00:24:09] Liz Covart: It's a really good point, because when we talk about the occupation of New York and the American Revolution, we do tend to start with the British. But you're absolutely right. George Washington, when he made his calculated decision that Howe was headed for New York, he brought his Continental Army with him from Cambridge to occupy New York City and its environs. You know, to try and prevent its capture by the British.

So, what was it like when George Washington and his Continental Army made his first occupation of New York, and how did the Continental Army prepare for the British?

[00:24:43] Blake McGready: There are certain routes that Washington knows they need to defend and the military engineers of the Continental Army need to know they defend. For instance, in upper Manhattan, Inwood, King's Bridge, the physical bridge that spanned the Harlem River that connected Westchester to Manhattan was of vital importance because it provided this land route by which you could reach the island of Manhattan and the mainland colonies.

Another really important passage, Hellgate, which is the junction of the Long Island Sound, the Harlem River, the East River that was filled with whirlpools and rocks.

There were remains of shipwrecks all around this area. But they knew it was going to be a crucial passage for smaller vessels that were going to be trying to enter the East River from the Long Island Sound. So again, fortifications are going up there.

But then fortifications appear in new places that hadn't really been considered that militarily important before, especially in earlier imperial wars. So Bayard's Hill, just near the freshwater pond in lower Manhattan, there's a fortress that's going to go there. Fort Washington, along the Hudson River, across the Hudson River in New Jersey, Fort Lee, all these places start to get militarized.

Long Island is really important because both armies seem to realize that they're going to need immense quantities of food, forage, and fuel. So there's going to be fortifications going up on Long Island that are going to be used to defend essentially the village of Brooklyn, today the borough of Brooklyn, from British attack.

And Washington's army at this time is probably about twenty thousand or so persons. And he's sending them all around the city along with enslaved laborers that are drafted into military service to build some of these fortifications. So in many ways, the entire region is militarized in this period.

And the Continentals know that it's going to be an incredibly difficult task because what they don't have is a navy. And New York has miles and miles of shoreline that are in need of defending.

[00:26:44] Sarah Henry: It is impossible to protect the shoreline of what's today the five boroughs of New York City. We're talking about hundreds of miles, right? So it must have been quite, not just a challenge, but like intensely difficult and distressing, especially as warships begin to arrive, for Washington to know what to do.

How would he know which area to pay attention to? And he might have known that Howe was coming, but what was going to happen next must have been incredibly perplexing and difficult.

[00:27:16] Blake McGready: Yeah, I'll say for now that Washington really debates with Congress and New Yorkers themselves the value of holding the city. I think he and his military engineers realized these difficulties, and perhaps it was worth sacrificing New York later on down the road.

But yeah, that's certainly weighing on his mind how to even prepare for the British assault. Perhaps he didn't realize how large it was going to be. But these questions about where to place your soldiers and the politics of war are certainly in his calculus at this moment.

[00:27:47] Liz Covart: And speaking of the calculus of war, after the British evacuated Boston, they sailed to Nova Scotia in Canada to resupply and get reinforcements. But by August, the British naval fleet and army had appeared off the coast of Long Island.

So what was it like for New Yorkers when the British arrived in August 1776? And what happened next?

[00:28:10] Sarah Henry: As the ships begin to amass in New York Harbor, and it starts in late June, early July of 1776, there are hundreds of ships and boats amassed in the waters. And you could see them from the shores of lower Manhattan or from the village of Brooklyn.

And famously, one observer said "it looked as if all of London were afloat." It was considered to be a sea of masts. It was the largest amphibious invasion in human history up till, I think, World War I or even to World War II. So it's like nothing anybody had ever seen.

And that is part of what we're trying to get people when they first enter the exhibition to imagine themselves, because whether you had taken sides in this dispute or not, you were in the sights of this vast military force.

And that's sort of what the visitors experience. They didn't ask to have cannons aimed at them, our visitors, nor did New Yorkers at the time. But that's the shared experience.

[00:29:13] Blake McGready: And for visitors who are interested in this campaign for New York, we've set aside quite a bit of space in the exhibition to really talk about that campaign as it unfolded from August of 1776 through the final defeat of the Continental Army at Fort Washington in November of that year.

You can see objects from the time period, uniforms and accoutrements. We have a light-up map where you can follow the paths of the armies. And the story you'll learn, and the story that's been told by military historians for generations now, is one of just a complete drubbing the Continental Army takes throughout this campaign.

They lose at the Battle of Brooklyn or the Battle of Long Island in August of 1776. They are able to make an improbable escape from Brooklyn across the East River to Manhattan when they seem like they're being surrounded.

Sarah alluded to some of these individuals that we talk about throughout the exhibition, folks who we have created silhouettes of. We talk about one of the sailors from the unit of soldiers

from Marblehead, Massachusetts, a man who appears on the rolls named Manuel Soto, who was one of these New England mariners who rode the Continental Army across the East River.

We also later in the exhibition mentioned Hugh Hughes, who was a quartermaster in the Continental Army. He's the guy who actually gets the boats to bring the army from Brooklyn across the East River.

But even that sort of American-Dunkirk escape is not enough to save the Continental Army. They lose at Kip's Bay in September. The British capture the city on September 15th. They fight other skirmishes around northern Manhattan and Westchester, Harlem Heights, White Plains. And then the fall of Fort Washington, as I mentioned, really seems to mark the end of this campaign.

The final thing I'll say, though, about this is that what Washington loses in terms of materiel and men, thousands of soldiers and invaluable supplies, what he does gain is time from that campaign. It's something else we try to explain a little in the text of the exhibition, is that he's able to hold the British at bay and prevent them from, say, capturing New Jersey and Philadelphia in one campaign season.

So by really important metrics, of course, these are significant defeats to the Continental Army. But in the game that perhaps this army was trying to play, they were able to gain valuable time.

[00:31:34] Sarah Henry: One of the things that we pair with those cannons that are pointing at you when you enter the exhibition is right behind you is a case full of cannonballs and other cannon munitions that were dug up throughout the coastline, basically, of the city.

And you really get a sense, starting in Brooklyn and moving the way up through Manhattan and into the Bronx and Westchester, the city was under bombardment. It was a ferocious bombardment. And still to this day, we are walking on cannonballs as well as, of course, human remains of this huge and I think little remembered battle by most New Yorkers and visitors to New York.

It's something that's been somewhat erased from the city's memory, hopefully not by historians as well. But part of the goal here is to get people to have that visceral feeling that they are indeed walking on these sites as they go about their everyday business. You don't

have to go to, you know, Gettysburg to visit a military battlefield site. You do it every day in New York City.

[00:32:38] Liz Covart: How does *The Occupied City* exhibition discuss the British coming into control of Manhattan and New York by September 15, 1776?

[00:32:47] Blake McGready: Yeah, so this is the real heart of our exhibition. As visitors enter, as we've been talking about, you'll be confronted by these cannons. And many folks will go immediately to that section to their left to learn about what life was like during the period of British occupation.

I think it's first worth noting that as the military headquarters of Great Britain during the war, many thousands of people are coming to the city for a restored sense of imperial stability, protection from persecution by the rebels.

And this creates a real problem for the British and a really significant dilemma. On the one hand, they need to control the lines, they need to make sure that spies and rebel troops aren't getting into the city. They need to ensure that they have the compliance of the population, so they institute martial law.

On the other hand, you have loyalists who have come to the city expecting to have their rights restored and finding that they're having those very same rights denied. So this is a really tricky dilemma for the British throughout this period of occupation.

And when we try to show that among opponents of the rebellion, they come to New York and many of them start making the same sorts of demands for representation and civil government that their patriot neighbors had been making. So I think that's one of the most important sources of friction in this British occupied city during the war.

[00:34:20] Sarah Henry: And I'll add that the additional layer of the physical impact on the city of this. Blake talked about the political and demographic and economic impact. But, you know, as Washington's troops are getting defeat after defeat, as they go up the island, a huge fire breaks out in lower Manhattan.

And it burns a big percentage of the city, including some of its most important housing stock, that great fire of the fall of 1776. And there is a section that kind of introduces the occupied city that looks at the area that was destroyed by that great fire.

We collaborated with Ubisoft, who created the now classic video game Assassin's Creed 3, which is partially set in New York in this period to visualize what it was like, this great burnt fire district that stretched down the west side of the town.

And that area doesn't get rebuilt throughout the entire occupation and then well into the postwar period. And it becomes known as Canvas Town because all those folks who are streaming in, Blake mentioned them, there's not enough housing for the people who are already there because of the destruction of the housing stock. More people are coming, and they start building basically impromptu refugee camp using sailcloth, hence the name Canvas Town.

And it's a real period of immiseration. They also get hit by some of the coldest winters in recorded history. So there's that just physical requirement as well as the political one: how do you provide for this population and hopefully keep them on your side? Which proves, as we've already referenced, out of the British reach. Visitors get to sit in a little theater and take a visual stroll through this occupied city, which doesn't look so great by the fall of 1776.

[00:36:20] Blake McGready: If you walk from City Hall today down Broadway to the edge of Manhattan, for listeners who have taken that stroll, you'd have to imagine that everything to your right on the other side of Broadway is burned by the Great Fire of 1776. So just to underscore Sarah's point that there's an incredible housing shortage. And Canvas Town is an impromptu response to that.

So in addition to taking that bird's eye view through the exhibition, when you walk down that center hallway, you'll also see that we've placed texts and objects behind big cloth drapes. So you can maybe get a little sense as to what the material that was being used in this place.

And desperation grows from this housing crisis. For Loyalist refugees, something the British Army desperately needed was men to cut wood. So refugees, both white and Black, join these woodcutting outfits that then go into the countryside to try to get enough fuel and firewood for the army. For women who are coming to the city, they could become nurses or laundresses, servants, perhaps for officers.

But for the ordinary colonists who's coming to New York, the ordinary loyalists who's coming from New York, These are times of sheer desperation. And a large part of that's the

consequence of this fire, that it creates such a shortage of housing that it pushes people to the brink.

[00:37:43] Sarah Henry: Blake, can you just talk a little bit about the deforestation?

[00:37:47] Liz Covart: Oh, yes, Blake, please do, because I was going to ask a follow-up question about that.

[00:37:51] Blake McGready: Yeah, so Sarah mentioned that the war spans some of the worst winters of the eighteenth century. This is a period known as the Little Ice Age, which is this period of global cooling. So the opposite of global warming, as we know today, is a period of global cooling that ran throughout much of the early modern era up until about the mid-nineteenth century.

And one of the worst winters of the Revolutionary War was the winter of 1779-1780, what was known as "the hard winter." And it's that winter in which the British run an incredible firewood deficit. They need about six hundred cords of wood a week to sustain the garrison at sometimes they have lower than seventy.

And because they're having such a hard time obtaining wood, according to some accounts, every single tree on the island of Manhattan is chopped down. We know that they are cutting up old vessels that have been trapped in the ice and distributing the wood to the poor. But this also has long-term ramifications because in winters to come, the British need a more dependable source of fuel.

So those refugees I was mentioning end up chopping down trees in Long Island and perhaps some of the most devastating cuts occurred within sight of the city on what was then referred to as the Jersey Shore. Today, Hudson County, New Jersey, places like Bayonne, Hoboken, Weehawken.

And according to research that we did for this exhibition, in what today is Bayonne, New Jersey, the British Army cut down about eleven hundred acres of woodlands. That's about 30% larger than present-day Central Park.

This would have had enormous and long-term environmental repercussions, but it also affected how people thought about British rule. As all of these changes are happening in the land, things are getting quite desperate. And it might have affected which side ordinary people living around New York thought was better suited to lead and rule North America.

[00:39:40] Sarah Henry: And a parallel thing is happening with the need to obtain food and specifically forage for the animals, right? If you're going to have an army, you're going to need lots of horses as well as cattle.

And the unending need for forage to feed animals means that the farmers around are also having their crops and land seized for the war effort. So it's not pretty to be living in this occupied city, even though you're under British, quote unquote, protection.

[00:40:11] Liz Covart: It also seems like there was a tension, right? We talked about how the British army needed to win over the hearts and minds of New Yorkers, while at the same time, they also need to accept the many people who are streaming into New York City because they were loyalists. Because they were being persecuted in what is now upstate New York, New Jersey, and New England. But their arrival in New York, well, that seems to really strain the army supply system.

And the British had to import much of their supplies to feed, clothe, and sustain their army anyway. So in some cases, it seems like in New York, supplies were easier to get than elsewhere. But it also sounds like supplies were just generally very hard to come by, period.

[00:40:52] Blake McGready: Yeah, one of the things that happens during the revolution in New York is that the war really makes New York's island geography so important, right? As I was talking about the winter of 1779-1780, that really traps crown forces on the island and forces them to get whatever they possibly can from this region.

The countryside's also filled with hostile patriots. As these foraging units go out and they're competing for supplies, they will often run into each other.

In fact, one of the battles that we put a spotlight on occurs in what today is Van Cortlandt Park, where American foragers, many of them were of the Stockbridge Nation, these are Native peoples who allied themselves with the United States, run into troops under the Queen's Rangers as part of the foraging expedition.

So this contest for resources animates so much of what's happening around New York City during the war.

[00:41:52] Sarah Henry: And to put a number on this, Blake had mentioned earlier in our conversation that on the eve of the Revolution, the population of New York was twenty-five

thousand. And between the loyalists fleeing the American occupation and then the patriots fleeing the British occupation, the population actually plummeted to around five thousand.

And then over the course of the seven years of the occupation, not only did it rebound to the twenty-five thousand, it actually doubled to fifty. So we're talking about supplying and caring for a population that was twice as large as the sort of baseline of what the city had been. And of course, under very, very difficult circumstances for all the reasons that we've been talking about.

So the logistical problem of actually supplying and carrying foreign housing all of these folks is really, really considerable. And I think it's no surprise that people got despairing and disgusted with what was going on.

[00:42:53] Liz Covart: So just so we heard this right, over the course of the war, the population of New York City doubled, even as 25% or 30% of its housing was decimated by that fire in the fall of 1776?

[00:43:05] Sarah Henry: Correct. Yes.

[00:43:07] Liz Covart: Okay, now let's talk about the city's changing population. Actually, let's take this opportunity to thank our episode's sponsors first and then talk about the city's changing population.

[00:43:19] Liz Covart: This year, as we mark the 250th anniversary the United States's independence, I've noticed something about the episodes that you and I have explored together. Many of the best questions we've asked didn't come from me, they came from you.

When you send me a question about the people and events of our early American past, I bring it to the historians that we interview. Your curiosity that helps decide where our conversations go, and it's one of my favorite parts of making *Ben Franklin's World*. We're exploring the past together. *Ben Franklin's World* is a listener supported podcast, it's a production of Clio Digital Media, a nonprofit organization. Every episode that you hear takes weeks of reading, research, interviewing, and editing to produce.

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And if you've already given, thank you truly, your generosity is what keeps our conversations going. A special thank you to David K., Kristen K.B., Brian K., Jordan K., Lori K., and Steve K., thank you so much for helping me keep this work going. Thank you.

If today's episode is peaking your curiosity about New York's past, I know just where you can keep exploring, the New York Almanack. For nearly twenty years the Almanack has published new stories every day about New York's history and culture, its natural world and its outdoor adventures. From the Adirondacks John Warren brings together writings by historians, journalists, preservationists, and authors from across New York state. He also rounds up the latest New York history podcasts, exhibits, events, and books so you'll always know what's new in New York history. So if you're interested in new York history visit the Almanack, with a K, at newyorkalmanack.com. That's newyorkalmanack.com, and almanack is spelt with a K, I'll also include a link and put it in the show notes.

[00:45:28] Dynamic Ad Break: Audio varies and may shift timestamps in the second half of this episode by 1-2 minutes. Thank you for supporting *Ben Franklin's World*. If you'd like to support the show directly with a tax-deductible donation, visit benfranklinsworld.com/donate.

[00:46:00] Liz Covart: Blake and Sarah, when you look at the history of the American Revolution as a whole, its military history is mostly a series of defeats for the Americans. Yes, they won a few key battles, but mostly their strategy was just to outlast the British army.

But the British, they go into North America and they're very successful. They start occupying places like Charleston and Savannah. They go into Virginia. But when the British lose those places, they start sending ships carrying all the people who had flocked to their side in the South, and they send those ships to New York City.

So a lot of these people who go to New York City, they are loyalists, and they're also people who self-emancipated themselves. They ran away from their Southern enslavers and seized their opportunity to get freedom and go to New York City.

So I wonder if you could tell us about the different people living in New York City while the British are occupying it and the types of tensions, you know, the racial, ethnic, and otherwise

tensions that existed on top of everyone being mad at each other because there's not enough supplies or housing to go around.

[00:47:05] Blake McGready: Absolutely. Thousands of white loyalists come to New York City. Thousands of crown soldiers and their families, right, soldiers' wives, children are coming to the city.

But perhaps the most conspicuous group of arrivals during this time period are the roughly ten thousand people who are fleeing slavery from points across North America. Some of these would have been enslaved people working in New Jersey or Long Island who are able to run away or attach themselves to a British unit.

Some of these, as you alluded to, Liz, are coming from points all across the empire, particularly the southern colonies. As these British units leave these places, they're sending self-emancipated people to New York.

The major turning point for this is it comes in 1779 when Sir Henry Clinton, who was the commander-in-chief of the British forces at this moment in the war, in Westchester, in Philipsburg, he signs a document known as the Philipsburg Proclamation, in which he promises freedom to any enslaved person who can make it to the British lines, often on exchange for their labor.

So these self-emancipated people, men, women, and children, are gathering behind the lines in New York. They are competing with loyalists for housing, they're competing for work, they are looking for jobs in whichever way they can get it.

But they have also been promised their freedom. Self-emancipated people were omnipresent around the city at this time period and were contributing in really important ways to the British war effort out of New York City.

[00:48:47] Liz Covart: We've talked about how we'll enter *The Occupied City* exhibition, that we'll immediately get a sense of what it was like when the British Navy moved into New York Harbor. We've also talked about how the City Museum of New York has set up a tavern in this exhibition where we can sit and read about the political issues of the day and decide those political issues for ourselves. And how we can go on a video walking tour of Canvas Town, where a lot of these formerly enslaved people, these self-emancipated people, lived because there wasn't enough housing to go around.

We've also seen glimpses of what *The Occupied City* exhibition is like, but I wonder if you could give us a full audio tour to help us navigate it from start to finish. So can you connect the pieces that we've heard about this exhibition together into a fuller picture of what this exhibition looks like?

[00:49:40] Sarah Henry: So the exhibition is on the third floor of the Museum of the City of New York, and it takes up the entire floor, which makes it arguably the largest exhibition we've ever done. It's the nature of the architecture of the building that you enter in the middle, which is one reason that we began the story with the arrival of the British ships in July 1776, and you're confronted by these cannons facing you.

You're then given a choice as to whether you want to rewind in history to find out how we got there, whether you want to go sort of forward and learn the military story, or turn left and explore the occupied city and then its aftermath.

And I would say each of the rooms has a different quality to it. It's a very graphically vivid show, because we have amazing artifacts and documents in the show, but they tend to be a little staid compared to the story that they're telling. And one of the things we wanted to be able to help people do is to get the drama that these objects and documents attest to.

And we did that in part by creating a scenographic kind of environment for them to be placed into. It's not literal. We're not recreating these places. We're invoking them. And we work with our exhibition designers, as well as our own internal team and interactive designers to create a feeling of drama.

So if you do turn right, you're brought into the section about the imperial crisis called "Divided City." And that has a kind of scenographic set of environments in which you can explore places, not just the port and not just the barracks, but also the coffee house where the Sons of Liberty was founded.

The port itself, we haven't spoken much about the economic importance of New York to the British Empire and to the Atlantic world, but we give a sense of why it was so economically important and why the port became a place that was a real breeding ground for radical politics. So there's a section you can go through there, and about the great Stamp Act Riot of 1765. There's a cannon there and it's pointing at you again because the British turned the cannons at Fort George, which had been facing out to sea to protect the city from invasion

during the riots, they actually ordered them to be turned inward to face at the population. So that's a place of investigation that's very place based.

The second section of the exhibition is smaller, but very intense. And it's about that first occupation. And one aspect that we haven't talked about, but is very memorable for people, is that there's a hands-on opportunity to kind of invoke the feeling of when the statue of King George, that was erected after the repeal of the Stamp Act at Bowling Green, enormous gold gilded lead statue was torn down by patriots after the Declaration of Independence was read. We actually have a video projection with real ropes that you can use with your fellow visitors to tug and tug and finally see that statue tip and then get turned into bullets, which is what happened to it.

I mentioned that to say that we're always blending artifacts and environmental elements with hands-on opportunities that are very memorable and that are very experiential. It's not about touchscreens. It's about a lived experience.

[00:53:02] Blake McGready: Yeah, to build upon that, Sarah, one of the things I think maybe it's worth highlighting is the section where we talk about the experiences of self-emancipated people in New York City.

So after the occupation comes to an end, thousands flee New York with the British army to points in Canada and around the British Empire with passes that had been guaranteed their freedom as patriot enslavers try to recapture their enslaved people. And in terms of the artifacts and the experience, one of the walls features the names of people who traveled out of New York and were recorded in a ledger that was known as the Book of Negroes.

These are very terse lines and line items that show ages of persons, where they were coming from, their names, a little bit of description. And the British kept this ledger in order to record all those people who were traveling via New York to freedom outside of the thirteen colonies.

So we have a couple of things, I think, to bring this to light in that room. Not only do we have all those names appearing on the wall for you to look at, we have on loan from the National Archives the original document.

So, visitors can look at that ledger, one of the first and most important freedom documents in United States history. And then we also have a reproduction where you can thumb through the pages yourself and look at the stories.

And some of these lines are just extraordinary. You can see entire lives captured in just a couple of words. That's, I think, the most meaningful and moving spots in the exhibition. Just having a moment to stand there with visitors and say, flip to a page and let's read a couple of the names that we see here, and think a little bit about their stories.

So that's another spot where I think in which the design team did such a fabulous job and we were able to, with the help of great historians and advisors on this project, bring a really important story to life.

[00:55:03] Sarah Henry: And it's literally a turning point in the exhibition and the floor plan of the show, as well as in the history and in the lives of all those people. So we call that section "City of Hope." It's an event that was happening during the war, technically, after the signing of the Treaty of Paris, but before the British evacuation.

And you've just gone through a section that is about the occupation, very physically dark. We talk in that section about the prison ships, which we haven't touched on yet, but a very dire part of the history that took place in New York. And as you move into the "City of Hope" section, the lights brighten, the colors brighten, and you have that sense of coming out the other end of something.

And then the final section of the exhibition, which you turn right and go into, is about the evacuation itself and then the postwar settlement slash arguments about where the city and the country next. So we touch on the Constitution and the ratification, and Alexander Hamilton, and the whole question of whether the loyalists will be punished or reintegrated. And there's a sense of that gathering momentum, I would say, towards rebuilding and reinvention.

It's kind of left as an open question. And then the final experience is called the "Revolutionary City Today." And it's a beautiful installation done by a video artist named Tim Gersten of quiet, evocative, moving images of many of the sites as you can experience them now.

So you sort of get to relive or to broaden out your lens into a selection of the sites that were touched by this history. So it's a little bit of a contemplative space, which I think we need because you need to decompress after the intensity of this first civil war, the most destructive

period in New York City history ever, the most traumatic. And we were mindful that it was a very traumatic time and we wanted to do justice to that, but also not traumatize our visitors.

[00:57:14] Blake McGready: I also think it's worth highlighting a room towards the end of *The Occupied City* exhibition that deals with the experiences of self-emancipated people who come to New York City, thousands of whom travel to the city seeking freedom during the war. And in 1783, as the terms of the Treaty of Paris are being negotiated, one of the sticking points for American negotiators in Europe was that enslaved people be returned to patriot enslavers.

So in 1783, slave catchers and enslavers are descending on the city en masse trying to have their human property returned to them. And this becomes a sticking point between George Washington and Sir Guy Carleton, who was the British commander-in-chief at this time. Washington is pressing to the return of these people back into bondage, but Carleton wants to guarantee them passage to points outside of the British Empire.

In order to record where these people were traveling and a little of their experiences so they could identify those who would be passing through New York to points of freedom beyond the city, they created a ledger known as the Book of Negroes that included the names, some biographical information, descriptions of these individuals.

And we are lucky enough to have a version of that document on loan to us from the National Archives. And we also have a reproduction of that document on display, so you can thumb through. One of my favorite experiences when I give tours of the exhibition is to stand by that document and just read a couple of lines and you can see whole lives come to life.

[00:58:51] Sarah Henry: And I'll say that of the people whose stories we tell in that particular section, two of them are people whose names were listed in the Book of Negroes. And one of them was Harry Washington, whose last name is Washington because he had been enslaved at Mount Vernon by George Washington.

And being able to tell his story from being kidnapped in Africa, enslaved in Virginia, escaping twice, actually, and going behind British lines in Richmond and eventually ending up in New York, George Washington was really trying to reclaim Harry Washington. But he prevailed with the protection of Guy Carleton and General Samuel Birch, who was overseeing the hearings to figure out who was eligible.

He ends up going to Nova Scotia and eventually joining a recolonization effort to go back and ends his life in Africa again, first in Sierra Leone, where he gets into some political difficulty for participating in some reform efforts there and is ultimately banished like a second time. But we were able to hear this in a first-person kind of narrative to relive just one of thousands of stories of people who went through this extraordinary exodus.

[01:00:09] Liz Covart: How did the British occupation of New York City end? And how and when did New York City return to American hands?

[01:00:19] Blake McGready: Following the Battle of Yorktown, as the British public tires of the war, there's fierce negotiations between these two parties about what the specific ramifications of that will be. What day are the British going to go? How many soldiers? In fact, there are attempts by the British to maybe even hold on to New York in the terms of the final negotiation.

It finally comes to an end on November 25th, 1783, which was then and forever known as Evacuation Day. In fact, it was a large holiday in the city of New York for generations. The British army depart at the southern end of Manhattan with thousands of enslaved runaways with them who are now moving on to parts of freedom around the empire.

Other loyalists who had come to the city are also going to be leaving New York with the British army. It's also worth noting that these loyalists had been Americans themselves. They had deep attachments to place and family and grieve the loss of America and grieve the loss of this war as they were traveling now to places that they were not familiar with, many of them in Canada.

So New Yorkers are jubilant. George Washington leads the Continental Army down Broadway. He's flanked by George Clinton, who is the governor of New York. You can actually see a large reproduction of this painting when you go into this section of the exhibit.

But there was going to be a costly rebuilding happening. The city had been devastated, not by just the great fire, but subsequent fires. Trees had been cut down. Churches had been turned into stables. The freshwater pond, which had given New Yorkers drinking water before the war is polluted.

So the questions looming before the city at this moment are existential. How are they going to be able to recover? What is reconstruction going to look like? So it's a moment of great joy

that would be celebrated for generations to come. But for the people who lived it, there was also a moment tremendous uncertainty.

[01:02:13] Liz Covart: Yeah, one of the things that we often forget about the Revolutionary War is just how much damage it caused to many places and how much rebuilding of buildings and infrastructure like roads and bridges had to be rebuilt after the British left.

[01:02:31] Sarah Henry: One of the structures that we feature in the show is Trinity Church, which was the tallest building in New York before the war and is destroyed in the Great Fire. And it still lay ruins when George Washington reclaimed the city.

And it took more than a decade to rebuild Trinity Church, which was, along with the barracks and Fort George, a symbol of British hegemony, right, in the city. It's the seat of the Anglican Church. And so all that housing, but also these important structures, as well as the economy and the political system. And frankly, the social fabric of the city all need to be rebuilt.

[01:03:10] Liz Covart: And it seems like New Yorkers did a pretty good job of rebuilding because after the American Revolution in 1789, New York City became the first capital of the new United States federal government.

So could you tell us about that transition from an occupied, war-torn city that had been severely damaged into this new federal city, this new federal capital?

[01:03:33] Blake McGready: So the New York economy starts to rebound after the war, and there are new opportunities for the independent United States and New Yorkers operating in the independent United States.

One of the things we place a spotlight on in the exhibit is the *Empress of China*, which opened the trading relationship between the US and China after the revolution. There had been prohibitions on that trade when these thirteen North American colonies were part of the British system. But with independence, they could open up new trading routes. That helps the city's economy rebound in part.

New York was still centrally located among the colonies, and that plays an enormous role into why it is selected as the capital, among with the lobbying from New Yorkers themselves. Perhaps Alexander Hamilton is the most famous, right. He emerges in this moment as the defender and voice for New York and is trying to center the nation's politics, but most importantly, its economy in the city in which he made his home.

The other thing I think that's really interesting about this period, and you kind of see it throughout the exhibit time and time again, is that, you know, New Yorkers could have made a different choice. It seemed possible that, for instance, New York would enthusiastically join the resistance movement. New Yorkers were the last to authorize the vote for independence. And as delegates gather in Philadelphia, they draft a proposal for a new national constitution to replace the Articles of Confederation they had agreed to in the war.

Once the failures of the Articles become clear and this new form of government is proposed, what side will New York take? Will they support ratification or oppose ratification is a bit of an open question. Even as other states start to ratify the document, it seems perfectly possible that New York may not remain a part of this union.

So one of the things I'm most proud of in the exhibition is this section where we show this debate about how New Yorkers were encouraged to either support or oppose ratification. Among the objects we have is a first edition printing of the Federalist Papers, which in many ways were written as an op-ed to convince New Yorkers that they should support ratification.

We, of course, know this document has a much longer history in the legal history of the United States, but it really began in many important respects as a way that Alexander Hamilton and his partners, James Madison and John Jay, were trying to get this crucial state over the finish line for ratification. So these are the types of stories we explore in this last section of the exhibition.

[01:05:58] Sarah Henry: And Blake, you had mentioned Hugh Hughes earlier as we're talking about how the American-Dunkirk was accomplished when Washington's troops evacuated across the East River. He makes a reappearance in this room because in the section, the antifederalists and the folks who were opposed to the new constitution, Hughes writes a series of letters in which he says the Constitution is a betrayal of the ideals for which we fought, because it is a pro-slavery document. And if liberty is not available to all, it's available to none.

That's just one of many New York voices that are participating in this debate, which is really about what was the revolution for? What was the nature of this? And what's the nature of the society and polity that we are going to create in its aftermath?

[01:06:49] Liz Covart: It's now time for us to move into our next segment, which is "1776 in Context." Now that we're in the midst of the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution, would you tell us about New York's legacy in the American Revolution? What is New York's legacy, and do you think it's a fair one?

[01:07:07] Blake McGready: I think in many ways, New York looks significantly different from the other cities that immediately come to mind when we think of the American Revolution. Part of that's just the built environment, right? There is, in Lower Manhattan, where we were talking about most of our conversation today, there's no dedicated sort of historic district. There's no freedom trail that connects the historic sites as there's one in Boston. There's no old city like there is in Philadelphia. So I think it's harder to get a sense of New York's eighteenth-century connections.

Another issue is that so many of the prominent histories that were written in the revolution in the nineteenth century were written by New Englanders who had deep suspicions and distrust of New Yorkers, the differences between Red Sox and Yankees fans, right? It goes back generations. And these regional rivalries, I think, lead to many downplaying the insignificance of New York.

And then there's also just the politics of cities. Even in some ways during the Revolutionary War, patriots make the argument that the American nation, the real virtues are embodied by the countryside. And because of that, cities are diminished. They're seen as sites of loyalism during the war. They're places of profiteering, according to many revolutionaries.

So in all those ways, I think New York's historical reputation takes a bit of a hit after the American Revolution. But I think when we get a chance to revisit this history, what we see is that there's many different fights for self-determination in the city in this period: among loyalists who feel of rights are being denied by martial law, among New York patriots who are protesting the parliamentary reforms in the 1760s and 1770s, among enslaved people who travel in great numbers to New York.

So ultimately, I think one of the things the story captures are real people making real choices about what might provide them the best life possible. And it's also a reminder that nobody ever really lived in the past, right? They all lived in their own present. And I think that's something that we try to get a good sense of in the exhibition.

[01:09:15] Sarah Henry: I think you really put your finger on it. In addition to the New England authorship of a lot of these histories, it's also the patriot authorship, right? The stories of the military engagements, they're not glorious from an American point of view.

So they have, I think, been sometimes swept under the rug in some of the patriotic narratives about inevitability or of an American triumph. That's not the story that comes through in New York.

And you mentioned the physical transformation of the city. There was a lot of destruction here because of the occupation and the fire. So a lot of those landmarks were gone by the time rebuilding began. The Gotham Center, who is our partner on this project, has created a really wonderful walking trail slash app that you can experience now that is, in a way, our answer to the Freedom Trail in Boston.

I really agree with you, Blake, that the story that we see about the American Revolution when you look at it through the lens of New York is a different one than we see elsewhere. And it's partly because New York is more diverse in all the different ways that we've talked about. It's not just demographically diverse, but ideologically and economically diverse and geographically diverse. And having that kaleidoscope through which to examine this struggle gives you a much more, I think, true sense of what it was like to live through this at that time.

The other thing I think we get from looking at it through New York lens is an appreciation of not just the trauma and divisions, but the resilience and ability to repair and rebuild. That didn't have to be the case. It wasn't inevitable, but people made choices. And the city did prove to be able to rebound in an extraordinary phoenix from the literal ashes way.

And that's something I think that can give us some hope at periods of intense polarization of a society, that there are histories that we can look back to that show something new being made out of that fracturing.

[01:11:26] Liz Covart: Well, you've really provided us with a great overview of the history of the 1776 New York campaign and *The Occupied City* exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York. When we're ready to book our trip to New York City and come see this exhibition in person, where should we go to find more information?

[01:11:45] Sarah Henry: Sure. Well, the Museum of the City of New York, America's first city museum, is on Fifth Avenue and between 103rd and 104th Streets, right across from the

amazing Conservatory Gardens of Central Park. So you can definitely make a day of it. The museum's open seven days a week. And it has a website, of course, mcny.org —like museum city new york. And the show will be open until March 19, 2027. There's also a lot of public programs. And I really urge people to visit our website and take a look at what we have on offer.

[01:12:20] Liz Covart: And for those of us who are unable to make it to New York City by March 17, 2027, are there any resources or virtual parts of this exhibition that we can explore?

[01:12:31] Sarah Henry: Well, the thing I would really point you to is the incredible scholarship that's in the Gotham Center's walking tour. One of the many reasons this collaboration was so great is that that project has been underway for years. And we were able to leverage the scholarship of Blake, Peter-Christian Aigner, and the others who have been working at the Gotham Center to really recenter New York in revolutionary history and vice versa. So I think that would be like the number one place.

We, of course, have not just our webpage, but our Facebook presence and Instagram presence where we spin out particular stories. So please check out Museum of the City of New York on all your favorite channels everywhere.

[01:13:13] Liz Covart: Great. I'll include a link to that app in our show notes. If we have more questions about *The Occupied City* exhibition or the history of New York in the American Revolution, where's the best place for us to continue the conversation?

[01:13:26] Blake McGready: Yeah, I'd love to hear from folks who have questions about New York and the revolution. The best way is probably to reach me via email, mcgreadyblake@gmail.com.

[01:13:33] Sarah Henry: You mentioned I'm curator emerita. So this is my last show after twenty-five years at the Museum of the City of New York. So I am retired, but I still have an email address, which is shenry@mcny.org. And we can connect you, if I am not the right one, to amazing colleagues in all the departments.

[01:13:53] Liz Covart: Wonderful. Well, Sarah Henry and Blake McGready, thank you so much for helping us better understand New York City as an occupied city and its role in the American Revolution.

[01:14:01] Blake McGready: Thank you, Liz.

[01:14:03] Sarah Henry: Thank you for doing this.

[01:14:05] Liz Covart: The 1776 New York campaign unfolded as a series of defeats for the Continental Army. The British defeated Washington's army at the Battle of Brooklyn in late August 1776. They won again at Kip's Bay in September, and captured Manhattan and New York City on September 14, 1776. After fighting at Harlem Heights and White Plains, the campaign ended in November 1776 with the fall of Fort Washington at the northern end of Manhattan.

Yet as Blake related, George Washington gained something valuable from these losses, time. Washington may have lost thousands of soldiers and invaluable supplies, but he delayed the British long enough to prevent them from also capturing New Jersey and Philadelphia in 1776.

Now for New Yorkers, the British capture of their city began a seven-year occupation. During those years, a devastating fire destroyed twenty-five to thirty percent of the city's housing, forcing refugees to move into that burned district where they built Canvas Town from sailcloth.

By the end of 1776, New York City's population fell from about twenty-five thousand to around five thousand. But as refugees flocked to British lines over the war, it doubled, so that by the end of the war, it was nearly fifty thousand.

As Sarah noted, New York City is a poster child for the idea that the American Revolution was a civil war. The revolution split New Yorkers, often dividing families. And many people weighed fear for their families and their physical safety, against which side they would support, if they chose to support a side, which is something that we saw in our last episode, episode 454, when we explored the wartime experiences of Westchester County.

Now, New Yorkers' choices did not end in 1783. Hugh Hughes, that quartermaster who had gathered all the boats that Washington needed for his improbable escape from Brooklyn, later argued that the proposed Constitution for the new United States betrayed the ideals that revolutionaries had fought for, because it protected slavery. As Sarah revealed, Hughes and many other New Yorkers debated the Constitution's ratification as a question of, what was the revolution for?



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And New Yorkers were not alone in asking that question. Many revolutionaries, loyalists, and self-emancipated people across the former colonies asked it in their own ways. And New Yorkers' experiences offers us just one window into how differently people answered it.

Look for more information about Sarah Henry, Blake McGready, and the Museum of the City of New York's exhibition, *The Occupied City*, plus notes, links, and a transcript for everything we talked about today on the show notes page, benfranklinsworld.com/455.

Friends tell friends about their favorite podcasts. So if you enjoyed *Ben Franklin's World* little look into the New York Campaign of 1776, please tell your friends and family about it. Production assistance for this podcast comes from Joseph Adelman, Karin Wulf, Bria Felicien, and Morgan McCullough. Breakmaster Cylinder composed our custom theme music.

Finally, Sarah reminded us that we don't need to travel to places like Gettysburg to stand on a battlefield. New Yorkers walk across one every day. So is there a place near where you live where history hides in plain sight? Is there a spot where most people, they pass and they don't even know what really happened there? I'd love to know about it, so tell me, liz@benfranklinsworld.com.

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