

The KILLING of TIM KNAPP

Maryhelen Clague

IT'S LIKE BBINC LOST IN A GOOD
DETECTIVE STORY!

Few historical documents can offer that kind of experience yet that is exactly how I felt when, casually reading the McDonald Papers, I stumbled on an incident that sent me searching avidly through for more information. These wonderful reminiscences compiled in the middle years of the 19 century by Westchester native, John M. Macdonald – God bless him! – have all the usual frustrating characteristics of oral history. Frequently they are only long enough to whet your appetite for more. More often than not they reflect the uncertain memories of the people who were speaking. Often two persons retelling the same event will contradict each other, give different names for the people involved and reflect opposing views or even differing circumstances. This is not surprising, of course, since the reminiscences were, most of them, recorded many years after the events and often were not told by eye-witnesses but by their offspring who had heard the stories handed down.

Actually, the really surprising thing about the papers is the very realistic reflection they give us of the war years in Westchester. They ring

with authenticity and the raw spirit of the times. But, if the particular event they are recording is an especially intriguing one, these frustrating divergences can drive the modern clay researcher right up the wall!

I never intended to get that involved. My only purpose in searching **out** the papers was to pick up some contemporary information about one of the characters of the American Revolution whom I find most intriguing, Colonel James Delancey of the Westchester Refugees. It is not so easy to find accurate information about Colonel James. He appears to some, those unpatriotic souls who feel empathy with the loyalists of that day, as a sort of eighteenth century Errol Flynn, a dashing cavalry leader who forged a band of five hundred men into one of the most effective guerrilla units of the British war machine. To others, and that includes almost any historian with red, white and blue blood in his veins, he was a dastardly traitor who went hack on his sworn oath, plundered his neighbors and homeland shamelessly and, what's more, took pride in doing it.

What did those neighbors themselves think of the Colonel? Well, first you look up Delancey, Colonel

James, in the index and then you start leafing through the six volumes of memoirs we call *The McDonald Papers*.” The results are fascinating, although somewhat damaging to the Errol Flynn image. Typical examples :

Delancey was large and coarse but good looking. All the family was unpopular. Overhearing, a coarse man, large, fleshy, florid but fine looking.

I have not yet figured out how you can look coarse and fine at the same time, but no matter. Another:

Delancey was stem and savage. He knocked down a countryman who asked for a permit to take a bushel of salt upcountry because he wore his hat in his presence. He turned black in a passion.

Sounds pretty awful, I'm thinking. Then I come across this:

Delancey's trooper, Josiah Gaines, stole the horse of the doctor who cared for him. Delancey made him pay the doctor the full value.

Can it be that Delancey was not the complete villain that many of his Westchester contemporaries believed? I know from reading his memorial to Sir Guy Carleton after the war that he himself claimed he could not control his troopers and was personally blamed for every infraction they committed. True, he was labeled “The Scourge of Westchester” and “The Outlaw of the Bronx,” but partisan feelings were anything but mild during the Revolution, and for decades afterward. His portrait shows a handsome, intelligent man, very sure of himself.

Hoping to come across something to corroborate this more sympathetic side of Delancey, I am stopped in my tracks by a description of a completely new incident. Immediately I am caught up in one of those small human dramas that lined the landscape of Westchester County during

the war years. It is recounted by Mrs. Daniel Edwards:

When Delancey's horse was taken he offered 100 guineas to anyone who would bring in the thief. Tim Knapp was captured by Robert Emery and Nathaniel Taylor and Charles Merritt, who brought him in. At 9:00 A.M. Delancey came to headquarters according to custom — walked two or three times across the floor, looked very black and exclaimed: ‘Tim Knapp, prepare to die (or meet death) ! You shall be hung before 12:00 by the living God!’ Knapp was very young and good looking, from Horseneck. He was first taken to Theophilus Hunt's barn, but that (the frame of that) was doubled girted and consequently unfit. They then took him to Thomas Leggett's or the Gore lot farm, north of the village of West Farms. Theophilus Hunt, pitying so young and handsome a man intended to intercede but when the hour of execution came Delancey drew his sword and swore by God he would cut off the first damned rascal's head that dared to intercede. A black man (Lunnon) a fiddler, was the executioner and received Knapp's suit of clothes which was very fine as compensation

What a provocative and dramatic incident even though the picture it presents of Colonel James nearly does ‘away with the Errol Flynn image for all time!

But who is this Tim Knapp? His is not a name I have come across in Hufeland, or Shonnard & Spooner, or elsewhere. Young and good looking, with a noose around his neck, he sounds interesting to say the least. Only a few passages later he crops up again, this time in a narration by Andrew Corsa:

Delancey was a large, fleshy man — florid — fine looking. His horse was stolen by Tim Knapp, who had deserted from him and was hung in Theophilus Hunt's barn in West Farms. Leggett's barn?)

Aha! So Knapp was a deserter as well as a horse thief. Does this partially explain Delancey's anger? The next reference to Knapp tells us what

happened to the horse: Mrs. Thomas Ferris says:

I think the capture of Delancey's horse by Tim Knapp was the same affair in which my husband was involved. I saw the horse at Greenwich, Connecticut, after he was taken. He was sold for a very large sum to an American officer and the money shared among the captors. Several were concerned in the enterprise. Tim Knapp was the handsomest young man

This is the second reference to Knapp's personal beauty and he becomes more interesting with each passage. Then to add even more to his sympathetic image, Scott Merritt of Rye tells us:

Tim Knapp was a handsome fellow who was master of numerous accomplishments for those days. He sang, danced, and played upon the violin extremely well and had been a great favorite of his commander, Colonel Delancey until his concern with the capture of the horse, Goliah. It is said and believed that Delancey only intended to frighten him, but that when he kicked the barrel from under his feet, his neck was broken by the sudden fall. Tim was so great a favorite that no one, not even the black hang man, would remove the barrel so that the Colonel was compelled to do it himself.

So it was not Lunnon the fiddler who executed Tim, but Delancey himself. Through the frustratingly bare bones of this story a strong sense of personal tragedy is reaching across the years. Did the fact that Knapp was a 'favorite' have something to do with Delancey's severity? Feeling there has to be more to this story, I turn to the index and look up "Knapp, Tim." There are a whole sheaf of **numbas** and the very first reference throws new light on the event:

Delancey's officers, Huggefurd, Holms, Totten, Kipp and (Captain) Knapp, were present one day when it was proposed to make a trial of the speed of their horses and Tim Knapp rode the Colonel's horse which outdistanced the

other horses and Knapp took him off. Carpenter commanded the party that brought him in and told him he had better escape for Delancey would surely hang him, but Knapp said 'No.' They were passing a wood near John Treadwell's in Eastchester, when Carpenter advised his escape which he might have accomplished by jumping from his horse.

It is not too difficult to imagine that Knapp's interest in Goliah might well have sprung from the experience of riding him in this race. Delancey was famous for his fine-blooded horses and perhaps letting Tim ride one of them was a favor on his part. The next passage by Daniel Edwards of West Farms adds a new note of mystery :

Knapp deserted from Delancey's and came down afterward. Staved in Burnet Jackett's swamp on Willett's Neck, now belonging to Dr. Beach. Delancey's horse, Goliah, was for safety in a stable (formed in a haystack?). Knapp was very good looking. The horse was kept on Willett's Neck, where Dominick Lynch and Clason afterwards lived. He was taken to Thomas Leggett's barn on the hill below the village of West Farms. Lunnon, the fiddler, put the rope across a strong piece of timber while Knapp was standing on a barrel -the barrel was then kicked away. (Knapp's observation to Delancey).

Observation? What observation? Only a few pages later it is brought to light by Nicholas Berrier of Fordham:

Tim Knapp, when he found Delancey was going to hang him said, "General, if you and your corp were hanged for every horse you have stolen, where would you be?"

Knapp makes a good point, but it did not save his life. Obviously Delancey was in such a passion, swinging his sword and threatening to cut off the head of any man who interfered, that reason was not going to move him. My heart is beginning to hurt for poor Tim. The next reference comes from Mrs. Nancy Searles

of Middle Patent:

Tim Knapp was from near Horseneck and a very handsome young man. He stole Delancey's horse and took him to a place where he met Tom Ferris and some others concerned in the enterprise. They got off safely but were pursued. I think Tim Knapp was not taken till the spring after he captured Delancey's horse. Brom Bannett, I have always heard, was afterwards hanged to retaliate for Tim Knapp's death.

Another hanging? And who is Brom Barnett? Then comes this poignant reference :

Tim Knapp was illegitimate, the only child of his mother and remarkable for unusual personal beauty. His untimely death was much lamented.

More descriptions bear this out:

Tim Knapp was from Horseneck near Putnam's Hill. A very handsome young man who dressed particularly well. He belonged to a handsome family and was a great favorite with the women and very much lamented by them.

Tim Knapp was a very likable young man; a little freckled.

There is no denying that Knapp made a strong impression on those who knew him, but one wonders whether it was because of his untimely death or his appealing personal attractiveness. Perhaps both. The next passage, too long to be printed in its entirety, is a masterfully detailed description of the theft of Dehncey's horse recounted by James Hopkins of Round Hill, age 82. Hopkins had either a good imagination or an excellent memory, for he tells us in graphic detail how Ferris, Carpenter, and Tim stole down to Willett's Neck to carry off two suburb horses belonging to Delancey, Goliah, a gelding, and a mare. They waited until the small Negro boy watching them was driven in by the rain, then took the horses. With Ferris and Carpenter riding Goliah and Knapp riding the mare, they headed north. At William's

Bridge they met a party of returning Refugees who recognized the Colonel's horses and pursued them. Ferris had to abandon Goliah and take to the fields on foot while the other two men outdistanced their pursuers after a race that carried them all the way to White Plains. Ferris finally caught up with them at North Castle, where he saw the two horses 'like himself,' safe, but weary. Carpenter was later taken prisoner, and Delancey threatened to hang him, but because he was an officer he escaped Tim's fate.

After this beautiful description it is difficult to believe that there is now anything more to learn about the theft of Delancey's horses. But that notion is quickly dispelled by a later passage from Joseph Fuchs:

Tim Knapp was not along with the three that took off those horses although he might have given information about them. I have heard Ferris say he (Tim Knapp) was innocent and was hanged without judge or jury.

Knapp was innocent? Good grief! And indeed, Joseph Fuchs names Ben Green as the third abductor who spirited away Delancey's prize animals. Yet it is hard to imagine that Tim was actually an innocent victim when so many others specifically name him as one of the thieves. And would Delancey have been so intent on revenge if there had been a question of Knapp's innocence? I wonder.

Meshing all this together and trying to read between the lines, one gets a picture of a compellingly tragic human event. Tim Knapp, a popular young man of great personal charm joins the Refugees and becomes a favorite of their leader, Colonel Delancey. At one point he is even favored by the Colonel to ride his favorite horse in a race which he wins.

Later, for reasons we don't know. Knapp deserts and goes back north to join the Rebels. There, in company with two other men he slips back down to Willett's Point at night and steals the Colonel's horses. Narrowly escaping capture, they have an eventful flight back to North Castle where they stable the horses in Carpenter's barn. Later, Goliath disappears never to return to Delancey, but Knapp is captured. Delancey, in a rage, takes him to Leggett's barn, forces him on a barrel and places a noose around his neck. The men around him protest that Knapp has had no trial and Knapp himself points out that he is far from being the only horse-thief in the room. But Delancey is adamant, threatening to run through any man who dares to interfere. When **his** black servant, Lunnon, fearfully refuses to kick away the barrel, Delancey himself does it, sending Tim Knapp to an early grave.

Closing the cover on the MacDonald Papers one tries to picture this event of a spring day in an isolated barn near West Farms. Certainly it made enough of an impression on the people of that time that pieces of it were still vividly remembered more than half a century later. The tragedy of Tim Knapp's early death when he was so young and personable left a searing impression.

And Delancey? He sounds the complete villain but, remember most of our narrators are whigs or neutrals.

Certainly the Colonel must have felt betrayed by a young man whom he had favored and trusted. Not only did Knapp desert the Refugees for the upper party, but he came sneaking back to steal the Colonel's favorite horse – and Delancey was nothing if not the proud owner of superior horse-flesh. Yet how to excuse that black burst of temper that kicked away the barrel from under Knapp's feet when no man in that place would do it, not even a frightened servant. Can the dark passion that Delancey fell into be explained completely by Tim's actions? The punishment seems far in excess of the crime. Was there more to the story? If so, unfortunately for us it has drifted beneath the dust of **two** hundred years.

If you keep searching through the papers you learn that after this execution another deserter, Brom Barnett, who had fled the other way to the Refugees, was hanged by the Rebels under the direction of one Fade Donaldson. They claimed he was a deserter and a spy, but it was generally assumed that the real motive was revenge for Tim Knapp's death. Then, a few months later, Fade Donaldson himself was hanged by a party of Refugees in retaliation for Bamett. After that saner men, who were appalled by the indiscriminate killing, agreed there would be no more hangings on either side without a proper trial and jury. It was about time.

Mrs. Clague is the author of *So Wondrous Free*, an exciting love story set in Westchester's Neutral Ground during the Revolution. (See Book Review, West Hist. Vol. 54 No. 4).

*Photo copies of The McDonald Papers are in WCHS's library.
