

Chapter 3.20

**“DUTCH UNCLES”**

**Abraham Heyliger, Johannes de Graaff, Jacobus Seijs and the  
Fourth Anglo-Dutch War.**



**Johannes de Graaff (1729-1813)**, a first cousin of Abraham Heyliger. This portrait hangs in the New Hampshire State House, Concord, N.H.

## Chapter 3.20.

Johannes de Graaff (1729-1813) and Jacobus Seijs (1726-91) were Governor and Secretary respectively of St. Eustatius during the early stages of the American War of Independence. Both were related to the Heyligers, and this chapter has been added in view of their significant place in the history of St. Eustatius and the Dutch Republic.

Johannes de Graaff and Abraham Heyliger (1711-1785) were first cousins. Abraham's mother Maria Heyliger and Aletta de Graaff, Johannes de Graaff's mother, were sisters, being daughters of Johannes Salomons (Governor of St. Eustatius 1693-1700). Johannes de Graaff was therefore a first cousin twice removed of Adriana Heyliger, and a first cousin five times removed of Elinor Semple.

Jacobus Seijs married Abraham Heyliger's daughter Maria in 1753. He was thus Abraham Heyliger's son-in-law and a great-uncle, by marriage, of Adriana Heyliger. Jacobus Seijs became *Secretaris* of the island during the governorship of Johannes de Graaff, which suggests that he succeeded his brother-in-law, the sick Johannes Heyliger, Adriana's father (Chapter 3.11), in 1776.

In view of Johannes de Graaff's unique distinction of having had the King of England demand his dismissal from his job in 1777 and of being commemorated, posthumously, with a bronze plaque by the President of the USA in 1939, I have included this section to record his story. Most of the information has been drawn from parliamentary records in Cobbett and Wright's *The Parliamentary History of England from the Earliest Period to the Year 1803*. So much information has been drawn from this source that references have been omitted, since the date of a debate, or the date of a presentation of a petition in Parliament is all the information needed. Most references will be found in Volume XXII of Cobbett and Wright, covering the period from 26th March 1781 to 7th May 1782. Some of the information derives from Dutch records, a precis of which can be found in a New York Times article<sup>1</sup> of 11<sup>th</sup> February 1906 chiding Americans generally, and American historians in particular, with ignorance of their own history and the extent to which the Dutch Republic provided a model for the new American republic and the part played in it by the Dutch. The New York Times article was drawn from the Blue Book<sup>2</sup> of the Estates-General; I have taken my information from the New York Times in order to avoid having to translate the Blue Book.

Abraham Heyliger was removed in 1775 from his post as Governor of St. Eustatius, by British pressure on the Estates General in the Hague, and his place taken by Johannes de Graaff, the Constable of St. Maarten. My attempts to locate the relevant correspondence between the British Minister in the Hague and the Estates General in Amsterdam concerning the dismissal of my five-times-great-grandfather Abraham Heyliger have so far not been successful. However, in my search I came across texts of correspondence concerning his successor, Johannes de Graaff, who in 1776 was at the centre of a major diplomatic incident in Oranjestad Bay usually referred to as 'The First Salute'.

The contributions of Abraham Heyliger and Johannes de Graaff to the calamity which befell St. Eustatius in 1781 are indicated by diplomatic correspondence between the British Minister in the Hague and the Estates General, in which George III's views on the matter are conveyed to the Dutch. Johannes de Graaff ultimately eclipsed Abraham Heyliger by provoking the diplomatic fallout from *'The First Salute'*. As George III was widely disliked by the Dutch it seems likely that Johannes's reputation as Governor of St. Eustatius would have been suitably enhanced by the distinction of George III's call for his dismissal. With hindsight, however, Johannes de Graaff's governorship was a disaster for St. Eustatius and the Dutch Republic as a whole, as the following quotation<sup>3</sup> describing the situation leading up to and after the removal of Abraham Heyliger suggests:-

*"The edicts of the Estates General against the export of materials of war had not had the slightest effect. On the contrary, Mr. Heyliger, the new governor of St. Eustatius, the centre of the smuggling trade in the West Indies, was greatly interested in the business, and encouraged it with all his might. Finally, England lodged such a severe complaint about him in The Hague that the West India Company was obliged to call the governor back. Heyliger was ordered to return to the country at once and a certain de Graaff was appointed as his successor. De Graaff was worse than his predecessor. He was the type of short-sighted eighteenth century merchant who looked only for his immediate profit, who cared nothing for any further consequences as long as he got his dividends. While he omitted to curb the activity of the Dutch smugglers who made St. Eustatius their headquarters, at the same time he omitted to provide for any means of defence of the island. Neither in 1775 nor in 1776 did it come to an open break between England and the Republic. It was a time of continual misunderstandings between the two nations and mutual annoyances, but England was still too busy to enter upon a new war and the Republic was left in peace".*

Britain's interlocutor with the Estates General during this period was Sir Joseph Yorke, the British Minister in the Hague. The years leading up to the outbreak of the American War of Independence in 1775 were a difficult period in Anglo-Dutch relations, and, due in some measure to the parts played by Abraham Heyliger and Johannes de Graaff in St. Eustatius, the period from 1775 to 1780 was critical. There had been much rivalry between England and the Dutch Republic during the seventeenth century arising largely from differences in trading methods. The Republic was very rich, highly successful and embraced free trade, while England was mercantilist and had been less successful in expanding her colonial empire. England's attempts to protect her trade from the highly efficient Dutch competition contributed to three Anglo-Dutch wars, in 1652-54, 1665-67 and 1672-74; these were largely commercial disputes that did not spill over into the general population. In 1676 after the Third Anglo-Dutch War, Britain signed a treaty with the Netherlands that recognised the Dutch desire for a measure of unrestricted trade within their empire which was at odds with practices in England's empire - in which trade was less free. Complacent and commercially-oriented, the Republic began a slow decline, promoting commerce, neglecting its navy and simply concentrating on making itself and its people richer.

By the late eighteenth century Britain was seen by the Dutch as a bullying neighbour run by King George III, a buffoon nicknamed by his subjects “Farmer George”. At the heart of the problem were Dutch neutral rights arising from the 1676 treaty which entitled the Dutch to trade freely with Britain’s enemies, subject to the condition that the Netherlands remained neutral. The 1676 agreement had not been intended to include free trade in armaments with Britain’s enemies in times of war; Britain saw such activities as a breach of neutrality. The Dutch however continued with their very loose interpretation of the meaning of the word neutral during the American War of Independence which started in 1773, while Britain took steps to arrest and confiscate the cargo of any Dutch ships found carrying war materials, causing much bad feeling among the Dutch. Some Anglo-Dutch animosity may be laid at the door of the British Minister in the Hague, whose unenviable task was to pursue the wishes of George III by making representations, where, necessary, with the Estates General. The following quotation<sup>4</sup> summarises the Dutch attitude to the British Government’s representative in the Hague in the late eighteenth century:-

*“Sir Joseph Yorke belonged to that class of arrogant British diplomats who at all times and in all countries have by their overbearing behaviour done so much to prevent a good understanding between their home country and the country to which they were accredited. He was very honest, and belonged to that order of honest people who always speak the truth when it does most harm and is least called for. He represented a country which was then at the height of its glory, the foremost nation of Europe. But he represented it in a country which was then rapidly going towards the lowest depth it would ever reach. Sir Joseph unfortunately had the bad tact to let the Hollanders continually feel their changed condition, and was very apt to treat the Estates General as if they existed only by sufferance of His British Majesty.”*

So this tactless diplomat established himself with an undesirable reputation in the Netherlands, which might go some way to explaining why the Estates General did not exactly go out of their way to meet his “demands”. The ‘First Salute’, the international incident at Oranjestad on November 16<sup>th</sup> 1776, when an 11-gun salute was fired from the Oranje Fort is covered briefly in Chapter 3.12. This event was another step towards war between Britain and the Netherlands; the full story and its repercussions have generated historical accounts by the score and it is sometimes difficult to piece together truth from allegation, but the following is my attempt:-

In November 1776, the *Andrew Doria*, a warship of the Continental Navy under the command of Captain Isaiah Robinson, was on a mission to St. Eustatius to collect a shipload of arms for George Washington’s rebel army. Its mission was also to ensure the support of the island’s Governor Johannes de Graaff by providing him with a copy of the Declaration of Independence. It was hoped that Governor de Graaff would sympathise with the rebels’ revolutionary cause and continue as their principal source of arms and ammunition. The New York Times estimates that 50% of George Washington’s armaments came from St. Eustatius; much of the material was British-made, having been exported to the Netherlands with false documents by British merchants “*more fond of the shilling than the King*” and then re-exported by Dutch merchants to St. Eustatius. On arrival in Oranjestad roads flying the flag of the Continental Congress (the thirteen rebel American colonies), Captain Robinson ordered the

traditional 13-gun national salute. The Constable of the Oranje Fort sought guidance from Johannes de Graaff, who ordered an 11-gun salute in reply, hoping that he could mitigate the diplomatic fallout, by claiming that he had not given a 13-gun national salute to a rebel state. Johannes de Graaf, himself a Netherlands-educated lawyer, would probably have been aware that a similar incident had taken place at St. Croix a couple of weeks earlier with no diplomatic repercussions. However the St. Croix incident concerned an American merchant ship, not a warship. Some accounts claim that Johannes de Graaff took time out to read his copy of the Declaration of Independence, before instructing the Constable to return the salute with 11 guns.

As the *Andrew Doria* anchored in the bay, a crew member, Princeton College student John Trottmann, who had been press-ganged into the Continental Navy in Philadelphia, jumped ship and boarded a sailing ship that was about to leave for St. Kitts. Within hours he was in St. Kitts where he and his new friends gave a detailed report of the events to the island's President, Craister Greathead. Some days later, while the *Andrew Doria* was loading its infamous cargo, an American privateer, the *Baltimore Hero*, captured a merchant ship from St. Kitts off St. Eustatius, allegedly within range of the cannons in the Oranje Fort, and escorted it to Delaware. President Greathead accordingly made representations to Johannes de Graaff concerning his actions which were serious in the extreme - since the Dutch Republic and Britain were allies committed to coming to each other's aid in time of war. Since Britain did not recognise the United States of America, and was at war with George Washington's rebel army, Johannes de Graaff's actions in recognising Britain's enemy and then failing to take action to protect a friendly (British) ship under attack caused justifiable British outrage. Governor de Graaff's 11-gun ploy got him no credibility, and although he claimed that the *Baltimore Hero* was beyond the range of the guns of the Oranje Fort, I don't think anybody was inclined to believe him. President Greathead sent a comprehensive report to London covering the whole sorry tale; this eventually reached the eyes of George III who read it, was royally displeased by it, and issued instructions for a formal diplomatic protest to be lodged at the Hague by Sir Joseph Yorke. In February 1777, three months after the *Andrew Doria* incident, Sir Joseph sent the following letter to the Estates General:-

*"The complaints which I have orders to make to their High Mightinesses are founded upon authentic documents annexed to this memorial, where their High Mightinesses will see with astonishment, and I doubt not at the same time with displeasure, that their new governor, M. Van Graaff, after having permitted an illicit commerce at St. Eustatia, hath passed his forgetfulness of his duty to the point of conniving at the Americans in their hostile equipments, and the permitting the seizure of an English vessel, by an American pirate within cannon shot of that island. And in aggravation to the affront given to the English nation, and to all the powers of Europe, to return from the fortress of his government the salute of a rebel flag. In return to the amicable representations made by the president of the neighbouring island of St. Christopher, on these facts of notoriety, M. Van Graaff has answered in a manner most vague and unsatisfactory, refusing to enter at all into the subject, or into an explanation of the matter with a member of his Majesty's council of St. Christopher, despatched by the president for that purpose.*

*"After exhibiting the documents annexed, nothing remains with me but to add that the King, who had read them, not with less surprise than indignation, hath ordered me*

*to expressly demand of your High Mightinesses a formal disavowal of the salute by Fort Orange at St. Eustatia to the rebel ship, the dismissal and immediate recall of Governor Van Graaff, and to declare further, on the part of his Majesty, until that satisfaction is given, they are not to expect that his Majesty will suffer himself to be amused by mere assurances, or that he will delay one instant to take such measures as he shall think due to the interests and dignity of his crown.*

*(Signed)*

*Joseph Yorke*

*Given at the Hague Feb.21, 1777”*

After the First Salute incident, Johannes de Graaff, claiming his right to free trade under the 1676 treaty, managed to avoid being recalled to the Netherlands, but when France joined in the American War of Independence in 1778 on the American side, de Graaff's arms trading activities became even more unacceptable to Britain and he was recalled to Amsterdam for consultations with the Dutch West India Company. Little if anything was done by the Company, however, about his activities on St. Eustatius; he managed to avoid the treatment which had been meted out to Abraham Heyliger, and he returned to St. Eustatius in 1779 - to find that the Continental Navy had named two ships *de Graaff* and *Lady de Graaff*, in honour of himself and his wife. Since the Netherlands still maintained its neutral status in the war, he continued supplying armaments to the American rebels undeterred by the offence caused to Britain.

This situation did not last long, however, after the British Prime Minister, Lord North, told the House of Commons that the American war could not be won while weapons from St. Eustatius were continuing to reach the American rebels. To make matters worse, on 3rd September 1780 an American packet boat, the *Mercury*, en route from New York to Amsterdam, was intercepted off the Newfoundland banks by a British frigate, *HMS Vesta*, and a passenger was seen to throw his luggage, a large trunk, into the sea. The trunk was fished out of the water and its owner was found to be an ex-President of the Continental Congress named Henry Laurens. He was a wealthy businessman from Charleston, South Carolina, owning rice plantations and, allegedly, the largest slave trading business in North America. His trunk was found to contain some documents believed to be in code so he was treated as a spy, arrested, his documents confiscated, and he was taken to England on board *HMS Vesta*.

Arriving in Dartmouth on 1<sup>st</sup> October 1780, Laurens was taken to London where his documents were examined in some detail. The “coded” documents were in fact in uncoded Hebrew script and harmless. However, several other documents were found to be highly incriminating. One was found to contain details of a large loan from the Dutch Republic to the American rebels, another a list of wealthy Dutch individuals who supported the rebel cause and who it was thought might provide yet more funds. A third was the original of a proposed trade treaty under negotiation since 1779 between Amsterdam and the American Congress. Another was a report describing the failure of a scheme to build, in France, two warships for the American rebels; the funds had been diverted to buy arms and ammunition in Amsterdam, which had then been shipped to America via St. Eustatius. This report concluded that, rather than try to deal with the American rebels via a representative in Paris, the Netherlands would be happy to deal, secretly of course, with a special representative appointed to the Netherlands by

the American Congress. Henry Laurens, in filling that position was thus to be the American rebels' Minister in the Hague, a position provisional in the sense that it would become official when the thirteen colonies gained their independence. After Laurens was taken prisoner, it was clear that not only the Estates of Holland but the whole country was being manipulated by the regents in Amsterdam. Henry Laurens was charged with high treason and was committed to the Tower of London on 6<sup>th</sup> October; his place as representative in the Hague being taken by John Adams, who was later to succeed George Washington as President of the USA. Some agile diplomatic manoeuvring must have been necessary to appoint Adams, since only the Estates of Friesland recognised the rebel American regime; the Estates General did not.

When Henry Laurens' documents were given to Sir Joseph Yorke, he passed them to the Prince of Orange and it became clear that the Estates of Holland, the Estates General and the Prince of Orange were all unaware that the city of Amsterdam was negotiating in their name, and that enormous offence had been given to an ally, Britain. The anarchic nature of the government of the Netherlands became clear for all to see, and it was apparent that war was imminent. Britain made a big fuss, demanded apologies, guarantees etc.. to which the Estates General responded by joining the Armed Neutrality coalition, a mutual defence pact led by Russia and including several neutral European countries. Bizarrely, the Estates General omitted to advise Britain of this move, and failed to reply to Sir Joseph Yorke's demands. Britain recalled their Minister and Sir Joseph promptly left the Hague on 23rd December 1780 without saying goodbye - a declaration of war in all but name. Fortunately Catharine the Great, was unimpressed with the tactics of the Estates General, considering that war had already been declared when the Netherlands tried to join the defence pact, and Russia refused to fight. The Netherlands' French friends did not come to their aid either and, disastrously, the Dutch were left to fight Britain on their own. The Dutch Patriot Party's support for France after it had joined in the American war in 1778, and the lack of popular support for the weak Prince of Orange, William V, made Britain fear that the Netherlands, Britain's last remaining ally in Europe, would join the American war at France's side. Lord Stormont, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, put it bluntly to the House of Lords in January 1781 "*...we should not be in our present situation were it our good fortune that St. Eustatius had been destroyed, or sunk in the ocean.*"

On 3rd February 1781, six weeks after war was declared, a Royal Navy fleet of 15 ships of the line, several frigates and a 2-3000-man land force, commanded by Sir George Brydges (Admiral Rodney) arrived off Oranjestad. The indecent haste with which the Royal Navy arrived confirmed for many that Britain had been planning their attack before the arrest of Henry Laurens with his incriminating documents. Rodney is quoted as saying he would not leave the Lower Town of Oranjestad until "*that nest of vipers, which preyed upon the vitals of Great Britain, be destroyed*". The citizens of St. Eustatius were unaware that England and the Netherlands were at war and made ready to give a polite welcome to their uninvited visitors, while Admiral Rodney had the following letter<sup>5</sup> delivered from his flagship, *H.M.S. Sandwich*, direct to Governor de Graaff:-

**SUMMONS**

***Sandwich – St. Eustatius***

*3<sup>rd</sup> Feb. 1781*

*We the General Officers, commander in Chief of his Majesty's fleet and Army in the West Indies, do, in his Royal Name, demand an instant surrender of the island of Saint Eustatius, and its Dependencies with every Thing in and belonging thereto, for the use of his said Majesty.*

*We give you One Hour, from the delivery of this message, to decide. If any resistance is made, you must abide by the Consequences,*

*Signed*

*G. B. RODNEY*

*J. VAUGHAN*

The island's only protection was a 55-man militia, of whom only 12 men were trained soldiers and the 90 guns of *H.M.S. Sandwich* could have demolished the Oranje Fort within minutes, so Johannes de Graaff made a sensible decision and within the hour signed, along with the island's Secretary, Jacobus Seijs, the following instrument of surrender:-

*Governor de Graaf, not having it in his power to make any defence against the British forces which have visited this island of St. Eustatius, surrenders the same,*

*Signed: JOHANNES DE GRAAFF*

*JACOBUS SEIJS*

Without a shot being fired, Johannes de Graaff had been forced to concede sovereignty, territory and all property on the island to the British. In his reply he made no comment on the "dependencies" (the islands of St. Maarten and Saba for which Governors of St. Eustatius were also responsible), but they surrendered later anyway. As the Dutch West India Company, through the offices of the island's governors, had been responsible for the islands' defence, law and order, recruitment and maintenance of the militia etc., this event was a complete loss of credibility for the company, for the Dutch Republic, and for the individuals concerned.



Meanwhile Rodney had seized between 150 and 200 unsuspecting American, Dutch, French and Spanish ships and their cargoes in Oranjestad roads. Two thousand American sailors (Britain considered them British, of course) were then shipped back to England by the Royal Navy as prisoners-of-war, along with the unfortunate Johannes and Judith de Graaff. Johannes's place as governor was taken by a British appointee.

These events would have been a concern to the Heyliger and Moore families in view of the familial connections between them and the de Graaff and Seijs families. Johannes and Judith de Graaff, dispossessed from their home and all their worldly goods including, allegedly, even their bed seized, were under arrest. Was Uncle Jacobus, whose signature was also on the instrument of surrender, to be arrested too? In the event all private property, including personal papers, letters, account books and even food supplies, was confiscated, with especially harsh treatment for Jews, Americans, and some English residents, reducing all the islanders to a state described in the House of Commons as "*general beggary*".

Rodney allegedly noticed that an unusual number of Jewish funerals were taking place after he had seized the island, so he ordered a Jewish funeral to be halted and the coffin opened. It was found to contain money, valuables and jewellery, which were promptly seized by the marines. A number of Jewish burials were then disinterred and found to contain similar valuables. Rodney's punishment for the Jews was to imprison the menfolk, burn down the Honen Dalim (Chapter 3.12) and then release the men in time to see their property sold at auction, before being put on board *HMS Shrewsbury* bound for exile in St. Kitts. This information concerning the Jews can be found on the website of the Jewish Magazine<sup>6</sup>; I have so far found no other source to corroborate it.

One old Jewish merchant, Samuel Hoheb, was searched and found to have concealed coins in the lining of his coat; he was rewarded by seeing them confiscated and all his property sold off for one third of its value. Rodney permitted only the Dutch residents to remain, describing the English merchants of the island as "*rebels to their King*" and therefore worthy of especially harsh treatment. The treatment of Johannes and Judith de Graaff was worse; in a debate in the House of Commons on February 7<sup>th</sup> 1782 the treatment of Johannes was described in the following terms:-

*"...they considered him as a Dutchman and an Englishman; as a Dutchman they confiscated his property; as an Englishman, they confined him as a traitor, and sent him to England to be reserved for the justice of his country to pronounce upon him"*

Johannes de Graaff was in fact a wealthy man, holding \$55,000 in his house<sup>7</sup> as ready money which he counted out in gold and silver coins to be carted away to Rodney's headquarters. More than the \$47,000 of the Dutch West India Company's money in the island's 'colonial chest' was similarly taken by Rodney. The treatment of Judith de Graaff was ungentlemanly, to say the least:-

*"The British officers strip the Dutch Governor and plunder even his lady, breaking open her cabinet, and taking from her everything valuable in it: and at the same time endeavour to justify and palliate the act by blasting her character, saying that she was an usurer..."*

Captured American, French and Spanish sailors were put aboard ship bound for England, as were the de Graafs, the attorney general and others. Hansard records, however, that the de Graaffs were treated on the voyage “*with the greatest humanity*” by Commodore Hotham and Captain Halliday of the Royal Navy. On arrival in England, the captured sailors were despatched to prisons while the de Graaffs eventually arrived (allegedly, no records found) in Northampton on June 25<sup>th</sup> where they were put under house arrest.

I have yet to discover what happened to the Moores; were they considered as English, Irish, or did Adriana’s family convince Admiral Rodney that the Moores should be treated as Dutch? Considering Britain’s objections to Abraham Heyliger, I suspect that the Moores would have fled, or been deported, to St. Kitts, leaving the Heyligers to look after their house and any other property not seized by Rodney. Adriana’s mother and her new husband, Charles Hagart, would almost certainly have fled or been deported to St. Kitts; their only child, Thomas Campbell Hagart, was born there three years later.

Confiscated goods were impounded in the warehouses of Oranjestad Lower Town from where they were auctioned off to anybody who cared to attend the sale - more or less what Abraham Heyliger and Johannes de Graaff had been doing for many years. Requests for food from the islanders were bluntly refused – “*not a mouthful, not even were you starving*” was the response the Marines’ Quartermaster gave to the islanders’ requests. Many of the islanders, already in desperate straits after a severe hurricane the previous autumn, were starving and fled to St. Kitts to seek the charity of their hurricane-hit English neighbours.

On March 5<sup>th</sup>, a Dutch ship arrived in Oranjestad bringing news from the Hague that Britain and the Netherlands were at war and that Dutch merchant ships were likely to be seized on the high seas! The ship’s master, Captain de Broeck, was allowed to return to Europe with the news that the Dutch colonies in the Americas were already in British hands. This was a new low for the Dutch Republic, reduced to a laughing stock in Europe for the provinces’ inability to defend their colonies. The British Government declared open season on Dutch merchant shipping, leading to privateering booms in the North Sea and Caribbean which brought all Dutch foreign trade to a stop. Admiral Rodney even kept the orange, white and blue flag of the Dutch Republic flying over the Oranje Fort to attract more unsuspecting ships into the harbour so that he could seize them.

These events are amply described in the official record of a parliamentary debate in the House of Commons in London on 14<sup>th</sup> May 1781, in which Edmund Burke MP attempted to censure Admiral Rodney for his behaviour. The report of the debate, or at least the first twenty pages of it, is recommended reading. Unfortunately it is not clear who the “Mr. Moore” was who presented a remonstrance to Admiral Rodney and General Vaughan in the great cabin of *H.M.S. Sandwich*; he could have been William John Moore, William Moore (aged 23 and not a burgher, so not very likely), Thomas Moore, or even an unrelated Mr. Moore from St. Kitts. Whoever he was, “Mr. Moore” got short shrift from Admiral Rodney. The arrival of Admiral Hood’s squadron on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1781, in poor shape after an encounter with the French fleet off Martinique, reminded Rodney what his real job was, and he withdrew in the direction of Martinique, leaving behind a large garrison of marines. Having also rejected the warning of “Mr. Moore” that the French might invade, saying *they wouldn’t dare*, Admiral Rodney would have had to eat his words on 25<sup>th</sup> November that same year when St. Eustatius’s brief spell as a British colony came to an abrupt end when the island was retaken by the French, who later returned it to their new Dutch allies. The French Admiral, the Marquis de Brouille, treated the

islanders with politeness and humanity, allowing all citizens who wished to return from exile to do so, and restoring to them all their property that had not been stolen by Rodney and Vaughan. However, this was perhaps not as magnanimous as it sounds as most of the booty was already in France. That portion of the plundered property of the islanders, originally seized “*in the name of the King*” by Rodney, that had not been sold at auction in the Caribbean, had been sent to England in a fleet of 34 commandeered ships, 22 of which had been intercepted by a French squadron under Admiral de la Motte Piquet off the Scilly Isles<sup>8</sup> and taken to Brest. However, both Admiral de Brouille and Admiral de la Motte Piquet received high praise from Edmund Burke MP in the House of Commons on 4<sup>th</sup> December 1781 for their magnanimous treatment of civilians in their Caribbean campaigns; describing the French as “*a polite nation*”.

There was an ironic end to Admiral Rodney’s seizure of St. Eustatius. His personal financial circumstances were not in good shape in England and Rodney was intent on boosting his finances by continuing to plunder the island. Prize money was still an established custom in the Royal Navy in 1781 and plundering of enemy property under such circumstances was legal. Partly due to the fact that his ships were busy transferring booty to England, Admiral Rodney failed to intercept a French fleet en route to Chesapeake Bay to support the American and French forces in their attack on General Lord Cornwallis’s forces at Yorktown, Virginia. The battle of Yorktown, which was subsequently lost by the British, and in which Cornwallis was taken prisoner, marked the beginning of the end of the American War of Independence and Admiral Rodney suffered much criticism for his personal greed, brutality and anti-semitism during the seizure of St. Eustatius. Having auctioned off military supplies from St. Eustatius at knock-down prices to all and sundry, this material would have ended up in the hands of Britain’s enemies. Rodney thus provided supplies to the American rebels just as Abraham Heyliger and Johannes de Graaff had done. The events of 1781 in St. Eustatius rumbled on for many years, not least in the London law courts where aggrieved citizens of St. Eustatius were able to sue Rodney and Vaughan for compensation. Admiral Rodney remains, however, one of the heroes of British naval history!

The fallout from Rodney’s sacking of St. Eustatius was considerable. By June 1781, 200 of the “*almost naked and barefoot*” American sailors being held as prisoners of war in Mill Prison in Plymouth had petitioned Parliament complaining of their treatment. They were receiving worse rations than French, Spanish and Dutch prisoners, their clothes were in rags and concern was being expressed that this might affect the treatment of British prisoners in North America. However, being recognised independent countries, France, Spain and the Netherlands were allowed to supplement the diet of their own prisoners; America was not so recognised and had no agents to help their prisoners. The sailors were however grateful for much charitable assistance they had received from the local population. Indeed the men were so healthy, the House of Commons was told, that “*only*” 18 of them out of 681 had so far died, of smallpox, and the reality was that the French, Spanish and Dutch prisoners were receiving unnecessarily generous rations. Not only that, the rations the American prisoners were receiving were better than could be afforded by more than half the population of England at the time, and were indeed more generous than was provided to English troops on board transports to North America. Unsurprisingly, the petition was rejected, although orders were given to ensure that prison clothing was replaced at three-monthly intervals.

Samuel Hoheb, the Jewish merchant who had concealed coins in his coat, fared much better. Having been stripped of his life savings by Admiral Rodney, he somehow managed to get Edmund Burke to take up his case, and a petition was presented to the House of Commons on 7<sup>th</sup> February 1782. Described as a “*venerable old gentleman of near 70 years of age*”, the unfortunate Mr. Hoheb’s situation was discussed at some length and, while his petition for compensation was rejected, on the grounds that everybody else would want the same treatment, a motion was passed that “... *the attorney-general to be ordered to prosecute at the King’s expense the plunderers who had so shamefully robbed a respectable merchant and put it out of his power of doing himself justice*”.

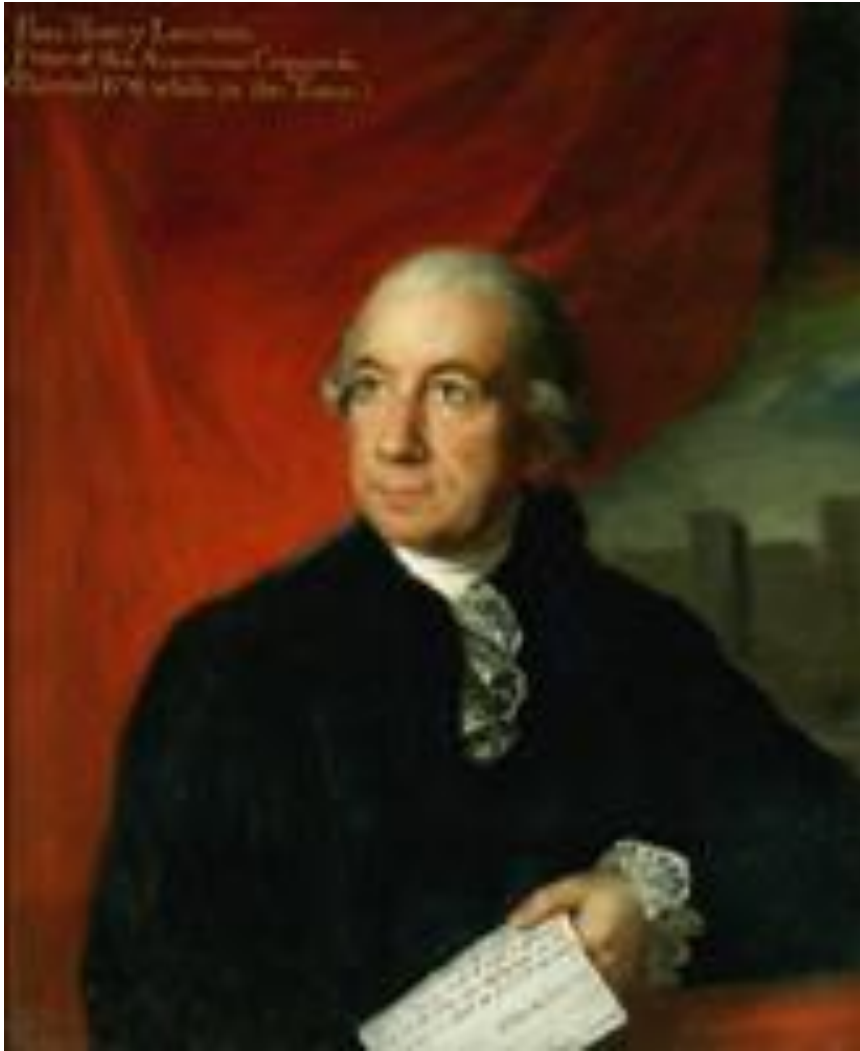
On 4<sup>th</sup> December 1781, Admiral Rodney and General Vaughan, both now appointed MPs, spoke in the House of Commons in a debate on a request by Edmund Burke for a formal inquiry into their behaviour at St. Eustatius. Having failed to have Rodney and Vaughan censured in the debate of 14<sup>th</sup> May, Burke was not about to give up on issues which, in later centuries, would be considered breaches of the Geneva Conventions. Regarding the Jews, General Vaughan stated that he had “.. *ordered a ship to take them to St. Thomas, at their request after they had been taken to St. Kitts without his knowledge; he had ordered their houses and property to be restored to them: and that they were well satisfied with his conduct, would appear from an address presented to him in their synagogue, expressive of their happiness at being under the kind government of George III*”. The synagogue, it should be noted, being the one burnt down, allegedly, by Admiral Rodney before (?) the Jews were exiled to St. Kitts. General Vaughan was unable, no reason being given, to read his own report on the seizure of St. Eustatius and he had to give it to Admiral Rodney to read for him. He claimed to have received not a penny from the plundering activities, all of which he carried out in the name of the King, and all benefit he assumed would accrue to the Crown. He gave no explanation of why the islanders’ food supplies were seized, or of the value to the Crown of the merchants’ account books. Unfortunately the Honourable Members of the House were living in a dream world on 4<sup>th</sup> December 1781, since only the previous week, Admiral de Brouille had siezed the island for France, overpowering the garrison of Marines which General Vaughan had left behind on 3<sup>rd</sup> May to keep the island secure. Although the MPs did not know it, St. Eustatius was no longer British even as they were speaking, and life was about to become a lot more difficult for General Vaughan.

Henry Laurens’s stay in the Tower of London was no bed of roses either; among the deprivations he suffered were the means with which to write, and, being charged with high treason, he was not eligible for exchange as a prisoner-of-war. His case was discussed in the Commons on 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1781; the Lieutenant of the Tower was called to the bar of the House, and Henry Laurens’s complaint of “*very severe and unprecedented hardship*” was discussed. It was concluded that “*all was to be proved*” and Mr. Laurens’s petition was “*left on the table*”, a euphemism for sweeping under the carpet. However on 17<sup>th</sup> December the House debated a proposal by Edmund Burke to introduce a Bill which would provide for a prisoner exchange for Mr. Laurens. This would also regularise the unfortunate situation concerning Henry Laurens’s right of habeas corpus which was being violated. According to Edmund Burke, while Mr. Laurens had been treated well by Captain Keppel of *HMS Vesta*, his treatment in the Tower was disgraceful. Not only had he been deprived of pen and paper with which he could have written cheques to purchase some of the necessities of life for himself, but the

Tower authorities had presented him with a bill of £99-10s for his board and lodging. Henry Laurens's memorable response to this insult had been to reply "... I believe I shall be obliged to quit my lodgings, for really they are too dear for me; I cannot afford to pay so high for them".

Conditions in the Tower, the House was told, were worse than in the Bastille – "...there though looked on as the horridest jail of a despotic and arbitrary government, the provision was ridiculously grand". While access to Mr. Laurens by his son had been denied, the situation was now one of some embarrassment since "Mr. Laurens's son, a brave, a worthy, and a polished officer in the American service, had Lord Cornwallis in his custody, and that the treatment of his noble prisoner was directly the reverse of the treatment experienced by his father who was then locked up in a prison of which he (Cornwallis) was governor".

However, Edmund Burke's version of events was challenged, Mr. Laurens having told the Governor of the Tower that "no humanity or civility could exceed that which had been exercised towards him in his confinement, and that he felt the utmost gratitude for it". The Prime Minister (Lord North) said he thought the allegations of mistreatment were untrue and the debate moved on to a possible prisoner exchange with General Burgoyne, who had been taken prisoner in America, released on parole and was sitting in the House. This was not considered a fair exchange, since Burgoyne only held the rank of Lieutenant-General, was already released, in effect, and had shown no enthusiasm for relinquishing his parole to return to an American jail. A Lieutenant-General for a President was not considered a fair swap either. A proposal to exchange Laurens for Lord Cornwallis was similarly rejected as Cornwallis also only held the rank of Lieutenant-General. The House agreed on December 17<sup>th</sup> that Mr. Burke should be allowed to introduce his Bill, but just after Christmas, on 31<sup>st</sup> December, it was agreed that Henry Laurens would, after all, be exchanged for Lord Cornwallis and he was released in early 1782, the only American ever to have been imprisoned in the Tower. He moved on to Paris and his signature appears, alongside that of John Adams, on the Treaty of Paris of 1784 which settled the end of the American War of Independence. His parting shot was to add, on the day the treaty was to be signed, a clause prohibiting Britain from "*carrying away any negroes or other property of American inhabitants*", a clause which subsequently caused difficulties between the British and American governments for many years. The portrait of Mr. Laurens (below), painted while he was in the Tower, does not give the impression of severe and unprecedented hardship. Perhaps being detained at His Majesty's pleasure was, relatively speaking, unprecedented hardship for a wealthy slave owner.



**Henry Laurens.** The only American ever imprisoned in the Tower of London. In the top left are the words “*Hon. Henry Laurens. President of American Congress. Painted 1781, while in the Tower*”

After being held under house arrest in Northampton for a short while, the de Graaffs were allowed to proceed to Amsterdam and from there they eventually returned to St. Eustatius where Johannes took no further part in the administration of the island; he appears to have been largely ignored by the islanders. He died in 1813 and the location of his burial place is unknown. His cousin, Abraham Heyliger, by contrast, came out well from the calamity he did so much to help create. The war with England had a disastrous effect on the Dutch economy, and St. Eustatius’s attempts to secure a foothold as an entrepot in the future trade with an independent USA failed. The newly-independent Americans showed little interest in trading European-made goods through St. Eustatius when they could deal direct with the British or the Dutch. However in 1785 Abraham was rewarded with the Governorship of the Dutch Leeward Islands, but he did not enjoy his new-found prestige for long; he died in November the same year aged 74. Adriana Heyliger, after marrying William Moore in 1779, ultimately inherited much of Abraham’s wealth when her three brothers died leaving her the only surviving grandchild, and she stayed on the island for the rest of her life. Adriana’s inheritance enabled William to buy the *De Goudsteen* plantation and William became a prominent and wealthy

burgher of Oranjestad – this was not an enviable position to be in when the Dutch Republic's new French friends declared war on them in 1794, precipitating the Republic's final collapse. In 1795 William was elected to negotiate the island's new status with a visiting delegation from the new French Revolutionary Government.

Finally, in 1939 during a visit by President F. D. Roosevelt, the thanks of the American people to Johannes de Graaff for his action in ordering the world's first diplomatic recognition of the United States of America were recorded by the presentation of a commemorative plaque which was placed in the Oranje Fort, where it can be seen to this day:-

**In commemoration of the salute to the flag of the United States fired in this fort on 16<sup>th</sup> November 1776 by order of Johannes de Graaff in reply to a national gun-salute fired by the United States brig-of-war *Andrew Doria* under Captain Isaiah Robinson of the Continental Navy of the United States of America was first formally acknowledged to a national vessel by a foreign official.**

**Presented by Franklin Delano Roosevelt  
President of the United States of America**

## References

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- <sup>3</sup> The Fall of the Dutch Republic. Hendrik Willem van Loon (1913). Elibron Classics 2006, p.207.
- <sup>4</sup> Idem., p.207.
- <sup>5</sup> The Rodney Papers (1789:10). Public Record Office (National Archives), London.
- <sup>6</sup> Jewishmag.com/history/JewsofStEustatius
- <sup>7</sup> History of St. Eustatius. Dr. J. Hartog. Central USA Bicentennial Committee of the Netherlands Antilles, Aruba, 1976. p.93.
- <sup>8</sup> St. Eustatius, Treasure Island of the Caribbean. Eric O. Ayisi, Africa World Press, Trenton N.J. p.20

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