

“A True Servant of the Lord”: Nils Collin, the Church of Sweden, and the American Revolution in Gloucester County

Richard Waldron

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I want to talk with you this afternoon about Nils Collin, whom we in New Jersey call Nicholas Collin (he did change his name to Nicholas eventually). From 1770 until 1786, Collin was a minister at the church at Swedesboro, Gloucester County, a town that often was still called “Racoon,” even after its official change of name in the 1760s. From 1773, he was the pastor at Swedesboro and of an associated church at Pensneck (now called Pennsville), down on the road to Salem. Both of these were Swedish Lutheran churches, and Collin was a minister of the Church of Sweden.

Sweden’s official state church managed a mission in the Delaware Valley from 1697 until 1786, ministering to both the spiritual and the cultural needs of the local population that was descended from the settlers of New Sweden, Old Sweden’s colony on the Delaware from 1638 to 1655. Local people had invoked the mission in the 1690s, alarmed by the influx of Quakers into West New Jersey and then Pennsylvania that began in the mid-1670s.

Our chief source for Collin’s New Jersey ministry (he also pastored in Philadelphia from 1786 until his death in 1831) is his journal, or rather an epitome or summary he wrote after the original was lost in a shipwreck while on its way back to Sweden in 1786. Though Collin was fluent in English, he wrote the journal and its reconstruction in Swedish. Amandus Johnson translated and published it with a biography of Collin in 1936.

In the journal Collin recorded activities in his congregations and their wider community, as well as events related more strictly to church life (though I don’t think that church and community were separable then, nor are they now). He wrote about marriages, baptisms, and burials. He also tells us a great deal about the local politics of the American Revolution in Gloucester County, the fears and alarms the war caused, its battles and skirmishes, and relations between the sects in southern New Jersey during the 18th century. Religious politics and Collin’s status as a minister of Sweden’s official state church help us to understand his experience of war and revolution in southern New Jersey in the period from 1776 to 1779 or ’80.

In 1776, Collin recorded “much anxiety here about the war.” British warships and rebel galleys fought near the Pensneck church, and the area was in constant alarm after the British victories around New York City. The British Army, he wrote, “spread itself over [New] Jersey.”

Collin was direct and insightful in his observations—he treated his journal in much the same way as he treated his neighbors and the members of his congregation. He wrote incisively about the eternal difference between what we say and what we do and the dislocations war brings. He wrote that “all” had been eager for the war, “but as the fire came closer, many drew away, and there was much discussion among the people.” He added that while some “concealed themselves in the woods, or within their houses,” others “were forced to carry arms, others offered opposition and refused to go.” Things became so bad that people feared to come to services at his churches because the local (that is, rebel) authorities used that as an opportunity “to get both horses and men.”

Collin did not favor the American cause, but it seems clear that he was opposed to violence and bloodshed in no matter what form. We see this in his summary for 1776 in his recounting of the shooting and escape of a young man who refused to fight against the British. Collin intervened to stop an ensuing “dreadful” quarrel among his neighbors from ending in bloodshed. He chastised the people for their “mad, un-Christian behavior,” and refused to conduct services at the Pensneck church “until they behaved better,” and he wrote that he preached in private houses in Pensneck until the following spring.”

On February 4, 1777, Collin was taken prisoner by the New Jersey militia. He claimed that the officer in charge was “a man of rather bad character, and his religion, if he had any, was Moravian.” This remark was not innocent. There was a rivalry of longstanding in the Delaware Valley between Moravian and Church of Sweden ministers, and in general the Swedish ministers had a low opinion of Moravians, as they did of any kind of pietist or English or British dissenter, be they Quakers, Presbyterians, Baptists, or Methodists. Collin wrote that his arrest had been ordered by a “worldly-minded . . . old Swede” and his Presbyterian son-in-law, who together were “the Magistracy under the new government.”

Collin was to be marched to an unnamed destination he said would be about 100 English miles away. He was closely guarded and expected he wrote to be shot at any moment. But he and his escort had not gone far when a local patriot, the physician Bodo Otto, used his considerable influence to get Collin released. Collin characterized Otto as both kind-hearted and a German Lutheran.

Collin was given a choice of removing himself to the British, and that the very next day; or of giving his oath of allegiance to the new government. He liked neither alternative. On the one hand, he did not want to have to sell his “small possessions” quickly and for less than their value. On the other hand, he wrote that as a Swedish subject “I could not give my oath of allegiance to any but my own government.” He did negotiate a way, though, to give his oath, “short and adapted to persons of very different quality,” and

containing an “explicit reservation” that he would be allowed to remain neutral and do “nothing which would be unworthy of me as a Swedish subject.” In his journal Collin noted that unlike “other American clergymen in the place” he could not urge people to support or participate in rebellion: To do so was both against his “conviction” and “contrary to [his] official duties.” He concluded this episode by writing that “I took no part in their factions, but to chastise godless persons and to prevent arson and theft is the duty of a true servant of the Lord, even if it costs [him] his life.”

Clearly Collin’s neighbors had marked him as lacking in sympathy for the rebel cause, if he were not an out-and-out loyalist. This perception goes far beyond Collin’s reaction to the previous year’s events. The perception of Collin, and the Swedish ministers as a group, is embedded in the history of the Swedish mission, and the way the Swedes comported themselves with respect to other Christian sects.

Remember that until 1776, the Swedish missionaries were the guests of the British government and the Church of England. The Church of Sweden’s mission was in fact the only religious agency of any government at work in the Middle Colonies, and each missionary showed his awareness of that fact by visiting the bishop of London for a letter or passport or introduction while on his way to North America, and by calling on a power-that-be in the Delaware Valley on arrival, usually whoever was in charge in the state house in Philadelphia.

Moreover, during vacancies in Anglican or Swedish pulpits, the ministers of one denomination served the congregations of the other, when it was physically possible for them to do so, as, for example, the ministers at Raccoon and Pensneck so often did at St. John’s Anglican church in Salem.

And so it is possible, probable, I think (though I’ve no evidence to support what I think), that public opinion around Swedesboro and Pensneck held the Reverend Collin to be an English sympathizer. And Collin’s behavior during the remainder of 1777 and throughout 1778 and ’79 must have strengthened that belief among at least some of his neighbors.

In September 1777 the British occupied Philadelphia after beating the Continental army on the Brandywine. On October 4, the Americans lost again, at Germantown. On the 22d, though, Hessian troops assaulted Fort Mercer at Red Bank in Gloucester County, not far from Collin’s Swedesboro church, and the Continentals and the New Jersey militia won a resounding victory.

Next day, the 23d or 24th, Collin and many others went “to inspect the place,” he with a few friends of the “ruling faction.” Collin, multitasking and endlessly curious, was seen to be making drawings of the battle site and “some rascals” accused him of spying. Collin was arrested again and threatened with summary hanging. He was released after giving his word to become a prisoner again on demand. Collin wrote that “this was a narrow escape, because this man [the American commander] was [indeed] cruel, and was said to have executed a number of people.”

Collin, indeed, chose to visit the German, not the American, wounded, and pray with and comfort them in German. Watching the Hessian soldiers read from their prayer books led Collin to comment that “religion makes such a glorious difference in the case of soldiers, when their courage is tested to its utmost.” He also reported for 1777 that three members of his congregation died that autumn “through this unhappy war.”

Collin quartered some American troops that fall, including a Presbyterian minister who wanted permission to preach in Collin’s church on Christmas Day (Collin wrote that the man would have done so even without permission). After the Swedish communion service, the troops and the Presbyterian minister entered the church. Collin wrote that many of his [Collin’s] congregation were unhappy with this event, “although strong Republicans, because a religious prejudice is often apparent even in those, who otherwise are rather indifferent in their own religion.”

On the last day of February 1778, General Anthony Wayne passed through Swedesboro on the back end of a famous victualling raid for the American army. With him were 300 badly-clothed troops. They left the next day, pursued closely by British troops. Collin’s comment on Wayne was that he was a “well-bred gentleman” who showed the Swedish pastor “great respect.”

Collin reported a run-in of sorts with a British officer and his troops. While Collin took no harm and was barely disturbed by the episode, the soldiers killed some of his hens and ducks, prompting him to comment that the “English soldiers were undisciplined and cannot always be controlled.” They robbed their friends and their enemies “in the most despicable manner, and sometimes with the permission of the officers.” Thus Collin accounted for what he called “their slight success” in the war.

Conditions around Swedesboro were wretched until the British left Philadelphia at the end of June 1778. Collin thought by then—following the British capture of American forts on both sides of the river the previous November—that “it looked as though America would be conquered.” He reported that local people had begun to trade with the British for sugar, tea, “syrup,” specie and “strong liquors” even in the midst of the 1777 campaigns for Philadelphia and control of the Delaware.

He wrote movingly about the war’s grievous, nonmilitary effects. “[E]verywhere distrust, fear, hatred and abominable selfishness were met with.” The war divided families, and all were subject to the “constant and barbarous roving and plundering, and destroying” by Americans and British alike.

They smashed mirrors, tables and china, etc., and plundered women and children of their most necessary clothing, cut up the bolsters and scattered the feathers to the winds, burned houses, whipped and imprisoned each other, and surprised people when they were deep asleep.

At the end of March 1778, local authorities arrested 15 people for trading with the British. About half were members of Collin's congregations. Three weeks later a force of loyalists and British troops just missed bagging a militia force and burned the schoolhouse where the 15 had been imprisoned. Collin remonstrated with them that such acts ill-served the king [of England]. The militia returned and in the ensuing fight "both parties aimed so badly, that the bullets flew in all directions, so that it was best to stay inside."

The bad relations between those for the king and those for the new American government wore on in 1778: On Easter Day a man accused of the "forbidden trade" was flogged so severely that he later died. Collin was careful to note that he was married to a woman of Swedish parents.

In May some American troops took over one of his churches for some weeks and "filled it with filth and vermin, so that no divine service could be held."

Toward the end of June 1778, the British army left Philadelphia and marched across New Jersey to battle at Monmouth Court House and escape to New York City. Afterward a commission inquired about local people who had helped the British. Many had to pay fines, and some lost their property. Nineteen were condemned to die for fighting for the king. Collin visited these in prison since some "in a way belonged to the [Swedish] congregation." After detailing the depredations local people had endured from rebels and loyalists alike, the Swedish pastor wrote this epitaph on the war that was about to recede from Gloucester County and its consciousness:

From all this it is apparent how terrible this Civil war
Raged, although during the whole time only one man was
shot because both parties fought not like real men with
sword and gun, but like robbers and incendiaries. The fact
that no important detachments were stationed here contributed greatly
toward such barbaric licence, as the province was too wild and of less
importance, so that straggling parties under lesser and poor officers were
allowed to proceed according to pleasure.

The war moved away after that. Collin reported few alarms thereafter, though he spent some pages in the journal for 1779 describing the end of a young man who was hung for bearing arms for the king after he had once been pardoned for that very offense. Collin attended the man's last days and death and took no side, not overtly, except to write that he "declined to have anything to do with things pertaining to these deplorable political matters, [and] said that unfortunately many of the best Americans had fallen on both sides. . . ."

He summarized his wartime experiences this way:

I thank God Almighty who gave me strength to go
through this fiery ordeal with Christian steadfastness

and the good conscience of never having taken a step from the path of honor either from hope or fear. As far as I was concerned personally, it was most difficult to suffer in the affairs of strangers; for my own dear native country and my own beloved King, I would gladly have been imprisoned, bled and died.

How can we generalize about Pastor Collin's experience? First, by comparing it with those of two of his missionary colleagues, who left brief, tantalizing clues to their wartime experiences.

Mathias Hultgren ministered at Philadelphia's Gloria Dei Church for part of the time Collin was in New Jersey (Collin succeeded Hultgren and it was Hultgren who was shipwrecked with Collin's journal in 1786). Hultgren's diary for these years contains almost nothing about the war, since he only arrived in Philadelphia in October 1779, more than a year after the British abandoned the city. But even then he noted that "the English had destroyed all the pews in Wicacoa Church [Gloria Dei], as she was by them used as a hospital." He said the church was not fit for divine services.

Lars Girelius was the pastor at Holy Trinity Church in Wilmington during the Revolution. In the only entry in the churchbook that has anything to do with war and revolution (and a deeply confusing entry it is), Girelius wrote that militia were quartered in the church for about two weeks in August and September of 1776 or 1777, "which made all public worship cease" until the British commander ordered Girelius "to perform Divine service for his men." (509-10)

That Collin's Philadelphia and Wilmington colleagues had little to say about the war we can explain in two ways. First is that these men, Collin included, possessed a genuine spirituality, a sense of having a spiritual mission that overrode most material concerns. Second, either the British or a rebel government controlled those cities at various times. It was never the case in either that no one was in control, as happened in Gloucester County during 1777 and 1778.

Collin did live through a civil war and while he tried to remain above it, to serve men as he served God, his church, and his sovereign, the way he did those things drew him into the fray that he said he meant to avoid. And I cannot imagine the other ministers of the Swedish mission whom I know well—Ericus Björck and Israel Acrelius—doing much differently had something like the American Revolution occurred during their times in America, 1697 to 1714 for Björck, 1749 to 1756 for Acrelius.

Nils Collin was serving his king and his archbishop in a foreign land, on the sufferance of another king and another state church. He also was serving a spiritual, not a material purpose. But he was wrong in his belief that his acts were not political: both they and his journal were highly political. He took a side—rather, I suppose, he made a side, his own side-- and the side was that of reason, order, and traditional authority. He sided against revolution and violence. He manifested that choice by who he chose to chastise—rebel

sympathizers in December 1776, for example—and who he chose to succor—Hessian wounded after the battle of Red Bank, the young parole-breaker in 1779. In an area of the new nation and at a time when neither the British nor the new American government was firmly in control for very long in the period from '76 to '79, to make these sorts of choices was to choose against the rebel side. It was Collin's goodness as a man, most people's reluctance to do much harm to a man of God, and Collin's clear good standing among Gloucester County's elite—men such as Bodo Otto—that combined to protect him from the consequences of his contrary and flamboyant choices of the souls in which he invested his time.

By Collin's own testimony, his local community and his congregations were divided deeply, politically and religiously. We see the political division in his identification of certain Swedish Americans who favored each side in the political and military struggle—remember that old Swede who ordered his arrest in 1777. We see the religious division in his own relentless categorization of people by their religious affiliation. Members of his own church and the Church of England ranked at the top of his hierarchy; next came German Lutherans; then the raucous mob of dissenters and pietists—Presbyterians, Baptists, Quakers, Moravians, and Methodists—all perpetrators of the promiscuous freedoms of the American milieu. The religious unrest in his congregation and its community was historical, the product of a steady erosion of the Swedish-American social and economic position along the Delaware and the consequent pressure for Collin's people to become more and more American in order to thrive in American society.

Nils Collin's view of the bad effects of American religious freedom on a traditional sense of community among Swedish Americans was fairly typical of the Swedish ministers' reaction to the bewildering lack of religious standards and authority in America—lack, at least in terms the Swedes were used to. After all, in Sweden, a minister was a representative of the government and as such could call at least in theory on the government's coercive power to help him to maintain order, which was always a major function of the Church in Sweden. A few of the Swedish missionaries—Andreas Rudman, early in the century, for example—seem not to have let freedom distract them from helping their people to know Jesus Christ and gain eternal life. A few others, especially Carl Magnus Wrangel, just before Collin's time in America, adapted themselves and the way they conducted their mission to the American style of church organization and worship (too well in Wrangel's case, for he, the leader of the mission in the 1760s, lost the allegiance of his colleagues because of his alleged pietism). Nils Collin, he who after nine years' pastoring in Racoon and Pensneck, could still refer to the local people as "strangers," remained a prisoner of the mores of the Swedish mission, at least for the time he spent in New Jersey.

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