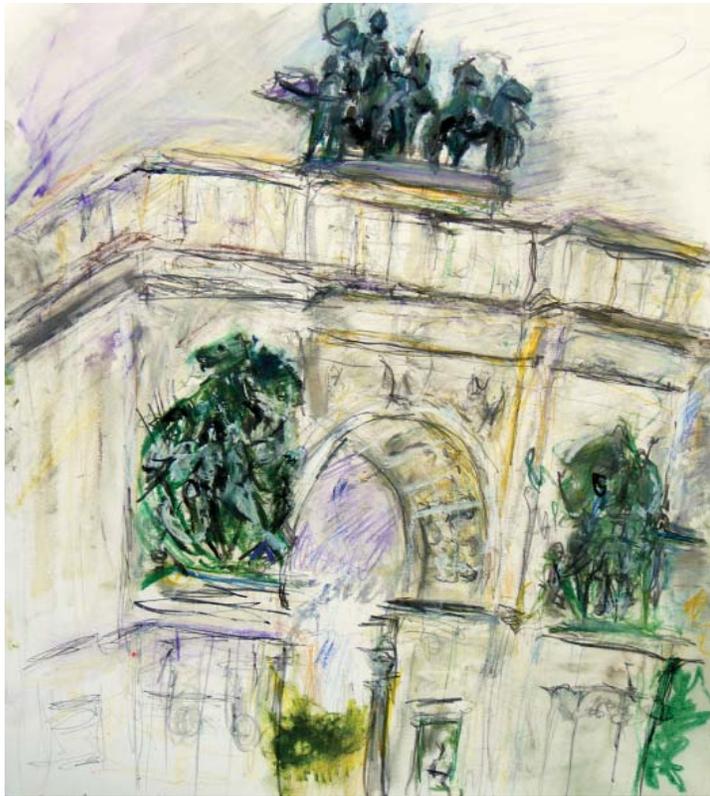# HMS Jersey: Absences and Memory from the Battlefields of Brooklyn by Howard Skrill

detail from Mary Cuddihee Skrill's Wallabout Bay, Pencil on Paper, 2015

HMS JERSEY (HMſ Jerſey) ©2015,

Howard Skrill, 172 Fifth Ave., Brooklyn, NY, 11217,
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Howard Skrill, Grand Army PLaza Arch, Oil Pastel, Oil Stick, Pencil, Chalk Pastel on Paper, 14" x 17". ©2014

In 1902, the scuttled wreck of the HMS Jersey was discovered in its watery grave in Wallabout Bay in Brooklyn, New York. During the American Revolution, the Jersey was a makeshift prison for American prisoners of war and was in use for the duration of the conflict. On July 4th, 1800, Jonathan Russel of Providence, Rhode Island described conditions on the Jersey: "It was in the dungeons of our inhuman invaders; it was in the loathsome and pestiferous prisons, that the wretchedness of our countrymen still makes the heart bleed. It was there that hunger, and thirst, and disease, and all the contumely that cold-hearted cruelty could bestow, sharpened every pang of death. Misery there wrung every fibre that could feel, before she gave the Blow of Grace which sent the sufferer to eternity. On board one only of these Prison ships above 11,000 of our brave countrymen are said to have perished."

The Americans were crammed together below deck without access to fresh air or adequate food and water. The holds were perpetually dark because they were so overcrowded that oil lamps couldn't stay lit. The Jersey crawled with vermin and Americans died in large numbers. Americans, captured in the Battle of Brooklyn in the summer of 1776, the Battle of Fort Washington in Washington Heights in the Autumn of 1776 and other near and distance skirmishes, were interred in the Jersey and other prison ships moored in Brooklyn harbor.

The Jersey plied its brutal trade for the duration of the American Revolution. The last of the eight thousand Americans held in its hulls were released from it in 1783, when Great Britain finally abandoned its effort to suppress the rebellion. The British burned the ship as they abandoned it. Ruined and charred, it remained visible in the harbor decades later before sinking to the bottom of the bay.

Brooklyn was a sparsely populated area of rich farmland and gently rolling palisades dotted with hamlets in the years leading up the revolution and as the revolution flared. Brooklyn Heights, sitting at the edge of the East River, was a scattering of workhouses, shops, taverns and homes clustered around a ferry dock. Heavily armed fortifications were scattered in the Heights and up the Guan palisades that rises towards modern day Carroll Gardens and Fort Greene and further to the East. Brooklyn swarmed with soldiers in 1776, regulars in the American army that had recently been established, American militiamen, Hessian German mercenaries, British colonial invaders and loyalist militias. Russel was able to view the Jersey moored in Wallabout Bay, offshore of what is today's Brooklyn Navy Yard. He remarks "Her wreck still remains, and at low ebb, presents to the world its accursed and blighted fragments. Twice in twenty-four hours the winds of Heaven sigh through it, and repeat the groans of our expiring countrymen; and twice the ocean hides in her bosom those deadly and polluted ruins, which all her waters can-

Howard Skrill, Soldiers from the Esst Pier of Grand Army PLaza Arch, Oil Pastel, Oil Stick, Pencil, Chalk Pastek on Paper, 14" x 17". ©2014

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Howard Skrill, Union Soldier from Battle Hill, Greenwood Cemetery,
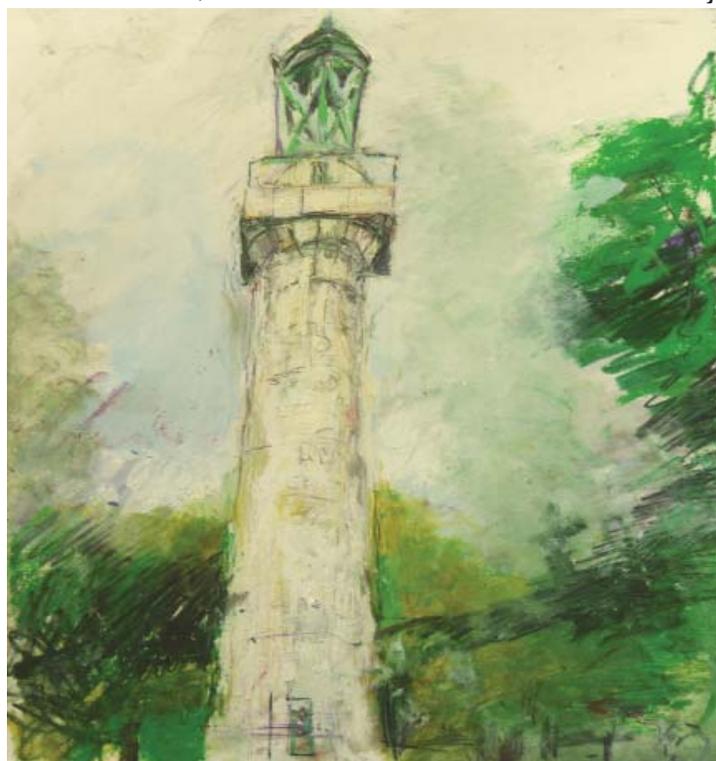Oil Pastel, Oil Stick, Pencil, Chalk Pastek on Paper, 14" x 17". ©2014

not purify". American soldiers' remains were on the ship when it was set ablaze. The bodies were still on the wreck as Russel decried its mocking presence in 1800. When the ship finally sunk from view, they sank along with it. Their unclaimed corpses remained at the bottom of Wallabout Bay for over a century as New York City and the City that eventually became the Borough of Brooklyn arose along the shores of the East River. Finally in 1902, they were recovered. Russel suggested that "there ought to be raised a Colossal Column whose base sinking to Hell, should let the murderers read their infamy inscribed upon it; and whose capital of Corinthian laurel ascending to Heaven, should show the sainted Patriots that they have triumphed". The towering Prison Ship Martyrs Monument, built a century later to finally inter the remains of Americans dredged from the wreck of the Jersey and other prison ships, is a version of that column. It is constructed on the highest point in Fort Greene Park. The massive, tapered, off-white column is topped by a bronze funerary urn that once contained a light that could have been seen from Wallabout Bay. The monument was dedicated in 1908. With the Jersey finally gone from Wallabout Bay, the beacon, if it still functioned, would shine instead into the windows of residential towers and office build-

ings that are spouting up between Wallabout Bay and Fort Greene Park. A descriptive plaque describing the monument's purpose was placed into storage and was not replaced until 1960. An elevator inside the monument stopped functioning decades ago and was never repaired. Bronze eagles flanking the monument were continually vandalized and removed and the crypt bearing the remains has repeatedly been violated.

Brooklyn was the largest battlefront in the Revolution, and the hulking ruin of the Jersey as witnessed by Russel, demonstrates Brooklyn's central role in the conflict even after Brooklyn ceased being an active battlefield.

The British had been amassing an enormous colonial army, augmented by Hessian German mercenaries, on Staten Island, for most of the summer of 1776. The United States of America came into being in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in early July of 1776. In the last week of August, the British and Hessians began sailing into Gravesend Bay in modern Fort Hamilton, Brooklyn and marched northward in direction of American fortifications of Brooklyn Heights. The army was enormous and advanced in separate columns. The larger British column headed east before turning north and the smaller British column followed the western shore of the East River up current day 3rd and 4th avenues in Brooklyn. Hessian troops advanced between the two British columns.

George Washington, from his headquarters in Manhattan, divided his smaller American army

Howard Skrill, Prison Ship Martyrs' Memorial, Oil Pastel, Oil Stick,
Pencil, Chalk Pastel on Paper, 14" x 17". ©2014

Howard Skrill, Male Figure from the World War II Memorial Cadman Plaza, Oil Pastel, Oil Stick, Pencil, Chalk Pastel on Paper, 14" x 17". ©2014

into two parts, uncertain whether the British would attack Manhattan or Brooklyn. The outnumbered Americans on the Brooklyn side were concentrated on the south slope of the Guan Heights, that gently rose from Brooklyn Heights towards the northern entrance of what is now Prospect Park. The palisade levels out into the modern neighborhood of Prospect Heights. The Americans were in the direct path of the Hessians and were being flanked by the British. On August 27th, the smaller British contingent confronted Americans at Battle Hill, the highest natural point in Brooklyn. The hill is in Greenwood Cemetery in Sunset Park. The British troops at Battle Hill were the smaller of the two British columns, but they vastly outnumbered the Americans defending the hill. After a fierce engagement, the Americans were forced to retreat towards Brooklyn Heights.

A large beige obelisk was erected upon Battle Hill, flanked by life sized bronze statues of four dashing Union soldiers from the Civil War. A bronze statue of Minerva was erected by an immigrant industrialist, Charles Higgins, to correct the absence of monuments to the Battle of Brooklyn at Battle Hill. Revolutionary war fatalities were often buried where they fell. Underneath Minerva, the Civil War soldiers and Greenwood's 'permanent residents' are certainly unacknowledged remains of American and British soldiers who perished in the encounter.

In the final days of August 1776, thousands of

Americans, British and Hessian Germans were scattered in miles of encampments and fortifications. To wander through Brooklyn is to trace the paths taken by these soldiers. To the West of Prospect Park Lake, tucked into an overgrown rise, a small, austere Obelisk was erected to honor four hundred Marylanders, under the command of General William Alexander, who made a final stand against the invaders at Park Slope's Old Stone House. When the larger British column reached the Guan Heights, they turned east along the palisades' ridgeline before turning towards the American encampment in what would become Prospect Park's Long Meadow. The British, having split their troops, forced the much smaller and less experienced Americans to engage British troops descending upon them from the north, east and west. The Hessians advanced upon them from the south. Swarmed by disciplined and well seasoned British Colonial troops, aided by German mercenaries, the Americans resisted for a few hours before abandoning the Guan Heights and fleeing down a Westerly slope towards into the appropriately named modern neighborhood of Park Slope. Americans captured in the skirmishes of Guan Heights and Battle Hill were interred in the Jersey and on other prison ships.

The Soldiers and Sailors Monument, also known as the Grand Army Plaza Arch, celebrates the preservation of the American union in the Civil War. The monument was constructed along the ridgeline of the midpoint of the Guan Heights. The monument stands across a traffic island from the entrance to Prospect Park. The park was constructed over the principal battlefield of August 1776. Construction of the park unearthed human remains from the battle. Along Prospect Park's East Drive descending gradually from the Guan Heights, a busy bike and jogging path, are modest plaques and an eagle on a pedestal rising from undergrowth noting significant encounters in the battle.

The Lefrak Lakeside Center ice staking rink, opened in 2014, was constructed along the line of advance of Britain's principal column. A bronze statue of Abraham Lincoln stands within sight of the rink. The statue was originally located further north on the Guan Heights, by Grand Army Plaza, but was relocated to the heart of the battlefield. North of the Lincoln are a series of Portrait busts of prominent musicians and composers on high pedestals in an area designated as the 'Concert Grove'. Adjacent to the Lefrak rink is a monument to the dead of the First World War with a shrouded female figure reaching from behind to embrace a doughboy. Names of Brooklyn's dead from WWI are listed in two large bronze plaques that

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Howard Skrill, Lincoln from Prospect Park, Oil Pastel, Oil Stick, Pencil, Chalk Pastek on Paper, 14" x 17". ©2014

extend as semi-circular wings attached to the reddish stone monument. Revolutionary war soldiers' remains may well be buried under the feet of the doughboy and the malevolent figure ensnaring him.

The Old Stone House, painstakingly reconstructed at Third Street and Fifth Avenue in Park Slope, was originally known as the Vechte-Cortelyou House. The cottage was sandwiched between the easterly slope of the Guan Heights and Guan [Gowanus] swamp to the West. General Alexander's Marylanders turned in direction of thousands of pursuing British and Hessian troops and slowed their advance. Half of General Alexander's company fell under enemy fire. The rest of the Americans slipped over a small bridge spanning the Guan swamp and retreated to their fortifications closer to the East river. The Marylanders' stand most likely saved the American army and perhaps the Revolution itself. One hundred years later, the house was demolished as modern 5th avenue was elevated, leveled and paved over. Washington Park, now J.J. Bryne Park, was built on the spot, It once contained an ice staking rink built over the Marylanders' unmarked graves.

As the Americans reached Brooklyn Heights', Carroll Garden's and Fort Greene's fortifications, the British stopped their advance and prepared for a siege.

The Americans chose to abandon their fortifications and sailed across the East River to rejoin the remainder of Washington's army on the Manhattan side of the river. Despite a flotilla of British war ships encircling New York harbor and patrolling the East River, the entire American army managed to escape. New York City was abandoned by the Americans shortly thereafter. The city was recaptured in 1783, the same year that the HMS Jersey was abandoned and burned.

Along the Americans' escape route is a statue of Christopher Columbus on Cadman Plaza in Brooklyn Heights and another statue of Henry Ward Beecher, the Brooklyn Heights based Abolitionist preacher whose fiery oratory excited anti-slavery passions before the Civil War.

The Americans gathered for their final escape at the Brookland ferry dock. The dock is still in use, serving commuter ferries and tourist boats arriving under the massive stone shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge's Eastern Pier. Framed by the Brooklyn Bridge's roadway is a large austere white marble wall flanked on its Western edge by a towering, classically clad figure of a man holding a sword close to his body. A classically draped female figure cradling a child holding a laurel wreath is on the opposite flank. This monument recognizes Brooklyn fatalities in World War II.

Statues of young men of the Revolution holding muskets in battle ready positions are erected in

Howard Skrill, World War I Memorial from Prospect Park, Oil Pastel, Oil Stick, Pencil, Chalk Pastek on Paper, 14" x 17". ©2014

Howard Skrill, Henry Ward Beecher from Cadman Plaza,
Oil Pastel, Oil Stick, Pencil, Chalk Pastek on Paper, 14" x 17". ©2014

town squares throughout the Northeast. Brooklyn possesses no such statues, although it does possess the lion's share of the remains of these soldiers. As demonstrated by the images accompanying this essay, representations of valiant young men overflow the piers of the Soldiers and Sailors' Arch at Grand Army Plaza, stand regally and confidently at the Battle Hill monument, rear back from the embrace of Death by the ice staking rink in Prospect Park, but none of these figures represent the individuals whose bodies actually lay beneath these very monuments. The only free standing monument to George Washington in Brooklyn is in a neglected skateboarders' park by the Williamsburg Bridge plaza. The statue depicts him in a topcoat and on horseback, in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, very far from the river that he crossed during the Battle of Brooklyn and that the Williamsburg Bridge currently spans. A person standing on the bridge looking South has excellent views of Wallabout Bay and Washington's escape route.

Those that perished in the dank hulls of the HMS Jersey exist now, like the ship itself, as shadows. The suffering prisoners and their brethren have been assigned to the shadows by the very people whose liberty was secured by their sacrifice. Shadows remain of the Marylanders laying underneath the blades of ice skaters that once glided over the ruins of the Old Stone House and skaters that now glide over patriot graves on the battlefield of Guan Heights.

These drawing almost entirely mark absence rather than presence for the dead from the Battle of Brooklyn and the Jersey. Words must serve to return the HMS Jersey's victims to visibility. The drawings also stand as an indictment of earlier generations' belated, meager efforts to commit HMS Jersey's cruel legacy to public memory in the community its presence once haunted.

Howard Skrill, Christopher Columbus from Cadman Plaza, Oil Pastel, Oil Stick, Pencil, Chalk Pastek on Paper, 14" x 17". ©2014

Howard Skrill, Washington at Valley Forge from the Williamsburg Plaza, Oil Pastel, Oil Stick, Pencil, Chalk Pastek on Paper, 14" x 17". ©2014