

## Traitor or Patriot?: A History of American Identity During the Revolutionary War

Ever since the Revolutionary War ended (1776-1783), Americans have looked to the men and women who fought it for guidance. American society today is framed by an identity that was presumably established and fought for in that war. My research on Thomas Johnson of Newbury, VT, based on the historical archives at the Vermont Historical Society, reveals how the identities of this man, of the state of Vermont, and of Americans as a whole were not static, but fluid concepts in the late eighteenth century. Johnson, an officer in the Continental Army, was captured by the British in 1781, and released upon the condition that he spy for his enemy to help the attempted Canadian annexation of Vermont. Disclosing his predicament to his Continental officers, Johnson became an unwilling double agent for the rest of the war. While George Washington and other patriot leaders knew of Johnson's loyalty to their cause, many of his fellow citizens did not and he was harassed as a Loyalist and traitor until he died in 1819. By examining other spies during the Revolutionary War, the journals and letters written by and about Johnson, the negotiations between Vermont and Canada, and Americans' social response to Loyalists, I am starting to piece together a picture of a confusing time of identity and loyalty. Contrary to the popular American myth, the Revolutionary War was not a black and white affair between imperialist oppressors and humble, but righteous, egalitarians. Further sub-themes of my research indicate stark class divisions during the war and aggressive political divisions, often class-based, after the military conflict ended. My conclusion is a more nuanced interpretation of a war that has inspired much of the American identity, one that recognizes that life is often more complicated than black and white interpretations can represent.