

JAMES MOODY, AN AMERICAN LOYALIST & His Interceptions of Washington's Communications with Philadelphia

By Jean R. Walton

For many years, this picture in Barber & Howe¹ has fascinated me, and set me on the trail of the man General Washington called “*that Villain Moody.*”



Fig. 1: Moody's Rock, just south of Newton, NJ in Sussex County, as shown in Barber & Howe, 1846. It was a hideout for Tory James Moody during the Revolution.

The story included there as a footnote which runs several pages tells of this “cave” (really an indentation in a cliff under an overhang of rocks), and the infamous Tory who used it as his hiding place during the American Revolution, James Moody of Knowlton Township, Sussex County. Moody's Rock is located just south of Newton, not far off Route 206, in an area known as Muckshaw Ponds. The description from Barber & Howe follows:

Two miles out of the village of Newton, and half a mile west of the stage-road leading to New York, are two adjacent bodies of water, known as the Big and Little Muckshaw; the former lying immediately south of the latter, with which, in high water, it forms a communication of several yards in width. Below these two ponds, to the south and east, a marsh extends, for quite a distance, in many places abounding in stagnant pools, and noxious weeds, or foul swampy shrubs, very difficult, if not totally impossible to be traversed. On the west of this marsh, a point of land juts forward, bounded northward by the southern most margin of the Big Muckshaw, eastward by the marsh itself, upon which it abruptly fronts, and on the west, for considerable distance, by an inlet of the pond, and a piece of marshy ground below; while to the southward it runs off into a ridge of irregular rocks, thickly shaded by a dense growth of trees, which for many a long year have concealed the gloomy haunts within. .

This is one of the numerous spots in New Jersey, around which [during the Revolution].. an instrument of foreign tyranny found shelter for himself and his loyal followers, in those days of peril. Hence, like a band of hungry wolves, they broke loose from their den, in the darkness of midnight, to commit their depredations upon those who rallied around the standard of liberty, and bade defiance to the wrath of the oppressor. To this wild and secure retreat, when danger threatened, did the Tory leader, and his company of active associates resort; and the political hypocrites of those times nourished them there, and kept them advised of what was going on among the friends of the colonists.¹

Who was James Moody and of what possible interest is he to students of postal history? Born in Little Egg Harbor in 1744 of parents who had recently emigrated from England, he spent his youth in the forested wilderness and fruitful coastlands of southern New Jersey. He was extraordinarily tall for this era, 6'2" and of full build. In or around 1766, James set out on his own, to establish a farm of some 500 acres in west Jersey, along the Delaware in Knowlton Township, then in Sussex County.² He married Elizabeth Britain, whose family were from this part of the county, and by 1775, he had three small children, a number of livestock, and a successful agricultural enterprise. He was an American in every sense, and nothing would yet suggest the path he was to take in the Revolution ahead.

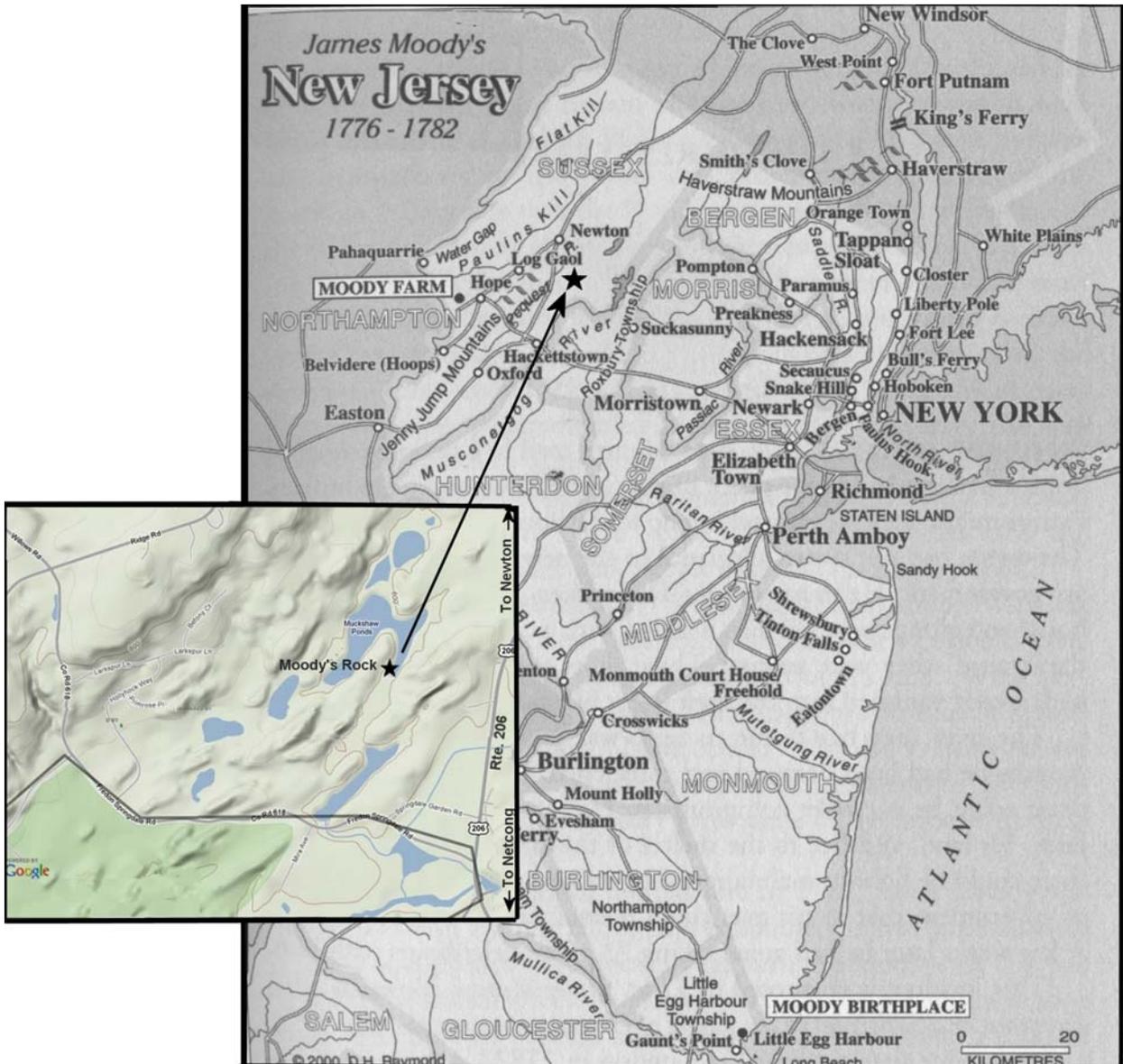


Fig. 2: Map of “Moody’s New Jersey,” from *So Obstensibly Loyal*³, with an overlay of a Google map showing the location of Moody’s Rock, and a tentative location of Moody’s farm in Knowlton Twp., Sussex County.

Cartographer David Raymond, in *So Obstensibly Loyal*.



Fig. 3: James Moody, American Loyalist³

strong proponent of the Crown, and when the forces for Independence took over, his conscience led him to choose the side of the Loyalists. Happily for us, Moody wrote his own narrative (written in the third person) of his thoughts and exploits, so we have some view into his feelings in his own words:

When the present ill-fated Rebellion first broke out, he was... a happy farmer, without a wish or an idea of any other enjoyment, than that of making happy, and being happy with, a beloved wife, and three promising children. He loved his neighbours, and hopes they were not whole without regard for him. Clear of debt, and at ease in his possessions, he had seldom thought much of political or state questions; but he felt and knew he had every possible reason to be grateful for, and attached to, that glorious Constitution to which he owed his security. The first great uneasiness he ever felt, on account of the Public, was when, after the proceedings of the first Congress were known, he foresaw the imminent danger to which the Constitution was exposed; but he was completely miserable when, not long after, he saw it totally overturned.

The situation of a man, who, in such a dilemma, wishes to do right, is trying and difficult. In following the multitude, he was sure of popular applause: this is always pleasing; and it is too dearly bought only when a man gives up for it the approbation of his own conscience. He foresaw, in its fullest force, that torrent of reproach, insults, and injury, which he was sure to draw down on himself and his family, by a contrary conduct; nor does he wish to deny, that, for some time, these overawed and staggered him. For himself he felt but little, but he had either too much or too little of the man about him, to bear the seeing of his nearest and dearest relatives disgraced and ruined. Of the points of debate between the parent-state and his native country, he pretended not to be a competent judge: ... he could come to no other conclusion, than that, however real or great the grievances of the Americans might be, rebellion was not the way to redress them. It required moreover little skill to know, that rebellion was the foulest of all crimes; and that what was begun in wickedness must end in ruin. With this conviction strong upon his mind, he resolved that there was no difficulty, danger, or distress, which, as an honest man he ought not to undergo, rather than see his country thus disgraced and undone. In spite even of concern for his family – with the most ardent love for his country, and the warmest attachment to his countrymen, he resolved to do anything, and to be any thing, not inconsistent with integrity – to fight, to bleed, to die – rather than live to see the venerable Constitution of his country totally lost, and his countrymen enslaved.⁴

James Moody, 1782

With this point of view as his banner, Moody nevertheless sought to keep his peace and not expose himself and his family because of his Loyalist views. In Sussex County, he was not alone, with ardent Loyalists (including his in-laws, and many others in Knowlton Township) outnumbering Patriots. The Patriots had the upper hand, as they were the activists, and eager to set up an alternative government. The Committees of Safety were established to extract oaths of allegiance, and to harass those who would not submit. Moody talks of being threatened and insulted, and on March 28, 1777, the Patriot militia arrived at his home with the intention of arresting him, firing several shots.⁵ Moody escaped, and realized he was no longer safe except behind British lines.

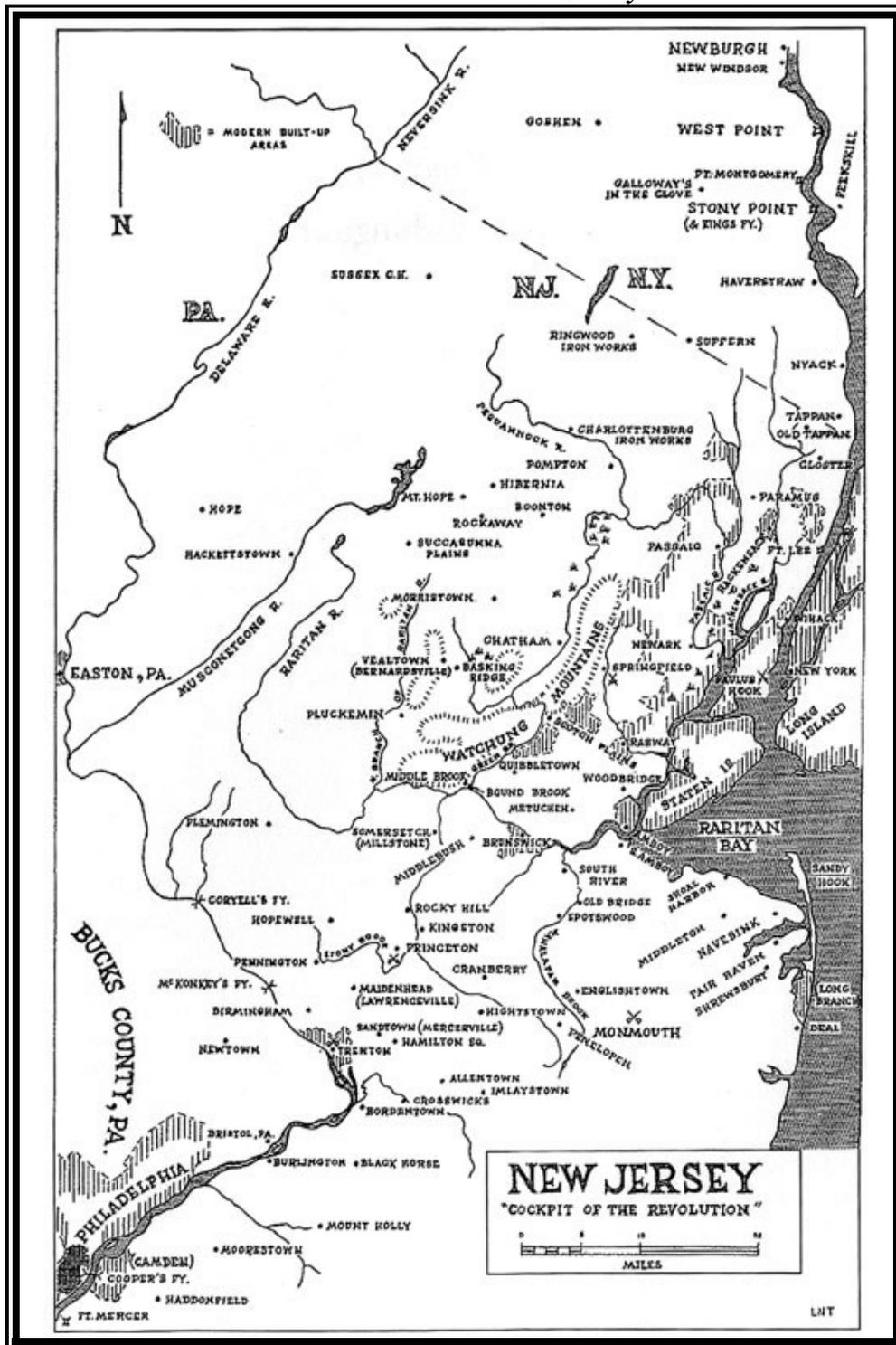
Thus began the career of a Loyalist, whose first efforts were enlisting others of like mind, and bringing them within the British lines. This he did on numerous occasions. He contributed much in the area of intelligence to the British, assessing the stores and provisions of the Patriots, their troop numbers, quietly observing what he could and passing it on to the British. It was the hope of the New Jersey Loyalists that the British, camped at New Brunswick, would sweep the State of its denouncers of the Crown, and they were ready and eager to do their part. It was a great disappointment to their movement when Howe moved his troops to the Chesapeake instead, squandering, from their point of view, a golden opportunity to nip the Revolution in its bud.

The American War for Independence had three, not just two armed forces. The Patriots and the British were the obvious opponents, but a third force – the American Loyalist movement – constituted a third, hated by the Patriots as traitors to the American cause, and often dismissed by the British as they were not trained soldiers and were viewed as untrustworthy.

So began a period of years when James Moody was recruiting Loyalists for the British forces, conducting raids, collecting information, releasing prisoners from jail – and in general doing anything he could to aid the British cause and foul the efforts of the Patriots. One of these skirmishes even resulted in Moody's imprisonment in Morristown, and then at West Point, from which he escaped. But the alarm that "Moody is out and about" raised fear in the hearts of many from Perth Amboy to Easton and points north – but especially in the area of Newton and Moody's hideout at what became known as Moody's Rock. This area he knew like the back of his hand, including who would help conceal him and who were his enemies.

This however is not the heart of this story – this story covers only the last year of fighting in the War for Independence, 1781, when Washington was headquartered at New Windsor, near West Point, and Moody, now an Ensign and later a Lieutenant with the British Army irregulars, was tasked with capturing the mails between New Windsor on the Hudson and Philadelphia, the seat of the American government, on the Delaware. This inevitably involved New Jersey.

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S New Jersey 1776-1781



From *Cockpit of the Revolution*, Cartographer Larry Tumlinson, 1966.⁶

Fig. 4: This map, similar to the one in Fig. 2, shows Washington's New Jersey during the Revolution. It was inevitable that the Moody and Washington would cross paths.

CAPTURING THE MAILS.....

Our story deals with 1781 --- when Washington's headquarters were located in New Windsor, NY, just south of what is now Newburgh, and above West Point on the Hudson. Washington sought to keep General Clinton and the British occupied with the defense of New York City, and in the dark as to whether the Continental Army would attack at New York or in the Chesapeake.

Rochambeau arrived in the Colonies on July 10, 1780, and with a section of the French fleet, lay off Rhode Island. A plan had yet to be determined, whether they would sail for New York City, or for the Chesapeake Bay, to join Washington in support of the Continental Army.

Washington and Rochambeau were connected by a Chain of Expresses which had been established in July 1780, first along the coast from Rhode Island to Stamford, where communications with Headquarters were already established.⁷ Riders were stationed every 15 miles, and employed Dragoons and civilian riders to stand at the ready, with horses, and to ride by day or night. As there were some attempts at interception on these dispatches, the line was moved further inland in late August, to King's Ferry, near Peekskill. It proved difficult to maintain, however, because of its cost in men and money, and this chain was discontinued in December 1780, as seen in this letter from Washington to the Chevalier de la Luzerne on the 14th:

*Your Excellency's dispatches for Rhode Island, accompanying your letter to me, came to hand at the instant the Post was setting out, and was committed to his care. It is the only means of conveyance now left me, since **the Chain of Expresses which was formed by the Dragoon Horses (and worn down) have been discontinued. The Quarter Master General has it not in his power, for want of money, to furnish an Express upon the most urgent occasion.***⁸

They were reestablished in 1781 on a different route, and manned by Dragoons and French hussars.

Communications with the Continental Government in Philadelphia and communicating with forces of the Marquis de Lafayette further south now become very important to Washington, and a good deal more problematic.

In February 1781, Washington wanted to establish another Chain of Expresses between New Windsor and Philadelphia, but it is unlikely this was ever done, as reflected in his letter to Benjamin Harrison on March 27 (see below), so whether he was relying on the regular post or his own riders when Moody captured the first mail in March is unclear. Washington maintained a few messengers of his own at Fishkill,⁹ one of whom was Benjamin Montanye (or Montaigne), a blacksmith and Baptist minister who wished to serve, but did not want to bear arms.¹⁰

James Moody, who had been captured and imprisoned at West Point, had managed to escape and had rejoined the British forces in New York City by late 1780. The British were in need of intelligence, and Colonel Delancey, the Adjutant General, aware of Moody's knowledge of the area, requested, on March 6, 1781, that he arrange a sortie to capture Washington's dispatches between New Windsor and Philadelphia. Moody – then an Ensign with Brigadier General Skinner's New Jersey Volunteers – accepted this mission, and wrote the following proposal to the British General at New York, Sir Henry Clinton:

149.44

Sir

I beg leave to mention to your Excellency what I humbly conceive necessary to undertake the enterprise against the Rebel mail

1. to have an order from your Excellency to execute the business; with two men armed in a light manner as the Artillery men are, a good fuzee for my self; and, to be landed in Jersey; also some Cash in order to defray Expenses I have the honour to be with great respect

New York
the
march 16th 1781

your Excellency's most obedient and
very humble servant

James Moody

his Excellency Sir
Henry Clinton

Mr Moody
16th March 1781
Propal

Image from the Clements Library, Papers of Sir Henry Clinton¹¹

Fig. 5: (Misdated March 16)¹² In Moody's own hand, addressed to General Clinton, he proposes the terms under which he will undertake this risky mission. Text is below.

Sir –

I beg leave to mention to your Excellency what I humbly conceive necessary to undertake the enterprise against the Rebel mail.

I to have an order from your Excellency to Execute the business with two men armed in a light manner as the Artillery men are, a good Fuzé [musket] for myself, and to be landed in Jersey. Also some cash in order to defray Expenses. I have the honor to be with great respect

*Your Excellency's most obedient and
Very Humble Servant,*

*New York
March 16, 1781*

James Moody

His Excellency Sir Henry Clinton

[This document appears to have been carried within the British detachment in New York, and not through the mail. The note on the back may not be contemporaneous.]¹³

Moody first left New York on the night of the 7th of March, with a small party and a guide. Travelling by night, they concealed themselves in a swamp by day. On the second day, their guide refused to go any further. While Moody's first thought was to execute the man on the spot for dereliction of duty, he decided instead on the side of mercy, and was forced to return to New York with him, sequestering him from any others so their plan could not be betrayed.

Once the guide was isolated and secured in New York, they set out again with a new guide, which Moody describes (as always in the 3rd person) in his own *Narrative*:¹⁴

He set out a second time, and on the night of the 10th, he reached Haverstraw mountains. On his march, he was informed that the post had gone by that day. On the 11th, the weather became very inclement, and he, with his party, suffered exceedingly from a heavy fall of snow; notwithstanding, they pushed forward, hoping, by rapid marches, to get ahead of the rider. These efforts, though excessively fatiguing, were as yet all in vain, but on the 15th, they were successful, and got possession of their prize, and after some equally and distressing marches on their return, they at length arrived safe with it in New York. The inexpressible hardships which the party underwent in the adventure, both from hunger and cold, were fatal to the health of most of them. James Moody, 1782

Additional sources also mention this capture of the mail. The guide on this second foray, Benjamin Kelly, notes that on the first night they reached Paramus, making only five miles on the following day. The other members of the party were Jonathan Gage and Steven Roblin, members of Skinner's Battalion. They slept five nights in the swamp, waylaying the postrider Benjamin Montanye, on the 15th. They returned with the mail and the postrider to New York.

Montanye's description (told and recorded by a third party, so perhaps apocryphal only), adds the interesting details of his dispatch – that when first given his orders, he hesitated, knowing that the route he was to take – through the Clove or Ramapo Pass – would result in his capture, and when Washington saw Montanye was still present, uncertain whether to voice his concerns, said “What? Not gone, sir?” Montanye replied, “Why, General, I shall surely be taken, if I go through the Clove!” to which Washington replied, “Your duty is not to talk, but to obey!”¹⁵ Montanye places the capture as just beyond the Ramapo Pass, on the road to Sloatsburg.

JAMES MOODY, AN AMERICAN LOYALIST ~ Jean R. Walton

The mail taken contained a number of dispatches, but was not as useful to the British as they had hoped. Washington’s Papers however contained several mentions of letters taken in this event, and copied and resent later, such as this one below from General Washington to Benjamin Harrison on March 27, 1781:

Head Quarters, New Windsor, March 27, 1781.

Dear Sir:

On my return from Newport, I found your favor of the 16th: February, with its inclosures, at Head Quarters. I exceedingly regret that I could not have the pleasure of seeing you... because I could have entered upon the subject of your mission in a much more and full free manner, than is proper to be committed to paper....

*By the expiration of the times of service of the old troops, by the discharge of the Levies engaged for the Campaign only, and by the unfortunate dissolution of the pennsylvania line, I was left, previous to the late detachment under the Marquis de la Fayette, with a Garrison barely sufficient for the security of West point, and **two Regiments in Jersey to support the communication between the Delaware and North River.....***

Our Stock of Ammunition, tho' competent to the defensive, is, by a late estimate of the commanding Officer of Artillery, vastly short of an offensive operation of any consequence....

Of Cloathing we are in a manner exhausted. We have not enough for the few Recruits which may be expected...

Nothing which is within the compass of my power shall be wanting to give support to the southern States, but you may readily conceive, how irksome a thing it must be to me to be called upon for assistance, when I have not the means of affording it. I am etc.

Duplicate. It is feared that the original miscarried with last Weeks Mail, which is missing and is supposed to have been taken and carried into New York. ¹⁶

This first mail, taken on March 15, 1781 was captured along the post route from New Windsor and Morristown, but although Moody’s movements were largely in New Jersey, he encountered the post rider just north of the New Jersey border, as shown below by the star:

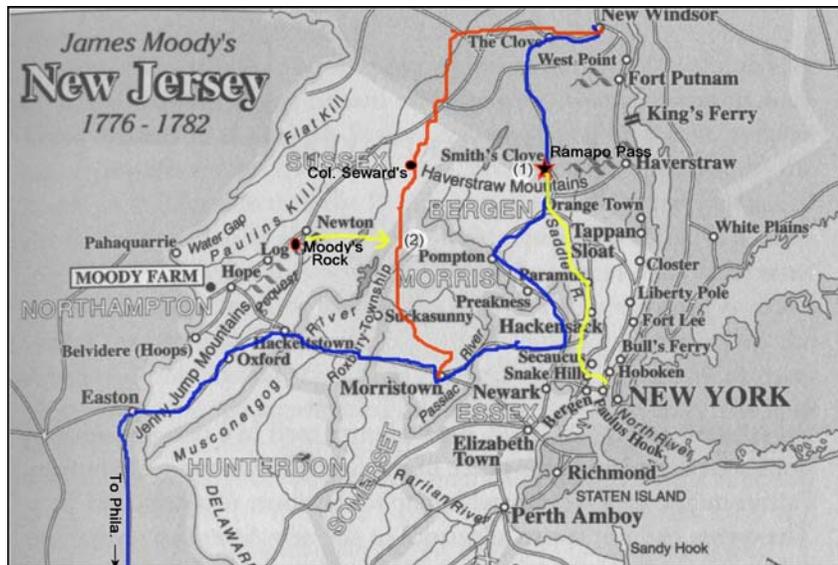


Fig. 6: Map showing the points of capture. The first (1) is shown by a star at the intersection of the yellow line (Moody) and the post route (blue), just north of the New Jersey line. The “back route” (2) used unsuccessfully in the second capture is shown in red, and the interception point is not known.

After this first capture of the mail, Washington changed the route for the mail between New Windsor and Morristown, as this letter to Postmaster General Ebenezer Hazard indicates:

Head Quarters, New Windsor, May 9, 1781.

*Sir: I have received your favor of the 24th. of April. I immediately **after the accident happened to the post in the Clove, I changed the Route, and he now travels by the way of Warwick to Morris Town, which is but a few Miles further about, and upon a Road which is as safe as any in this part of the Country can be.***

*It would be impossible for me, was the occasion ever so urgent, to send escorts of Horse with the Mails as you propose. In the first place, I have not the Horse, and if I had, I could not find them subsistence. It is with difficulty I keep two orderly Dragoons at Head Quarters. I am etc.*¹⁷

[Note: To Postmaster General of the United States, then at Jamaica Plains, near Boston.]

Shortly after the first expedition, Moody was made a lieutenant in Skinner's Brigade. Sir Henry Clinton, still eager for intelligence, sent out a second expedition in May. The British Adjutant General again used Moody for this task. On the 15th of May, they set out again, but it was soon clear that they had been betrayed by intelligence out of New York to the Continental Army. Twenty-five miles from the City, they were discovered, but escaped unharmed. There seemed no recourse but to return to New York. However, figuring the enemy would not be expecting a second attempt so soon after the first, they set out again on the 18th. Moody again, in his own words:

On that night, with his small party of four men, he got as far as Secaucus. The next night they crossed the Hackensack river, by means of a canoe which Lieutenant Moody always kept there for such purposes, and which after crossing, he concealed till his return. He then proceeded on, till, coming to the edge of a marsh, he fell in with a party of Rebels, who were patrolling that quarter....

This patrol at first allowed Moody to pass, but then halted them – at which point the patrol discharged their weapons. Moody convinced the patrol there was a larger force behind them, and the Patriots dispersed.

Marching on about four miles farther, he came to Saddle River, which it was necessary to cross, but apprehensive that there might be a guard stationed there, he waded, for several yards, through a considerable depth of water, till he got close to the bridge, where he saw, as he feared, a regular guard. On this he retreated with all possible speed and caution; and was obliged to wade through the river, about half a mile farther up, without much difficulty and danger.

The country being now much alarmed with rumours of Moody's being out, occasioned by this little rencontre, the mail, instead of being sent by Pompton, as it usually had been, and where it was expected to be met with, was now sent by the back road, with a guard to secure it.¹⁸ Discovering this, the Lieutenant dispatched a trusty Loyalist to a distant part of the province, with letters to his friends; and particular directing one of them whose person, figure, and voice most resembled his own, to pass for him but a single hour: which he readily did. James Moody, 1782¹⁹

This device apparently worked, and drew the militia away from where Moody actually was. However five days of lying in wait were still needed, apparently in the area of Newton²⁰ (and perhaps at Moody's Rock), "until the opportunity presented itself. This mail contained all the dispatches that were sent in consequence of the interview between General Washington and Count Rochambeau in Connecticut."²¹ The mail was taken on June 1; Moody returned to New York on June 4 with it in hand.

The exact location of this second capture of the mail is not clear, and Moody does not elaborate on this point. Shelstone reports these days were spent in the area of Newton, so it is likely that the mail was taken somewhere between the New York border and Morristown. The red line on the map in *Figure 6* for this back route is generally correct, but the interception line is only approximated.

Clinton was delighted with his prize, and boasted about it, even publishing parts of these letters in the Loyalist press in New York, and in the London *Political Magazine*. This letter from Washington to Colonel Elias Dayton on May 28, 1781.

Head Quarters, New Windsor, May 28, 1781.

Dear Sir: The late accounts from New York are mysterious and perplexing, but they at any rate demand that we should be in readiness to move. ... The parties at the Clove are not to be immediately called in, but the Officers commanding them warned to be in readiness. Should an evacuation of New York take place, as many strongly suspect, the troops under your command will be next in order for detachment....

As I am very anxious to learn what they are really doing in New York; you will oblige me by obtaining and sending me as accurate intelligence as possible. I am &c.

P.S. You will be pleased to forward the Letter to Genl Knyphausen by a flag.

*[Note: The draft is in the writing of Tench Tilghman. The P.S. is in the writing of David Humphreys, who has added the **note that this letter was taken by the British "in last Week's Mail."** A duplicate was forwarded to Dayton on June 4.²²]*

Many letters in Washington's letterbooks are followed by similar notes. It is interesting to note that almost all of these letters appear to indicate that New York will be the combined target of Washington and Rochambeau, following their conference in Wethersfield.

In George Washington's Papers, a letter to John Sullivan, May 29, 1781:

Dear Sir: I have been favoured with your two letters of the 2d. and 17th. of May; the former reached me at Weathersfield after I had met the Count de Rochambeau at that place; from which time to the present moment, my whole attention has been so occupied by a variety of concerns, that I have been hitherto involuntarily prevented from doing myself the pleasure of writing to you.....

And I must inform you, there is yet another obstacle, which makes the attempt you have suggested, absolutely impracticable with the means you propose, but which I dare not commit to paper, for fear of the same misfortune which has already happened to some of my letters.

You will have seen, before the receipt of this, by my public letter to Congress of the 27th. Inst., the result of the deliberations of the Count de Rochambeau and myself at Weathers field. That plan, upon the maturest consideration, and after combining all the present circumstances and future prospects, appeared (though precarious) far the most eligible of any we could possibly devise whilst we are inferior at Sea. The object was considered to be, of greater magnitude, and more within our reach than any other. The weakness of the Garrison of New York, the central position for drawing together Men and Supplies; and the spur, which an attempt against that place, wd. give to every exertion, were among the reasons which prompted to that undertaking, and which promised the fairest prospect of success, unless the enemy should recall a considerable part of their force from the Southward. And even in this case, the same measure which might produce disappointment in one quarter, would certainly in the event afford the greatest relief in another.

With the highest Sentiments of regard etc. ²³

[*Note: The draft, which is in the writing of David Humphreys, with several changes by Washington, has this note: “June 4th Duplicate. The original in my own handwriting, supposed to be taken and carried into New York.”*]

To the Marquis de Lafayette he wrote on May 31, 1781:

New Windsor, May 31, 1781.

My dear Marqs: I have just returned from Weathers field at which I expected to have met the Count de Rochambeau and Count de Barras, but the British fleet having made its appearance off Block Island, the Admiral did not think it prudent to leave Newport. Count Rochambeau was only attended by Chevr. Chattellux; Generals Knox and Duportail were with me.

Upon a full consideration of our affairs in every point of view, an attempt upon New York with its present Garrison (which by estimation is reduced to 4500 regular Troops and about 3000 irregulars) was deemed preferable to a Southern operation.....

We have rumours, but I cannot say they are well founded, that the enemy are about to quit New Yk. altogether. ...

*I take it for granted that your last dispatches inform you fully of European Affairs and that you can judge from them of the probability of such an event as I have mentioned taking place. As you have no cypher by which I can write to you in safety, and my letters have been frequently intercepted of late I restrain myself from mentioning many matters I wish to communicate to you.*²⁴

From George Washington to Nathaniel Greene on June 1, 1781:

*I have lately had an interview with Count De Rochambeau at Weathersfield. Our affairs were very attentively considered in every point of view, and it was finally determined to make an attempt upon New York with its present garrison, in preference to a southern operation, as we had not the decided command of the water. You will readily suppose the reasons, which induced this determination, were the inevitable loss of men from so long a march, more especially in the approaching hot season, and the difficulty, I may say impossibility, of transporting the necessary baggage, artillery, and stores by land..... I can only give you the outlines of our plan. **The dangers, to which letters are exposed, make it improper to commit to paper the particulars; but as matters ripen I will keep you as well informed as circumstances will allow.***²⁵

And another to Lafayette on June 4, 1781:

New Windsor, June 4, 1781

My dear Marqs:

*I have this moment received information that the letters, of which the inclosed are copies, with other dispatches and the Southern Mail, were taken between this and Morristown and carried, it is supposed, into New York. It is unhappy that the communication is so insecure! and that corrispondencies (sic) from one part of the Country to another are liable to such accidents!*²⁶

And finally from George Washington to the President of Congress in Philadelphia:

Head Quarters, New Windsor, June 6, 1781

Sir: I have been honored with your Excellency's favors of the 28th May, with their several inclosures. I have written to the Board of War on the subject of the removal of the Convention troops, and have given it as my opinion, with my reasons, that they had, best for the present, be halted in Pennsylvania.....

I send your Excellency by this Conveyance duplicate of my letters of the 30th: May. The original was taken in the last Weeks Mail. The Communication by the post from hence to Philada. has become so dangerous, that I cannot, in future, trust any dispatches of importance by him, and I beg you will observe the same Rule. The parties which are sent out know the exact time at which he

may be expected and cannot fail of securing him. They have not the same opportunity of intercepting Expresses, as their times of riding are uncertain. I have the honor etc.

Not all letters were militarily significant, and the following is an example – a letter from George Washington in New Windsor to his dentist in Philadelphia regarding instruments to clean his famous false teeth, also taken in this mail capture, and hence now included in the Clinton Collection at the Clements Library in Ann Arbor:

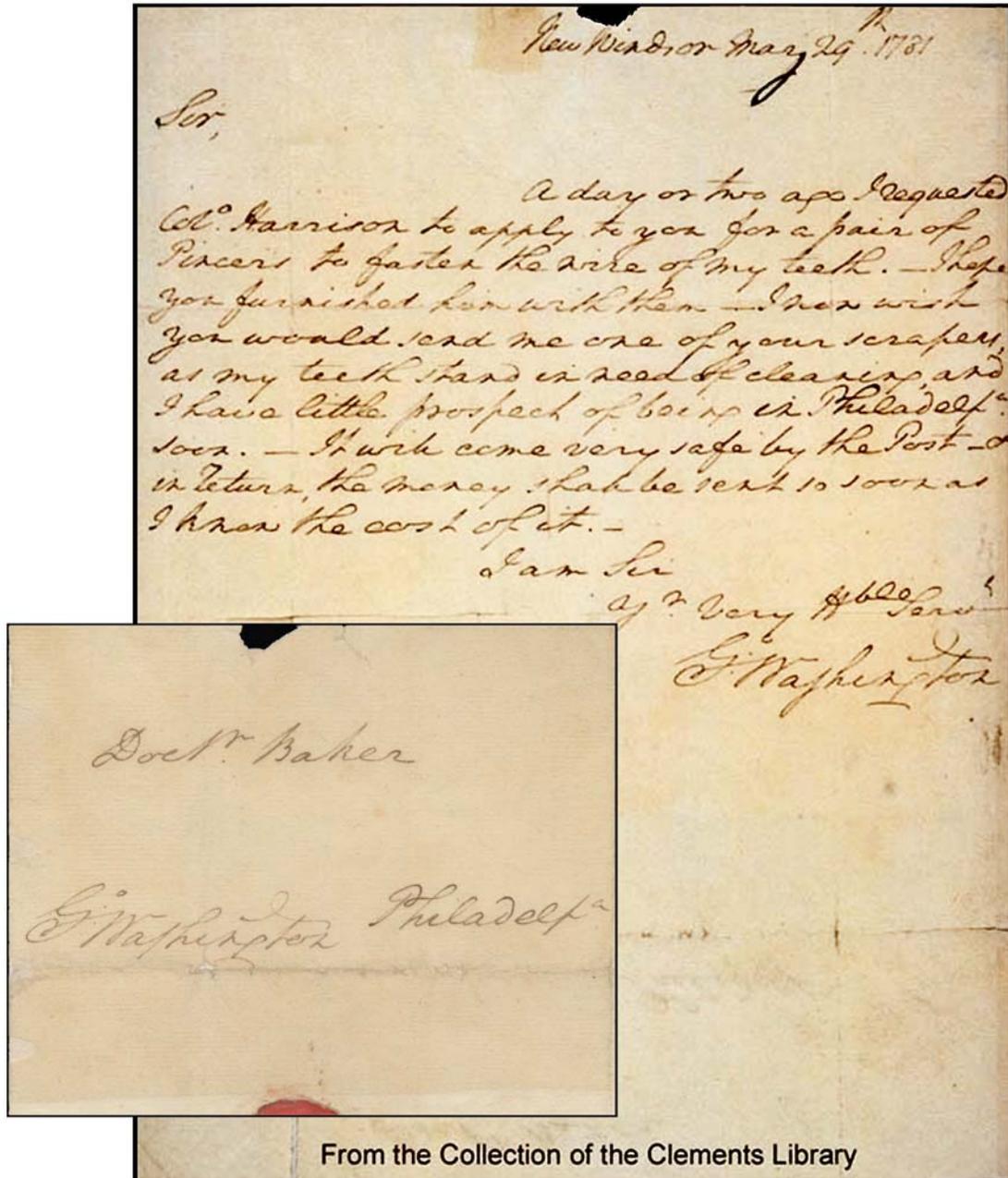


Fig. 7: Letter from Gen. Washington to his dentist in Philadelphia, May 29, 1781, taken in the mail capture on June 1, and currently with Sir Henry Clinton's papers in the Clements Library.¹¹

Many of the letters captured seem to indicate the Washington was considering most seriously an attack on New York City. Since in fact the last thrust was at Yorktown, it must give pause – was Washington using the mail to belie his real plans? Washington maintained an intricate spy network, and it is not beyond the realm of possibility that some of these letters were intended to be captured, in order to confuse the British towards his real intentions, and keep Sir Henry Clinton from sending relief to Cornwallis.

Five years after the end of the war, George Washington wrote:

It was determined by me, nearly twelve months before hand, at all hazards, to give out, and cause it to be believed by the highest military as well as civil officers, that New York was the destined place of attack, for the important purpose of inducing the eastern and middle States to make greater exertions in furnishing specific supplies, than they otherwise would have done, as well as for the interesting purpose of rendering the enemy less prepared elsewhere. It never was in contemplation to attack New York, unless the Garrison should first have been so far degarnished to carry on the southern operations as to render our success in the siege of that place, as infallible as any future military can ever be made. That much trouble was taken and finesse used to misguide and bewilder Sir Henry Clinton, in regard to the real object, by fictitious communications, as well as by making a deceptive provision of ovens, forage, and boats, in the neighborhood, is certain; Nor were less pains taken to deceive our own army; for I had always conceived, where the imposition does not completely take place at home, it would never sufficiently succeed abroad.... Many circumstances will unavoidably be misconceived, and misrepresented. Notwithstanding most of the papers, which may properly be deemed official, are preserved; yet the knowledge of innumerable things, of a more delicate and secret nature is confined to the perishable remembrance of some few of the present generation.²⁷

So was it all a ploy? Did Washington intend in fact that these messages would be taken? Washington's remarks – and the planning necessary to position the French fleet so as to bottle up Cornwallis at Yorktown – strongly suggest this was the case. It worth noting that the Yorktown campaign was in fact planned at the conference with Rochambeau in Wethersfield.

James Moody arranged for two other expeditions to capture the mail, but did not personally participate in them; both occurred in Pennsylvania, and were attempts to take papers of the Continental Congress. One, in August of 1781, involved his younger brother John. In this raid, John was captured in Little Egg Harbour, and sentenced to death. He died by hanging at the age of 23 in November of 1781.

Washington certainly showed vexation towards Moody, and his continued efforts against the Patriots. He wrote from Philadelphia to Governor Livingston in January of 1782:

Dear Sir:

*It is a pity but **that Villain Moody** could be apprehended lurking in the Country, in a manner which would bring him under the description of a Spie. When he was taken before, he was in Arms in his proper Uniform with a party, and had his Commission in his pocket. It was therefore a matter of great doubt whether he could have been considered otherwise than a prisoner of War. It was said he had been inlisting Men in the Country but no proof of the kind ever appeared. I have the honor etc.*

JAMES MOODY, AN AMERICAN LOYALIST ~ Jean R. Walton

One last letter from Washington to PMG Ebenezer Hazard in October of 1782 shows that protecting the mail continued to be a problem:

Head Quarters, October 24, 1782.

Sir: The Secretary at War has been consulted on the subject of your Letter and it is concluded for the present that the Dragoons shall continue to carry' the Mail as they have done for some time past.

The Head Quarters of the Army will move in a day or two to Newburg; I desire therefore that the Mail may in future be sent by Morris Town, from thence by the most direct road to Colonel Swards, then thro' Warwick and Chester to Newburg except the Route thro' Hackers town to Sussex, Warwick &c. which would be inconvenient to the People of Jersey, the one now proposed is the most direct and the safest that can be taken; it has been proposed before, but has always been opposed by the different Post Masters on account of distributing their News papers. If however it should not be thought proper now to take that Route I cannot nor shall I confide in the Post for any Dispatches coming to or going from Head Quarters; nor can the Dragoons be furnished as an Escort.²⁸

Moody was busy with his personal affairs in 1782. His wife Elizabeth and his three children had apparently remained in Sussex County during all this time, until she was killed by a fall from a horse in early 1782. He remarried soon after, and his new wife Jane and his three children lived in New York City, until the evacuation of the British in 1783, when she followed him to England and the children went to live with their paternal grandfather in Little Egg Harbor. James and Jane returned to this side of the ocean to settle in Nova Scotia in 1786, where the children rejoined him. He died in 1809 and was buried in Sissiboo – now Weymouth – Nova Scotia.

Nothing marks the spot today where Moody's Rock once served to hide Moody and his Tory cohorts. Even finding the spot is not easy – the land where it is located is part of the New Jersey Nature Conservancy. It is most easily accessed by crossing private property, but for this permission is needed. The large overhanging rock which once provided cover in the cold and rain is now gone – blasted away some 70 to 80 years ago, for fear it would fall. But it is there, and for those who believe, its ghosts still roam the land.

My sincere thanks to Susan Shelstone for her excellent study of Moody's life, to the Clements Library and their archive of Sir Henry Clinton's papers, for the various archives of Washington's letters, to Moody himself for recording his own adventures, and to the Nature Conservancy in New Jersey²⁹ (and the adjacent property owner) for a pleasant walk in the woods and back through history.



Fig. 8: Moody's Rock, November 2011 – barely an indentation in the cliff, without its long overhanging rock.

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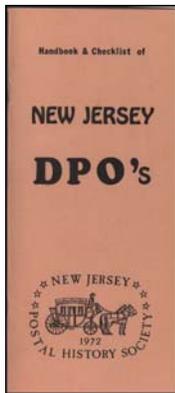
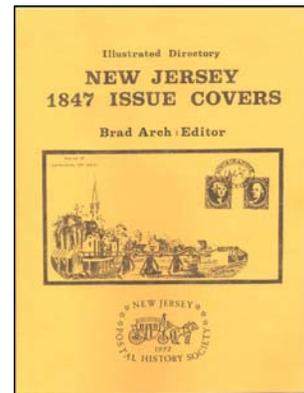
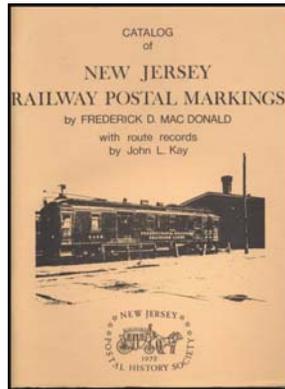
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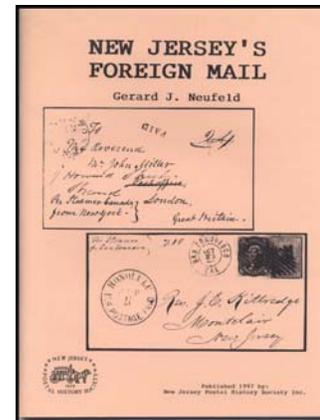
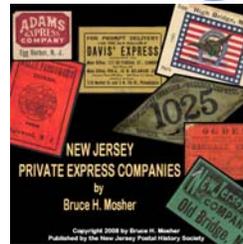
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